

Laying the Ground Work: Setting Up a Student Mentoring Programme

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RUNNING TITLE: LECTURER'S IMPRESSIONS OF A PROPOSED MENTORING PROGRAMME

KEYWORDS mentoring, lecturers, students, student support

ABSTRACT Universities in South Africa take the issue of student success and progression from one year level to next seriously. Following a high number of first entering students who were to repeat first year modules in a particular year at a South African University, the authors decided to conceptualise and pilot a student peer mentoring programme to assist the repeating students pass their modules. The purpose of this study was to establish lecturers' impressions on this pilot student academic mentoring programme and to enhance their positive understanding of a programme of this nature. Designed in the qualitative research design, the study made use of individual open conversations with academics to obtain their impressions and recommendations on the proposed programme. Data were analysed through content analysis of emerging themes. The study found that lecturers had varying views on the introduction of a mentoring programme. It concludes that it is important to involve all stakeholders from the onset when setting up a programme of this nature and recommends that the institution's teaching and learning centre should work closely with all affected stakeholders in the university before introducing new interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The first year of study at university is usually the most challenging for students in South African universities, some of whom are usually under-prepared and this has a significant bearing on whether these students progress to second year or drop out (Bunting 2004;Letseka and Maile 2008;Nelson et al.2009; Jacobs 2010; Wilson-Strydom 2010; Council on Higher Education 2010;Selesho 2012). Statistics on student attrition at first year level in South Africa for example, indicate that the dropout rate of the year 2000 cohort amounted to 30% (Bunting 2004). Similarly, as Selesho (2012) shows, in Australia there is a concern among Australian universities about the extent of first-year university student withdrawals. It is clear that universities need to put mechanisms in place to help their first entering students. As McInnis et al. (2000) cited in Nelson et al. (2009) show, the commitment of an institution to the student is a critical factor in retention and since attrition is highest amongst first year students, universities need to initiate, support and promote student personal, social and academic engagement in the early weeks of first year to retain students and stop the drift away from university life.

At the university under study, one of the authors analysed the first entering students' examination results for the year 2011 and found that 53% of those students would be repeating one or more first year modules in the following year. An intervention had to be put in place to assist first entering students in order to avoid a repetition of the scenario. It was with this in mind that the authors decided to introduce a student peer mentoring system in the university. The authors believed that, for such a system to succeed, winning over the support of lecturers and heads of departments was critical. The purpose of this study was therefore to market this initiative, establish lecturer's impressions on this intended pilot student academic mentoring programme and to get their buy in.

The need for the involvement of stakeholders before implementing innovations

Engagement with stakeholders as early as possible in decision-making right from conceptualisation to planning and implementation has been frequently cited as essential if participatory processes are to lead to high quality and durable decisions that stakeholders take ownership of (Mokoena 2011; Reed 2012;Wadesango 2012; Rabinowitz 2013). Rabinowitz (2013) points out that stakeholders "should be part of every phase of the work, so that they can both contribute and take ownership". The Civitas-initiative (2013) defines stakeholder

consultation as “...the integration of the opinions and concerns of relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. The aim is to make the decision-making process more transparent; to gather more input on which to base decisions; and to create support for the decisions that are made”.

Commenting on the importance of communication and consultation before introducing mentoring programmes, the University of Melbourne (2012:2) notes that “[o]pen communication is vital at all stages of the formal mentoring program... Everyone in the area, whether participating in the program or not, needs to know what the program involves, how it will work and why it is being implemented”. It is indeed important to consider other people’s concerns as their feelings and perceptions account for the success or failure of the decision (Wadesango 2012). Rabinowitz (2013:4) identifies some of the advantages of consulting stakeholders before implementing an innovation;

- It puts more ideas on the table than would be the case if the development and implementation of the effort were confined to a small group of like-minded people.
- It gains buy-in and support for the effort from all stakeholders by making them an integral part of its development, planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- It’s fair to everyone. All stakeholders can have a say in the development of an effort that may seriously affect them.
- It saves you from being blindsided by concerns you didn’t know about. If everyone has a seat at the table, concerns can be aired and resolved before they become stumbling blocks. Even if they can’t be resolved, they won’t come as surprises that derail the effort just when you thought everything was going well.
- It strengthens your position if there’s opposition. Having all stakeholders on board makes a huge difference in terms of political and moral clout.
- It increases the chances for the success of your effort. Identifying stakeholders and responding to their concerns makes it far more likely that your effort will have both the support it needs and the appropriate focus to be effective.

Based on the beliefs discussed above that decisions reached through consultation are more likely to succeed, the authors decided to consult with lecturers in the university who would be affected by the proposed student academic peer mentoring program to get their input and buy in before piloting the initiative.

The concept of ‘mentoring’

As this study examines lecturer's impressions on an intended mentoring programme, a brief discussion of the concept of mentoring is in order. Oltmann (2009) avers that the 'mentoring' has become a buzz word in organisations, both in higher education and business contexts, and it has brought about positive results within these contexts. Another positive impact the concept 'mentoring' has is its versatility to be attached to varying activities that share a goal of empowering. Oltmann (2009) outlines four different models of mentoring. The didactic model aims at assisting someone to improve their academic performance. The entrepreneurial model is meant for less experienced workers to learn the ropes of an organisation from senior colleagues wherein they observe the moves of their seniors. The collegial model is evident when a professional becomes a role model to freshmen in their demonstration of professional activities and the friendship model encourages the development of friendship between the mentor and the mentee. The one common feature that these models share is their role to serve as empowering tools in educational contexts and also in the workplace. The mentor in all instances inducts the mentee into a given community of practice.

Mentoring as an intervention strategy to curb low pass rate

Mentoring has proven itself to be an effective support strategy in bringing about improvement in learning, work performance, confidence in participation etcetera. Some of the contexts where mentoring has proven to be effective include the teaching profession where teachers were mentored to become effective head teachers and managers (MGSLG, 2009). As a result of the positive effect it has brought about in social settings, mentoring is beginning to gain popularity in the higher education context to help address issues such as curbing a low pass rate. Historically, student support has been extensively used in the form of tutorials, mentoring or supplemental instructions for different reasons; such as reflective and reflexive practice (Ranshaw, 2009), to foster empowerment and confidence in making mature and responsible decisions by students (University Campus Suffolk, 2012), for improved performance in traditionally difficult modules (UKZN, 2010). But the common goal that they share is that of providing educational support for improved performance.

Conceptualised mentoring programme in the university under study

Mentoring in the university under study is relatively new and it is synonymous to tutoring. A handful of departments have been involved in student support initiatives but have not been following a formal system. A number of those who have been involved in student support have used the concept 'tutoring' in which the activities have often been an extension of the

main lectures. These have designed their own academic support programmes guided by their needs and human capacity. The activities were not being coordinated from a central office. With the establishment of a centre that oversees teaching and learning activities in the entire university, a formal mentoring programme was conceptualised. As already alluded to in the previous section that a mentoring initiative was conceptualised at the university under study for first entering students and since this was the first formal student support initiative in the university under study, a lot of ground work was required and benchmarking with other universities in South Africa had to be done. The institution under study is a rural based comprehensive university situated physically far from most other institutions that are in cities or big towns. The student profile is composed of mainly what could be considered as an 'underprepared' cohort for higher education studies who mostly come from poor family backgrounds. By February 07, 2014 about 7468 students had received confirmation of funding from National Student Financial Aid Scheme(NSFAS) at the University under study which had a total enrolment of 11 000 in 2013. This is an indication that more than half of the student population rely on bursaries, loans and other forms of financial assistance. For this reason, a mentoring programme that would suit the context had to be thought of carefully taking into consideration both poor infrastructure as well as lack of infrastructure that caters for mentoring or tutoring activities.

The institution secured a reasonable amount of funds from government to introduce a mentoring programme as a result of the worrying failure rate of first entering students in the university. The funds cover mentor training and payment of at least 40 mentors per school over a period of three years. The initial agreement was that the HEMIS office of the university would assist in identifying students 'at risk'. These are students who are repeating a module or more in their first year of study. These students would be linked to a mentor who is a senior student (final year or post-graduate student). They would meet for a period of not more than two hours per week to discuss content matters of the problem module. Since mentors are senior students, a strategy to avoid overwhelming them with work was devised. It was then agreed that mentors would work with a maximum of five mentees throughout a semester. The mentor and the mentees were encouraged to agree on a topic that they would discuss in their next mentoring session. Mentors were then also encouraged to attend the main lecture sessions of the modules they were responsible for in mentoring. The motive behind this was that mentors would revise the content of the modules which would make it easier for them to make a meaningful contribution during mentoring sessions. Another

interesting aspect was that all trained mentors would also be trained in life skills to ensure that they provided meaningful support to the mentees.

The purpose of the study was to establish lecturer impressions on the intended pilot student academic mentoring programme and how the Academic Development Unit sold the idea of introducing a mentoring programme.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm

The study adopted a qualitative approach where conversations were held with academics without any predetermined set of structured questions. A qualitative research study is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The guiding question in the researchers' minds was what the academics' impressions were of the proposed programme and to note down any recommendations.

Population and sampling

After the analysis of the first entering students' examination results, 10 modules with the highest number of repeaters were identified as modules at risk. A purposive sample of seven lecturers teaching the identified 'at risk' modules was targeted for the study. In purposive sampling, sampled units are selected for a specific purpose on which the researcher decides (Holloway & Wheeler 2010). In the present study, the specific purpose was to set up a mentoring programme for students 'at risk' and therefore the lecturers teaching those modules were considered 'information-rich' sources because of their work with students who were repeating the modules. The pilot mentoring programme was to be conducted with these 'at risk' modules before being rolled out to the whole university.

Participants sampled for this study were lecturers in Mathematics, African Languages, English Communication Skills, Geography, Ecology and Resource Management, Geo Information Sciences and Management Sciences. Since data was collected during the exams marking period, participating lecturers, through their Heads of Departments (HoDs), were visited in their offices. In only one case the HoD took part in the conversation together with the course lecturer.

Data collection

Visits to lecturers' offices

The authors set appointments with lecturers sampled for interviews for this study. This was done telephonically by the authors themselves. Participants were visited in their offices by the authors. This was done to ensure that they were interviewed in spaces in which they felt most comfortable. Prior to the visit lecturers were forwarded an electronic copy of the proposed student mentoring guidelines that had been drafted by the Deputy Vice Chancellor-Academic. These academics were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the document before the meeting took place. In cases where there was more than one lecturer teaching the module, a combined session was held with such lecturers, while in cases where there was only one lecturer taking the module, an individual conversation was held with the lecturer.

Conversation about the previous year's exam results

The conversation started with the authors explaining the results of the analysis about the previous year's first entering students examination results in that particular module, followed by the explanation of the proposed student academic peer mentoring initiative. The authors then invited a response from the lecturers on the proposed programme as a starting point for the discussion. While the sessions did not take the form of interviews, some questions were used to guide the conversations. Guiding questions included ascertaining the lecturers' views on the introduction of a mentoring programme, and whether or not they thought such a program would work in the university? What challenges did they think the programme might face and how could these be resolved?

Data analysis

Using content analysis, the authors analysed data gathered from meetings with the lecturers. After seeing what themes emerged from the unstructured discussions (Leibowitz et al. 2013), the inductive approach was adopted. Elo & Kynga (2007:109) assert that the inductive approach is recommended in situations where there is not enough background around an issue. Since there was no former background about student academic mentoring at the University in question, one could safely assume that the inductive approach was ideal for this study. This was followed by a meeting of the two authors where identified emerging themes were compared and a final set of themes was drafted. For illustrative purposes, some of the verbatim responses from respondents are presented in the results section.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The authors took the responsibility of openness in the study. They sought permission from the interviewees to have this content published. Although there was no consent form that was handed to the participants, they were assured of the confidentiality of the matter.

RESULTS

The conversations held with academics from different schools and departments brought about two stances by academics. Some felt positive about the idea of introducing a mentoring programme, others appreciated the idea but raised concerns regarding lack of structural support while others yet were hostile to the idea, accusing the University of just trying to copy and export ideas from other universities. The results are presented below. The emerging themes from the conversations held with academics are captured in table 1 below:

Sub-categories	Generic categories (appreciation/concerns raised)	Main category
• Calibre of hardworking students will be strengthened • Helpful to returning students • Solve current understaffing challenges	positive about the introduction of a mentoring programme	Academics' impression of a mentoring programme
• Manual drawing of university teaching time table to be addressed first • Current student-lecturer ratio issues to be resolved first • Infrastructure development to be addressed first • University has no agreed workload for both staff and students, this should be	support the introduction of a mentoring programme while still having some reservations attached	

addressed first • No scientific study conducted to confirm the need for a programme of this nature • No administrative assistants in academic departments - this to be addressed first • Extra burden for lecturers because they are understaffed and are responsible for admin duties		
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Table 1: Results of academics' impressions of a mentoring programme

Support for the introduction of a mentoring programme

Lecturers in this category raised contradicting reasons why they found it important for the institution to introduce a mentoring programme.

Lecturer 1

This lecturer was positive about the idea of introducing a new mentoring programme. He cited several reasons for supporting this initiative. One was that if mentors were appointed to augment teaching activities, that would be better because tutors had thus far been appointed in his department. Their role, however, was to carry out administrative duties because the department had no administrative support, yet academics were fewer than required. *Lecturer 1* had this to say:

“Tutors are appointed but for assisting in the administration of the department, yet the current staff-student ratio is 1:250 yet the recommended ratio by the Department of Higher Education and Training is 1:25.”

Coming from the student support perspective, the authors are not comfortable with the idea of using students in providing only administrative support to departments. This creates a negative imprint for both the students concerned and the department itself. The challenge is that the students providing admin support are not necessarily gaining disciplinary knowledge which they could share with their peers during support sessions. The concept of ‘tutor’ loses meaning along the way because while these students are appointed as tutors, yet their job

description is not aligned with the meaning of their title. Renshaw (2009:96) defines tutoring as follows: “Tutoring is an intentional, goal-oriented activity aimed at fostering the understanding and learning of knowledge through the process of questioning, critical dialogue”. The cited definition brings in the idea of instilling a sense of deep learning rather than simply the provision of administrative support by tutors. The risk of using students as admin supporters is that they end up being reduced to messengers, typists, make photocopies etcetera, because the lecturer cannot trust them with bigger responsibilities. If students were to access departmental official and confidential documents, this could lead to leakage of important information. The concern is student access to the department’s confidential documents. As a lecturer, how does one monitor tutors’ access to confidential departmental information?

Secondly *Lecturer 1* commended the calibre of Univen students who were seen to be hard working and willing to learn despite their poor schooling background. This positive commentary was raised by a lecturer who had worked as a lecturer in another rural-based institution for a period of 25 years before joining Univen. In essence the lecturer saw this from a comparative perspective which, in our view was an important observation which is worth being popularised in the University; the reason being that lecturers in this institution believe that the institution attracts mostly weak students who could not meet admission points in other institutions. He appreciated the commitment that his students showed towards learning. This is what he had to say:

“With the calibre of students we have at Univen, that is hard working students, we should invest in this strength and provide the best learning environment we possibly can.”

Lecturer 2

This lecturer brought a contradictory reason for introducing a mentoring programme at Univen. Unlike lecturer 1 who felt the programme would strengthen the pool of committed students the University admits, lecturer 2 felt that the University was populated with weak students mainly those who left school in the late 1990s. These were seen as deserving students for a mentoring programme. These adult learners appeared to be failing to cope with university demands and needed more attention than the students coming directly from high school. The lecturer showed a strong sense of frustration. This was highlighted as follows:

“The registration period of 2012 has seen a large intake of students who finished school/matric in the mid-1990s. This led to a number of students with an exaggerated amount of academic problems amongst students.”

Unlike with *lecturer 1*'s intentions, *lecturer 2*'s view on the introduction of a mentoring programme was more on the advancement of disciplinary knowledge than on academic or admin staff shortages. This view is commended from the student support perspective. A programme of this nature should first and foremost help in the advancement of disciplinary knowledge to 'at risk' students before imparting any other skills such as administrative skills to these students. As university teachers we should respect the role that universities should play and also the importance of students' learning experience during their stay at an institution.

Support for the introduction of a mentoring programme with reservations

Similar to what academics in the first category mentioned, academics who admitted that there was a need for a mentoring programme but with reservations, felt that mentoring would only succeed if certain structural issues were first addressed.

Lecturer 3

“The mentoring programme would be an extra burden to academics because one would not want a situation where students coach others without the lecturer's supervision.”

The same point made above by *lecturer 1* is reiterated here. While *lecturer 1* feels extra hands from mentors would ease teaching pressure on academics, this one feels that as long as there is shortage of human resources a programme of this nature won't work because that would mean poor monitoring of activities by module lecturers. This point is well supported by the student support team. Without monitoring the purpose of the programme would be defeated. *Lecturer 1* has confidence in the calibre of Univen students hence he believes that a mentoring programme will succeed and that senior students, especially postgraduate students, can serve as mentors. On the other hand *lecturer 3* is concerned about the quality assurance of the mentoring programme, hence he feels such a mentoring programme cannot be run without proper monitoring or strong presence of the module lecturer.

Lecturer 4

“Though I appreciate your intentions to run a mentoring programme for first year students, I think this will be a fruitless intervention if the issue of clashes in the main time table is not resolved urgently.”

This participant shows concern with the University main time table. He argues that although introducing a mentoring programme is a move in the right direction, it is not going to solve students' performance in this institution because the main time table for the whole institution is in the hands of an individual who draws it manually. With the growing number of programmes and modules at the university, it is becoming cumbersome to have a practical time table planned for manually. The current time table creates endless clashes which naturally lead to poor attendance of classes.

Opposing views to the introduction of a mentoring programme

Lecturer 5 condemned the University for displaying a tendency to adopt the pragmatic social science research approach, noting that the University in question had a tendency to copy from other institutions as shown in the quotation below:

“UHL has a tendency to copy from other institutions; we should learn to customise projects according to UHL needs and situation.”

In this instance however there was research based evidence that there was a need for a mentoring programme at the University as an analysis of examination results had been conducted and indicated that more than half the first entering students would be repeating a module the following year. What also seemed to be the issue according to *Lecturer 5* was that the student support unit of the University outsourced funds externally to introduce a mentoring programme without first consulting lecturers to hear their views. She argued that the University should learn to be original, that is, the institution should learn to customise its projects according to its own needs and not according to trends seen elsewhere.

Lecturer 6, instead of focusing on the mentoring programme that was being proposed, took a swipe at the University for failing to come up with a workload model that would see lecturers carrying fair teaching loads. This is what *lecturer 6* had to say:

“There is no university wide agreed workload at Univen.”

There is need for the university to resolve the workload issue as this creates frustrations among lecturers and leads to demotivation.

This was echoed by *Lecturer 4* who felt that coupled with the current shortage of administrative assistants, the mentoring programme would simply create an extra burden for academics.

DISCUSSION

Support for the introduction of a mentoring programme

As shown in the results section, lecturers in this category have differing motivations for introducing a mentoring programme. Some feel a mentoring programme will help ease their current teaching workload. There seems to be a misunderstanding on the part of these lecturers regarding what mentoring is, as they perceive it to be a programme that will allocate more people for actual teaching. Mentoring, as the literature shows (Mcghie 2012; Hatfield (2011) Husband and Jacobs (2009; Heirdsfield et al. 2008) is meant to provide additional space in the absence of the lecturer where peers can create a supportive and safe environment where students can learn to speak openly. Citing Parsloe and Wray (2000), Husband and Jacobs (2009:231) advise against using mentors as teachers when they argue that, “Mentors need not be teachers. Although there is a tendency for mentors to try and teach, this should be discouraged.” Rather than using mentors as teachers, Hatfield (2011:1) avers that, “... in order for students to succeed as whole human beings, students need additional attention and care outside of the classroom.” Mentoring should thus be seen to be complementing what already takes place in lecture rooms and not as a replacement for it.

Another view supporting mentoring from the findings was that the University had seen an upsurge in the intake of adult learners and that a mentoring programme would help these students to cope with University demands. This finding is similar to findings by Mcghie (2012) in Australian higher education, who found student peer mentoring was particularly important and effective for international and mature students in finding a social group and practicing English language skills and broader academic skills.

Support for the introduction of a mentoring programme with reservations

Academics in this category appreciate the idea of a mentoring programme but they strongly believe that the existing structural challenges will not give room to the success of the programme, therefore before the programme is rolled out certain structural challenges need to be addressed. The issue of conducting an empirical study before a programme is implemented should be taken seriously to minimise varying expectations by stakeholders. The idea of a

mentoring programme might be brilliant but the other structural effects should be taken into consideration before implementation. Cultural effects also cannot go unnoticed when bringing about changes in an organisation like a university. Not only are cultural and structural effects important, but personal issues from individuals should be taken seriously.

Opposition to the introduction of a mentoring programme

One interesting finding emerging from the study was the rejection of the mentoring programme as a mere copy-cat from other institutions and the accusation that the University was guilty of importing inappropriate interventions unsuitable for its own context. This lecturer seems to be unaware of the benefits of benchmarking in higher education. Instead of viewing benchmarking as mere copying from other institutions, Achim et al. (2012) argue that, “benchmarking strengthens an institution’s ability to successfully ..; measure and compare, i.e. how well are other higher education institutions in the sector performing, ... discover new ideas, looking out strategically; learn from others how to improve.” It should be noted however that according to Achim et al. (2012), despite the majority of positive recommendations for using benchmarking and successful examples of its current use, there are critics of its applicability to higher education. “The stated objections include the belief that benchmarking is merely a strategy for marginally improving existing processes, that it is applicable only to administrative processes (or only to teaching practices), is a euphemism for copying, is lacking innovation, or that it can expose institutional weaknesses” Achim et al. (2012:856). There could therefore be justification in the fears of these academics for borrowed interventions from elsewhere to be blindly implemented.

Ownership of an idea often comes when participants are consulted from the onset. The finding from this study that lecturers were only consulted after funding had already been obtained and an intervention already conceptualised is cause for concern. As Rabinowitz (2013) shows in order to get support for interventions, buy-in and support for the effort must be sought from all stakeholders by making them an integral part of its development, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Approaching the academics with a complete product only to get buy in for implementation can indeed falter.

CONCLUSION

There is evidence that some form of student support is necessary at UHL. However it is also true that there is a sense of doubt amongst academics that the intervention might not work. It

appears from lecturers' concerns that the institution was not ready for such a big programme to be implemented. With the next Council on Higher Education quality enhancement project which will focus on teaching and learning, there is a need for academics to embrace interventions such as peer mentoring that enhance student success. It appears that academics in this institution have difficulty in embracing change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to allay fears shown by lecturers in laying the groundwork for a mentoring programme, the authors make the following recommendations to the teaching and learning committee of the University:

- An empirical study is the key to providing evidence that will convince lecturers of the need for setting up a mentoring programme. The University is advised to involve the lecturers in such a study in order to promote ownership of the findings. Students, through the Student Representative Council (SRC) could also be brought in to get their views on any new proposed programmes meant to benefit them.
- That lecturers be involved from the onset in the conceptualisation of any interventions meant to benefit the students they are teaching. Without such involvement, lecturers are likely to see such interventions as impositions and reject them.
- Where benchmarking is conducted, lecturers should be included in the benchmarking teams in order to see for themselves the best practice from other institutions.
- The University should take the matter of assisting staff in change management. Lecturers could be encouraged to attend change management short courses as an up skilling technique.

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