James Cook University
Case study report

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This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:

Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/

Executive summary

The James Cook University (JCU) Student Mentor Program has been running since 1991. Identified as one of the early leaders in peer-to-peer mentoring in the Australian higher education sector, in 2015 568 mentors supported 2179 mentees (incoming students) in their first semester at JCU's Australian campuses in Townsville and Cairns.

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, although many mentors maintain face-to-face meetings with their mentees as required.

The key findings emanating from this case study indicate that 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. 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. They also want to 'give back' to the university.

Findings from this case affirm the interactions identified in the Kahu model of student engagement (2014) by supporting Students (Structural Influences - student-background) through the Psychosocial Influences element, in particular those aspects identified under Student. The Student Engagement element is supported by data that demonstrates the Affect and Behaviour aspects. Experiences in the JCU Student Mentor Program lead to positive Proximal and Distal Consequences that were affirmed by both mentees and mentors.

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

James Cook University (JCU) was established in Townsville in 1970. Since this time, it has expanded into a multi-campus institution with campuses in the regional tropical cities of Cairns, Singapore and Townsville and smaller study centres in regional and remote parts of Australia, including Mount Isa, Thursday Island and Mackay. James Cook University's undergraduate and postgraduate course span the Arts, Business, Creative Arts, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Health Sciences, Science, Information Technology and Social Sciences. The university focuses on developing graduates with the capabilities to make a difference to life in the tropics.

Students come from many backgrounds, promoting a rich cultural and experiential diversity on campus. Currently, there are approximately 21 000 students enrolled. The student cohort is diverse, with a high proportion of non-traditional students represented in the overall student population. The catchment region for JCU is marked by low participation in higher education. Over 65% of the enrolled student cohort are the first in their family to participate in higher education, and of those who complete 12 years of schooling, less than 35% moved directly into higher education options. This compares to other more urbanised Australian jurisdictions, where post- school participation rates in higher education are as high as 60% (State of Queensland, 2014).

1.2 Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to inform the 21st century regional student experience project about one of the practices that JCU engages with to support the transition of students.

2 Case design

2.1 Case study plan

Initially this case study began with a collection of all of the related documents that describe the JCU student mentor program. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with staff and focus groups with mentors, some who had come through the program as mentees.

This investigation of the impact of the JCU student mentor program on the student experience (both mentors and mentees) is characterised after Kahu's (2014) Conceptual model of student engagement by examining the intersections of:

- Negotiating the structural influences element and its relationship with the student(s);
- Interrelationships between the psychosocial influences element, specifically emotion and the student and the other elements;
- Impact that the student mentor program has on affective aspects of the student engagement element;
- Considerations of the social implications in the proximal consequences element; and,
- Impact on the social aspects of the distal consequences element.

2.2 Theme

2.2.1 Theme title

The role of peer support and advising in a regional university

2.2.2 Theme description

This case study focuses on the impact of the JCU student mentor program on the student experience of university. Kahu's (2014) conceptual model of student engagement will be used to examine the intersections of each of the domains with the students' experience of the student mentor program.

2.2.3 Unit/Units of analysis

The JCU Student Mentor Program.

2.2.4 Theme scope

The opinions of staff and students who have worked with mentors or who have been part of the on-campus student mentor program at either the Townsville or Cairns campuses. The opinions of students who have participated in the online student mentor program have not been included in this case because there are too few representatives of this program.

2.2.5 Participants

Mentor program leaders and student mentors participated in interviews (mentor program leaders) and focus groups (student mentors).

2.3 Data Collection, management and Analysis

Interview and focus group data was analysed thematically using content analysis. Subsequent themes were mapped against the elements of Kahu's (2014) student engagement model.

3 Timeline

Table 2 Case study timeline

	2015					2016				
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Activities										
Invite participants			X	X			X			
Conduct interviews/ focus groups							X			
Conduct analysis								X	X	X
Write report									X	X

4 Findings

4.1 Overview

In the JCU context mentoring is described as "the art of helping and empowering others to shape their learning behaviours" (JCU Student Mentoring Handbook, 2015, p.1).

4.1.1 Background

The James Cook University Student Mentor program began as the Buddy Program in 1991. The program has evolved since its inception, but continues to be driven by a committed group of volunteer mentors supporting their mentees (incoming students). During 2015 there were a total of 568 mentors and 2179 mentees across JCU's Australian campuses at Townsville and Cairns. At present the ratio of mentors to mentees is approximately 1:15. Appendix 10.1 describes the rationale for the program and how it currently operates.

4.1.2 Key case study findings

The key findings emanating from this case study indicate that 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. 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. They also want to 'give back' to the university. In addition, participating as a mentor contributes to their professional and personal development.

4.2 Description of themes

4.2.1 Mentors support new students to negotiate the structural environment of the university

One of the key features of the student demographic at JCU is the high percentage (65%) of first in family students. At JCU the mentors provide the support that incoming students need to navigate the university. This quote is indicative of incoming students' experiences of entering the university environment and the value of having a mentor:

> "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." (Focus group)

Importantly, mentors understand the importance of their role in supporting the initial navigation of the university environment.

> "….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." (Focus group)

In addition, incoming students choose their mentor based on aspects of the mentors 'story' that resonate with them. This adds to the personalisation of the mentoring experience and helps to support the mentee who understands that their mentor, coming from a similar context, is able to empathise with them.

> "I got a mentor…. because she was a part time student with children, had come back to school when they were very young, - so she was a mother of two young children and had worked her way through university part time." (Focus group)

James Cook University staff associated with the mentor program expressed how they are always able to support every student that wants a mentor:

> "….we have such a diverse demographic of people, a lot of mature age, it's an absolute salad bowl of students, and we can always match them up." (Interview)

Finally, one of the key aspects of being located in a regional area and being a smaller university supports the continued practice of personalisation in the mentor program:

> "I think the fact that we're still trying to retain some element of personalisation of it [the mentor program] based on the fact that we are in a regional area. I think that's the beauty of studying in a regional area…." (Interview)

4.2.2 Rationale for adopting the mentor role

Three subthemes were identified that relate to the rationale for adopting the mentor role.

1. A sense of belonging.
2. Giving back to the university.
3. Personal and professional development.

4.2.2.1 A SENSE OF BELONGING

The sense of belonging to a vibrant and supportive community generated by the mentors is illustrated in following quote:

> "It's not just you and your mentees; it's every other mentor and mentee, and the shirts and the community movement." (Focus group)

4.2.2.2 GIVING BACK TO THE UNIVERSITY

A significant number of the mentors spoke about their rationale for becoming a mentor being located in their experience of being a mentee. This speaks to the ability of the mentors to help the mentees to see themselves as being part of the wider university community. So, when mentees 'graduate' out of the mentoring program some of them look forward to taking the opportunity to give back to the program. The following quote is part of a larger discussion that a mentor shared about utilising the mentor program as the basis for an academic assignment focussing on community development.

> "…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" (Focus group)

4.2.2.3 PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Primarily, the JCU mentors identified the development of leadership skills, responsibility and a sense of self-satisfaction and belonging through their involvement in peer mentoring.

> "…for me it's the understanding of harnessing transferrable skills. So not just your degree specific tasks but the ability to network, the ability to communicate with people, the ability to have the awareness of what people need…" (Focus group)

4.3 Observations from the case study

JCU has the lowest percentage of students identifying that they had considered leaving university of both commencing and completing students (UES, 2014) when compared with the other participant

universities. In addition, internal JCU data analysis on retention (2015 – 2016) indicated that students with a mentor were more likely to stay at university (82%) as opposed to those that did not (62%). At JCU, the Student Mentor Program has been identified as the greatest statistical influence on retention.

5 Understanding the regional student experience

5.1 Relationship to the Kahu model

The JCU Student Mentor Program has been identified as contributing to the Kahu (2014) model in the following ways:

- Supporting incoming students to negotiate the structural influences element;
- Describing the interrelationships between the psychosocial influences element, specifically emotion and the student and the other elements;
- Discussing the impact that the student mentor program has on affective aspects of the student engagement element;
- Considering the social implications in the proximal consequences element; and,
- Describing the impact of the social aspects of the distal consequences element.

This case study is able to demonstrate is that a program that is situated largely outside of the formal university curriculum is able to contribute positively to an incoming student's experience of university in their first semester, and in this sense enhance retention. In addition, this case study demonstrates 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.

5.1.1 Supporting incoming students to negotiate the structural influences element

This has been described previously described in 4.1 as a key theme of the JCU Student Mentor program.

5.1.2 Describing the interrelationships between psychosocial influences element, specifically emotion and the student and the other elements;

Being a mentor brings together a series of skills and attributes that positively impact on the personal and professional growth of the individual. In the following quote the mentor describes the wide-ranging impact of their involvement. It also demonstrates how psychosocial influences (emotion, motivation and skills) mediated by student engagement (interactions) with other mentors and mentees, supports the development of proximal (satisfaction) and distal (personal growth) consequences. The following quote highlights the interrelationships with different elements of the Kahu (2014) model.

> "….what this program teaches you, how to emphathise with people, how to work and create a community, because that's what it is." (Focus group)

5.1.3 Discussing the impact that the student mentor program has on affective aspects of the student engagement element

A sense of belonging significantly contributes to student engagement. This quote highlights the impact of a having a mentor on this student's feelings of belonging and affirms the role that the student mentor program plays in the student engagement element of the Kahu model.

> "…I think she really helped - she really did make an effort and really helped us all succeed and get through our first year; help us feel comfortable." (Focus group)

5.1.4 Considering the social implications in the proximal consequences element;

The following quote illustrates an agreement with how academic (achievement) and psychosocial influences (motivation) supported this mentor's sense of belonging (Student engagement – affect).

This mentor relates how her academic achievement led her to become engaged with mentors that are encouraged to 'hang out' in The Learning Centre.

> "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." (Focus group)

5.1.5 Describing the impact of the social aspects of the distal consequences element

This powerful quote highlights the interactions between the formal and informal learning that students who are involved in this type of volunteering experience during their time at the university. This mentor clearly articulates how psychosocial influences (motivation), student engagement (enthusiasm) and proximal consequences (learning) support the development of social distal consequences (cizitenship and personal growth).

> "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." (Focus group)

5.2 Insights gained

The overarching contribution of this case to the Shaping the 21st century experience at regional universities project lies in the multifaceted engagement of students in the JCU Student Mentor Program. The mentor program engages both mentees and mentors with multiple elements of the Kahu model through the acceptance of and/or the provision of mentoring. This case study provides specific examples of interactions between multiple and diverse elements that suggest that the JCU mentor program can be recognised as something that contributes to more than 'just' the retention of incomings students, but supports the overarching professional and personal development of undergraduate students.

5.3 Good practice examples

At JCU incoming students (mentees) have the opportunity to personally choose a discipline-based mentor for their first semester of university study. Mentors are academically successful students in their second year (or above) who have been identified as positive role models and have participated in a competitive selection process. Prospective mentors engage with a one-day training session that focuses on their role, university-based support services available and cross-cultural awareness. During Orientation Week in both semesters of the academic year mentors participate in discipline-based Welcome Days where incoming students have the opportunity to choose their mentor. Subsequently, mentors have email contact with their mentees at key points in the student lifecycle in weeks 1, 3, 6, 9 and 12 of semester. Mentees can also arrange face-to-face meetings with their mentors at any time.

6 Implications

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 budgetary pressure. In recent years the opportunity for face-to-face meetings between mentees and mentors has decreased due to budgetary constraints. In moving the program forward, 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.

7 Conclusion

The JCU Student Mentor Program is designed to support incoming students to negotiate the university environment during their first semester of university. Mentors act as role models who foster academic success and support appropriate help-seeking behaviours in the incoming student. Mentors take on the role because they experience a sense of belonging in and to the university and valuing the sense of community they create. It is suggested that the mentor program be viewed as more than just a retention strategy because of the skills and attributes that are developed in the mentor cohort. Finally, the current practices relating to mentor choice should be maintained. Recent budgetary constraints have limited face-to-face engagement of mentees and mentors at formal social events. If it is not possible to re-instate face-to-face social events the opportunities to include mentors in formal course and curriculum-related activities should be considered.

8 References

James Cook University Student Mentor Handbook (2015) retrieved from www.jcu.edu.au/learningskills/resources/mentors.

9 Funding acknowledgement

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

10 Appendices

10.1 4.4.1 Background to the JCU Student Mentor Program

In 1991 a study skills advisor, responding to calls for additional support from mature-aged students who had not studied for a long time and those that lived a long distance from the university, matched supportive current students with an incoming students' request for support based on their discipline area or their postcode (Treston, 1999). The ethos of the program was to "offer of a friendly helping hand from a continuing student for each new student in his or her first semester" of study (Treston, 1999, p. 236). Treston (1999) attributed that the successes of the Buddy and subsequently renamed JCU Student Mentor Program emanated from staff and student ownership and commitment to operational and support structures integral to the program. In addition, the continued success of the program, reported by Treston (1999) was related to the ongoing improvement and adaptation to the changing nature of the student demographic and evolving technologies.

Currently the program is operated in the following way. Incoming students have the opportunity to meet prospective mentors on Welcome Day in Orientation Week of both semesters. On Welcome Day, mentors, based in their discipline groups, introduce themselves to the incoming students. During this session the mentors share aspects of their 'story' with the incoming students as a means of providing them with sufficient information to support them to make a decision about whom they wish to choose as a mentor. One of the key empowering aspects of this program is that the mentees choose their mentor based on the resonance of the mentors experience with their own. For example, a single mother returning to study or a student from a remote community. Subsequently, mentors maintain contact with mentees via email at key stages of the student lifecycle at weeks 1, 3, 6, 9 and 12 of semester. Mentors can also arrange face-to-face meetings with their mentees at any time. Incidental meetings on campus that present a friendly and known face also present opportunities to interact.

Mentors are also encouraged to congregate in Learning Centre (Cairns) and Learning Circles (Townsville) spaces.

10.2 Interactions between the published literature and the findings from the JCU Student Mentor Program case study

10.2.1 4.2.1 The role that mentor programs play in supporting students to 'navigate' the university environment

The widening university participation agenda has increased the number of first in family students. James Cook University has a high percentage (65%) of first in family students. O'Shea (2015) suggests that although first in family students are not part of the identified cohorts at a disadvantage when they enter the higher education sector, they are at high risk of attrition. (http://theconversation.com/why-first-in-family-uni-students-should-receive-more-support-38601) O'Shea cites Ball and colleagues (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002) who reported that that a lack of family culture in relation to higher education participation impacts student preparedness. In addition, O'Shea describes a "steep learning curve" that first in family students experience. In her research (O'Shea & Stone, 2014) participants describe starting university as like "travelling in a foreign country, where a new language, new customs and new expectations had to be learnt, with no one to teach them" (p. 85).

10.2.2 The role that a student mentor program plays in retention

Collings and colleagues (2014) in a study with both an experimental and control group from two different universities that examined the impact of a peer-to-peer mentor program on the first 10 weeks of university, found that non-peer mentored students were 4.16 times more likely to want to leave university compared with their peer mentored contemporaries. In contrast, only small numbers of mentees (166 out of 7000) indicated that their mentor made a difference in their decision to persevere with university at Curtin University in Western Australia (Smith & Elliott, 2012).

10.3 4.3 Observations from case study

While it is acknowledged that a combination of factors contributes to a student's choice to leave university, findings from this case study suggest that having a mentor who was able to direct a student to university-based support structures enabled students to stay. What the JCU Student Mentor program continues to feature, despite internal and external pressures, is the element of student choice. Incoming students have multiple opportunities to meet potential mentors face-to-face, they are not allocated a mentor via email, nor are they one of up to 100 mentees that one mentor may support. In addition, aside from email contact at key points within the student lifecycle, mentors and mentees actively take opportunities to engage with each other on campus. It is these humanising elements that support a sense of belonging that has been identified as important to retaining students at a university (Kift, 2004).

10.4 Good practice examples

Title: The role of peer support and advising in a regional university

Institution: James Cook University

Leader: Dr. Kathryn Meldrum

10.4.1 Context

James Cook University (JCU) was established in Townsville in 1970. Since this time, it has expanded into a multi-campus institution with campuses in the regional tropical cities of Cairns, Singapore and

Townsville and smaller study centres in regional and remote parts of Australia, including Mount Isa, Thursday Island and Mackay. James Cook University's undergraduate and postgraduate course span the Arts, Business, Creative Arts, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Health Sciences, Science, Information Technology and Social Sciences. The university focuses on developing graduates with the capabilities to make a difference to life in the tropics.

Students come from many backgrounds, promoting a rich cultural and experiential diversity on campus. Currently, there are approximately 21 000 students enrolled. The student cohort is diverse, with a high proportion of non-traditional students represented in the overall student. The catchment region for JCU is marked by low participation in higher education. Over 65% of the enrolled student cohort are the first in their family to participate in higher education, and of those who complete 12 years of schooling, less than 35% moved directly into higher education options. This compares to other more urbanised Australian jurisdictions, where post- school participation rates in higher education are as high as 60% (State of Queensland, 2014).

The James Cook University Student Mentor program began as the Buddy Program in 1991 and was identified (Treston, 1999) as an early leader in the provision of peer-to-peer mentoring in the Australian higher education sector. The JCU Student Mentor Program has evolved since its inception, but continues to be driven by a committed group of volunteer mentors supporting their mentees (incoming students).

Currently the program is operated in the following way. Incoming students have the opportunity to meet prospective mentors on Welcome Day in Orientation Week of both semesters. On Welcome Day, mentors, based in their discipline groups, introduce themselves to the incoming students. During this session the mentors share aspects of their 'story' with the incoming students as a means of providing them with sufficient information to support them to make a decision about whom they wish to choose as a mentor. One of the key empowering aspects of this program is that the mentees choose their mentor based on the resonance of the mentors experience with their own. For example, a single mother returning to study or a student from a remote community. Subsequently, mentors maintain contact with mentees via email at key stages of the student lifecycle at weeks 1, 3, 6, 9 and 12 of semester. Mentors can also arrange face-to-face meetings with their mentees at any time. Incidental meetings on campus that present a friendly and known face also present opportunities to interact. Mentors are also encouraged to congregate in Learning Centre (Cairns) and Learning Circles (Townsville) spaces. During 2015 there were a total of 568 mentors and 2179 mentees across JCU's Australian campuses at Townsville and Cairns. At present the ratio of mentors to mentees is approximately 1:15.

10.4.2 Positive program outcomes

The JCU Student Mentor program supports incoming students (mentees) to negotiate the university's structural environment (Influences). Mentors work with mentees to support them to develop good academic skills and appropriate help seeking behaviours. Most mentee's choose their mentor during Orientation week of both university semesters. Mentees can choose their mentor based on aspects of the mentors 'story' that resonate with them. This continues to be a positive feature of the program.

Both mentees and mentors report that their involvement with the program supports affect and behaviour elements of student engagement. For mentees this is most apparent in supporting their sense of belonging at the university. Mentees also gain a greater appreciation for the behavioural aspects, in particular time and effort, thorough their engagement with the mentors who model successful academic behaviours.

For mentors, elements of the engagement domain are much broader as they experience a strong sense of being a member of and creating community (Affect). They are willing to volunteer their own time to support mentees and each other (Behaviour).

Involvement with the mentor program brings positive benefits for both mentees and mentors with respect to proximal and distal consequences. For mentees, as already indicated, strong and positive role modelling from the mentors results in academic success (Proximal consequence). In addition, all the aspects of the JCU Student Mentor Program come together for the student and the university with respect to supporting retention (Distal consequence). Internal JCU data analysis on retention (2015 – 2016) indicated that students with a mentor were more likely to stay at university (82%) as opposed to those that did not (62%). At JCU, the Student Mentor Program has been identified as the greatest statistical influence on retention. For mentors, the reported proximal and distal consequences were largely social, contributing positively to an ongoing sense of satisfaction, the development of citizenship and personal growth.

10.4.3 Impact

This quote is indicative of incoming students' experiences of entering the university environment and the value of having a mentor:

> "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." (Focus group)

Importantly, mentors understand the importance of their role in supporting the initial navigation of the university environment.

> "….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." (Focus group)

In addition, incoming students choose their mentor based on aspects of the mentors 'story' that resonate with them. This adds to the personalisation of the mentoring experience and helps to support the mentee who understands that their mentor, coming from a similar context, is able to empathise with them.

> "I got a mentor…. because she was a part time student with children, had come back to school when they were very young, - so she was a mother of two young children and had worked her way through university part time. ….But to me what was more important, wasn't so much the subject material, it was her life experience, that she brought to her studies and how she managed that." (Focus group)

The sense of belonging to a vibrant and supportive community generated by the mentors is illustrated in following quote:

> "It's not just you and your mentees; it's every other mentor and mentee, and the shirts and the community movement." (Focus group)

Here the sense of belonging to a community and wanting to contribute back to the community interact. The following quote is part of a larger discussion that a mentor shared about utilising the mentor program as the basis for an academic assignment focussing on community development.

> "…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" (Focus group)

Primarily, the JCU mentors identified the development of leadership skills, responsibility and a sense of self-satisfaction and belonging through their involvement in peer mentoring.

> "…for me it's the understanding of harnessing transferrable skills. So not just your degree specific tasks but the ability to network, the ability to communicate with people, the ability to have the awareness of what people need…" (Focus group)

10.4.4 Implementing the practice

10.4.4.1 THE ROLE OF THE JCU STUDENT MENTOR PROGRAM

The following quotes describe the historical beginnings of the JCU Student Mentor Program, initially the 'buddy' program, how the current program operates and its primary role.

> "….we [JCU] were the original [Australian] university to have a student mentoring program." (Interview)
>
> "It was quite intimate in its early forms and as it grew and as the campus grew it started to have to take on a bit of a different form because of the logistics of doing the matching [mentees to mentors]. It became in its current form now where we match students who are within the same course." (Interview)
>
> "….we match undergraduate students, as much as possible, to new students arriving at university. Those undergrads/mentors then help those new students through their first six-months transition into university, allay some of their fears and anxieties and just basically refer them to all services that they ask for." (Interview)
>
> "The focus is really to provide some sort of friendly and inclusive community for them when they're entering into university." (Interview)

James Cook University staff associated with the mentor program expressed how they are always able to support every student that wants a mentor:

> "….we have such a diverse demographic of people, a lot of mature age, it's an absolute salad bowl of students, and we can always match them up. I don't think there's ever been - even people with a disability - we look after absolutely everyone." (Interview)

One of the key aspects of being located in a regional area and being a smaller university supports the continued practice of personalisation in the mentor program:

> "I think the fact that we're still trying to retain some element of personalisation of it [the mentor program] based on the fact that we are in a regional area. I think that's the beauty of studying in a regional area is that personalisation of your study experience." (Interview)

10.4.4.2 MENTOR RECRUITMENT

The process of choosing mentors is an involved one and involves recommendation from academic staff as well as checking the academic record. Mentors do not have to have a 6.0 GPA but need to be able to demonstrate that they are good students who can manage their time appropriately.

> "Mentors can apply online and, during that application process, they provide academics who will basically endorse them, or they can be academically recommended." (Interview)

When deciding who will be offered the opportunity to become mentors, JCU staff are looking for:

> "People who are good with time management and happy go lucky personalities and things like that. If the academic endorses those people, then they're invited to come along to training. They won't become an official mentor until they've completed training and the Welcome Day, which are two integral parts." (Interview)

10.4.5 Training mentors

Training is conducted at the beginning of every semester and prospective mentors must attend. Key elements addressed during training include:

> "….having a conversation about how we mentor at JCU. What it is to be a mentor, what are the qualities and attributes of a good mentor. Getting them to reflect on their personal attributes and what they bring to the mentoring role in relation to that." (Interview)

In addition, some time is spent on raising the cross-cultural awareness of prospective mentors.

> "…we do spend probably at least a half an hour talking about cultural inclusivity, cultural safety and cultural awareness. We have the largest percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at any university at JCU so it's really important for us…" (Interview)

Mentors do not perform the role of solving problems of mentees. The focus of their role is supporting students to seek appropriately qualified help within the university's structure.

> "We then provide them with a lot of information from the support services around the university because they are a hub. It's really important for us to know that they know where to send people, so we spend a good amount of the day just explaining the support services and getting them to have a really good understanding of that." (Interview)

Finally, this quote highlights the expectations that are communicated to prospective mentors about the role that they play and the importance of it.

> "So we make sure in the training that they are well aware of that and that they understand that we require them, even though they are volunteers, to be professional and inclusive and respectful and all those things we want them to understand." (Interview)

10.4.5.1 INTRODUCING THE MENTORS

Aspects of introducing the mentors have already been discussed throughout the case study; however, the following quote sums up the mentors initial engagement with incoming students and prospective mentees.

> "In O Week they have a big remit around supporting the Welcome Days and that's where they engage with the students for the first time. They take them on a campus tour. They have a Meet the Mentor activity where they do an ice-breaker. So they're really actually the first people they have any great contact with on their first day of university." (Interview)

10.4.6 Conclusion

The JCU Student Mentor Program is designed to support incoming students to negotiate the university environment during their first semester of university. Mentors act as role models who foster academic success and support appropriate help-seeking behaviours in the incoming student. Mentors take on the role because they experience a sense of belonging in and to the university that is created either by feeling fully supported as a mentee or recognising and valuing the sense of community found as a mentor. It is suggested that the mentor program be viewed as more than just a retention strategy because of the skills and attributes that are developed in the mentor cohort. Finally, the current practices relating to mentor choice should be maintained. However, the decision to discontinue face-to-face engagement of mentees and mentors at formal social events at strategic times during the student lifecycle should be reconsidered. If it is not possible to re-instate face-to-face social events the opportunities to include mentors in the formal course and curriculum-related activities should be considered.

10.5 References

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Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

Findings from the James Cook University case study
Peer support and advising enhances the
student experience

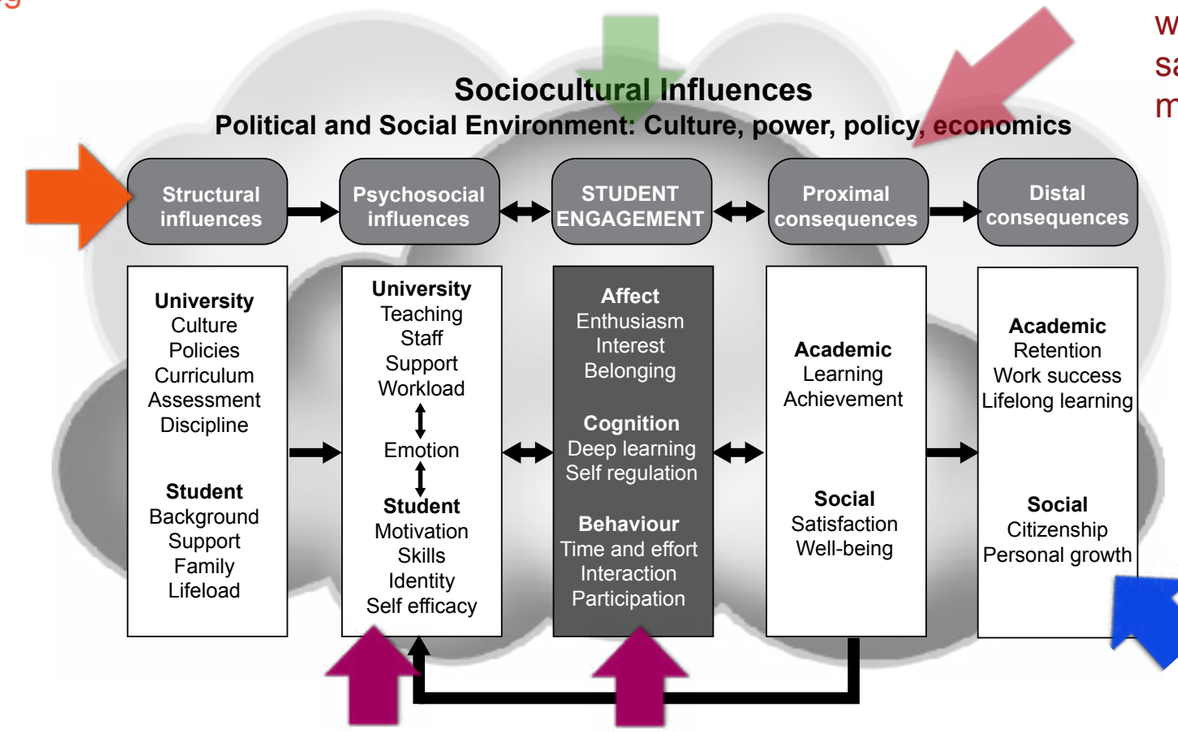
These quotes illustrate how the JCU Student Mentor Program enhances the student experience by providing support in all domains of the Kahu (2014) conceptual model of student engagement

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

"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."

"…I think she really helped - she really did make an effort and really helped us all succeed and get through our first year; help us feel comfortable."

"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."



"….what this program teaches you, how to emphathise with people, how to work and create a community, because that's what it is."

For more information go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSHza0pZocA&rel=0 or scan this QR code

"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."