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Transitions and choices: Graduate student mentoring for psychology honours students. A Practice Report

Shaun Yon-Seng Khoo^a, Jenna Zhao, Adrian Walker, Jessica Kirkman and Branka Spehar

^aConcordia University, Montreal, Canada

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Peer mentoring programs are typically designed to support students transitioning into university. However, recent work has highlighted the importance of supporting transitions through and out of university. The Australian psychology honours year is a particularly stressful period that involves transitioning through university into the research environment and is soon followed by transitions into the workforce or postgraduate study. The School of Psychology at the University of New South Wales, Australia (UNSW) recently developed a graduate/honours peer mentoring program. Pairs of PhD students mentor small groups of honours students in monthly meetings, discussing various aspects of honours and career options. Most honours students sign up for mentoring and evaluation results show that mentees find the program helpful, most frequently acknowledging that their mentors helped them with general advice and understanding their career options. Peer mentoring can therefore support psychology student transitions through and out of university.

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Introduction

Peer mentoring programs to facilitate the transition into the first year of university are widespread and have been used for many years in psychology (Chester, Burton, Xenos, & Elgar, 2013; Huon & Sankey, 2000), and numerous other disciplines (Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014; Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, & Marin, 2017). Previous studies have shown that peer mentoring is associated with improved retention and academic performance for undergraduates (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Collings et al., 2014; Crisp, Baker, Griffin, Lunsford, & Pifer, 2017). In addition to providing benefits for the transition into undergraduate studies, recent work has also emphasised the way that peer mentoring programs can facilitate the transition out of university by developing skills as students prepare to graduate (Xenos, Chester, & Burton, 2013).

However, for many psychology students third year is not the end of their undergraduate careers. The honours year in Australian universities is a high stress period of transformative learning where students engage in intensive research training and are required to complete a research thesis (Allan, 2011). Alarming, by the time of thesis submission nearly half of psychology honours students show psychological distress in the clinical range for depression (Cruwys, Greenaway, & Haslam, 2015), indicating that better support for these students may be necessary. Encouragingly, previous studies have found that students with high anxiety showed comparable academic performance to students with low anxiety when receiving mentoring (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), and that peer mentoring can decrease negative affect (Collings et al., 2014). These results suggest that peer mentoring may be a useful intervention for psychology honours students.

Psychology honours students must successfully navigate the transition into the research environment and contemplate their transition to the workforce, further study (e.g. a clinical masters), or the possibility of a research career. To add even more pressure, honours years are also an educational bottleneck, with top marks providing access to the postgraduate training programs necessary for psychologists to register and scholarships for graduate programs. Although the Australian honours year is understood to be a transitional period (Kiley, Boud, Manathunga, & Cantwell, 2011), we are not aware of examples in the literature of peer mentoring programs targeting honours students.

Previous research has shown that mentors need to have experience and a working knowledge of the university environment to be effective (Johnson, 2002; McLean, 2004). Graduate students may therefore be ideal mentors for honours students. Graduate students may also be perceived as more accessible and available than academic staff members, both of which improve mentee satisfaction (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Lawson, 1989; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Graduate students are therefore ideally placed to act as mentors for honours students because they are more senior, but still accessible.

To facilitate the transition into the university research environment, provide pastoral care, and assist with the transition out of (or through) university, we developed a Graduate/Honours Peer Mentoring Program. While many honours students receive informal mentoring and pastoral support from PhD students, research assistants, and postdoctoral researchers in their honours laboratory, students occasionally find themselves in laboratories that are relatively small, or experience difficulties where advice from within the school (but outside their research group) would be helpful. To fill this gap and provide supplementary formal mentorship to honours students who wanted extra support,

the Graduate/Honours Peer Mentoring Program was designed based on the peer mentoring program described by Huon and Sankey (2000). Principles from transition in transition out programs (Xenos et al., 2013) were also incorporated to assist graduate students to transition out of their programs and into the workforce.

Program participation and design

Graduate students completing PhDs or combined masters/PhD programs were recruited to act as mentors for honours students. Graduate students possess important characteristics such as seniority and accessibility (Ehrich et al., 2004), but may also benefit from mentoring as a professional development activity (Xenos et al., 2013). Mentors worked in pairs and met with small groups of honours students (usually six-ten) on a monthly basis. A peer mentoring manual (available as supplementary material) including a schedule of topics was provided for mentors to assist in structuring sessions. Mentors were encouraged to adapt the schedule according to the needs and interests of their mentees because mentoring may have benefits even if mentors take very different approaches to their role (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon, & Schabmann, 2014).

Mentors were recruited by emailing PhD students in the school and were provided with a combination of online and face-to-face training on their role and responsibilities as mentors. During the program's pilot in 2015, eight mentors were recruited, and from 2016-2018, 12 mentors have been recruited each year. An online training module was provided covering the purpose of their role, their ethical responsibilities, refreshing their knowledge of university services, and assessing their responses to hypothetical challenging situations and dilemmas. Mentors then met with the peer mentoring coordinators and the honours program coordinator for an induction

session to reinforce key points on the goals of the program, their role and responsibilities, as well as common issues and difficulties that honours student mentees might be expected to encounter. Mentors are recognised for their service in the co-curricular section of their Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement to support applications for employment or research fellowships.

Mentees

Honours students were provided an opportunity to sign up as a mentee during the honours student welcome at the beginning of the year. They were provided with an overview of the program by the peer mentoring coordinators. From 2017 onwards, this overview was incorporated with an academic writing skills lecture. Although there is some evidence that matching mentees and mentors based on personal characteristics, personality, or mentee choice is ideal (Bell & Treleaven, 2011; Crisp et al., 2017; Ehrich et al., 2004), this was impractical due to the honours workload. We therefore paired mentees and mentors based on schedules. Mentees were provided pairs of mentors to provide broader perspectives and given the option to change mentors at any time.

Mentee participation has increased from 15 during the program pilot in 2015, to 50-55 students between 2016 and 2018, representing approximately 75% of psychology honours enrolments. Moreover, from 2017-2018, 27 of the 108 mentees (25%) had previously served as peer mentors for first year students. The strong participation at sign-up suggests that despite having three years of university experience, psychology honours students are aware that honours years are frequently challenging and are keen to have access to any extra support that is available. Previous research has also found that participation in peer mentoring does not depend on academic motivation (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003),

suggesting that strong participation is likely to be due to honours students' anxiety about the challenges ahead of them (Cruwys et al., 2015).

Program design

The suggested schedule began with an introductory session for mentees to meet others in their group and their pair of mentors. Mentors lead a group discussion on how to have a successful honours year. Since graduate employment program applications are usually due between March and May, mentors also discuss corporate and government programs for university graduates. Data indicates Australian psychology students have difficulty finding jobs because of the generalist nature of their degrees (QILT Team, 2018), so mentors are provided with employment resources to share with mentees, including information about psychometric tests often used in recruitment and places to begin searching for jobs.

Time management and writing skills were the focus of the next two sessions. The most common issue honours students identify is a lack of control over academic outcomes (Cruwys et al., 2015). Consequently, these workshops aimed to provide tips on and strategies for time management in a research environment, as studies have shown that even a short session of time management training can reduce students' perceived stress and increase their perceived control of time (Häfner, Stock, & Oberst, 2015). The writing skills session gave students an opportunity to receive tips on writing their literature review and provided an opportunity to receive peer feedback that has been shown to improve writing skills (Topping, Smith, Swanson, & Elliot, 2000).

The next three sessions focused on further study options, discussing research careers,

practitioner masters options, and alternative registration pathways. Because of the generalist nature of their undergraduate degrees, psychology students are some of the most likely to pursue further study (QILT Team, 2018), which may be in pursuit of a research career or registration as a psychologist. The research career session involved a discussion of the pathway to a research career, from honours to principal/chief investigator, the pros and cons of pursuing research, and tips on picking a suitable laboratory or supervisor. In the following session, psychology practitioner masters options were discussed and mentees were given an opportunity to ask questions of a current masters student (or a student in a different masters program to their mentors). The last of these sessions discussed registration as a psychologist in Australia, the alternative 4+2 and 5+1 internship pathways¹ to registration, potential changes to these pathways, and the value of volunteer experience for aspiring psychologists.

In the month preceding submission, a thesis writing workshop was scheduled. Like the previous writing skills workshop, the aim of this session was to help mentees to adjust to the higher standard expected of them in the full thesis by giving them an opportunity to improve their skills and receive peer feedback. After thesis submission, a final session was scheduled to give mentees an opportunity to debrief with their peers and mentors about their experience and discuss their next career steps.

Program monitoring and evaluation

The peer mentoring coordinators monitored the program on an ongoing basis by sending reminder emails to mentors and soliciting informal reports after meetings with students. In the middle of the year, the peer mentoring coordinators would meet with graduate student

¹ The "4+2" and "5+1" pathways allow combined accredited coursework and training with an approved supervisor. The 4+2 pathway involves 4 years of accredited coursework followed by a 2-year internship and the 5+1 pathway involves 5 years of accredited coursework and 1-year internship.

mentors and discuss any issues raised by mentees and how they were dealt with. Mentees were also informed that they could contact the peer mentoring coordinators if they were dissatisfied with their mentors. From 2018, a mid-year evaluation form was sent to mentees to better monitor and assess the program. Mentors generally expressed satisfaction with how the program was going, although they noticed that it was often the case that many mentees did not regularly attend sessions, which mentees most often attributed to lacking the time to attend sessions.

At the end of the year, mentees were sent an evaluation survey, using Qualtrics (Qualtrics Provo, UT, USA) asking them about their participation, reasons for not participating (if applicable), the helpfulness of the program, and for comments on how the program could be improved. In 2016 and 2017, the response rate was typically poor, ranging from eight responses from mentored students in 2015 to

15 responses in 2016 and nine responses in 2017. This was perhaps due to the survey being administered around thesis submission when students were minimally interested in engaging in other activities.

Evaluation results showed that nearly all respondents rated the program as helpful in some way when asked to rate the program's helpfulness on a 5-point scale ranging from 'Very unhelpful' to 'Very helpful' (see Figure 1). The program received the highest rating in overall helpfulness and appeared to be meeting its objectives of helping mentees understand their career options, making career decisions, and providing them with access to someone to ask for help (advice) if they needed it. Mentees also found the program somewhat helpful in adjusting to the demands of the honours, and it provided some benefit in helping them feel part of the school (belonging). However, evaluations were limited by a small number of responses and so may not represent the views of all

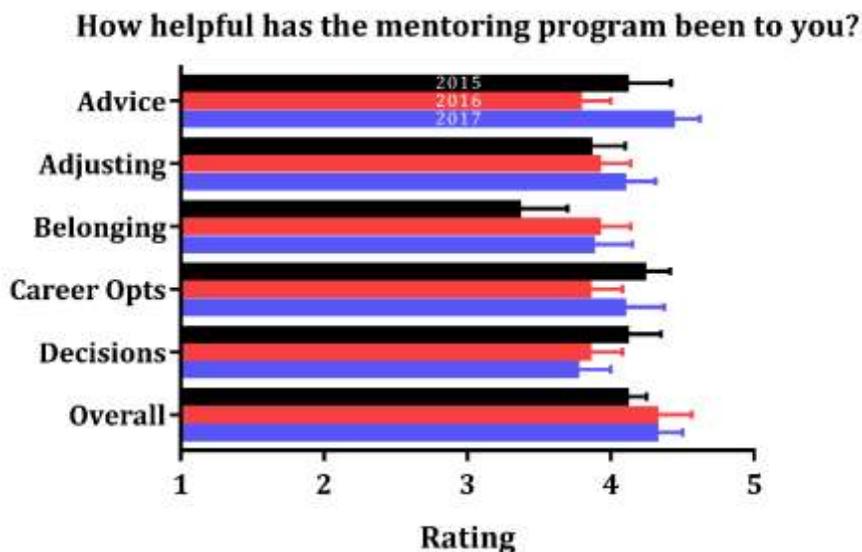


Figure 1. Mentee's mean ± SEM ratings of the program's helpfulness (2015-2017), on a scale of 1. Very unhelpful, 2. Unhelpful, 3. Neutral, 4. Helpful, and 5. Very helpful.

mentees, particularly those who were disengaged with the program, so additional and potentially timed (e.g. mid-year) evaluations are required.

Mentees were also given the opportunity to select all the ways that their mentors helped them. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who selected each option, with the frequency of the response indicated on the bar. Mentees most frequently identified general advice as one of the ways they were helped by their mentor, followed by understanding career options, help with job and university applications, social support and reassurance, communication, and technical skills. Mentees who responded 'other' wrote that their mentors helped them to take a break from stress to chat and gave time management advice.

Discussion

We developed a peer mentoring program where pairs of graduate students provide small-group mentoring to psychology honours students. The

program aims to provide pastoral support during honours and facilitate their transition through and out of university. The program has been generally well received by honours students who continue to sign up in large numbers.

Consistent with the aims and design of the program, evaluation results indicate that the program's strongest impact is in providing honours students with general advice and a better understanding of their career options, to facilitate their transition into the workforce or through university to postgraduate programs. The Australian honours year has been identified as a transitional and high-stress period of time (Allan, 2011; Kiley et al., 2011) and peer mentoring has previously been shown to be beneficial for anxious students and can decrease negative affects (Collings et al., 2014; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). It was therefore encouraging that most honours student mentees report finding the program helpful. Although fairly low survey participation have limited the interpretation of our evaluations, we are

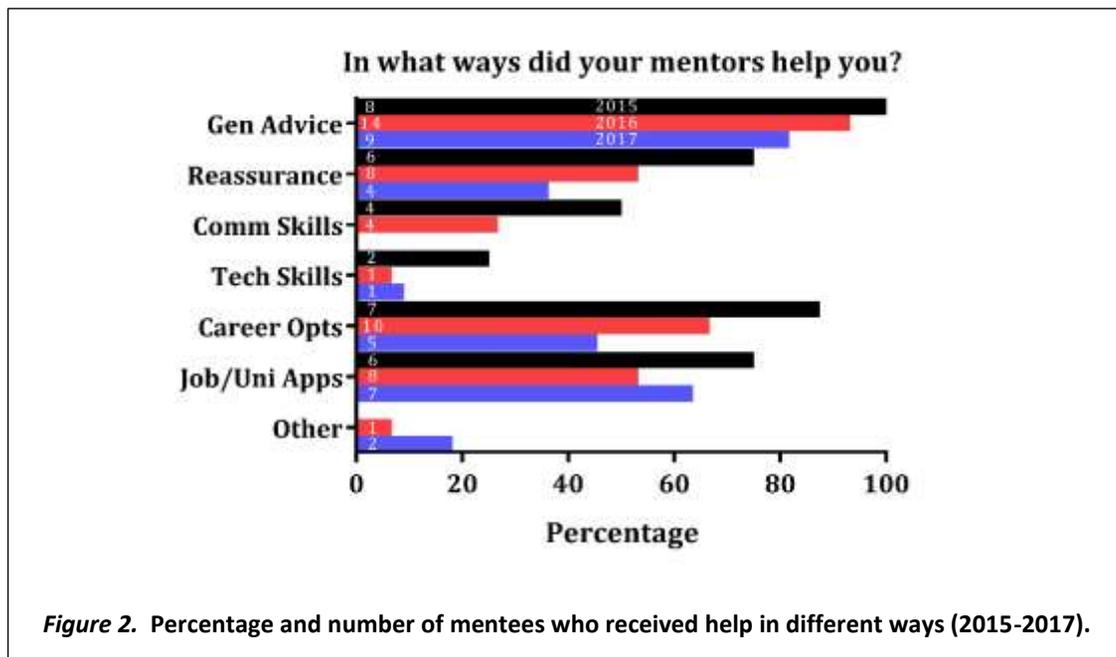


Figure 2. Percentage and number of mentees who received help in different ways (2015-2017).

addressing this by conducting an additional evaluation and adjusting the end-of-year evaluation to maximise participation.

However, ensuring regular and consistent contact between mentors and mentees remains an important challenge (Ehrich et al., 2004; Lawson, 1989; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Mentees occasionally identify poor contact with mentors as an issue or suggest increased meeting frequency, while other mentees identify a lack of time as a reason for not attending meetings. Further refining the time management session may help tackle this issue as time management training has shown to be effective in increasing students' perceived control of time in the long run (Häfner, Stock, & Oberst, 2015). A drop-off in attendance is consistent with our experience coordinating peer mentoring programs for first year students but may mean that students who are in need of some support do not receive it. To ameliorate this effect, mentors are asked to make themselves available on an informal basis outside of the regular schedule in case mentees want to discuss any other issues. Mentors are instructed to send out meeting summaries to all of their mentees and these emails provide an opportunity for mentees who did not attend scheduled sessions to seek informal contact. We have also refined our scheduling to aim for times around lunch breaks or classes that students can more easily incorporate into their day.

The Graduate/Honours Peer Mentoring Program builds upon previous work focusing on the first year transition into university (Chester et al., 2013; Huon & Sankey, 2000), by facilitating the transition through university into the research environment. Graduate mentors address many of the issues that may be relevant to psychology honours students, such as difficulty with employment, postgraduate study (QILT Team, 2018), and academic issues such as time management and writing skills (Cruwys et al., 2015). As an added benefit, the

program builds upon the skill development opportunity offered by acting as a third-year undergraduate mentor (Xenos et al., 2013), extending these opportunities to graduate students who mentor and support honours students as they manage transitions through and out of their undergraduate career.

Conclusion

Peer mentoring programs are frequently used to effectively facilitate transitions into university and promote student retention and achievement at the undergraduate level (Crisp et al., 2017). However, despite the transitional nature of the Australian honours year, there have been no previous reports of programs aimed at supporting honours students (although such programs likely exist). We developed a Graduate/Honours Peer Mentoring Program for psychology honours students to facilitate their transition into the research environment by providing academic skills workshops and their transition out of undergraduate study by discussing options for employment or further study. While the program is undergoing constant refinement, evaluation results suggest that it is effective in providing honours students with access to advice and information that may facilitate success in and beyond the honours year.

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