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Engaging 'students as partners' in the design and development of a peer-mentoring program

Sarah O'Shea, Sue Bennett and Janine Delahunty

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Abstract*

This presentation focussed on an innovative approach to developing peer mentoring programs. Drawing upon a 'student as partners' framework, the presentation explored how this has been used to underpin an approach to peer mentoring from the ground up. University peer mentoring programs are largely designed and developed by staff, who not only recruit and train student mentors but also select frequency and type of involvement for all parties. This pilot project proposes a different approach by collaborating with students in the design, development and enactment of a peer-mentoring program within one School of Education. From this pilot, we will develop guidelines and recommendations for the implementation of student-led peer mentoring programs (Students as Partners in Mentoring: SaPiM) across the University of Wollongong (UOW).

*This 'Emerging Initiative' was first presented at the 2017 STARS Conference in Adelaide, Australia in July 2017 and was selected by the Conference Committee as one of the top-rated reports. The authors have kindly given their permission to have this report published in this special issue of the Journal and it has undergone a further review by the editors to confirm it aligns with the Journal format.

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Project Overview

Background

Peer mentoring programs exist in many different guises across institutions. Some provide student guides for initial orientation to the university environs, others facilitate academic support (e.g. Peer Assisted Student Sessions [PASS]), while others may engage with students over a period of time characterised by more formal interactions and even weekly information sessions. However, these initiatives are largely administered and developed by university staff, who provide training and overall management/coordination. While these programs are beneficial to students, this emerging initiative will report on a pilot mentoring program across one school that is being developed, designed and implemented by students in partnership with staff. This innovative approach is being titled *Students as Partners in Mentoring* or SaPiM.

Project design and description

The benefits of peer involvement in student transitions have been well documented in literature on student learning and engagement. Research indicates that information and skills about university are better received from student peers, due to their age and stage of study (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Peer interaction is also reported to aid the transition and retention of first-year students (Kantanis, 2000; O'Shea, 2012; O'Shea & Vincent, 2011). However, we argue that to be most effective, peer-mentoring programs require student involvement from development to enactment, which are key to effective retention strategies (O'Shea, Harwood, & Chandler, 2015). Who better to expose the implicit or hidden curriculum of university than those who are already on that journey?

Utilising a 'students as partners' framework (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Matthews, 2016), this emerging initiative describes the collaboration between UOW students and staff. The presentation focusses on the initial implementation and discusses ways that this approach could inform other peer-led mentoring programs.

The objectives and outcomes of this initiative include:

- developing a meaningful 'students as partners' culture within UOW.;
- informing strategies for preparing and supporting students who enter higher education by drawing on the authentic learning experiences of existing learners;
- forging meaningful links between university staff and current students to facilitate authentic engagement and also provide opportunities to build additional skills and knowledges to those involved; and
- creating accessible resources and guidelines for other Faculties and Schools interested in implementing similar programs within the 'students as partners' model.

Of particular interest in this presentation is the relational aspects of the 'students as partners' process and we report on the ways we are consciously maintaining student and staff ownership of this process. The intention of this project is to 'work with' the students rather than 'work on' the students, creating trust-filled relationships that are not simply tokenistic in their application. In unpacking these interpersonal complexities, we hope to provide insights into how this approach can be managed and replicated in other institutions.

Project design

This SaPiM project is defined by authentic collaboration, with the overall intention to develop a 'whole of school' approach to effective partnerships with students. Such relationships are underpinned by recognition that 'students not only identify areas for enhancement, but ways to carry out that enhancement, as well as helping to facilitate implementation where possible' (Williamson & Jones, 2014, p. 6). As this is an emerging initiative, the presentation reported on the initial stages of this project and plans for the future. We provided insight into the consultative approach adopted, the development of the committee and the various hurdles or unanticipated issues encountered.

The presentation also included reflections from the staff and student participants involved around their motivations for engaging in this project and what they have learnt from this involvement. These reflective pieces were written reflections from participants and focussed on the transformative potential of SaPiM, particularly as this relates to what this involvement means in terms of being 'an academic' and being 'a student'.

Project deliverables or outcomes

The presentation reported on the initial stages of the project particularly relating to the mechanics of establishing the committee and managing relationships. However, at the culmination of the project, planned dissemination includes the organisation of a roundtable symposium for stakeholders interested in implementing similar partnership initiatives. Additionally, the project will produce best practice guidelines and recommendations in order to facilitate similar collaborative partnerships across the institution and beyond. Overall, the SaPiM project has been designed to provide the UOW community with an insight into how to

implement similar Student as Partner programs across the teaching and learning field, as such collaboration is an emerging strategic priority for the institution.

Overview of the outcomes of the session

The initial part of the session provided a brief overview of the Students as Partners approach with reference to key literature and existing applications within the field. The SaPiM project was then highlighted and activities to date outlined, this included reflections from participants around their motivations and learnings from this involvement. This feedback to date exemplified by the following comment made by one of the student participants:

...its [sic] been a very valuable experience and interesting to see the difference in knowledge between staff and students as the students have raised some issues that staff may not have been aware of (e.g the difficulty in having the confidence or knowledge of how to approach a tutor or lecturer for information) while the staff have been able to provide a broader view of the student experience and knowledge of how to roll out the program in a practical way. (Student Committee Member)

During the session group work, some questions arose concerning more precise indicators of how the student participants contributed to the design and development of the mentoring program, particularly how this student perspective was informing the training for mentors. During the ensuing discussion, it was noted how the student committee members had placed much emphasis on the mental health and wellbeing of both mentees and mentors. Repeatedly in committee meetings, student members reflected on the need to foreground these health and well-being issues within the mentor training and within the program itself. In related discussions, student

committee members also referred to issues of 'power' during the transition to university, specifically the ways in which commencing students might 'feel powerless' during their first year of study. In response to these insights, the training includes a focus on resilience and mental health for students as well as reflective activities, which are both culturally sensitive and designed to foreground student voice.

Finally, the presentation also included a copy of the Student Partnership Agreement that the committee had developed collectively. This partnership agreement was modelled on exemplars from the United Kingdom and specifically outlined the principles of the partnership, the values and behaviours underpinning these principles and details of the areas that the committee intended to address as well as the various tasks and responsibilities associated with these areas. Copies of the partnership agreement were distributed at the presentation and further copies can be obtained by emailing saraho@uow.edu.au

of Higher Education website <http://melbourne.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/research-projects/experience/trends-in-the-first-year-experience>

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