



Peer support and advising enhance the student experience

The challenge

James Cook University (JCU) was established in Townsville in 1970. JCU students come from many backgrounds, promoting a rich cultural and experiential diversity on campus. Currently, there are approximately 21,000 enrolled students, although the catchment region has low levels of higher education participation. The student cohort is diverse, more than 65% of students are the first in their family to participate in higher education and of those who complete 12 years of schooling less than 35% have transitioned directly into university.

The JCU Student Mentor Program has been running since 1991. In 2015, 568 mentors supported 2179 commencing students in their first semester at JCU's campuses in Townsville and Cairns. At present the ratio of mentors to mentees is approximately 1:15.

At JCU mentoring is defined as 'the art of helping and empowering others to shape their learning behaviours.' Incoming students select their mentor at their course-based orientation session. Mentors continue to support their mentees through targeted emails at key milestones in the student lifecycle and many mentors maintain face-to-face meetings with their mentees.

JCU data (2015-2016) indicates that students with a mentor are more likely to stay at university (82%), as opposed to those that do not (62%).

So I want to go out there and shake the world a bit up now and try and change those things and try and take these things I've learned here and not just the things I've learned in my course but being a mentor you learn that you can empower people.

This study provides some insights into how the peer mentor program shapes the JCU student experience.

Key findings

Of the eight universities in this project, JCU has the lowest percentage of students identifying that they had considered leaving university, of both commencing and completing students¹.

The key findings arising from the data indicate that:

1. Mentors support new students to negotiate the structural environment of the university by being good role models who foster academic success and support appropriate help-seeking behaviours.

¹ 2014 University Experience Survey National Report <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/36863>

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I just remember being really scared when I first came in and, yeah, just getting those emails and I'd run into her around campus. She'd always pull me up and be like how are you going with it all.

(Mentee)

2. Mentors take on the role because they value the sense of belonging created either by feeling fully supported as a mentee and/or recognising and valuing the sense of community found as a mentor.

for us, it's helping people to integrate in to our academic community here, learning how to navigate the world of becoming a university student and make those connections. (Mentor)

3. Mentors also benefit and want to 'give back' to the university.

once you recognise a community like that [the mentor program], you start to recognise how that fits into a broader community. Then that has really helped me to feel deserving, to belong somewhere, because I can give back. (Mentor)

Peer support shapes the student experience

When examined in light of Kahu's model², the JCU Student Mentor Program was found to enhance students' experiences by:

- Supporting incoming students to negotiate the university's structural elements
- Acting on the psychosocial influences of engagement, specifically emotion

she really helped us all succeed and get through our first year; help us feel comfortable. (Mentee)

- Building confidence, social connections and a sense of belonging for commencing students

But [at] the end of my first year, after doing well, I actually had a lecturer recommend me to do peer assisted study sessions, and that's how I stumbled in to The Learning Centre and found a wonderful community. Someone said, 'Hey, you should be a mentor.' (Mentor)

In addition, this case study demonstrated how participating as a mentor supports and extends student engagement with the university, and positively contributes to their personal and professional development outside of the formal university curriculum.

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(Mentor)

Implications for practice

The JCU case study has demonstrated how a program largely outside the formal curriculum works to positively influence students' experiences of university in their first semester. The JCU mentor program contributes to more than 'just' the retention of incoming students, but was found to support the overarching professional and personal development of undergraduate students.

Conclusion

The JCU Student Mentor program has been running continuously for 25 years. Like other programs that are external to the formal university curriculum, it is under pressure. In recent years the opportunity for face-to-face meetings between mentees and mentors has decreased. In sustaining the program and continuing to realise the benefits, mentor program leaders have suggested that it may be more appropriate to embed opportunities for mentors to engage with mentees and other first year students within the formal curriculum.

² Kahu, E. (2014) Increasing the emotional engagement of first year mature-aged distance students: Interest and belonging. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 5(2), 45-55.