Leading the Way: Peer To Peer Mentoring To Improve the Student Experience and Adaptability through Change

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Abstract

Peer to peer mentoring is well established in the literature as providing an effective mechanism to foster student's sense of belonging and to support their resilience and academic progress .This paper reports on a peer mentoring model that was established within a Built Environment School in 2015. The mentoring program was designed to provide peer mentoring support for Chinese students who were articulating into the third year of a Construction Management program delivered at a Melbourne university. The Chinese students had successfully completed two years of a Building Science program at the China University of Mining & Technology (CUMT). To support the Mentees to transition into year three of the Construction Management program three teaching academics from the Construction Management program partnered with their School's Academic Developer. The project team was formed to design and implement a mentoring program that sought to deliver reciprocal learning for local Melbourne based mentors and the newly arrived Chinese mentees. The program was designed to support Mentees to transition into the Construction Management program and living in Melbourne by providing study support and opportunities for social engagement. In this paper the authors reflect on their experiences of designing and implementing the peer mentoring program and report anecdotal evidence which suggests that peer to peer mentoring can provide an effective mechanism through which students are better prepared and supported to deal positively with the process of transition and the many complex challenges this can entail.

1 Introduction

As Australia endeavours to sustain the growth of its international education industry, there have been major concerns regarding the experience of international students (Outhred and Chester, 2013).

In addressing the many complex challenges facing universities and students, extensive research has shown the benefits of mentoring models, including peer mentoring, for higher education students (Collings, Swanson, and Watkins, 2016). Peer to peer mentoring is well established in the literature as a mechanism which delivers many benefits for both mentors and mentees. Its benefits are many and include academic support and social connectedness and student wellbeing, (Collings, Swanson, and Watkins, 2014). This paper reports on the initial anecdotal student evidence and the author's reflections of the impact of a peer mentoring program piloted in RMIT University's School of Property Construction and Project Management. This mentoring model, PCPM LEAD, was designed to support international student transition into the Built Environment discipline and to enhance student experience and wellbeing. The catalyst for the model was the influx of students from CUMT (China University of Mining & Technology) and the Beijing Normal University. Through a partnership with the School of Property Construction and Project Management (PCPM), students complete the final two years of undergraduate study within in either the Bachelor of Applied Science Construction Management or the Bachelor of Applied Science Property & Valuation programs.

This paper reports on the learning from the initial pilot phase and situates this learning in relation to key literature within the field. The authors identify particular dimensions of learning and impact which warrant further and deeper investigation. The model was designed to support this particular group of student's academic outcomes and progress, the model is also open more broadly to all international and local students in the School. PCPM third and fourth year students work as peer mentors and provide academic, social and transitional support for the mentees. The mentoring program is affiliated with the RMIT LEAD program and mentors receive recognition from the VC for participation in the program.

2 The PCPM Lead Mentoring Program: What We Did and Why

The PCPM LEAD mentoring model forms part of the RMIT LEAD program. RMIT LEAD is designed to foster co-curricular learning opportunities that allow students to: make a difference to individuals and communities; feel connected to the RMIT community; explore, test and fulfil their potential become creative, skilled, highly employable and purposeful graduates. Within the School of PCPM, it was identified that a mentoring program could provide the opportunity to support the transitional needs of the newly arrived CUMT and Beijing Normal University students, along with the broader student community.

The mentoring program was designed and supported by four academic staff: one Australian born Academic Developer who is qualified in ESL and whose role is to support learning and teaching within the School; two Australian born educators who have rich teaching experiences in the designated programs both in Australia and in Singapore and Hong Kong; and one Chinese born educator who grew up and studied in China, and has worked in Australia for more than six years. All staff acted as the academic champions within the program. The mixed backgrounds and specialisations in this team provided a unique knowledge set for international students' needs. Figure 1 shows the LEAD mentoring model which will be further explained in the following subsections.
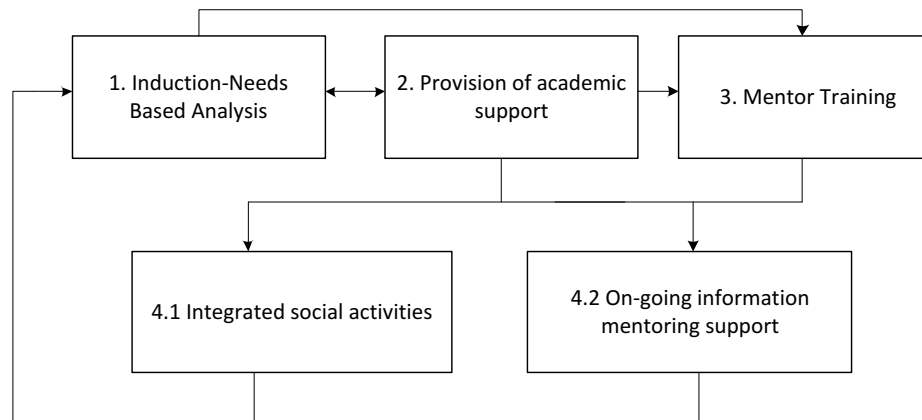
Figure 1: PCPM LEAD Mentoring Model

2.1   Program Design

The PCPM LEAD mentoring team developed the initial program to best suit the needs of the mentees by drawing on their local and international teaching experience. Volunteer mentors were recruited from years three and four of their undergraduate program. The mentors included a mix from the Construction Management, Property and Valuation and Project Management disciplines. All mentors were required to complete five hours of mentor training which included a focus on attributes of the mentor, the boundaries between the role of the mentor versus teacher, skills and strategies to facilitate learning through working with peers, inter cultural communication, relationship building and understanding different learning styles. In addition to their training, mentors were required to contribute a minimum of fifteen hours mentoring for each semester.

The PCPM mentoring leadership team had two objectives: (1) to assist students to transition into their new social and academic environment; (2) to ensure students were supported to develop the academic literacies to be able to achieve success; (3) to optimise opportunities for the mentees to build relationships within their cohort, and with their PCPM mentors. The program was also designed to facilitate deeper relationships with the authors, three of whom were teaching into the program. This approach drew on the existing literature which validates peer to peer mentoring as a highly effective mechanism through which students can support their peers and importantly learn from one another (Christie, 2014). As such, the developed PCPM LEAD mentoring model is underpinned by the core principles of reciprocity, recognition that mentoring programs delivers beneficial learning outcomes for both mentors and mentees, and voluntary student engagement (Collings et al., 2016).

Upon their arrival in the School of PCPM CUMT and Beijing Normal University students (mentees) were briefed about the mentoring program and encouraged to participate. Working as School champions, the authors developed and nurtured in and out of class relationships with the mentees students and devised a program to support their academic and social engagement. Further, the program was designed so that was to across the mentors and mentees so that students would initiate further contact themselves and interact more informally.

2.2   Program Activities

The activities developed by the LEAD mentoring team varied slightly across 2015 and 2016. In 2015 PCPM LEAD mentors worked in class with the teacher in a common third year Research Methods course and participated in fortnightly 'Study Buddy' Drop in sessions. The objectives of these activities were to assist in the transition in teaching and learning styles between the western and

non-Western education methods, and the different disciplinary content. Further, the Mentees have studied a "Building services" program in China which is embedded with calculations, designs and exams; while the current program in Australia is management-oriented requiring comprehensive understanding about the construction industry operation, and strong text based academic skills on essay and report writing. The diversity of these activities provided a formal and informal mentoring experience, allowing for different student needs to be addressed. Additionally, social events which included cooking and bowling were held. The objective of these events was to assist in the transition to new socio cultural environments experienced by the mentees. This included language and cultural issues which present major hurdles to the development of new friendships. In 2016, Study Buddy Drop in sessions and social events were run which included cooking and bowling and a day trip to a wildlife sanctuary were held with the same objectives.

3 Reflections on Practice and the Role of Conversation

In reflecting on our practice, the development and leadership of the PCPM Mentoring Model we draw upon Haigh's (2006) concept that our conversations play a formative role in fostering our understandings. As Haigh identifies this involves making explicit our tacit understandings of the particular phenomena. By engaging in an on-going dialogue about our experiences as we developed and implemented the mentoring model we shared our perceptions of the efficacy of the model, the challenges we faced and the observed benefits the model delivered for our students.

Senge (1994) developed the term 'learningful conversation" to describe conversations which foster learning about practice. Our conversations as "learningful' fostered learning to evoke our critical reflections on practice. Our reflections encompassed a focus on what Senge refers to as "the mental models that are a foundation for personal action". As Senge (1990) describes, these mental models, "are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge, 1990, p. 8).

We held a schedule of meetings throughout each semester for the purpose of sharing and debriefing about the on the ground experiences and needs of the mentees and mentors so that the program could be refined/adapted as required. These meetings were also critical in facilitating the exchange of the author's goals and aspirations, and in further developing our understandings of students needs and of how best to support them. Our conversations were critical to ensuring that our approach was collaborative: with an ethos of collegiate collaboration pivotal in our work. Our conversations were also critical to ensuring that we optimised the learning outcomes for all students. In this way we adopted an action learning cycle of plan, act and reflect to inform future practice.

4 Our Observations of the Student Experience

4.1 Mentees

In our many discussions about the needs and progress of the mentees the authors noted that issues of isolation and intercultural communication represented key challenges. Adjusting to Western ways of knowing and student centred active learning pedagogies also presented key challenges. Text based assessments were also challenging for students as they were required to adopt a linear approach to these assessments, (such as reports, analyses, research).

Added to the academic needs of students was their need to develop a sense of belonging and to build a connection with the local students. Transitioning into living in Melbourne also represented a key challenge.

In our conversations with the mentees what we learnt was that they perceived and experienced was that the mentoring program helped to:

- Foster a sense of belonging in the School
- Support their learning and academic literacies
- Enable understandings the nature and role of Construction Management in the Australian context
- Identify with their mentors as peers
- Feel safe in terms of seeking help
- Understand Australian culture through interactions with locals and longer term resident international students
- Understand different ways of learning and working such as group work

Students also identified that they would benefit from preparatory lessons in each subject area to assist with learning, session on study tips and services and supports at RMIT.

4.2 Mentors

Conversations with the mentors students identified that they perceived that participation in the mentoring program enhanced their professional practice skills such as professional communication, time management, inter cultural communication, leadership, and organisational capabilities. Mentors also expressed that their participation in the program fostered their own sense of belonging within the School and broader university. One of the goals of the program was to foster a reciprocal exchange between the two groups of students about Construction Management. This did not arise as an outcome, and warrants further investigation.

Mentors also expressed the view that participating in the program enabled them to feel that they were giving something back to the School, and that working with the mentees enabled a deeper understanding of the transitional needs of international students.

Some mentors in the program were international students who expressed that they wanted to support the mentees as they had faced their own significant challenges and were mindful of the need for targeted transitional support.

5 Our Reflections on Practice

Leadership of the mentoring program can be described as taking three different foci: Coordination, Teaching and Social. Coordination activities involved scheduling mentee meetings, scheduling academic study 'drop-in' sessions and planning of social activities. Such coordination activity revolved around meetings across the PCPM LEAD team which were held throughout the twelve week teaching period. In 2015 teaching related support activity involved the formulation of in-class activities which could involve LEAD mentors working with mentees, as well as other students. These activities sought to build the course related capabilities of Mentees as well as providing leadership opportunities for LEAD students. Other, less formal course related activity involved the supervision of 'drop-in' sessions whereby LEAD mentors could provide ongoing and needs based learning support to the mentees. This support included course queries and addressing challenges in utilising learning resources, such as Blackboard. Lastly, the PCPM leadership team were also involved in planned social activities such as cooking, lawn bowls and visits to local attractions. In this context, the leadership team acted more as facilitators of social interaction rather than as teachers. In all, staff participation in the program involved a wide range of interaction ranging from the formal to the informal, across a variety of settings and contexts.

Initial formation of the staff leadership group and coordination of program activities was undertaken in a collaborative mode. Decisions were taken based upon consultation arrived at by consensus. Decisions were generally taken at meetings which were arranged by the first author who was also program lead. The voluntary nature of staff participation helped in this regard as commitment to program goals was strong across the group.

Course related program activities provided a range of experiences for the leadership team. In transitioning to Construction Management in the Australian context and the PCPM learning environment, it was acknowledged that mentees would experience differences in the teaching and learning styles utilised in the Australian Higher Education context as compared to those used in their country of birth. To provide academic support in 2015 LEAD mentors were invited into a portion of the class to assist mentees (and other students) to complete an in-class exercise. These exercises needed to be carefully designed so as to leverage the discipline knowledge and capabilities of LEAD mentors as well as providing useful guidance to Mentees. Such in class mentoring limited scope for mentor involvement as it generally required that LEAD mentors had previously completed the course in which the Mentees were being guided. Upon reflection, the in-class approach achieved a mix of results. It provided useful mentoring for both mentees and the wider class cohort. It also highlighted the importance of clarifying the role and remit of the mentors so that they were not perceived as a supplement to the teacher.

Greater success was achieved through coordinated 'drop-in' sessions at which LEAD mentors were rostered to attend at a scheduled location on a fortnightly basis. Times and locations were advertised to the wider student group and reinforced via further email to Mentees. In general these sessions were well attended by Mentees and sometimes by other students. LEAD mentors were able to provide advice across a range of course topics, supported by one of the authors who could oversee the interaction and interject in areas of uncertainty. This more informal form of interaction was seen as useful for participating students who tended to view the LEAD mentors as offering 'best intent' advice rather than formally sanctioned advice when participating in the classroom context, described above. This more informal and inclusive environment seemed more useful in providing transitional support for Mentees who proactively sought it out. Obviously, those who did not attend these sessions did not receive this benefit (as opposed to the classroom model which accessed most, if not all, of the mentees).

Although social activities did not link directly to course related learning outcomes, they seemed to provide strong benefits to both the LEAD mentors and mentees. The compounding cultural challenges experienced by many mentees in the classroom have potential to detrimentally affect the student experience, particularly when the overall course environment is considered. In general, transitioning Mentees were provided with course exemptions for subjects that had previously completed, which tended to involve technical/mathematical competency. This left subjects that mainly related to language, argument and qualitative inquiry, subjects which present an additional challenge when undertaken in a second language. It was not so much these subjects represented a language challenge, rather that they reflected an imbalanced program which would typically involve a more even mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Within this environment student confidence in their new environment is arguably under challenge, making success in other fields such as social life particularly important.

Planned social activities such as lawn bowls at the Fitzroy Bowling Club and a cooking class at a staff members home helped provided a valuable social experience that enabled a two way cultural exchange, but more importantly reminded students that there is more to life than just what happens in the classroom. For Mentees this experience helped place their in-class experience within the wider context of their international experience. Importantly the social activities undertaken employed a structured component which helped get students talking and sharing in a non-threating way. Preparing a meal involving a mix of Chinese and local dishes was a particularly successful activity as it seemed to deliver an interactive, confidence-building social activity, while at the same time relieving students

of the pressure to sustain social interaction entirely on their own. While not an impediment for the authors, clearly these activities involve a commitment to undertaking program activities outside of the campus environment.

In carrying out the program activities described above, it was particularly useful to have a member of the leadership team from Chinese heritage involved. This involvement enabled communication between the remaining authors and mentee group to be enhanced, particularly through the use of social media applications like WeChat. Discussion between the Chinese born author and mentees also provided an authentic perspective which resonated with students who could relate to shared experiences of the Australian culture. Deeper awareness of issues such as cultural impediments to asking lecturers for clarification was gained. The drop in sessions were critical to fostering these inter cultural understandings.

A final observation and reflection related to mentee's perceptions of life post-graduation. For many mentees, initial expectations of life after graduation involved undertaking postgraduate study, usually a Masters degree. Mentees started shifting their goals toward achieving industry-related part-time work in the later years of study. This aspect was largely unanticipated by the Construction Management program and provides an opportunity for further program development in subsequent years. Such program development may involve the inclusion of some kind of industry relevant experience for mentees and LEAD mentors.

6 Where to From Here?

Further research will build on this initial pilot phase. Future research will capture and evaluate post participant data to be captured during 2017 and 2018 with the aim to systematically explore the impact of participating in the mentoring program for mentees and mentors. Future examination of the student experience includes an exploration of the transitional, social and academic benefits of the program for mentees and whether the program develops professional practice attributes for mentors. By building on this study further research is well positioned to contribute to knowledge of how to best serve the needs of transitioning international students and to also deepen understandings of the impact of mentoring on the student experience in higher education (for both mentees and mentors). Future evaluation of mentor's experiences of the model is closely aligned with RMIT's strategic focus on employability. For mentees, the literature documents many benefits which include to support transition into higher education, foster student belonging and support students to work across academic literacies (Christie, 2014). Although mentoring is conceptualised as a mutually beneficial relationship there is comparatively less understanding of mentors' experiences (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Wilbanks, 2011), including outcomes for university student mentors (Hughes, Boyd, & Dykstra, 2010). By also examining the mentor's experiences further research will contribute to this gap in the literature.

7 Conclusions

This paper has provided some insights into the complex nature of the challenges transitioning international students can experience and how models of voluntary peer mentoring can support student well-being and assist in enhancing and optimising the student learning experience. As discussed, the academic and social needs for transitioning international students are complex and challenging. This is particularly so in the current mass education system in higher education.

Our paper has highlighted the need to systemically investigate models of peer mentoring in higher education in ways which focus on the learning and impact for both mentors and mentees. We have

begun here to contribute to the literature which examines how to optimise support provided for the transitional, social and academic needs of the international cohort. Our reflections on practice highlight the need for our on-going and expanded research and the importance of sharing and deepening knowledge through the 'learningful conversations".

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