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Peer mentorship and positive effects on student mentor and mentee retention and academic success

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Abstract This study examined how the introduction of peer mentorship in an undergraduate health and social welfare programme at a large northern university affected student learning. Using an ethnographic case study approach, the study draws upon data collected from a small group of mentors and their mentees over a period of one academic year using interviews, reflective journals, assessment and course evaluation data.

Analysis of the data collected identified a number of key findings: peer mentorship improves assessment performance for both mentee and mentor; reduces stress and anxiety, enhances participation and engagement in the academic community, and adds value to student outcomes.

Key terms: peer mentor; engagement; performance; learning; higher education.

Introduction

The broad aim of this research was to establish the effectiveness and nature of peer mentoring within an undergraduate health and social welfare course within a large university in the north of England. The peer mentor programme had been introduced to enhance the learning experience of students and as a response to the institution drive to increase retention and enhance standards and performance. The specific objective of the research was to assess the effect of introducing peer mentorship on learning and assessment performance. Existing literature (Breen et al., 2001; McLean, 2004; Campbell and Campbell, 2007; Flumerfeldt et al., 2007; Lennox-Terrion, 2010) suggests there is little doubt that mentorship will contribute positively to the undergraduate's experience in higher education. However, there has been scant attention to the impact it has upon successful learning and academic success. Jacobi (1991) asserts that academic success is largely assumed rather than demonstrated, and more than a decade later

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Paglis et al. (2006) indicate that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that mentoring adds value to student outcomes.

The research presented in this paper identifies and explores the effect of the peer mentoring process upon the learning of the mentee and the mentor. The findings presented suggest that mentorship can have a positive impact upon the learning experience by improving assessment performance, reducing stress and anxiety, enhancing participation and engagement in the academic community and adds value to student outcomes. Consequently, this study challenges the views of Jacobi (1991) and Paglis et al. (2006).

Whilst there is a suggestion (McLean, 2004; Campbell and Campbell, 2007; Flumerfelt et al., 2007) that mentorship as an 'in reach' activity will contribute to enhanced development and the reduction of stress and anxiety of undergraduates, there is little evidence to illustrate the impact peer mentorship has upon learning. There is a dearth of literature that investigates the effect of mentorship upon the students' acquisition of knowledge at undergraduate level. Jacobi (1991) in an extensive critical review of the literature, proposed that the link between mentorship and the promotion of academic success is largely assumed rather than demonstrated. She suggests that the mentoring process may be 'driven by nothing more than a sincere desire to help students succeed' and that 'mentoring remains an intriguing, but untested, strategy for enhancing undergraduate success' (Jacobi, 1991:528).

In order to resolve this, Jacobi called for empirical research to be conducted in this area. However, despite the continued growth in the number of publications included in the British Education Index and Education Resources Information Database that have the key term "mentor" in their title (98 in 1988, in 1998 127, and 219 in 2011) the research community has not responded to this challenge. This view is shared by Piper and Piper (2000) and by Campbell and Campbell (2007) who suggest, that much of the published research regarding mentorship is concerned with process, and how it is perceived by its participants, rather than outcomes. This, we would suggest has contributed to confusion concerning the concept of successful mentorship. A longitudinal study investigating whether mentorship had an influence upon student outcomes by Paglis et al, (2006) indicated that there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that mentoring adds value to student outcomes. Although there is some evidence in their study to suggest that mentorship does have a positive influence on self-efficacy.

Campbell and Campbell (2007) explored the long term academic effects of a mentoring process on courses in a large American university that had a low first-year retention rate. At the end of the first year of study those who had been mentored had a higher 'grade point average' and had completed more units of learning than those students who did not have a mentor.

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However, upon graduation these results become less significant. When reviewing academic records, they illustrated that mentored students completed more units over their course of study than non-mentored students, and had a higher "grade point advantage," suggesting that mentorship does have a benefit on student learning. However, there are significant flaws in Campbell and Campbell's study:

- No explanation of the interpretation of the term "Grade point Average" and Units of learning.
- No explanation of the educational background and profile of participants in the respective groups.

Significantly, Campbell and Campbell (2007) illustrate that if academic mentoring is successful, the mentee will be more comfortable in the education environment, have a greater motivation to succeed, and have higher aspirations than those that have not been mentored. The findings of Rodger and Tremblay's (2003) longitudinal study also support Campbell and Campbell (2007), suggesting a link between the mentor's role and engaging the mentee in the academic community.

Alred and Garvey (2000) and McLean (2004) assert that mentorship is beneficial to the learner's development, although they do not suggest specifically what these benefits are. However, they focus upon the benefits of the relationship between mentor and mentee. Crucially, the mentor enables the mentee to engage in the academic community quicker, and more efficiently. This process of becoming a participant in the community is viewed very much as a socio cultural process in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Thus, learning is equated with the process in which participation moulds knowledge and identity. Alred and Garvey (2000) appraise the literature concerning mentoring in the context of knowledge productivity and introduce the notion of the "learning landscape" to illustrate the shift from instructor led learning to a much more social and holistic model of learning in which the learner is at the centre of this process. The literature alludes to the value of mentorship within the context of higher education, and gives emphasis to placing the student at the centre of the learning process. The investigative processes employed within this study explores the impact peer mentoring has upon learning.

The Study

The case study explored the effect of a peer mentorship on a group of first and third year students on an undergraduate health and social welfare course.

The peer mentoring programme employed is based upon the recommendations of a model designed by Drew et al. (2000) and Breen et al. (2001) who emphasised the importance of using senior students to

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support junior students within higher education. The key features of the peer mentorship model adopted are:

- All third year students studying Health and Social Welfare are invited to apply for the role of mentor to a first year student on the health and social welfare programme. All would be volunteers.
- All first year students are informed about the peer mentoring programme and invited to apply.
- Participation is dependent upon an appropriate match with a mentee/mentor.
- Matching would take place based upon interests, age and areas of study, based upon the completion of a simple questionnaire.
- Each participant mentor would also be mentored in the role by a member of the academic team.
- Both mentee and mentor would receive a half day training for the role during induction/Freshers' week and work to an agreed 'contract' that outlines the role and responsibility of each party within the relationship.
- The relationship lasts for one academic year and includes contact via e-mail and face to face contact on campus. The frequency and duration of meetings is mutually agreed but should involve no more than 12 hours contact over the year.

In total, nine third years out of the cohort size of forty seven volunteered to be mentors, which enabled nine first year students to be matched with a mentor. Those participating in the study were representative of the Course demography:

- High incidence of Female students with children (70%)
- High incidence of mature students (80%)
- Diverse cultural backgrounds (40%)
- High incidence of local (home) students (90%)
- High number of students from lower socio economic groups (65%).

Using a case study approach, data was collected in three phases using semi-structured interview, questionnaire, reflective journals, student assessment and student survey data. In the first phase each mentee and mentor was interviewed prior to commencing the programme. The second phase required both mentee and mentor to maintain a reflective journal, providing a series of narratives describing key incidents and meetings held between mentor and mentee. The third phase that was conducted at the end of the peer mentor programme included further semi-structured interviews, collation of mentee and mentor assessment data and course evaluation data.

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Data collected from interview and the reflective journals was analysed through a coding process by categorising the concepts that emerged as each transcript and journal was reviewed. This notion of coding was derived from the grounded theory approach postulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). There is a multitude of interpretations of coding; however the most popular interpretation and the method utilised in this study is that which uses a 'cut and paste' method, where key excerpts from the narrative are 'cut' and then 'pasted' according to key headings that have been identified in relation to themes generated from the data (assessment, participation, engagement, stress and anxiety). Simple statistical data was collected from student profiles, identifying assessment performance of mentee and mentor and also those students who had not participated in the peer mentoring programme enabling comparisons to be made. End of year course evaluation data describing student satisfaction and student retention was also collated enabling a comparison of satisfaction and retention between the two groups.

Findings and discussion

The findings presented in this section identify and explore key factors that affect the learning experience of the mentee and the mentor in relation to the peer mentoring process.

Improving Assessment Performance

The most significant feature of this case study is the positive impact that the mentorship process has made upon the assessment performance for each mentee and mentor's assessed work. Data drawn from the interviews illustrate that mentees frequently commented upon the positive influence the mentor made on performance for example:

> [M]y mentor kept me motivated and was able to point me to the right tutor for help my grade are really improving (Mentee C)

> [I]ts good to bounce ideas off my mentor rather than my tutor he really helps me to get to grips with stuff...I think I'm a lot better because of him (Mentee I)

Whilst these comments suggest enhanced performance and are consistent with previous research (McLean, 2004; Campbell and Campbell, 2007; Flumerfelt et al., 2007), this study is distinctive, as academic achievement was measured by calculating the mean percentage score of each mentee and mentor for each module and then comparing it to the module mean score for the whole cohort of students. Mentored students achieved on average nine more percentage points than those without a mentor, which is almost a full grade within the current UK degree classification system.

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Academic achievement of the mentors was measured by calculating the mean percentage score of each module, and then comparing it to the mean score for the students who had been acting as a mentor, repeating the same process undertaken with the mentees. These students achieved five percentage points mean mark difference to those not acting as a mentor. In this case, it can be postulated that mentorship does have a positive effect upon assessment of performance both for the mentee and the mentor, contributing to a distinctly higher classification.

However, there is an issue concerning the validity and reliability of the data collected. Firstly, the relatively low number of participants. The mentor group comprised only 9 dyads, thus in terms of generalisability and comparability, application is limited due to the relatively small sample size. None the less, these findings do reflect those of Campbell and Campbell's (2007) large scale longitudinal study which indicates that mentorship does enhance academic performance for the mentee. Disappointingly, Campbell and Campbell (2007) did not explore the effect upon the academic performance of the mentor.

The second issue concerning reliability relates to the performance of the mentors. Determining whether the enhanced performance by mentors is a direct result of the mentoring process is not clear. These students may have performed at this level without participation, and they had been the 'high achieving' and 'motivated' students throughout their previous study. In an attempt to substantiate the possible link between performance and mentorship, their academic performance over the preceding two years was compared to the cohort average. Following completion of this exercise, it was identified that the mentors in the preceding two years of study had performed within the parameter of the cohort average. This suggests that the learning experience of participants had been positively influenced by the mentoring process and not by intrinsic factors, thus enhancing the reliability of the data collected. Examining the mentor's results from year one and two, the mentors did perform better, achieving a mark higher than their predicted mark set at the end of year two. Nonetheless, it can be postulated that these students were more motivated as reflected by their desire to act as a mentor (McLean, 2004) and therefore, more motivated to work towards higher marks in order to present themselves as positive role models.

A further positive feature of the mentorship process explored is in relation to academic performance and Value Added Score (VAS). This score is a measure of performance that compares degree classifications against entry qualifications. There is an expectation that the minimum value added score for a student on graduation is 1. A score less than one indicates a negative value, whilst a score more than one is a positive value added score. However, this data is only available for the mentors as the calculation can only be performed by comparing progress from entry to graduation. It is identified by comparing the VAS and the mean assessment scores that

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mentors perform better than those who do not participate in the scheme. The average VAS for the graduating year was 1.8 and those that participated as mentors VAS was 2.6. Whilst concern exists that the mentors' enhanced academic performance was due to the more able students participating as mentors, the scores mitigate this by illustrating that mentors themselves performed better as a result of the programme. Their performance was above what was expected based on their entry qualifications, supporting the assertion that the experience of mentoring also benefits the academic performance of the mentor. The reasons for this are far from clear, unlike those of the mentee.

However, a further suggestion could be that by acting as role models they wanted to demonstrate success by setting an example. Importantly however, one recurring theme was observed; the role of the mentor gave them enhanced confidence and belief that they could make a difference to their mentee's studies, and that they too had the ability to succeed. Not only has the mentorship process helped the mentee develop, it has also contributed to the development of the mentor, developing self-motivation, communication and organisation skills, and confidence, thus reinforcing the benefits to all parties involved in the learning process and illustrating the value of reciprocity within the mentoring relationship.

Campbell and Campbell (2007) illustrate the benefits of mentoring on academic performance and suggest that if academic mentoring is successful, the mentee will be more comfortable in the education environment, have a greater motivation to succeed, and have higher aspirations than those that have not been mentored. The preliminary findings of Rodger and Tremblay (2003) also support the findings of Campbell and Campbell (2007). This suggests that there is a link between the mentor's role and engaging the mentee in the academic community.

Enhancing participation and engagement

The findings from this study suggest that mentorship influences the learning process by enabling participation and engagement. An important part of this case study, as reflected by the approach chosen, was to explore how learning was affected and why mentoring affects the learning. This can be seen in part, by examining the interview transcripts presented which suggest there are factors associated with mentorship that influence learning and the acquisition of knowledge, these are:

- Support
- Earlier engagement with the academic community

For example:

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> My (mentor) really made me feel part of the Course, I met lots of other students studying my degree...she really helped me get over my nerves settling in. (Mentee A)
>
> My mentor really helped me to settle into uni, and get over some problems I had, she always know who to contact and what to say... (Mentee F)

Alred and Garvey (2000), Breen (2000), McLean (2004) and the National Audit Office (2008) argue that early involvement and engagement with the academic and social life of the institution lessens the risk of students dropping out of undergraduate degree courses, and also contributes to the success of the student's development of knowledge. Alred and Garvey (2000) and McLean (2004) further suggest that mentorship enables the mentee to engage in the academic community quicker and more efficiently, emphasising the role of engagement described by Lave and Wenger (1991).

The importance of this can be seen when the work of Lave and Wenger, (1991) and the notion of 'situated learning' is considered. Alred and Garvey, (2000) introduce the notion of the 'learning landscape' as a scaffold to illustrate the context of knowledge productivity. This scaffold represents the social and cultural influences that shape the learner, and illustrates the shift to a social and holistic model of the learning landscape. There are seven key areas that are identified as part of the learning landscape by Alred and Garvey (2000) as having particular relevance to the mentoring relationship in this setting:

- The acquisition of subject matter expertise and skill directly related to the scope of target competence.
- Learning to solve problems by using domain specific expertise.
- Developing reflective and critical thinking skills conducive to locating paths leading to new knowledge and its application.
- Securing communication skills that provide access to the knowledge network of others and those that enrich the learning environment.
- Procure skills that regulate motivation and affections related to learning.
- Promote stability to enable specialisation, cohesion and integration.
- Causing creative turmoil to instigate improvement and innovation.

(Alred and Garvey, 2000:264).

In order for this landscape to succeed in knowledge production, the student needs to be at the centre of the learning process and engaged within the community. It is this process, Alred and Garvey (2000) suggest that learning in, and through the mentoring relationship enables the knowledge

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production of the individual to be enhanced. The findings from this study suggest that mentoring facilitates this process.

One role of the peer mentor that this study illustrates is that the mentor enabled the mentee (the first year student) to participate in academic life much earlier, attaining the 'subject matter expertise and skill and in developing reflective and critical thinking skills conducive to new knowledge' (Alred and Garvey, 2000:264).

Those students who had a mentor approached their studies with more success and confidence than those who did not have a mentor. Illustrating this, mentee C commenting that:

> my mentor really helped me to settle into university life, we actually attended a couple of seminars together...I wouldn't have gone to these without the support of T.

Mentee H explained that her mentor helped her:

> to reflect upon my learning and look at ways of linking this to other modules on the course. This was really helpful.

The relationship between the mentor and the mentee contributes to breaking down some of the barriers associated with stigma and reluctance that inhibit participation, thus enabling the mentee to rapidly access the support mechanisms available and engage with academic activities and securing communication skills that provide access to the knowledge of others (Alred and Garvey, 2000:264).

The academic skills tutor within our department is a relatively new specialist appointment whose role is to support students develop their writing skills, for example constructing essays, referencing and developing analytical skills. However, there is reluctance amongst students to seek help from this specialist tutor due to the stigma associated with seeking support. One particular mentee associated this with remedial work conducted at her secondary school and another who recognised the value of this support, although associated it with students whose first language was not English.

This mentee identified that they perceived the role of the academic skills tutor to be available for those students who had difficulties, and emphasised that that she would only go if she was told to, due to the perceived stigma associated with seeking this support. The mentor encouraged the mentee to attend activities available to assist learning by helping the mentee overcome the barriers associated with the stigma, and improve awareness of the availability of support services such as from the academic skills tutor.

As mentee "E" describes:

> I thought that you would only go to [the academic skills tutor] if you had failed something, three of us went to see him because we were struggling with referencing...he put us on the right track, now we see

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> him whenever we need to... to be honest I wouldn't have used him unless my mentor had told me so. My mentor also uses him, so that's re-assuring.

These findings are supported by Drew et al. (2000) and Breen et al. (2001) who identified that the mentor could play a significant role in promoting awareness of the availability of such services.

Engaging and participating in both social and academic aspects of university life, was also seen to be a crucial feature, the data collected illustrates that the mentors actively encourage the mentee to make friends and engage with others, helping the mentee to settle into the social aspects of university life.

Whilst these are rather broad notions of the effects of learning, it is when considering the notion of 'inside knowledge' that the real impact upon learning begins to materialise. Stringer-Cawyer, Simonds and David, (2002:225) suggest that the process of mentoring facilitates socialisation, as mentees learn the 'ins and outs' of the organisation and adapt to the processes, values, social knowledge and expected behaviours inherent within the organisation. Early access to this inside knowledge would help the student to learn more effectively and to establish a stronger sense of belonging and participation within the organisation's community. For example, the early identification of strategies that work, who to contact for financial advice, what books to buy, how to use the interactive virtual learning environment, best times to visit the library, and enabling mentees to access short-cuts in the development of their work in order to help manage and organise the workload. The suggestion here is that the mentor enables the mentee's time to be used more productively and make best use of the resources available by accessing the 'inside knowledge' that the mentor possesses in terms of experience and successes. However, significantly this also linked to Bandura's (1997) notion of 'modelling' as the mentor provides a model of positive behaviour reflecting success and experience. Bandura, views 'modelling' as a powerful transmitter of values and attitudes, thus the mentor provides a role model that transmits a series of values and attitudes that are linked to successful learning, and a successful student to which the mentee can aspire. The mentees appeared to work harder in order to achieve higher grades reflecting enhanced motivation. However, data collected from the interviews indicated that the mentors had also become more directly involved in providing a degree of academic support.

Whilst this was not academic support directly involved with the assessment process, the extra support of the mentor provided the mentee with the encouragement to utilise the support strategies, for example use of academic skills tutors, personal tutor support, informal seminars, and optional library sessions that enhance student learning. It is this

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encouragement that could be a key influence upon successful learning in this situation. The basis of Lave and Wenger's (1991) assertion concerning knowledge productivity is rooted in their observation that learning is viewed as a form of participation and that the learner should be at the centre of the learning process. The central tenet of 'situated learning' is that learning, and the production of knowledge, is generated by the experience. Thus learning is equated with the process by which participation moulds knowledge and identity. It is participation in this community through engaging in the support strategies available and engaging with peers that enables in part, the mentee to access inside knowledge. Alred and Garvey (2000:265) suggest that it is this engagement with the learning process that gives impetus to the value of informal situated learning and within this context 'a mentor encourages persistence and effort' (Alred and Garvey, 2000: 267).

One way of doing this is by helping the mentee focus on the process of learning and on progress made rather than on their ability to do the tasks in hand. It is this that may offer an explanation. Self-efficacy is essential for student success, the belief that one can succeed is clearly linked to positive performance. Bandura and Locke (2003) emphasise the importance of self efficacy:

> Self-efficacy beliefs…affect whether individuals think in self-enhancing or self-debilitating ways, how well they motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties, the quality of their emotional well-being and their vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura and Locke, 2003:87).

Embracing a culture of success should aid students successful learning, as illustrated by Margolis (2005) who suggests that self-efficacy is essential and those students with strong self-efficacy are characterised by higher motivation, greater effort, persist longer and consequently achieve more. There is evidence within this study to suggest that the mentor contributed to the self-efficacy of mentees by procuring skills 'that regulate motivation and affections related to learning' (Alred and Garvey, 2000:264).

The importance of the role of the mentor in promoting self-efficacy was endorsed by a number of respondents. Mentees commented that they felt that their confidence had been enhanced by their mentors who gave them frequent encouragement and praise. This supports the view of Breen et al. (2000) who identified that a peer mentorship programme achieved its goals of providing emotional support, information and advice, extending friendship networks, orientation and reducing stress and anxiety. McLean (2004) also identified the benefits of peer mentorship in the learning context in reducing stress, anxiety and enabling the mentee to access support mechanisms to enhance the learning experience. Roberts (2000) also suggested in relation to self-efficacy, that the mentor enabled the mentee to discover latent abilities, growth in confidence, personal growth, increased

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awareness, increased effectiveness, self-actualisation and resonation, (Roberts, 2000:178).

Each of these seven consequences of mentorship is associated with reducing stress and anxiety in individuals promoting, 'stability to enable specialisation, cohesion and integration' (Alred and Garvey, 2000:264).

These findings support the findings of Roberts (2000) by illustrating the personal growth and effectiveness of the mentees displayed by their enhanced self-confidence, belief and performance. Whilst stress cannot be identified within the transcripts or journal entries in this study, the fact that the data suggests a connection with each of Roberts seven consequences of mentorship, it is fair to suggest that in this case study mentorship reduces stress and anxiety.

Reducing stress and anxiety

There are a number of potential stressors for undergraduates identified by Robotham and Julian (2006) in the literature, for example; examinations, demands on time, financial pressures, changes in sleeping and eating habits, new responsibilities, an increased workload, meeting new people, career decisions, fear of failure, and parental pressure.

Stress is also related to studying and the development of new academic skills such as guided reading, and the preparation of assignments and this reason is often cited more frequently than other factors causing stress. The pressure to meet deadlines is a major source of stress for many students suggest Misra et al. (2000) and many individuals feel overwhelmed by their workload (Reisberg, 2000; Morrison and Moffat, 2001). Associated with the perceived workload experienced by students is the issue of fear of failure, (Misra et al., 2000) and the mentor has an important role enhancing confidence and helping the mentee overcome these fears. Mentees and mentors commented upon the positive influences of the mentoring process in promoting confidence and encouraging self-belief:

> …helped me to improve my communication skills, I was able to use some of the skills I learned in the Health Promotion module about empowering people... It's also helped boost my confidence. Being a mentor has shown me how important these skills are, I felt at the beginning of the scheme that you just needed knowledge of the course. I can see now how dependent the first year can be, and you really do need skills if you are going to empower them. I got a real buzz seeing how my mentee improved over the year. (Mentor K)

Mentee A in a typical comment highlights that:

> my mentor really boosted my confidence he made me feel that I would pass and do well.

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Robotham and Julian (2006) identify that those students who reported high levels of stress also experienced dissatisfaction with life factors that contribute to self-esteem. Abouserie (1994) identifies that there is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem, life- and academic-stress. She argues, that it may be possible to increase an individual's ability to cope with stress by increasing their self-esteem and subsequently their self-efficacy, a distinct beneficial feature of the mentoring process illustrated by this research.

Time constraints are also an important source of student stress. It is not so much the management of time itself that causes stress, but the perception of control over time that is the source of student stress. This is a view supported by Macan et al. (1990) who found that individuals who felt themselves to be in control of their time experienced less tension. Students in the Macan et al. (1990) study highlighted the lack of time as one of the top three sources of stress, as it was observed that many students leave too much to accomplish in too short a space of time. This emphasises the importance of planning and organising time, and the value the mentees placed upon the role of the mentor in developing these skills. A typical comment made by mentees during the interviews was that their mentor helped them to plan and manage their time well.

However, for many students perhaps the most significant response to stress is a reduction in their academic performance, which in turn compounds the response to stress and self-esteem and self-efficacy. Robotham and Julian (2006) examining the relationships between stress and academic performance suggest that some students 'suffer in silence' and this can have a negative impact on students' well-being. Other students may not admit suffering from stress and anxiety because others may perceive this as a weakness. This reluctance to seek support may explain the reluctance of some university students as illustrated by Breen et al. (2000) and McLean (2004) to use support and counselling facilities offered by universities. Breen et al. (2000) and McLean (2004) suggest that this reluctance may be due to a fear of the possible stigma associated with the services and the lack of awareness of institutional support services available for students.

Mentees were clearly helped by their mentors in this study to access the appropriate support for their needs. The mentors during the course of the relationship recognised the value of providing this support, and it did appear to become an implicit dimension of the role. However, the importance of establishing clarity within the mentor role is illustrated by statements such as the illustration in a journal entry by mentee C:

> I was a little disappointed today. I thought that my mentor would help me with assignments. She told me that this was the job of the tutor.

She later went on to say that:

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> I'm getting help from my tutor for my assignments now, my mentor was right it is best that I see them.

This was also illustrated within an interview with a different mentee (F) who described:

> To start with I didn't really think that my mentor was very helpful, she didn't really give me any help with my assignments. I know that she explained that this wasn't really her job. As the weeks went by I understand now why she did this.

When mentees were probed further in the third phase of data collection, it was identified that the motive for some mentee's participation was that they perceived the mentor as someone who would give help with assignments, and they did not understand the difference between mentor and academic support, which potentially could generate conflict. When defining the role of the mentor during the preparation sessions it had been agreed that academic support would remain the role of the teaching team and that mentors would not comment upon assessment. When pressed in the interview, all mentors viewed the process of providing academic support to be the role of the tutor. What was clear however, was the observation that whilst they did not comment upon the nature and construction of assessments, they provided general guidance and helped the mentee access the appropriate sources, and organise their study time. Mentees however felt that they could approach their mentors for assignment support, although this perception did change during the course of the programme, consequently emphasising the importance of role clarity for participants.

Satisfaction

Mentoring in this study has enhanced student outcomes both in academic performance and by providing a more positive learning experience. Collating data from a retrospective course satisfaction survey of the undergraduate student group, indicates that 100% of those participating as a mentee were 100% satisfied with learning experience, mentors also were 100% satisfied this was in comparison to 80% who had not participated as a mentee, and 90% of those who had not participated as a mentor. Comparing end of year retention and progression data of the two groups, data illustrated that there was 100% retention of those who had participated in the programme compared to 80% retention of year one students and 94% of year three students. This data supports the claims of Breen et al. (2001), McLean (2004), Campbell and Campbell (2007), Flumerfeldt et al. (2007) and Lennox-Terrion (2010) who assert that peer mentoring enhances the learning experience, producing higher satisfaction and retention rates.

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Conclusion

Whilst the small sample only provides a snapshot and has limited generalisability due to the approach taken, none the less the findings presented within this study illustrate that mentorship has a positive effect upon the learning experience. Peer mentoring enables students to utilise support strategies, provides effective role modelling, and enhances participation and engagement in the academic community. Distinctly, it enhances assessment performance, retention and student satisfaction.

The learning experience is enhanced due to the increased level of support the mentor is able to provide; the mentor is able to encourage participation with the academic community's resources and support services and promote a sense of belonging. The mentor enables the mentee's time to be used more productively, and make best use of the resources available by accessing the 'inside knowledge' that the mentor possesses. Distinctly, the mentor provides a model of positive behaviour that reflects success and experience, acting as a powerful transmitter of values and attitudes, which reinforce successful learning. Mentors contributed to the 'self–efficacy' by procuring skills that Alred and Garvey (2000:264) suggest enhance learning and the production of knowledge.

Peer mentorship appear to contribute to the undergraduate's success. This study illustrates that peer mentorship adds value to the learning experience, contributes to academic attainment and enhances engagement within the higher education community for the mentee and the mentor. Higher education requires educators to be responsive to the needs of the student community. In an ever increasing performance driven and consumerist culture, peer mentoring is a strategy that can be utilised to enhance academic success.

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