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Short Title: Flexibility Within A Structured Mentoring Program

Building Community In Academic Settings: The Importance Of Flexibility In A Structured Mentoring Program

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Abstract

Academic mentoring is increasingly being used by many universities as a tool to enhance the quality of research-led teaching, promote cross-faculty collaboration and encourage a mentoring culture and community. This article reports on a pilot project established to investigate the benefits of building flexibility into a structured academic mentoring program at the University of Sydney. Twenty-six academics from the Faculty of Business and Economics and the Faculty of Education and Social Work participated in the program. The mentors ranged in position from Lecturer to Professor and the mentees from Associate Lecturer to Senior Lecturer. Flexible arrangements were shown to be important in a variety of ways, from the pairing of mentor with mentee, to focussing on issues of work survival and life balance, research outcomes and career advancement. The project highlighted the lower number of male academics involved in formal mentoring, which merits further exploration. All participants reported positive outcomes, although refinement of the pairing process was recommended. A variety of unanticipated outcomes was reported by mentees.

Keywords: Academic development; flexible mentoring, pairing process, career advancement.

Working Environment

Mentoring in a variety of professions has been a longstanding practice in Australia, and in recent years has become more widespread within the academic community (Maher, Lindsay, Peel and Twomey, 2006). In this article we provide a brief overview of relevant mentoring research before outlining the context of the pilot study, its aims and intended outcomes and the research method used. We report the findings of the investigation and conclude by outlining the study's limitations and future research opportunities.

Strong anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that many academics working in the higher education sector in Australia increasingly feel under pressure in terms of both how they work and how they utilise their time. Such pressures result from a number of factors which were noted in a hearing before the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee in 2001. The committee, established by the Australian Commonwealth government, identified drivers of potential stressors which affect academics. These include larger class sizes (due to higher enrolments), progressive reductions in government funding and an increasingly diverse body of students, some of whom are especially demanding. Intense scrutiny within administrative frameworks that demand ever greater accountability, as well as the need to master increasingly complex technology in teaching and learning programs, were additional factors that heighten stress.

The impact of workplace stress has been documented by Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, Hapuarachchi and Boyd (2003) who found that approximately 43% of Australian university academics who participated in a survey (n=3,711) were at risk of psychological illness. This compared unfavourably with just 19% of the general Australian workforce. Unsurprisingly, the survey also found that relative to other occupational groups job satisfaction among academic staff was low. It is reasonable to suggest that as the workforce

in the higher education sector continues to age, there may be a need to transfer the focus to addressing issues of job satisfaction, attracting and retaining new recruits and succession planning, rather than maintain our traditional reliance on simply trying to 'build' community in order to improve workforce retention.

Noting that high stress and low satisfaction were taking a major toll on academic performance, Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua and Hapuarachchi (2002) proposed that "interventions aimed at enhancing job satisfaction and reducing stress within universities will in turn enhance individual and organisational productivity" (p. 13). Business management, social work and education research literatures contain ample evidence supporting the application of workplace mentoring and coaching as a means of enhancing both the contribution and work satisfaction of knowledge workers and managers (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2004). In the course of research the latter reviewed 300 studies on mentoring in business, medicine and education. They concluded that more formal mentoring programs have only been introduced in government departments and businesses during the last two or three decades. These were in response to a desire to support staff development and the need to address issues of access for minority groups as well as respond to affirmative action legislation. It is also worthwhile noting that most formal mentoring programs have particular structures that allow program coordinators to pair more experienced senior colleagues as mentors with participating mentees (Mullen, 2008). In contrast, informal mentoring relationships, which rely on both mentee and mentor having a primary say in the pairing process, are generally thought to have superior outcomes, though more research is needed (Blake-Beard, 2001).

Benefits of Mentoring In The Academic Workplace

A growing body of research-based literature in business management, education, and social work supports the use of formal mentoring and coaching methods in the workplace.

Formal mentoring can enhance the contribution made by workers and managers, and is known to increase level of job satisfaction (Collins, 1994; Skiffington and Zeus, 2003). For example, it has been shown that effective mentoring of new professionals in primary and secondary education significantly increases the likelihood they will continue in the teaching profession (e.g., Birimac, 2003; Ewing and Smith, 2003; Hatton and Harmon, 1997).

Mentoring is ideally a two-way process with benefits for both parties. In fact, it has long been known that mentoring can revitalise the career of the mentor him or herself (Levinson, et al, 1978), resulting in increased confidence and personal fulfilment (Douglas, 1997). One of the most important benefits to be gained from the mentoring process is the facilitation of reflective practice by mentor and mentee (Barnett, 1995; Frost, 1993; Smith, 1999).

Mentoring and individual coaching can also enhance the ability of high performing academic staff and enable them to achieve their teaching and research goals (Ehrich et al., 2004; Gardiner, 2005). Following a major review of prior studies, Ehrich and colleagues summarised major benefits for mentors and mentees, including the provision of personal and emotional support. The mere existence of a mentoring program, however, is not sufficient to achieve beneficial outcomes for participants (Norman and Feiman-Nemser, 2005). In her analysis of the negative aspects of mentoring, Long (1997) suggests that lack of time, insufficient planning, poor matching, and the failure to fully understand and appreciate the process of mentoring can be detrimental to the mentor, mentee or both. Indeed, some mentoring relationships are not always positive. According to Long (1997) and Mullen, (2008), “contrived collegiality” can undermine trust and openness. Furthermore, being successful in one’s chosen profession does not necessarily make for an effective mentor

(Orland-Barak, 2001). A number of researchers (e.g., Moberg and Velasquez, 2004; Quinlan, 1999; Ragins and Cotton, 1991) have also suggested that mentoring of junior female academics has often been problematic for both parties. This may be due to a mismatch between, say, an older male mentor who has a particular experience of career development and a younger female who might perceive fewer opportunities for career-minded women academics. It goes without saying that coordinators of formal faculty mentoring programs have a responsibility to ensure that mentors and mentees are carefully matched (Mullen, 2008).

Formal mentoring programs allow us to recognise the activities of mentoring through the appropriate allocation of workloads. They also allow us to define the responsibilities of the mentor or even incorporate such responsibilities into the individual's duty statement. Informal mentoring is considered to be more effective and more prevalent (Cunningham, 1999; Blake-Beard, 2001) although it does not provide ready means of recognition, nor a clear structure or explicit expectations.

A truly effective mentoring program, whether formal or informal should be designed, developed and implemented in an inclusive and well-resourced manner. Where insufficient time is allocated for mentoring, or where the mentee has no say in choosing a mentor, the program runs the risk of failing. It can also fail due to inadequate professional development and other resources needed to support the mentoring process. The failure to address issues of gender or ethnicity may blunt the impact of mentoring, as can failing to acknowledge and affirm the contribution of the mentor (Mullen 2008). These issues were all considered when the pilot program was designed and implemented. The pilot provided modest funding to participating mentors and mentees in recognition of the importance of mentoring and workload issues.

Study Context: A Flexible Mentoring Program At The University Of Sydney

The pilot was conducted across the Faculty of Economics and Business and the Faculty of Education and Social Work at Australia's oldest university, the University of Sydney. Over 47,000 students are enrolled at this research-intensive institution. It was in the context of the two faculties that the study was initially conceptualised in 2004. Mentoring programs were already being offered in the respective organisations, and across the University at large, although they were highly structured with coordinators taking the lead role in matching the mentor-mentee pairs. In order to trial a more flexible mentoring process, a cross faculty project team was formed to develop and manage the pilot which was funded by an internal teaching improvement grant.

The two faculties are different in a number of important respects. The Faculty of Economics and Business continues to see enrolments expand, with a high intake of international students who pay higher fees than local students. This has put pressure on class sizes which have grown dramatically in recent years. At the same time student consumers, especially international students have come to expect high levels of service. In addition, professional associations exercise a degree of influence over curriculum, especially in business-related disciplines such as accounting. The need to maintain international accreditation as a leading business teaching and learning institution is seen as vital in order to increase graduates' employment opportunities as well as assist in attracting new international students (Faculty of Economics and Business, 2004). As business faculties seek to satisfy the priorities and standards of international accreditation agencies, further changes have been implemented. In short, market forces appear to play a significant role in shaping how the Faculty engages with its various stakeholders. The result for many academics has been increasing levels of performance-related anxiety.

The Faculty of Education and Social Work is also experiencing radical change, the most notable example being the merger in 2003 of the Faculty of Social Work with that of Education. Government interference in the fields of social work and education is never far away and presents ongoing challenges, especially in terms of the complexity of accreditation required at state and federal level. In view of the fact that both echelons of government employ significant numbers of social work and education graduates (i.e. primary and secondary schools, and social workers), they exercise regulatory control (especially among private providers) and continue to influence professional curricula.

Flexibility As A Key Feature Of The Program

For both faculties, the pilot mentoring project involved mentees from two different backgrounds. One category, productive researchers, was selected because they were identified as persons who would benefit from mentoring in their teaching. The second group, innovative teachers, was chosen because it was believed that developing their research-led teaching profile would prove beneficial. For them, mentoring would provide support and encouragement to pursue pedagogical research and mentoring in a range of skills including time management, research prioritisation, developing grant applications, teaching-research balance and/or disciplinary research-based teaching support.

The pilot differentiated itself from other programs in both faculties in that it focussed on teaching as the target of mentoring, something which existing mentoring programs failed to address. It also aimed to reproduce some of the features of informal mentoring which typically offered greater flexibility in the pairing process. Greater flexibility was achieved by allowing mentees to select from a pool of potential mentors either from within or outside their own faculty. Flexibility extended to the focus of the mentoring relationship. While promoting a focus on mentoring of teaching as an aspect of academic work, the participants were asked to identify their goals and intended outcomes. We discuss this later in the article.

The pilot program also encouraged participants to decide how they would use the support structures and resources provided by the project funding. In this way they were able to define both the focus and process of their particular mentoring relationship which proved to be a positive, confidence-building measure.

Specifically, the pilot endeavoured to motivate and develop a culture of mentoring in several ways. Mentors were invited to volunteer, rather than be nominated which was preferable in the case of senior academics. Mentees and mentors received a small financial reward, which not only provided a 'trigger' for them to participate but also demonstrated the faculty's commitment to mentoring. It was our belief that satisfied mentees would themselves become mentors following the pilot, thus adding to the pool of volunteers. A fourth and final motivator was explicit recognition for academics that chose to develop leadership skills through mentoring.

Design And Implementation Of The Mentoring Program

The program was designed and implemented in three stages: pre-program, program and post-program. Ongoing project management and evaluation were built into each stage to ensure a critical and responsive approach in the overall implementation and further development of the project. The dean of each faculty wrote to all academic staff inviting them to participate in the semester long program.

It was intended that promotion, recruitment and selection of mentors and mentees would occur over several events comprising:

- (1) An information session introducing the aims, objectives and concept of a cross-faculty academic mentoring project.

- (2) A half-day professional development workshop to establish a shared understanding of mentoring and to facilitate some relationship-building between potential mentors and mentees, as well as to clarify what people needed and wanted from their involvement.
- (3) A process for developing mentee-mentor pairs. A list of names, phone, email contacts and areas of expertise of potential mentors was circulated to all potential mentees. Mentees had the choice of approaching a mentor from either their own or the alternative faculty. The list was updated regularly, taking into account pairings and new potential mentors.

Participants in the pilot included 12 mentors (three males and nine females) and 14 mentees (two males and 12 females). The group of mentors ranged in position from lecturer to professor. Two of the mentors had two mentees each. While only one of the mentors indicated they had formal training in mentoring and career management, another had been engaged in a formal supervisory role, whilst six indicated they had previously participated in mentoring informally as part of their roles as senior academics. Of the 14 mentees one was a Research Associate, two were Associate Lecturers, eight were Lecturers, and three were Senior Lecturers. One mentee reported that she had previously been mentored by her PhD supervisor, while three cited earlier informal mentoring experiences. Two had participated in formal mentoring programs and one participant had been mentored through the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education program.

Once the pairing of the 26 participants in the program was finalised, the group met three times in course of Semester 1, early in the academic year. Participants discussed the agreement process and refined their agreements, which included goals, meeting times, use of the funding and reporting responsibilities. It was anticipated that these agreements would encourage them to identify personally relevant foci for the mentoring relationship and a

mentoring process and structure to the relationship that suited their needs. Participants were also provided with answers to frequently asked questions about the program and mentoring.

A follow-up meeting was held to discuss progress and to determine whether participants were interested in being involved in associated research and publications. Three opportunities were proposed: generic papers based on their experiences; co-authored papers between participants and project team members on particular themes; and participant papers/case studies. Ten of those involved in the mentoring pilot showed interest although this later reduced to five due to time constraints. Throughout the mentoring process, mentors and mentees were encouraged to undertake reflective writing to record insights, feelings, processes and outcomes.

Review Of The Pilot Program

At the conclusion of the program each person was invited to submit a reflection about their experience (see the appendix for the guiding questions). In the final meeting two focus groups met to further explore these experiences and evaluate the program. The data from the focus groups and the reflective statements were analysed according to specific themes. The reflective statements and transcriptions of the focus group interviews were analysed thematically (Aronson, 1994) using the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Eleven key themes emerged from the content analysis of the focus group responses and reflective statements. These were:

1. Pairing process
2. Entry participation barriers - recognition and time
3. Ongoing participation barrier - time
4. Participation incentives – rewards
5. Cultural compatibility

6. Gender
7. Goals
8. Outcomes – intended and unintended
9. Nature of relationships
10. Structure of program
11. Mentoring agreement

Each theme is addressed below.

1. Pairing process

Despite considerable attention paid to the pairing process, this was perhaps the greatest area of challenge. While some people found the three pre-program meetings helpful, others found them problematic. For example, although the lunch was designed to allow an informal opportunity to get to know potential mentors, several participants still reported finding it difficult to identify suitable partners.

Before the process I felt very awkward because I felt like I wanted to work with somebody mainly to get advice about my work – my research in particular. But I wasn't sure who to ask. I found the meeting we had at the Darlington Centre a bit weird, not so much what we did, as I enjoyed the activities and could see the relevance. It felt like a country dance where everyone sat around the outside of the hall waiting for someone to ask them to dance – I was nervous that no-one would ask me to dance. (Mentee 1)

In contrast, those who had known each other prior to the program found the pairing process easier. The degree of comfort with the process was highest amongst those pairs who could build on existing working relationships or who could extend an existing informal

mentoring relationship. Others had very high expectations that the pairing would involve a relationship of depth, even though the project was short-term. They expressed their desire to be paired with someone they identified with as a person— not just as one with an expertise in research or teaching.

I appreciated the fact that I was able to suggest a mentor whose career, personality and work ethic I respect. It was important for me to have a mentor who was familiar with the faculty's culture yet was removed enough to give me unbiased and frank advice. A person with integrity I could trust with professional as well as personal issues who allowed me the time to find my own rhythm and the space to develop my own insights and construct possible solutions to any problems/issues that could arise, rather than a person who would promote their own agenda. (Mentee 9)

Some expressed a particular desire to be paired with someone from their own discipline. In this case the mentor would more readily understand the context and work environment of the mentee. Additionally, it was considered by some that coordination of meetings with someone in close proximity would be easier to organise. Others considered the opportunity to be mentored by someone from another discipline or faculty as desirable since it would provide them with a different perspective.

When I first heard about the faculty mentoring process I was immediately interested to be involved as a mentee; I just felt that I needed guidance from a more senior academic outside my discipline in areas that are outside research in teaching and learning. (Mentee 14)

A number of people from within the two groups made suggestions as to how the pairing process might be improved, for example, making the list of potential mentors available from the very beginning with more detailed information about each mentor. In

retrospect project leaders might have collected more information about participants and made it available in order to facilitate pairing. This, however, would have taken longer than the project time-frame allowed. Furthermore, project information should have clearly stated that participants must take ownership and control of the pairing process – that while the pairing was facilitated by the opportunities provided within the program it would not be organised for them.

2. Entry participation barriers - recognition and time

Time constraints of the potential participants were recognised as a major concern to the effectiveness of the project. Since time is a finite commodity it must be taken at a cost to other opportunities. Fortunately, support for the project from senior faculty managers enabled the participants to have time out from other duties, allowing them to participate freely.

Members of the focus group noted that recognition for participation was not strong:

People outside the program didn't know it existed, there was no external recognition.

There was a big push initially from our Faculty to go to the first meeting, but little interest after that.

Mentoring is not happening at senior levels as it is not recognised as being important or being rewarded.

(Focus group participants)

In light of perceptions of limited recognition for the program by senior staff, an alternative means of providing recognition for involvement in future programs is recommended.

3. *Ongoing participation barrier – time*

The flexibility to schedule meetings was cited by many as a positive feature. Several participants cited time management and stressors associated with managing time as a specific outcome area for improvement during the mentoring project. Others pointed to the difficulty of scheduling meeting times and sticking to them once the mentoring project had commenced. Most pairs met every two weeks or monthly with many using email to communicate in the intervals between meetings. One participant commented that it was important not to force meetings in view of time constraints. Pairs who were time poor established strategies to maximise their interactions e.g. some pairs set an agenda for each subsequent meeting and felt that this kept them focused. This finding supports Cunningham's (1999) assertion that most academics involved in informal academic mentoring spend less than five hours a month on mentoring activities.

4. *Participation incentives – rewards*

Receiving funding for participating in the process was generally a pleasant surprise for those involved. The majority considered it a supportive gesture or incentive, enabling time to be more easily allocated to the project e.g. “the funding provided a palpable symbol of the dedication of time to the project” (Mentee 10). While everyone agreed that they were not “motivated by external recognition or money” (Focus group participant, mentor), one person suggested that it was both vital to sealing commitment from the mentor and mentee and prevented people from drifting away. In contrast one person was concerned that the amount of funding provided was too generous when other areas of research and teaching were comparatively under-resourced.

...also the money angle worries me a bit. It seems like too much money for what we did. There was cognitive dissonance – the money didn't match the activity, so it made

me feel I needed to do more, even though the process didn't need more. It creates an expectation that more needs to be done, which maybe isn't useful....So many people are desperate to get projects off the ground and this project was getting so much money while others get nothing. To me there is a justice issue involved regarding funding. (Mentor 11)

Some mentors declined to take the incentive, and in some cases allocated it to their mentee instead.

5. Cultural compatibility

Some concerns were expressed regarding the nature of faculty culture and the extent to which it enables the mentoring process.

This program was all focussed around individual behaviour of mentor and mentee. Systemic change is needed in the culture of faculties to see this as a core process that should underpin all roles in the faculty. It should be written into faculty Strategic Plans. In organisations that have knowledge about organisational management not to give thought to mentoring and succession planning keeps the organisation in cyclical change rather than upward and outward growth. Pure folly and wasteful of resources! (Mentor 5)

It was suggested in some cases that senior academics in the faculty had failed in their responsibilities to mentor their more junior colleagues. In other cases a highly masculine culture in one faculty was identified by several participants as an inhibiting factor:

The faculty has a very male dominated environment and culture and there needs to be some serious work by senior leaders within the faculty and the university to address the way women are treated in the faculty, and the way they feel about their work. This culture undermines women's contribution and as a result their confidence. When

women academics – particularly those of us in our 20s and 30s – get together and talk, the issue of the ‘boys club’ and our marginalisation from it comes up. Spending time with a senior academic in another (more feminised) faculty has actually heightened my appreciation of these issues. (Mentee 8)

The strength of the ‘pecking order’ in a particular faculty and the difficulties newcomers faced simply to feel welcome were also cited as cultural conditions inhibiting mentoring. Additional comments were made concerning the fragmented nature of one faculty and the barriers associated with this.

The culture [of my Faculty] is fragmented and I have found that when I have attempted to get to know people, there are a lot of barriers: age, gender personality, status etc. I was lucky, because I feel I had some common ground with my mentor, but not everyone will be so lucky. Getting a mentor would not have been so awkward had we had a tearoom culture where people could get to know each other at a comfortable pace. (Mentee 3)

6. Gender

Of the 26 participants, 21 were females. The gender imbalance was seen as an important issue by several participants who speculated about the relative absence of men in the program. Interestingly, some men had made themselves available as potential mentors but were not chosen. Alternatively the observation was offered that men do not perceive the need to be mentored:

It was also quite clear that there was very little participation from male colleagues in either faculty as either mentors or mentees. Do male colleagues already have mentoring relationships and so feel no need to participate because their careers are already being planned and supported? Do male professors mentor junior staff

informally and so don't feel a need to be part of a formal mentoring program?

(Mentee 13)

Several women expressed their preference to be mentored by other women which may partly explain the high number of female mentors. As Mentee 8 explained:

....I was keen to get involved in a mentoring process, especially with a senior academic woman outside our faculty (let's face it there are not too many within our faculty!). I was very keen to form a relationship with a woman – as I feel that women have a different appreciation of the various pressures that are on women at my stage in the career cycle than do academic men. I was keen to go outside of the faculty not only because of the dearth of women in my faculty but because I felt that this would allow me to make a more honest approach and form a more genuine relationship.

Exploring the reasons for the limited participation by men is especially important in light of the finding by Winefield et al. (2003) that men working in higher education display similar levels of stress on measures of psychological strain as their female counterparts. Encouraging more males to participate would be important in future programs.

7. Goals

Although participants recognised the importance of mentoring for both teaching and research, generally the goals reported were concentrated on research or on managing teaching in order to produce more research in relation to career progression. This may reflect the increasing primacy of research performance in academic career success at a research-intensive university. It was also suggested by some that it is easier to quantify research goals than quantify improvements in teaching.

While project team members envisaged that teaching would be a main focus, only two of the 14 pairings had goals specifically related to teaching. Mentees in these cases identified

developing a broader understanding of teaching; valuing and enjoying teaching and incorporating research-led teaching as important goals. Thirteen pairings developed research goals which ranged from specific outputs such as writing conference papers and/or journal articles, project management training, using faculty resources to strengthen the mentee's research profile and how to use research assistants effectively to broader knowledge such as developing extra-university research networks with industry participants and international academics.

Establish a clear focus for my research in 2005 particularly to increase my productivity in terms of publications. (Mentee 1)

To talk about research and publication possibilities. To develop strategies for managing workload and professional isolation. (Mentor 9)

Five pairings had goals that crossed the teaching and research domains of academic work. Examples of these included: improving time management, balancing different priorities, managing academic workload, building an academic identity, overcoming fears and other negative emotions in making progress and being able to refuse to take on additional work.

One of the early goals of the mentoring relationship was the opportunity to critically reflect on specific aspects of my career. (Mentee 9)

...I was also interested in concentrating some attention on time management issues particularly career/lifestyle balance issues and develop a plan of action to improve areas needing attention. (Mentee 10)

The short duration of the pilot program (one semester) meant that it was difficult to achieve long-term goals or measure stress reduction. Some pairs mentioned that their goals

were medium to long term (and more behavioural rather than concrete) and therefore in the time available it was difficult to adequately assess their success.

8. *Outcomes – intended and unintended*

The relationships between the goals set by individuals in the program and the outcomes achieved were extremely positive. Each pair described the achievement of their outcomes; some were more process oriented whereas others were outcome based. Interestingly some participants reported harder to quantify outcomes which were nevertheless felt to be very important such as: emotional support, increased sense of direction and benefit from taking time for reflection. Many mentioned the benefit of the process for developing formal and informal networks both within and across faculties.

While some of the goals set by participants were aimed at the longer-term and beyond the time-frame of the pilot project, other important outcomes were achieved during the pilot process. Judging by their comments it is evident that the mentees have a greater confidence to set, prioritise and achieve their goals. The achievement of these goals and attainment of concrete and specific outcomes has in turn resulted in mentees describing additional future goals that are now being pursued. For example mentees achieved significant research outcomes including the publication of journal and conference papers and writing grant applications. The grants ranged from an early career researcher achieving their first grant to others developing applications for national competitive grants. Pedagogical research was mentioned specifically in one instance.

I personally have gained a lot out of this mentoring relationship....I feel that there are already transformations taking place which will shape my direction as an academic. I feel more confident towards my whole attitude on research and have taken two actions to reflect that... (Mentee 14)

The number of publications was better than I anticipated – I have written and submitted 4 refereed conference papers, which have all been accepted. I've also pursued some additional research that I hadn't planned at the beginning. I'm well on the way to an ARC [Australian Research Council] linkage application. So in many ways I've exceeded my goals. (Mentee 1)

Some mentors were both inspired and encouraged by the process to continue the mentoring relationship beyond the pilot project, while others were encouraged to mentor others within their faculty. Mentors reported enthusiastically that they enjoyed the program and found assisting mentees to achieve their goals extremely rewarding.

I believe that I provided support of a more junior staff member, helped her to identify priorities and gave her some strategies for managing her career. (Mentor 9)

...it was a very positive experience for me....Apart from increased research output for both of us we have developed a very good professional relationship that extends to our teaching as well as research. I also feel that the experience has lead to a considerable change in the approach that Mentee 6 takes to his work and the way that he presents himself about the faculty....I feel that Mentee 6's progress over the past 6 months has made him a more valuable researcher and teacher and that we will be able to work together at a higher level as equal partners in the future. (Mentor 6)

9. Nature of relationships

Most participants specifically commented on the benefits of the relationships developed in the mentoring process. One person suggested that as well as increased research output they developed a very good professional relationship extending to teaching as well as research (see Mentor 6 comment above).

For some the relationships and meetings were informal, whereas others were more formal and structured having set agendas, action items and meeting notes. The participants developed agreed ways of working in early meetings and this seemed to override concerns about the formality or informality of particular relationships. Indeed, the development of the relationship was described by many of the participants as having continued beyond the program as joint goals were developed extending beyond the project. Despite some participant concerns relating to the pairing process the mentoring relationships were, without exception, described positively in the reflective writing feedback processes. The relationships were able to provide important personal and individual support for newer academics that were still coming to terms with their career development, workload and work/life balance. With regard to the latter, the mentoring process enabled participants to discuss these key areas, and the associated constraints and pressures, which are increasingly a recognised part of academic life. For some women simply having another senior person/woman to listen and offer support was greatly rewarding. Others described how they were able to develop strategic goals and processes to achieve them with the help of their mentors.

The mentoring relationship has increased my resolve to make changes in my work practices that will allow me to combine what were seemingly disparate research interests and further to view my research interests as genuine and worthwhile within the academic community. (Mentee 9)

The nature of the relationship was one of equals – rather than the more usual hierarchy of mentor/mentee – and based on us sharing insights and observations and helping each other to learn from these. (Mentor 4)

I took an instant like to Mentor 8 who was very welcoming and encouraging. She stressed from the outset that she was seeking to get something out of the process and

was not just there to do me a favour. Once we had met and discussed the process and what each of us wanted to get out of it I felt much more comfortable. (Mentee 8)

10. Structure of program

For some the formal whole-group meetings added information and ideas to the mentoring process. Not everyone agreed; Mentor 11 was irritated by the formal meetings:

Some of the group meetings weren't helpful...It was forcing a process that wasn't necessary for everyone as it was already being done. It was almost condescending and most of us are pretty cluey and also have many other demands.

As discussed earlier, the pairing process was of particular concern (see theme 1), as was the under-representation of men in the project (see theme 6). These concerns will be addressed in future iterations of the program. Other areas of the overall process were considered to work well within the time constraints.

11. Mentoring agreement

Several participants emphasised the importance of the mentoring agreement as a means of regulating and monitoring progress, and suggested that it provided much-needed structure to the process. Comments in the focus group indicated that the agreement helped participants set aside time in order to meet. Others used it iteratively– reflexively developing and shaping the agreement throughout the project.

First we developed a general agreement about how we both liked to work and how we would like to interact; we developed an agreement together reflecting this. (Mentee 8)

The funding helped, and also allocating time at the outset. It was a good acknowledgment of the importance of the process. The agreement helped you take it more seriously. (Focus group comment, Mentor)

Discussion

The mentoring program had many positive aspects which correspond to the desirable features of mentoring reported in the meta-analysis of Ehrich et al. (2004). The project provided an opportunity for participants to engage in a relational process in which they could discuss different aspects of their work. Feedback from mentors and mentees suggests that significant outcomes were achieved. For mentees there was general agreement that the process had improved their organisational skills and that they were able to talk about their concerns freely. They also commented that mentoring reduced their sense of isolation and as a result they were able to achieve important outcomes in their teaching and research. These outcomes are similar to those described by Gardiner (2005).

One of the objectives of the project was to identify the effectiveness of mentoring in reducing stress and enhancing job satisfaction for early career academics. Time constraints and time management was of particular concern to both mentees and mentors who discussed the need to develop clear and obtainable priorities. Mentees in particular recognised that mentoring assistance was valuable in helping them to prioritise their workload and manage their time. A combination of goal setting and prioritisation, guidance and support offered throughout the program was highly beneficial, such that all mentees reporting progression towards and/or achievement of their goals. Newer academics found the process enabled them to learn from the experience of senior colleagues. Whether or not participating academics experienced a reduction in stress levels is difficult to gauge in view of obvious time constraints on the pilot program. However, the findings seem to indicate that a more sustained program may alleviate stress in the profession.

The mentoring process was also the catalyst for participants to reflect upon their own professional development and how they might assist with the development and mentoring of other colleagues. The general enthusiasm for the project can itself be considered a positive

endorsement, as well as a major step to developing a culture and community of mentoring. The capacity for delivering further mentoring programs was greatly developed in both faculties.

The mentors were positive about the process and most stated that they would be willing to participate in future programs. Some mentees expressed their preference for informal mentoring and continued to build an informal mentoring relationships with their mentors. Mentors did not comment explicitly on how their own leadership skills had been developed, but reaffirmed their commitment to supporting junior colleagues. Three of the program participants have written a paper further exploring the personal aspects of the mentoring program and reconceptualising benefits in a mentoring program (Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ and Yip, 2007).

Cross-faculty collaboration was seen as a welcome and extremely positive feature of the project resulting in greater collegiality between the faculties. Significantly, collaboration enabled greater choice of mentors and greater breadth of expertise, although this was not considered universally important by mentees. Additional collaborative activities have occurred, such as participation on selection committees and sharing academic honesty resources.

Building choice into the program meant that many of the documented problematic aspects of mentoring were avoided, especially the personality/expertise mismatches reported by Ehrich et al. (2004), which is due to mentees being able choose their own mentors. Although time constraints were reported by both mentees and mentors, this issue was somewhat mitigated by recognising people's time (through the provision of funding) and by enabling participants to choose how often they met. The mentoring agreement template ensured that participants set clear goals and boundaries with the result that mentors and mentees had a clear understanding of the program's goals. The provision of answers to

frequently asked questions about the program provided participants with additional information and guidance.

Two major problematic areas were the pairing process and highlighting the need for cultural change with respect to supporting junior staff, particularly women. While mentee choice of mentor was seen as a crucial aspect of the program, the findings show that improvements were needed in terms of providing sufficient numbers of potential mentors and support for mentees in meeting, selecting and approaching mentors. Others needs yet to be addressed include how to encourage the professoriate to become more involved in mentoring, although this may require structural changes. In addition, the need to highlight the reciprocal nature of the relationship where mentors can learn from mentees using eLearning, for example, should be addressed. The program highlighted the importance of addressing cultural change at the systemic level, especially in relation to the lack of support for junior staff, particularly women. This issue is common throughout Australian universities as evidenced by Eveline (2004) and Gardiner (2005). Wasburn (2007) suggest that strategic collaboration— a group of three to five mentees guided by two mentors— is a useful way of providing sufficient mentors along with a supportive peer group to better meet the needs of female academics.

Flexibility was a key feature of the program and there are numerous examples of this in practice. Having a cross-faculty project team that included both professional and academic staff meant that the team could draw on a wide range of experiences and opinions to shape and direct the program. The program team showed flexibility in adapting to meet the needs of the participants. For example, the program was originally seen as an opportunity to mentor staff in their teaching, yet it soon became apparent that academics had themselves identified the need for mentoring in research and work/life balance.

Flexibility in the pairing process allowed mentees to select their own mentors. Furthermore, giving participants access to a funding incentive, which they could accept or

reject and use how they wished, enabled them to create space for the time demands of the program. Likewise, the opportunity for participants to write about the mentoring process was structured into the program with the further incentive of a writing retreat which provided two days off campus to concentrate on writing.

The main challenge of this flexible approach was that pairing took longer to achieve. Decision making by the cross-faculty project team also took longer than expected initially. Typically, meetings of the project team were punctuated by animated discussion of important issues which then required further dialogue in between meetings. The latter was hampered by the physical distance and cultural differences between the faculties. As we sought to move from this pilot to a fully-fledged program it became apparent that trying to do everything together in a cross-faculty team was unworkable due to systemic differences between the faculties, the need for timely decision making and natural changes in project team personnel over time. Thus, the program evolved into two programs, one per faculty, with the project team's relationship evolving into one of collaboration and benchmarking.

Conclusion

The pilot project highlighted the importance of flexibility, responsiveness and collaboration throughout every stage of a mentoring program. The critical and reflective approach adopted by the project team enhanced our understanding of key issues. These need to be addressed if we are to expand mentoring within the respective faculties. Some factors were identified from the literature review prior to the commencement of the pilot project, such as sufficient time being made available for mentoring to occur. The project team also gained a better understanding of the importance of: mentees' involvement in the choice of their mentor; the provision of professional development for mentors; the need for resources to support the mentoring process; and the need for recognition of mentors for their participation.

The findings of this research were limited for a number of reasons. These include the small number of participants, the short time frame of the program and the influence of the self-selection process. In addition we relied on participant self report and reflection to gauge its impact. The inclusion of additional measures of stress, for instance the General Health Questionnaire, used in other studies of academic stress (Winefield et al. 2003) would have improved our ability to determine the impact of mentoring on participants' stress levels. As noted, we can only speculate as to the reason for the gender imbalance in the program and further work investigating issues pertaining to gender would be useful. Nonetheless, the program findings have prompted a greater awareness of gender equity issues; one of the participating faculties is planning a 'women in leadership' program.

The program was maintained throughout 2006 and improvements continue to be made to the pairing process, with particular attention being paid to ensuring a gender balance. Future research might investigate the replication of the program in different contexts, as well as long term follow-up of participants and implementation on a broader scale (including non-academic staff) in order to achieve cultural change at a university-wide level.

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Appendix: Questions used by the authors to guide the reflective writing process for mentoring program participants

1. Describe the mentoring process – what happened? How did you get paired? How did a typical mentoring session go?
2. What were your reactions/feelings throughout the process (before the process, during and now)?
3. What difficulties did you encounter with the mentoring process, if any?
4. What were your original goals for the program?
5. Did your goals change? Why or why not?
6. Were your goals (whether original or changed) achieved?
7. How were your goals achieved? What evidence do you have?
8. What unexpected outcomes occurred?
9. What was it about your situation that had an impact on the process?
10. Will you make any changes to your work practices as a result of the program?
11. How much time did you spend? Was it more or less than expected/agreed? How did you feel about that?
12. Will you continue a mentoring relationship (either in your current pairing or with someone else)?
13. Would you be more confident to take on a role as a mentor in the future? (applicable to both mentees and mentors)
14. For mentors: what made you decide to volunteer to be mentor? Where did you learn the skills that allowed you to become a mentor?

15. What might you do differently if faced with a similar situation again?

16. In terms of how the program was run, what went well? What could be improved?

17. Were there other things related more to the University or Faculty that the project team should feed back to management?

Length of service at this university:

Time in current position:

Years of academic experience:

Have you been involved in mentoring before (whether formal or informal)?

Please describe briefly.