

Mentoring students who had opted to enrol in on-campus tertiary preparation classes, should support student class attendance. What we found was surprising!

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Mentoring students who had opted to enrol in on-campus tertiary preparation classes, should support student class attendance. What we found was surprising!

There is a high attrition rate within enabling programs designed for students that do not have the academic entrance requirements to enrol in an undergraduate degree. Recent papers by the authors have reviewed the positive influence of increased student engagement in enabling education. One natural progression from this research was to investigate how supporting students through a basic mentoring program might encourage them to keep attending on-campus classes and successfully complete their program.

A pilot project (named operation: connection) was trialled in Semester 1 2016 with the aim of connecting with a small group of students to investigate what processes were effective in supporting them and in particular, would encourage them to attend classes. Eight (8) interested Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) academics were allocated 7-10 students selected randomly from the Toowoomba on-campus class. This small project encouraged individual lecturers to use whatever process they were comfortable with to mentor their students throughout the semester and then evaluate what was effective and sustainable that could potentially be used to support students in future semesters. Despite a variety of strategies used to engage with this group of students, results showed that this pilot project did not alter class attendance or completion rates.

INTRODUCTION

The Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) at the University of Southern Queensland is designed to provide students from non-traditional backgrounds the essential skills and confidence to succeed in undergraduate courses at USQ. Successful students in this enabling program are awarded direct entry into the majority of undergraduate programs. The TPP is a fee-free bridging program and does not have minimum entrance requirements. It is a one semester fulltime suite of courses and is taught in both on-campus and online modes across the universities three campuses. Students study English communication, Study management and at least one course of Mathematics. Foundation courses for their undergraduate studies are not included in the TPP.

The on-campus classes are held on two mornings each week and include both lectures and tutorials so that students can get a taste of the undergraduate experience. There are also meetup classes with a previous TPP student and morning tea to encourage greater educational and social interaction. These classes can have up to 100 students attend each class early in the semester. Class attendance is not compulsory, nor is an attendance register maintained. The declining number of students who continue to attend on-campus classes as the semester progresses has been apparent over the last few years, with a noted drop off after the first week. Approximately 70% of students enrolled in an on campus class attend class in the first week. By semester end this attendance has dropped to 25%. Hodges et al. (2013) researched why there were high attrition rates in enabling education in the Australian context and made several key recommendations that if implemented could help to reduce the problem. In semester one 2016, the pilot project 'operation: connection' was created to improve the TPP on-campus class student attendance, attrition and pass rates and investigate ways to implement the following recommendations from the Hodges report:

- 1.1 develop procedures for identifying non-participating students, contacting them and assisting in re-engagement *or* a positive exit process *or* (as a last resort) administratively cancelling their enrolment,
- 4.1 appointment of a person devoted to developing and implementing systems for monitoring, reviewing and, where appropriate, contacting students in the period between enrolment and Week 3 of the program and

- 4.2 develop and implement systems to monitor student engagement in the early weeks of programs and offer counselling and pathways to a formal withdrawal or a facilitated re-engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Enabling students differ from traditional undergraduate students (Orth & Robinson, 2011). These differences impact upon their attrition and pass rates. Mehrotra, Hollister, and MCGahey (2001) found that tertiary preparation students often have less developed academic skills than their undergraduate colleagues and as a result require generous support in order to complete their courses successfully. Many students have low academic achievement in their secondary education due to a variety of circumstances that included the inability to fit in, health issues, poor discipline, lack of social development and low motivation (Mahsood & Whannell, 2016). Enabling students who have completed year 12, in most cases have selected a non-tertiary pathway that would not have emphasised the academic skills essential for success at university (Bradley, Nguyen, & Taylor, 2004). Both the past and present educational and social circumstances of enabling students constrain the development of confidence in their ability to survive and succeed (Willans & Seary, 2009). Low academic achievement prior to entry to tertiary studies is seen as a strong predictor of attrition (Gabb, Milne, & Cao, 2006).

In earlier studies, the authors concluded that as the TPP is a fee free program, students who enrol, do so with the knowledge that if they fail or drop out, there will be no fees to pay (Orth & Robinson, 2013). This lack of financial penalty may not be an incentive to continue studying when the work becomes more complex or the assignment load too onerous. This fragility of commitment together with low self-efficacy is demonstrated by a lack of resilience and persistence which does emerge in particular in diminishing class attendance for on-campus students as the semester proceeds (Pitman, Trinidad, Devlin, Harvey, & McKay, 2016).

Student engagement was critical to retention (Orth & Robinson, 2011). Class attendance was seen as an effective retention strategy as it helps to develop supportive social and educational communities (Gabb et al., 2006; Tinto, 1997). The longer the students voluntarily attend classes throughout the semester, the more likely they are to succeed

(Hupfield, 2010; Skinner, 2007). Valadez & Duran (1991) and Mladenovic (2012) recognised that class attendance was a positive demonstration of student engagement with the course and would significantly enhance success with their studies. Mentoring the on-campus class students was perceived by the project mentors as one important way to encourage students to attend class.

Although Jacobi (1991) referred to the definition of mentoring identified by several researchers, she preferred to define mentoring in terms of the function provided by the mentor or the role played by the mentor in relation to the mentee. The broad mentoring functions discussed were support, encouragement, advice, providing information, role modelling, coaching, opportunity and advocacy. The role that lecturers were to take in this project was not as extensive as indicated by Jacobi.

To be a successful mentor, Holt and Fifer (2016) suggested that the mentor should possess certain key personality characteristics. Some of these include: strong self-efficacy, be accessible and approachable, a dedicated commitment to the program or course and an ability to form a professional yet personal relationship. The personality characteristics of the lecturers who volunteered for this project were not evaluated according to Holt and Fifer's criteria. It was assumed for this project that the mentors possessed similar characteristics.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Enabling education program lecturers were asked to volunteer for basic mentoring of a small group of 8-10 students from the on-campus Toowoomba class in semester 1 of 2016. There was optimism that the class attrition rates would decrease and that the pass rates would increase as a result of the pilot project 'operation: connection'. There was also the possibility that information could be gathered as to why the students dropped out throughout the semester. This type of information has been difficult to gather. Students who drop are reticent to respond to a questionnaire or enquiries from their lecturer about their reasons for discontinuing their studies (Bedford, 2007).

The agreed role of the mentor was to contact their mentees, set up a weekly or bi-weekly communication, have an occasional coffee meeting with the group or individual, provide support and encouragement, provide information about where to get help and generally

form a professional but personal connection with the student (Tinto & Engstrom, 2008). The students in the group should recognise that there was a lecturer (who often did not teach them) who was concerned about their progress and did understand the university system and know how best to help if a problem arose. Mentors accepted these responsibilities and were aware that the time needed to do this effectively was about two (2) hours per week.

There were some broad mentoring boundaries discussed both with mentors and mentees. Although mentors would provide the mentees with their contact details that included email address, their office location and their office telephone number, mobile telephone numbers were not to be exchanged. The role of the mentor was not to become an academic tutor or a psychological counsellor (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015). If the mentee required academic help or specialised medical help, then the mentor would direct the student to the appropriate person. Mentors had access to the assignment results and the Study Desk activity of the students in their group but did not know if students were attending the on-campus classes.

METHODOLOGY

Prospective mentors met in the week prior to the first Toowoomba on-campus class to discuss the parameters and expectations of the project. Boundaries, arrangements and future meeting times were discussed and agreed upon. The primary expectation for the mentors was to make meaningful connections with the students and through support, encourage them to keep attending class and remain in the TPP. Mentors would choose what plan of action best suited their own personality and time schedule. At the conclusion of the project, the group would meet to evaluate how effective the various approaches were and what could be achieved in future semesters.

Students were randomly selected and put into 8 small groups of about 7-9 students. These groups were formed in the first Toowoomba on-campus class. The decision was made to avoid placing friends in the same group where possible so that students within the group would make an extra effort to engage with each other. Towards the end of the first class, each group met with their mentor to discuss the nature of the project and to meet each other. Contact details were exchanged and arrangements were made to meet again (perhaps a coffee meeting) in 1-2 weeks.

After the first meeting, mentors made contact by email to confirm their next meeting as well as remind the students how they could help them. Students were asked to confirm by return email that they had received the email and they were aware of the next 'get together'. However, there were very few email responses. When the mentors spoke directly to the students (in or after class) a very real problem emerged: students were only .being contacted through their USQ email. Early in the semester, many students were not aware of the university email policy that USQ only contacted them via their university email rather than their own personal email. Secondly, students who were able to read their USQ emails found that there were numerous university emails that had been sent over the first few weeks of the semester. Default protocols for the forums on the course Study Desks meant that whenever any student made a forum posting, a separate email notifying every other student of the posting was sent. This default required that it be manually changed so as to replace the numerous forum emails by a single one (1) page of reminders. There were also the numerous university operational emails that appeared at the start of a new semester. This email flood meant that the mentor's important email was lost in the overwhelming sea of other emails.

In order to resolve this problem, discussions were held with ICT to consider that the forum default protocols be changed so that forum emails could be sent as a group with one bulk email per forum per day, rather than one email per student posting. This could only be upgraded for the next semester. (It was upgraded in Semester 2 2016 but it was unclear whether these concerns were the catalyst for change or some other reason.) There was no way of constraining the numerous organisation and information emails sent by the university.

Although university policy is not to use the students' private email addresses, private email addresses were located and welcome emails were sent to remind students to read their USQ emails and in particular, the mentor's email. There was a good response. Coffee meetings, information sharing and problem solving, were now possible.

Some mentors met with their students at the end of the class, others arranged a coffee meeting and a third group made contact only through email. The project leader sent out emails to the mentors every two (2) weeks, to remind them to check the student progress through the Study Desk activity logs and the assignment results and to contact their group

to see how they might help them. A mentors' meeting was held in week 5 to discuss the progress of the project. It was apparent that many students were not returning emails, many were not engaging with the Study Desk (as evident in the activity logs) and several were late with their submission of assignments.

After the semester exams, mentors were given a short questionnaire to complete and asked to present their thoughts at a final mentors' meeting. The questionnaire indicated the student results, the number of contacts made, the number of responses, the estimated week that the student decided to leave the course, some individual comments about the process and what might be done to improve the process in the future.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROJECT

Class numbers remained the same for the first two (2) weeks. This was however due to a number of late enrolments who first attended in their second week. These new student numbers offset the number of students who did not attend in the second week and were in the process of dropping out. This was not apparent at the time but became clear when some of these new students appeared randomly in mentor groups.

On-campus student data for Semester 2014-2016 are shown below in Table 1 for the primary TPP course Studying to Succeed (TPP7120). All numbers are expressed as percentages. These statistics were included to determine whether there had been any identifiable improvement in student outcomes as a result of the mentoring program.

Table 1 % Student outcomes for Semester 1 2014-2016 TPP 720 (all ONC students)

	Dropped out	Failed	Extended to S2	Never participated	Passed	
2014	40%	12%	10%	11%	27%	100%
2015	28%	14%	9%	12%	37%	100%
2016	33%	14%	7%	15%	31%	100%

No significant improvement in the percentages of students who passed was evident as 31% of students passed TPP7120 in 2016 compared to 37% in 2015 and 27% in 2014. The variations can be explained more by the small size of the groups and the variable nature of the group academic ability from year to year rather than the specialised mentoring program

used in 2016. In fact, it appears that this group achieved the average pass rate of the previous two (2) years. The numbers of students (approximately 30) attending classes in the final two (2) weeks were similar over the last three (3) years. No more students were attending on-campus classes in the final two (2) weeks of the 2016 semester as an outcome of the mentoring process than in 2014 and 2015.

Table 2 reviews the student numbers for the 2016 mentoring group compared to the whole Toowoomba 2016 ONC group (the former group is a sub group of the whole ONC group). Students who “dropped out” have left after completing several assignments which can range from 1 to 9. “Failed” students have completed all of the assessment but did not achieve well enough to pass the course.

Table 2: Comparisons of 67 mentees versus 123 total enrolments in ONC TPP7120, 2016

Dropped out	Failed	Extended to S2	Never participated	Passed	Total
15 / 40	13 / 18	7 / 9	12 / 19	20 / 37	67 / 123

The data in Table 2 suggest that class attendance and possibly the mentoring program may have influenced students to continue participating for the entire semester even though there were indications that they would not succeed as 13 out of 18 students that failed (having completed all assessment) were registered in the mentoring program. However 12 of the 19 students that never submitted an assignment were also part of the mentor group. This suggests that by attending classes or taking the mentor’s advice, these students were able to make an early decision that they did not wish to continue with the program.

Analysis of the mentor questionnaire indicated that the general method of contact with students after the initial mentor-mentee meeting was via email. Several coffee meetings were initiated, with dwindling success. The overall conclusion by mentors was that they had very little success in forming supportive relationships with their mentees. However, some mentors reported several positive experiences where advice and support were given, especially in the first few weeks of the course. This usually happened when the concern was instigated by the student rather than when initiated by the mentor. Concerns, that mentors may have felt were elementary, were in most cases crucial to success for the mentee. Some of these included: how do I submit online, how do I withdraw from the course, how do I

question an assignment mark, what do I do if I am going away for several weeks and what do I do if I am sick? Mentors indicated that at most there were 4-6 communications with a responsive mentee and only 1-2 communications with a non-responsive mentee. Most communication from mentees ceased by week 8 of the 16 week course.

It was anticipated that students who were considering dropping from the course would have communicated their reasons for discontinuing to their mentor, but in fact this was not the case. For some students that left the program in the first few weeks, there were discussions on what to do and the appropriate support given so that the students could re-enrol in the future when they were more able to complete the course. Dropping out later in the semester was a more gradual process. These students kept visiting the Study Desk (as indicated in the Study desk logs) and occasionally attended classes (implied by the decreasing class attendances from week 2 to week 9). It only became apparent to the mentor when assignments were not submitted that a mentee had dropped from the program. If the mentor then tried to follow up with an email, there was no response. Many students dropped the course and did not let the university know. They would receive a Fail because they did not officially withdraw from the course. The mentors were not able to pinpoint when students left the course or the reasons that they did so.

At the final meeting, mentors shared their insights into how they might improve their approach to future mentoring, what the department might do to assist in the process and the success of the project. Their responses have been included in Table 3 and are categorised under mentor initiatives and College or Department initiatives.

Table 3: Suggestions shared in the final mentors' meeting

Mentor initiatives	College or Department initiatives.
Take a photograph of the students at the first meeting so that students can be recognised easily	Wait until the second or third week so as to include all ONC students in the process
Do not use USQ emails early in the semester	Allocate a professional staff member to contact every student who has not participated in the first three (3) weeks to offer advice and support

Mentor initiatives	College or Department initiatives.
Mentors could follow up on students after class	Greater encouragement is needed to help students withdraw formally so that there is no financial or academic penalty
Mentors might be able to make more effective contact through Facebook or phone texts	Build mentoring processes through interaction with lecturers using various class room activities including arriving to class early to resolve individual issues
Mentors should try to meet up with mentees at the ONC TPP Friday morning tea	Try peer group mentoring
Mentors need to be careful not to harass their mentees	Following up on 8-10 students frequently throughout the semester requires significant time resources. Feasibility is questionable for the entire student cohort.
Mentors need to respond to mentor questions or needs rather than initiate the discussion	Develop specific mentoring processes for the external and incarcerated students

DISCUSSION

The most common response from the questionnaire completed by the mentors on the effectiveness of their student contact process was that students were reluctant to respond to staff emails. Their reluctance to respond diminished the opportunity for effective mentoring to transpire (Mladenovic 2012). Most of the mentoring functions outlined by Jacobi (1991) were not possible because the student made a decision to not respond or be involved with the mentor. For mentoring to be successful, the mentee must want to participate in the process (Krause & Coates, 2008). If TPP students have low self-esteem and lack confidence, they do not always do what is necessary to succeed (Orth & Robinson, 2013). The students' low self-efficacy does influence their choice of activities, the effort that needs to be expended and how determined they are to complete the course (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Engagement is a choice. When opportunities were given to these students to engage with the course lecturers and each other in the mentoring trial, many chose not to participate (Murphy, Walker, & Webb, 2013). The decision not to participate

may be an indication of their academic fragility, their lack of confidence or that they do not sense the need for help at that particular time.

The fact that only 67 students out of a total of 123 enrolled students attended the first class is not directly related to the mentoring project but it is indicative of the issues that constrain the development of successful mentoring relationships. These issues may be explained by several circumstances. Many students were not fully committed and had already decided not to do the program after they had enrolled in TPP. Some of these students were exploiting government regulations by enrolling in TPP so as to receive Centrelink payments and never had planned to attend class. The USQ campus can be quite intimidating for new TPP students causing some students to have difficulty in finding their first class. USQ has a policy of enrolling students up to two (2) weeks after the course has started. Many of these students although pleased to be enrolled albeit late, never make it to class or if they do, struggle to catch-up with work that has already been discussed. When students are enrolled, they obtain access to their course study desks. A small group realise that the electronic resources that include lecture recordings and forums are sufficient for them to study the course effectively and make a conscious decision not to attend class. Many of these enrolment issues must be addressed if a mentoring program is to be successful across the TPP.

Whilst there appears to be no difference in the pass rate for students that chose to initially attend classes compared to the non-attendeers, attending class and/or providing a mentoring program does seem to influence students' ability to persist and complete the course, irrespective of the outcome.

CONCLUSIONS

The mentoring project failed to connect effectively with the majority of the ONC Toowoomba students. This unsuccessful connection was either a result of students not correctly identifying what USQ emails they should respond to or the students had made a conscious decision not to respond to the mentors enquiries or reminders. This decision not to respond could be due to the TPP students' academic fragility and their associated lack of confidence to communicate their concerns with the mentor. The project had no obvious impact on improving class attendance or the completion rates of the on-campus TPP

students. There were isolated successful mentoring experiences with several appreciative students. The project did convey greater insight into several important issues that need resolution if mentoring is to become an effective strategy across the TPP in the future. It identified that there was a time commitment to follow up on 8-10 students and this would be significant if each lecturer were allotted 50-100 students to support. The project also recognised that following up on new students who are not familiar with university processes and who lack confidence in themselves, may exaggerate the communication problems to a point that students may feel as though they are being harassed. This outcome is counterproductive to what the 'operation: connection' project was trying to achieve. The project mentors suggested a diverse range of options of how to improve the process so that mentoring could be more effective. There was optimism that TPP students could benefit from a mentoring program albeit that it will be significantly different from a post graduate or undergraduate mentoring program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further investigation is required into a range of alternatives before a mentoring program can be implemented across the TPP. The project highlighted that the time resources needed to operate a mentoring program across TPP would be considerable. The mentors suggested several alternative practices be investigated that might achieve better outcomes and require less resources than those required for the project. Peer mentoring, utilising phone texts for communication, having a dedicated staff member follow up on students at risk, reducing the number of general university emails and including more group based confidence building activities into the class structure were some of the initiatives that were suggested for further investigation. Reducing the number of constraints that make it difficult for students to attend their first class would be fundamental to improving continued class attendance. An extended project that included the external students (and the incarcerated students) would help to identify how to mentor this group of students more effectively.

The challenge for the TPP is to encourage self-efficacy and build resilience in the students so that they do communicate their needs and concerns to the right person and at the appropriate time, rather than just abandon their dreams and higher education aspirations so early in the semester.

Although the project had little effect on the class attendance and pass rates, it did expose fundamental communication problems with enabling students as well as offer useful organisational background that should be considered if a sustainable mentoring program is to be introduced across the TPP in the future.

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