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The QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program

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Abstract

This paper examines the partnership established between ALIA and QUT, through the School of Information Systems and the Careers and Employment Office, to provide a mentoring program for students in the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) course. The program has been offered to students enrolled in the Professional Practice unit of the course. The main focus of this unit is to prepare students for entry into their new careers and as such is conceptually and philosophically related to a mentoring program. A range of activities, both career-related and social, are offered to mentors and mentees, aimed at developing closer relationships between students and information professionals at a personal level, as well as interaction between the university and the information profession as a whole at the institutional level. The paper discusses the collaborative research project which investigates both the teaching and learning outcomes for students and the professional development outcomes for mentors resulting from this unique transitional mentoring program.

Introduction

In July 2002, an innovative new program was launched for students enrolled in ITN339 Professional Practice, a core unit in the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) course offered by Queensland University of Technology (QUT): the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program. The program is positive evidence of a collaborative approach between the University and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to prepare students for entry into the workforce, with a number of key people working together through both the planning and implementation stages to establish the program.

A subsequent development has been a project funded by the Faculty of Information Technology at QUT to undertake research not only into mentoring best practice, but also into both student learning outcomes and the mentors' own professional development outcomes from the program. The research itself reflects the collaborative effort for the project, combining the resources of the Faculty and the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee. This paper provides some background to the mentoring program itself and outlines the aims and methodology of the research project, together with the projected research outcomes.

While reports are available on a number of mentoring programs for information professionals, the focus remains fairly general and descriptive. Little work has been undertaken to date to formally evaluate the programs and to report on the outcomes. The current project aims to address this gap in the literature.

Background

The seeds for the mentoring program were sown by Kelly Meaney of the QUT Careers and Employment Office, which runs a number of mentoring programs for final year students across the university, when she contacted Gillian Hallam to determine whether Library and Information Studies (LIS) students would benefit from a mentoring program.

Two issues immediately emerged:

1. The existing QUT programs catered for final year undergraduate students within three or four year courses – and the graduate diploma is a one year full-time course. Accordingly the logistics for introducing a program were significantly different.
2. ALIA had already established a mentoring program for members in Queensland, but this program had to date excluded students.

Despite the challenges presented by these issues, the concept of a mentoring program for students was felt to have a natural fit within the Professional Practice unit which focuses strongly on the development of the skills and attitudes required for entry into the LIS profession. Contact was made with Chris Gissing from the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee, to explore the possibility of incorporating a student program into the Committee's activities. The idea was warmly received and the idea began to germinate.

Meetings between Chris Gissing, Kelly Meaney and Gillian Hallam were both creative and productive. The Executive Director of ALIA, Jennefer Nicholson, was approached to support the proposed program to ensure that it was recognised as a legitimate activity within the framework of the professional association. With ALIA's endorsement, the QUT / ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program was established as a partnership between the Faculty of Information Technology, QUT Careers and Employment Office and ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee.

The LIS mentoring program is distinctive in so far as the plan to incorporate it into the Professional Practice unit meant that it could only be launched in Semester 2. This contrasts with the other QUT mentoring programs which run throughout the complete academic year for final year students.

The fieldwork component of Professional Practice with two industry placements means that most students are still enrolled for a couple of months after the end of semester. It was recognised, however, that involvement in the program over the proposed 12 month period would extend it beyond the academic year per se. Thus the LIS program will bridge the period of entry into a new career, promising to forge closer links between the university and the profession.

The planning – even though it took several months to pull it all together - was probably the easy bit! Ideas had to be translated into reality... and reality meant people, both mentors and mentees. It was valuable to be able to access ALIA membership lists, so it was possible to make use of the association's e-lists to invite active library and information professionals to become mentors. The student cohort was a captive market for mentees on Day 1 of the semester when they were introduced to the program. As the participation in the program was entirely voluntary, it was expected that around 7-10 students would be interested. A total of 27 students wished to be involved – about 50% of the class, which meant finding 27 mentors – quite a challenge!

There has been a bit of stumbling along the way, but the 27 mentoring partnerships have been successfully established. The program itself involves a number of social functions, as well as some professional development seminars planned for early 2003, when the students will be free from the pressures of their studies. The mentors and mentees get together in their own time and in their own ways: some in the workplace, some more socially over coffee or lunch. Some students are also able to undertake one of their fieldwork placements in their mentor's organisation.

Communication between members of the group is encouraged and supported by the program's own community website. Through this site mentors and mentees are alerted to events of interest, relevant professional readings and can exchange ideas and views through the discussion forum. Involvement with the community web forum ensures that communication channels extend comfortably and naturally beyond the university context. Interestingly, one mentoring partnership has been established as an e-mentoring arrangement, with a student in Brisbane and a mentor in Broken Hill.

The significance of the project has been recognised through the award of a QUT Faculty of Information Technology Teaching & Learning Grant. Objective 1 of the QUT Faculty of Information Technology Strategic Plan 2001-2005 outlines the importance of "optimising the learning experience of students by fostering their capacity to become lifelong learners and meet their diverse professional needs, in courses relevant to and which meet the needs of industry" (QUT, 2001). The mentoring program consequently offers a valuable opportunity for collaboration between the University and industry to align the students' learning environment with the professional context in which they will be employed. It is hoped that the current project can be developed as a model for other collaborative mentoring programs both within the LIS profession in general and within other courses at QUT itself.

Research aims

While much has been written in general terms about the benefits of mentoring programs across a range of disciplines and professions, the current project aims to maximise the teaching and learning opportunities emanating from the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program. The overarching goals are to identify the value of mentoring programs within professional courses at the tertiary education level and to develop an appropriate methodology to evaluate such programs.

Specifically, the research project objectives are:

1. To undertake a literature review of mentoring programs, specifically within the information professions.
2. To identify and document best practice within existing mentoring programs, specifically for the information professions.
3. To identify and document the benefits and the challenges of mentoring programs to both mentors and mentees.
4. To encourage reflective practice as a key element in the learning experience within the mentoring process.
5. To identify and document the learning outcomes for students participating in a mentoring program.
6. To identify and document the professional development outcomes for mentors participating in a mentoring program.
7. To develop a tool to effectively measure the success of the student mentoring program.

The project will therefore explore selected mentoring constructs as presented in the literature to focus on the learning, professional development and psychosocial factors from the perspective of the participants, both mentors and mentees.

Methodology

The initial task for the researchers has involved a review of the relevant literature from both Australia and overseas, the scope of which is described below. A two-stage methodology is proposed for the research process itself. Phase One will encompass an exploratory research approach with the development of appropriate instruments to collect qualitative data about the mentoring experience from the participants, both mentors and mentees. Data collection will include surveys, individual interviews and focus groups. These differing approaches will enable participants to provide responses both confidentially about matters they would prefer to keep private, and through collaborative discussion which should encourage key ideas to be explored from different angles.

The surveys allow for the systematic collection of data about the mentoring program, with questions closely linked to the initial objectives of the program to determine the extent to which the desired goals have been attained. One possible approach for the survey may be to provide respondents with a list of expected benefits and ask them to indicate the extent to which they feel these benefits have been realised.

Gibb (1994, p.37) recommends that the scope of the interview questions should include the factual, descriptive and affective areas of the mentoring experience, to incorporate a range of information, for example:

- Factual
 - What has the mentoring relationship involved?
 - How often did pairs meet? How long were the interactions?
- Descriptive
 - How do participants describe their experience of mentoring?
 - What is the balance of learning outcomes, professional development outcomes, and psychosocial outcomes?
- Affective
 - What are the participants' feelings about the mentoring relationship?
 - Has it been worthwhile?

The interviews should include both structured questions to be able to compare and evaluate specific responses, and unstructured, open questions that require more personal, anecdotal and reflective responses. A pilot study will be undertaken to test the survey instruments to identify any problems, oversights or ambiguities. The research will be subject to review by the University Human Research Ethics Committee at QUT.

It is then proposed to develop specific hypotheses for Phase Two of the research in order to test the validity of the information gathered in Phase One. The hypotheses can have both a quantitative focus (eg out of the given student population, participants in the mentoring program experienced greater success in gaining a desired position in the LIS profession than non-participants) and a qualitative focus (eg participants in the mentoring program are more confident about their ability to work in the LIS profession). It is further proposed that Phase Two should encompass a longitudinal study of the contribution of mentoring to the career 'success' of the mentees, although it is acknowledged that this aspect of the research will need to be considered in greater detail in the months ahead.

Literature review

The literature review encompassed a wide range of resources, with searches focussing on resources in Australian academic and special libraries, the major research databases in the fields of library and information studies, education and organisational learning, and Internet resources. Given the vast amount of material identified, it was essential to refine the search process to look specifically for literature covering the 'transitional' models of mentoring and case studies within the LIS field. By focusing on transitional mentoring, it should be noted that the research project would therefore exclude internal workplace or executive succession programs and any school-based mentoring programs.

Specific attention was given to identifying resources to support the evaluation of mentoring programs, although it should be noted that the issues of best practice, perceived benefits of mentoring, learning outcomes and the evaluation of programs are all closely intertwined. While it was found that very little information was available in the literature regarding the evaluation or outcomes from mentoring programs in the LIS discipline, it was possible to discover some correlations with mentoring programs for beginning teachers or social workers.

Discussion

The central purpose of the research is to identify and document the learning and professional development outcomes from the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program. A number of issues emerge during the process of focussing the research.

Mentoring: definitions and models

The first question to be considered in the research was "What is mentoring?" Both the research literature and more informal sources present a considerable range of definitions and interpretations. While dictionary definitions of mentoring generally include the idea of trust and experience in their definitions, the scope of definitions in the literature covers concepts such as experience, leadership, growth, development, advice, support, coaching, counselling, motivation, and even power (Gehrke, 2001; Gibbons, n.d.).

The researchers have accepted the following working definition for the current student mentoring program:

Mentoring is a supportive learning relationship between a caring individual who shares his/her knowledge, professional experience and insights with another individual who is ready and willing to benefit from this exchange to develop his or her skills, confidence and abilities and to enrich his or her professional journey. (Faure, 2000, p.3)

Faure has highlighted the importance of mentoring as a reciprocal and beneficial relationship: "Mentoring is a long term relationship that meets a developmental need, helps develop full potential, and benefits all partners, mentor, mentee and organisation" (Faure, as cited in Gibbons, n.d.) The concept of the mutually beneficial relationship is central to the work of Beyene, Sanchez and Ballou (2002). The current research project will explore the extent to which the attributes discussed by these authors reflect the goals of the student mentoring program.

The literature presents a wide range of models of the mentoring process. The organisation Mentoring Canada presents a clear grouping of different categories of mentoring:

- Degree of formality
 - Informal or casual mentoring
 - Formal mentoring
- Functions and goals
 - Educational or academic mentoring
 - Career mentoring
 - Personal development mentoring
 - Cultural and faith based mentoring
- Settings
 - Community based mentoring
 - School based mentoring
 - Workplace mentoring
 - Internet mentoring
- Number of mentees
 - One-to-one mentoring
 - Group mentoring
 - Family mentoring (Mentoring Canada, 2002).

The current project and the individual mentoring relationships in the student mentoring program span a number of these categories. There is nothing prescriptive for participants in the program. Most mentors and mentees are meeting on a one-to-one basis, although there are opportunities for everyone to come together for group functions. The degree of formality adopted by each partnership will naturally differ. The settings also vary, with some pairs meeting socially and others within the workplace, some mentees actually undertaking work experience under the auspices of the program. The most difficult aspects to try and categorise are those listed under “functions and goals” – here the student program is expansive, incorporating the educational angle, the career and professional perspective and the personal development component. The definition of mentoring accepted by the researchers encapsulates these elements and it is hoped that they will be reflected in the research findings themselves to demonstrate a broad range of learning, professional development and personal development outcomes from the program.

The perspective of developmental phases or sequences of mentoring is widely discussed in the literature (Chao, 1997; Kram, 1983; Levinson et al, 1978). The terms ‘transitional mentoring’ and ‘career transitional mentoring’ have emerged more recently to incorporate the transitional mode from the academic environment to the workplace (although it can also specifically refer to programs for vulnerable youth and to prisoners moving back into the community). Cohen and Light note that “the literature supports the importance of mentoring in transitional periods, not only for transition into a new occupation or organization but also for transition into adult life itself” (2000). An important aspect of the research project is the way in which it will explore the learning and development outcomes within both the professional and personal domains.

Traditionally, the career transitional mentoring process has been regarded as an activity involving young new professionals and more mature, experienced mentors:

Mentoring is first encountered during the establishment stage, usually when young people first enter an organization and are in most need of guidance and support. Mentors, in their mid- to late 40s, at the maintenance stage of their career, pass on their acquired knowledge to young people who have just started, enabling them to build a sense of identity and purpose. (Darwin, 2000).

It is felt that in the current labour market, this traditional model may be becoming less relevant. People are changing careers, so the 'new professional' is not necessarily the younger member of the partnership or and the person with the role of mentor may not necessarily be the one having all the knowledge and skills to share, as noted by Darwin:

Development models assume that the mentor has more career-related experience and knowledge than does the protégé. However, midcareer workers... are now having to learn new skills: those in which younger workers may already be more competent. Career age, rather than chronological age, may be more important. Career growth will be a process of continuous learning, which combines relationships and work challenges. (Darwin, 2000).

The interplay of these developmental and transformational relationships between mentor and mentee and the respective learning, professional and humanistic outcomes promise to be a valuable angle of the research project. Beyene, Sanchez and Ballou (2002) explore the relational perspective which stresses "the need to examine relationship as central to any human endeavor and so becomes a guiding force in our consideration of mentoring." The interactive qualities of the relationships incorporate concepts such as empathy, friendship and support.

Mentoring programs for LIS professionals

The literature indicates that structured mentoring programs for library and information professionals have been established predominantly by the library associations, although some corporate executive development programs were also introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Field, 2001, p.271). In recent years, a number of professional associations have run semi-formal mentoring programs for interested members, eg the American Library Association, American Association of Law Librarians, Special Libraries Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, Medical Library Association, Montana Library Association, Connecticut Library Association and California Library Association to name a few. Some larger libraries, such as metropolitan public libraries and university libraries, run internal programs, but these programs lie beyond the scope of the research project.

It was particularly interesting to note that Field makes general reference to some faculty-based programs: "Many library education programs within particular courses create mentoring opportunities, pairing a practitioner with a student for a semester. Many of these pairings last not only through graduation but beyond" (Field, 2001, p.273). No individual programs are identified, however, so further research is required to explore this avenue, as it naturally has direct relevance to the current project. In 1990 the University of California Los Angeles – Graduate School of Library and Information Studies and the California Librarians Black Caucus (CLBC) received a \$27,000 California State Library grant to recruit and mentor African American library school students. The results of a survey of students in the CLBC/UCLA-GSLIS program will be explored as part of the research process (Kaplowitz, 1992).

One of the more high profile mentoring programs for library and information professionals is the REFORMA/ALA Spectrum Latino Mentoring Program run by REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to the Latinos and the Spanish Speaking) (Champlin, 2001). UCLA has also been associated with the REFORMA program, so to date these LIS mentoring schemes have predominantly been regarded as support mechanisms for minority groups.

Evaluation of mentoring programs

There are many texts which present ideas and opinions about the features which render a mentoring program successful, some presented as checklists (Lewis, 1996; MacCallum & Beltman, 1999; Rolfe-Flett, 2002) and others more discursive (Caldwell & Carter, 1993; Fletcher, 2000; MacLennan, 1995; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995). In addition there are many web resources available through organisations such as the National Mentoring Working Group, The Mentoring Group, Mentoring Canada, The Coaching and Mentoring Network, National Mentoring Center, as well as many industry-specific sites.

Mentoring programs are typically described in terms of the sequential activities which must be undertaken:

- Establishing a program
- Selecting program participants
- Implementing the program
- Evaluating the program (MacCallum & Beltman, 1999, Chapter 2).

Other ingredients for successful programs include the personality traits needed to make a potentially 'good' mentor and the desirable attributes of the mentee to be able to maximise the benefits from the program.

One of the most critical elements for any program, however, is the effective evaluation process. Bagayoko (1997) stresses the complex nature of this task: "The assessment and evaluation activities for mentoring are as intricate as mentoring itself." Nevertheless, an evaluative framework can provide a critical perspective on the process of mentoring, to identify both the potential and limitations of the program (Gibb, 1994, p.33). Much of the literature that discusses the evaluation of mentoring programs targets formal workplace-based schemes, and so considers the cost of, or inputs into, the program and the measurable benefits to the organisation as a whole. The current research project, however, involves the relationship between individuals in a broad range of organisations, so that evaluation becomes more complex.

The central concern for the research project is to determine what precisely should be evaluated. As noted earlier, the research aims numbered 5-7 list the following goals for the project:

5. To identify and document the learning outcomes for students participating in a mentoring program.
6. To identify and document the professional development outcomes for mentors participating in a mentoring program.
7. To develop a tool to effectively measure the success of the student mentoring program.

Accordingly the project focuses strongly on the developmental role of the program for the participants in the transition from education to employment, to consider the learning outcomes, professional development outcomes and success of the program. The evaluative process should therefore identify the nature and achievement of mentoring outcomes to consider whether it has made any difference to the students, as questioned by Gibb (1994): "What is the value of mentoring in terms of changing the knowledge, skills or attitudes of young people?" (p.32).

In considering the 'success' of the program, it will be necessary to define the role it plays, or the effect it has, in the broader environment, so to appraise the contribution it makes to work-

place learning within the GDLIS and also to the development of linkages between the University and industry. Gibb highlights the difficulty of endeavouring to evaluate the effects of a mentoring program, especially if it is a transitional mentoring scheme: “There is no clearly established relationship between mentoring and learning, or mentoring and career development... In contexts where young people are experiencing mentoring, this duality of learning and career concerns, in the transition from education to work, complicates the evaluation of effects of mentoring” (Gibb, 1994, p.33). The real test, perhaps, is to determine whether the participants have found the program valuable.

Outcomes from the program

Mentoring is inherently a very personal and individual activity: different people will get different things out of it (Gibb, 1994, p.34). While it is hoped that the process of reflective practice will capture some of these uniquely personal experiences and thus contribute to the qualitative evaluation of the program, the confidential nature of the process must also be recognised.

The teaching and learning aims of ITN339 Professional Practice unit are expressed in the unit outline:

The unit seeks to develop the students’ understanding of the key issues of contemporary professional practice in information agencies. It does this through group discussion of current topics in seminars and through practical experience during fieldwork placements. The unit seeks to develop oral and written communication skills, teamwork skills and reflective practice.

The Student Mentoring Program offers an additional avenue to further the unit’s aims, with a specific focus on generic capabilities and professional awareness, supporting the views of Kolb (1984): “An excellent education in any field should extend beyond the classroom.”

The program extends beyond the discipline-specific knowledge of the classroom and so contributes significantly to the development of the students’ generic capabilities. The spectrum of communication skills, specifically oral communication, as well as interpersonal relations and self-insight, are especially important in the mentoring relationship. It is hoped that students will also have the chance to develop the more complex attributes of critical thinking and problem solving as they are exposed to and contemplate the various issues currently impacting on the profession.

A major issue for new professionals entering the workforce is recognition of the importance of lifelong learning, both for themselves and for others. The mentoring program encapsulates the significance of continuing professional development for both mentors and mentees alike. The ability to consider personal goals and to proactively develop a career plan is an important step for mentees.

Desired learning outcomes for the students include a deeper understanding of professional and ethical topics resulting from the ongoing dialogue with their mentor. In this way they have the opportunity to consider specific issues and the role played by management in a practical way in the real working environment.

One significant outcome anticipated from the program is the development of individual professional self-awareness as students come to recognise the role they can each play as an active and engaged information professional. As reflective practice is currently an integral aspect of the teaching and learning approaches in the Professional Practice unit, this is being

further encouraged within the mentoring program. Students have been provided with a range of ideas to stimulate their interest in maintaining a professional journal to capture and reflect on their learning experiences. Their enthusiasm is proving contagious, with several of the mentors now following suit. This adds an extra valuable dimension to the mentors' own professional development experience through the program.

The research will consequently explore the concept of mutuality in the relationship between mentor and mentee, with both parties benefiting and growing through the interaction. Benefits for the mentor may include concepts such as satisfaction about the ability:

- to learn through the exchange of ideas
- to network and introduce the mentee to a range of other information professionals
- to develop a relationship with a new member of the profession
- to contribute to the broader objectives of the program, eg the interaction between the University and industry.

As the coordination of the program is being run as a partnership between the University and ALIA, the students are becoming directly involved in their professional association at an early stage. It is hoped that the students will respond to the stimulation of professional involvement through networking and so will remain actively involved and make their own contribution to the association in the future. The proposed longitudinal study in Phase Two of the research should prove valuable in monitoring the participants' career and professional development paths over a period of time.

As the student mentoring program is a pilot project within the Professional Practice unit of the GDLIS, an effective evaluation process is essential to determine whether the program can be regarded as a relevant, interesting and worthwhile initiative, whether it should be continued in the future, and what improvements should be made.

Communicating results of the research

One of the major challenges facing the researchers is that every mentoring program is unique. It is anticipated that the initial research findings from Phase One will include results of the survey of participants, responses from interviews and text from individuals' reflective journals. An important conclusion from the research is to communicate the findings to all stakeholders, at the individual and the organisational levels.

The alternatives for reporting the research findings will be investigated. While the traditional report format is considered the conventional channel of communication, there are examples in the recent literature of a more narrative approach, for example through communication of a personal journey. Such fictive representations are described by Avermann and Hruby as "research reports that preserve the integrity of the data while employing the tropes and techniques of fiction in the write-up for the benefit and pleasure of the reader" (2000). Houdek (1999) collates the contributions of law librarian mentors, which he presents as "word portraits" to capture the "fascinating and heartwarming" stories of personal and professional growth, while Jones-Quartey (2000) presents her own personal reflections on the mentoring experience as a special librarian. The researchers would like to explore the potential to develop this idea even more creatively and engagingly, perhaps in a multimedia format, to convey the personal experiences of both mentors and mentees.

Conclusion

“Mentoring is a natural act in which information professionals should engage. It is part of the ethos of our profession to share knowledge. We are not natural competitors like those within the business world. It is an excellent way for professionals to leverage their expertise and serves as a mechanism to continue their own professional growth” (Field, 2001, p.273).

The QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program has already emerged as a kind of model, being an example of content and process coming together. The professional networking required to establish the program reflects the nature of the program itself – encouraging and developing professional networking. Students consequently become aware of the productive ties between members of the profession, and that beyond the professional interaction, real friendships can evolve, so that professional development is interwoven with personal self-development. Some have found that this situation mirrors and builds on what they themselves have already experienced through personal and academic interaction with their peers during the course.

A critical feature of mentoring programs is the concept of diversity. Not only is there a great diversity of models for programs, but there is also enormous diversity amongst the players, both mentors and mentees. It is hoped that through this research project it will be possible to collect, analyse and synthesise the relevant data to determine what elements contribute to the success of a transitional program for LIS students moving from the academic world into their new careers.

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