

# Student-Led Peer Mentoring

Amy Hardwick, Lachlan Loader, Joel Driver, Lily Taylor, Katherine Hill,  
Arthur Eng Lip Yeow, Urwah Nawaz, The Faculty of Sciences, The University of Adelaide

## Abstract

*This emerging initiative paper discusses the student-led Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) within the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Adelaide. Using aspects of the ‘Students as Partners’ approach, Senior Peer Mentors (SPMs) were responsible for redesigning and redeveloping the Semester One PMP. This paper will discuss the impact the SPMs have on the design and delivery of the Faculty’s PMP. A student’s perspective and the importance of student testimonials will be highlighted as an effective resource in PMPs. The Faculty’s experience with a student-led PMP demonstrates how students can be encouraged to develop their understanding and ownership of their learning experience.*

## Peer Mentoring and Students as Partners

This emerging initiative paper discusses the Semester One 2017 student-led Faculty of Sciences’ Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) for first year commencing students at the University of Adelaide. The Sciences’ PMP is the only student designed and delivered PMP at our university. In previous years, the PMP has been organised by a small team of professional staff within the Faculty. In 2017 the program was revised to be led by six Senior Peer Mentors (SPMs) who were given organisational autonomy to redesign and redevelop the PMP. The Faculty recognised the benefits of having greater student involvement in the coordination and delivery of the PMP and therefore decided to investigate a ‘Students as Partners’ (SAP) approach in increasing student engagement with the university (Fieldsend-Dank, 2016). The SAP theory identifies the “importance of students’ active engagement in their learning, and the benefits to be gained when students plan an active role in shaping and enhancing their learning experiences” (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014, p.4). By purposefully engaging students in shaping student engagement activities this program challenges the belief that students are passive learners and participants. SPMs demonstrate the ability for students to be co-creators and co-designers of their own learning experience (Bovill & Bulley, 2011).

The majority of research regarding a SAP approach discusses student involvement in their academic learning. There is a gap in the literature concerning students as active participants in university transition and retention strategies and activities. Bovill and Bulley (2011) note that active student participation involves “students [who] are engaged in an experience – whether that is university life, committee representation, or taking part in learning activities” (p. 9). SAP exists in different contexts, but at its core are students being co-creators, leading to students developing their understanding and ownership of their learning experience (Healey et al., 2014; Fieldsend-Dank, 2016).

## Benefits of Peer Mentoring Programs

The need for universities to proactively assist new students’ peer interaction has been highlighted in the current literature (Roach, 2016; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015). PMP are well-

established as best practice in successful university transition programs. A literature review conducted by Bye and Hobbins (2015) concluded that “it is reasonable to conclude that peer mentoring programs are a sustainable, cost-effective initiative to effectively support and orient first year students to tertiary study” (p. 3). Peer mentoring is defined as a distinctive type of peer interaction with a more experienced student providing support and guidance to a less experienced student (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; ANZSSA, 2015). Researchers agree that there are many benefits to students who are involved as participants (mentees) and mentors in PMPs (Shojai, Davis, & Root, 2014; Bye & Hobbins, 2015). By encouraging students to develop a sense of belonging through making meaningful connections between peers and with university services, PMPs give students a positive experience at university (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; 2011; Beltman & Shaeben 2012; ANZSSA, 2015). PMPs also provide key benefits to the peer mentors. Students increase their employability through development of enterprise skills such as leadership, teamwork and communication and become more familiar with the universities systems and services (Menzies, Tredinick & Van Ryt, 2015). Mentoring is also a highly effective way of supporting the transition into university for students from under-represented groups (Beltman & Samani, 2016) including low SES students, students from rural and remote locations, indigenous students, students with disabilities and students whose first language is not English (Menzies et al., 2015, Bye & Hobbins, 2015). Due to these benefits, the PMP plays a unique and vital role in the Faculty’s overall transition strategy.

### **The Faculty of Sciences’ Student-Led Peer Mentoring Program**

The Faculty of Sciences’ PMP is designed for commencing first year science students and led by more senior current students. The Faculty of Sciences is a multi-campus faculty, spread over three campuses, but due to limited resources, the PMP currently only runs on the North Terrace Campus. The overall goal of the program is to ease the transition of new students to university life and study by facilitating their social integration and improve their subsequent retention. This is done by encouraging students to form early friendships and share in the knowledge of services and support structures within the Faculty and the university, all in a pressure-free environment.

#### *The Senior Peer Mentor Team*

In 2016 the Faculty of Sciences recruited six Senior Peer Mentors (SPMs) to redesign the facilitation and delivery of the Faculty’s PMP. The successful applicants were current undergraduate students who were previously peer mentors and selected based on their written application addressing the selection criteria. The team included four domestic students, two international students, three males, three females and one rural student. This diversity was intentionally done to reflect the commencing student cohort and give greater variety to the SPM Team. Each SPM received an honorarium of \$950.

The SPM Team was given organisational autonomy to run the Sciences’ PMP with support as needed from the Faculty. The team received a written position description which outlined their role’s responsibilities and expectations, which included:

- Redeveloping the facilitation and delivery of the Faculty of Sciences’ PMP
- Recruiting Peer Mentors and developing and running the training session for the Semester One Peer Mentors, with support from the Faculty of Sciences
- Acting as a role model and mentor for the Peer Mentors

As this was the first time running a student-led PMP, the position description was intentionally broad, so as not to inhibit the team's creativity or reduce their ability to redesign the PMP. The Faculty's Learning and Teaching Support Officer provided overall supervision of the team, giving assistance and guidance as needed. The majority of the assistance given by the Faculty was largely initiated by the SPMs themselves.

The SPM's initial meeting was organised by the Faculty staff in October 2016. The team used reports about previous PMPs run by the Faculty as well as interviewing past staff who were involved in the Faculty's PMP to better understand previous year's successes and challenges. As all SPMs were past participants and mentors in the program, they were also able to draw on their own personal experiences as they redesigned and implemented an engaging mentoring program. After the initial meeting the SPMs were responsible for deciding how they would work as a team. The SPMs utilised technology to assist with communication and planning, especially as the majority of planning occurred during summer holidays, and some SPMs were away interstate or overseas. Google docs was used as it allowed all SPMs to remotely view, edit and collaborate on different aspects of the PMP ("Google Docs - create and edit documents online, for free." 2017). A Facebook group was created to allow all SPMs to develop rapport, collaborate on projects and easily update the team. Email was also used, however it was noted that this was mainly used to communicate with the Faculty. The team allocated specific tasks to each SPM. These included; recruitment of mentors, allocation of mentor groups, training and induction, communication with participants, advertising the PMP, face to face mentoring sessions, weekly emails to participants and appreciation ceremony.

Some of the innovative changes made by the SPMs included redesigning the peer mentor online application by reducing the number of questions as well as rewriting all emails sent to students making them less formal and more personable. The SPMs will also run an additional short briefing session on the day of the first mentoring activity to highlight the importance of the mentor role and provide last minute clarification. The SPMs decided to utilise the online course SCIENCE 1000. This course is delivered via the University's Learning Management System, Canvas. The SPMs redesigned the course to make it more suitable for the intended purpose and more user friendly. There are 3 main Canvas functions the SPMs will use:

- The Quiz function: to gather information about the participants that is not available on other university's systems, including the intended majors of new students.
- The Announcements function: to deliver important communications to the participants in a timely and organised way.
- The Modules function: to disseminate important information and documentation to the participants including information about careers and academic integrity.

Being students themselves, the SPMs understood the benefits of using SCIENCE 1000. There is a danger of 'email fatigue' when communicating with students, which often results in important messages being overlooked (Bye & Hobbins, 2015). This is especially true in the first few weeks of university, where new students are bombarded with emails containing a wide range of information. By using Canvas, the PMP not only maintains consistency in the online experience students have, but also allows for information to be available to new students in a timely, user-friendly and organised way.

### *The Changing Role of the Faculty Staff*

The involvement of the Faculty in the PMP was dramatically changed, and the amount of time Faculty staff devoted to the organisation of the PMP was notably reduced. The coordination and delivery of the PMP was previously estimated to require 0.6 (FTE) staff from December

to March. With the SPMs involved, the staffing requirement was reduced to approximately 0.1 (FTE) staff from November to March. The Faculty's ongoing involvement can be divided into four sections:

- Overall supervision of the SPM Team: Attending meetings when required, monitoring the team's progress and being available to answer questions.
- Using university systems (timetabling, room bookings) and sending group emails.
- Providing information about the peer mentors: Supplied information to the SPMs to assist with selecting and matching the peer mentors with student groups. The Faculty also was responsible for checking peer mentors' GPA to ensure it matched or was greater than the requirement.
- Recognition of mentors: The SPMs requested that Faculty staff be present at the appreciation ceremony to personally thank and recognise those involved in the PMP.

The net reduction in staffing time requirements to run the PMP resulted in freeing up time to focus on other retention activities.

### **The Benefit of a Student's Perspective – Sharing Stories**

SPM involvement has led to student's experiences and testimonies being more effectively used throughout the program. The SPMs recognised the perceived low value placed on PMPs by new students. To counter this the SPMs will address all new students at the Welcome Sessions during Orientation and provide authentic, real-life testimonials about the benefits of participating in the mentoring program (Roach, 2016).

During the initial training session, the SPMs will draw on their own personal experiences about the skills and attributes they developed as peer mentors. This encourages the current peer mentors to "articulate graduate learning outcomes, skills or attributes related to the roles of the mentor" (ANZSSA, 2015) and understand the value PMPs have on increasing employability (Quail 2016; Menzies et al, 2015).

The SPMs will also invite current science honours and PhD students to be involved in the second mentoring session. Previously, academic staff have participated, however feedback from participants indicated that new students often find academic staff intimidating, and are therefore less likely to engage. Honours and PhD candidates' experiences are more relevant to the new students, but the candidates still provide additional maturity and understanding of the workings of the university. Using the testimonies of science students who have successfully completed their undergraduate degree is a valuable way to convey information to new students. The Faculty is able to engage new students in a conversation about the positive experiences and outcomes of an undergraduate science degree ("Student testimonials are an untapped source of competitive advantage in recruitment marketing", 2017), ultimately assisting to retain new students.

### **Future Recommendations**

To continue to develop the student-led PMP, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Intentionally find SPMs from underrepresented groups, so that their personal testimonies can be encouraged in the facilitation and delivery of the PMP
- Survey current PMP participants and peer mentors to better understand the success and challenges of having SPMs involved

## Discussion Questions

- What benefits and challenges are there for your institution in implementing student-led peer mentoring and do the benefits outweigh the challenges of implementing a student-led PMP in your institution?
- How do we overcome potential barriers including distance, staff workload and cost to replicate a similar student-led PMP on satellite campuses?

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