Been there, done that: Scaling-up a pilot alumni mentoring program for business students

Daniel Smith, Monica Vanderkley, and Nadia McDonagh
University of Sydney Business School

Abstract

The Business Alumni Mentoring Program, which pairs alumni mentors with business students, is discussed. After contextualising the program within the work-integrated learning and mentoring literature, this paper will describe the program and the challenges faced in scaling it up from 10 mentor-mentee pairs in 2015 to an expected 50 pairs in 2017. While successful overall, we faced challenges in terms of advertising and student selection, expectation management, mentor selection, and resourcing of labour-intensive practices. As the program continues to expand, we must carefully plan to ensure that the personal touch and program quality is not lost with increased numbers.

Increasingly, careers have changed from a model of one occupation for life to one of a myriad of choices (Niles, 2011). The changeable trajectory inherent in modern careers brings with it uncertainty in choosing one's next career step, and this uncertainty means that workers must take advantage of situations and networking opportunities rather than relying on rational planning (Murtagh, Lopes and Lyons, 2011). For students thinking about their career's first steps, anxiety is common; building up students' sense of self-efficacy in controlling their own careers and providing students with career development opportunities while at university, in particular mentoring and work integrated learning (WIL) experiences, can combat this sense of anxiety and lead to greater employment outcomes (Isik, 2012).

In addition to developing students' technical skills through real-world experience, WIL programs provide participants with a host of employability outcomes and skills, including a more informed sense of their career goals, ability to identify their skills and skill gaps, an understanding of the labour market, and practice at networking (Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Wilton, 2016). Another important outcome is the development of self-confidence and self-esteem at work, and what Jackson (2016) calls the Pre-Professional Identity (PPI), a transitional phase in which students develop their professional identity by working out the professional standards, expectations and ideology of their host organisation and applying it to their role as learner-workers.

Through self-reflection and mentorship, students can grow confident and take control of their career pathway (Spence & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2014). Career mentoring is an important aspect of WIL (Spence & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2014; D'Abate, 2010) and its benefits for career development outside of formal WIL programs have been well-documented, as Smith-Ruig (2014) notes:

> "The [mentoring] relationship helped enhance the mentees' knowledge and understanding of the organisation/industries in which they were involved, including exposure to the reality of a corporate/professional office environment, business context and client interactions." (p. 775).

One of the key areas of strategic growth in the Business School's 2016-2020 Strategic Plan[1] is supporting students' transition to work by providing WIL experiences. Along with rethinking our internship-based offerings, mentoring is one of the areas slated for increased roll-out across the School. There are a number of programs at the School that provide students with career mentoring experiences, such as the Lucy Mentoring Program for women, and a number of programs provided by student societies. These programs are competitive, with a rigorous application process that often involves interviews and requires a minimum weighted average mark (WAM) of credit or higher. Increasingly, we are becoming aware of the students who sit just outside the criteria for these programs and who do not have the personal networks to succeed post-graduation without these opportunities. Anecdotally, students who have difficult life circumstances, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and international students are more likely to be under-represented in these programs.

The Business Alumni Mentoring Program

The Business Alumni Mentoring Program piloted in 2015. It was designed to support the success, retention and career transition of students, particularly those with low grades or reduced professional network contacts. Its key aims were to develop career management strategies and students' pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016). The program design paid careful attention to four factors that have been identified as crucial to the success of mentoring programs: careful matching, adequate preparation, supported interaction, and evaluation (Gannon & Maher, 2012).

The structure of the program was based on the successful Lucy Mentoring Program (see Smith-Ruig, 2014), and is summarised in figure 1. After the application phase, mentors and mentees were invited to separate briefing sessions in April. Matching was conducted based on mentees' career aspirations and strengths (gleaned from written applications and interviews) and mentors' current roles and career trajectories. Pairs met and set the parameters of their relationship at the launch in May and met at least once a month for six months. There was a catch up with coordinators in the middle. Mentees shared their experiences in a three-minute presentation at the graduation event, talking about their achievements and what they learned. Each pair was provided with a "mentoring themes" document that contained discussion points and questions as an optional aide to scaffold meetings, providing practical advice on career planning and the recruitment process. Throughout the program, mentees were required to keep a learning journal to document their journey. Learning journals have been shown to bridge the gap between classroom and experiential learning by having students question assumptions and critically reflect on changes in attitude (Maellaro, 2013).
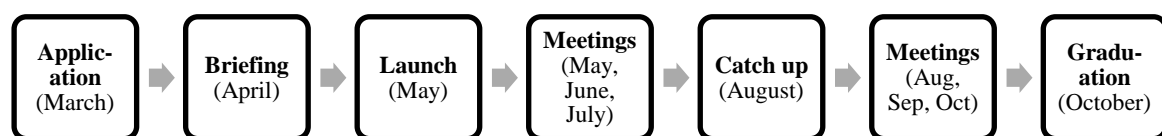

Figure 1: Business Alumni Mentoring Program structure

The pilot program yielded thirty applications, which were assessed against selection criteria relating to leadership experience and career goals. Mentors were primarily recruited through the Business Alumni Network at the School. All mentors had a minimum of five years'

experience in the workplace, and came from a range of businesses including major banks and professional services firms, and start-ups.

Feedback from the pilot was overwhelmingly positive. From a mentee perspective, negative feedback centred on the timing of events (the graduation and launch were both in the exam period) and the usefulness of learning journals was questioned, suggesting more time needed to be spent on it in the student briefing. Positive feedback praised the valuable insight mentors provided to their mentees, and the customisable content of the meetings:

> "The program was extremely helpful and I learnt a lot from my mentor. I actually found it helpful that the program let [us] decide the content of meetings by ourselves because that enabled us to make the program a personal experience that suited our needs the best."

Mentors reported positive experiences. In addition to a sense of satisfaction, one mentor noted that this experience forced them to ask themselves questions about their own career trajectory.

Scaling-up the program

Because of the School's strategic plan commitment, we faced pressure to increase numbers after the pilot year and agreed to an expansion to thirty pairs in 2016. We responded to feedback and changed the dates to ensure that the launch and graduation events were not during exams. We revisited Gannon and Maher's (2012) key factors and focused on improving participant preparation by redesigning the student briefing session to include a goal-setting exercise in which students practiced writing SMART goals to focus their reflection as the program progressed. We improved program interaction by providing a more structured mid-program catch up in which students had a one-to-one appointment with a coordinator to review their progress with reference to their initial SMART goals and the content of their learning journal.

While they had been hand-picked in the pilot, mentors were sourced through referrals or through an EOI process throughout the year. As for the pilot, mentors worked in major and mid-tier professional services firms and start-ups. The requirement for five years' work experience was relaxed to at least two years though suitability was assessed on a case-by-case basis based on meetings with prospective mentors.

Mentees applied in the same fashion as in the pilot, and 81 applications were received in two rounds (the second round was added to boost numbers after a low number of quality candidates applied). Of these, 42 were interviewed and 28 were accepted: Sixteen were women, eight were international students, twelve were in their final semester, and twenty-two had a WAM of credit or less. While priority was given to those in final years and with low WAMs, as per the pilot's criteria, we broadened the criteria to increase the pool of available quality candidates who could demonstrate commitment during their interviews because there weren't enough candidates who fit the strict criteria.

As for the pilot, mentee feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students described the program as "terrific", "life-changing", and "inspirational", and praised the mentors' commitment to the mentees. Mentors were similarly complimentary, highlighting the program as unexpectedly rewarding for their own development as leaders. The addition of the SMART goals proved a valuable one, providing students with a way to articulate their desired outcomes (some of which were abandoned and replaced as they progressed), to focus their monthly meetings, and to evaluate their progress. The one-to-one meetings provided a setting to discuss these goals at a point in the program that allowed them to reflect on their progress while they

still had time to act. There was a clear expectation from both mentors and mentees that this program should expand further to reach as many students as possible, and we are confident that those students who completed the program will have successful outcomes.

Challenges arising from the scaled-up program

We experienced challenges in four key areas: Advertising and student selection, expectation management, mentor selection, and resourcing.

Advertising and student selection

Positioning the program so that it remains true to its original purpose to help those who need extra support, without discouraging quality applicants was a key issue in 2016. We advertised the program as a prestigious program for those who needed a bit of extra assistance in reaching their career goals due to adversity, but at first we didn't receive enough serious applications so we had to extend our deadline to reach our target. Informal feedback about the advertising suggested that there was a perception that it was going to be very difficult to get into and thus many didn't apply because they felt they weren't disadvantaged. Two students were withdrawn by coordinators, and in the end-of-program feedback, two mentors commented that their mentees' commitment was "not good" or "poor". We don't know what happened in these cases, which highlights the need for increased monitoring. With a higher number of applicants, we would not have chosen those who were withdrawn so appropriate advertising would have mitigated the issue of having poor ambassadors for the School involved.

Expectation management

While an isolated case, one student was withdrawn because of inappropriate expectations, causing a major concern. She expected her mentor to reply to emails in a short amount of time, and when the mentor didn't (due to sickness), she sent inappropriate and demanding emails to the mentor. To complicate the problem, we discovered that the pair were communicating via the social network WeChat in addition to email, which proved problematic. One coordinator counselled the student on appropriate expectations and communication; throughout the session, it was clear that her expectations were unreasonable, highlighting the need to ensure time is spent during briefings on boundary-setting for both parties. Ultimately, because the relationship had soured, it was unable to continue past this incident.

Mentor selection

The requirement for mentors to have at least five years' experience was relaxed with mixed results. We believe that some of our fresh graduates have a lot to offer as mentors if it's the right fit. Particular students will benefit from having somebody who has just gone through the interview process, as opposed to an older mentor who may not be as familiar with psychometric testing and newer recruitment techniques. We became aware that a couple of the mentors selected were too inexperienced as the program progressed, and they needed to be monitored more closely than more experienced mentors.

Resourcing

From an administrative perspective, the key challenge was the additional workload by virtue of increased numbers. As we have already discussed, we only found about two problem pairings at the feedback stage when it was too late to intervene. From the outset, we were conscious that we did not want the personal experience of participants to suffer, which added significantly to our workload. In particular, interviews were challenging as we feel that in order

to ensure a good mentor-mentee match it is crucial that we get to know candidates, though we realise that one-to-one interviewing may not be possible as the program continues to grow.

Going forward and questions for discussion

As we plan for the 2017 program, we are aiming for 50 pairs. The obvious consideration is the exponential increase in labour during the recruitment phase, and we are exploring alternative interview and recruitment practices such as group interviews or online interviews, and ways in which we can streamline our monitoring of participants' progress. It's important that with the increased numbers of students that the personal touch will not be diminished by automation. We will be expanding our marketing efforts to ensure that the program is positioned as a prestigious program that is open to anyone willing to commit their time. Part of this will involve adjusting the messages we use, but we must also ensure that the message is distributed widely. Appropriate expectation management will be added to both briefing sessions.

- How could the selection process be adapted to cope with the increased numbers without compromising the need for us to get to know candidates in order to match them appropriately?
- How would you ensure the personal touch isn't lost with increased numbers?
- How can we mitigate inappropriate expectations on mentees' parts?

References

D'Abate, C. (2010). Developmental interactions for business students: Do they make a difference? *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 17,* 143-155.

Gannon, J. M., & Maher, A. (2012) Developing tomorrow's talent: The case of an undergraduate mentoring programme. *Education + Training, 54,* 440-455.

Isik, E. (2012). The relationship of career decision self-efficacy, trait anxiety, and affectivity among undergraduate students. *Psychological Reports: Human Resources & Marketing, 111,* 805-813.

Jackson, D. (2015). Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice. *Studies in Higher Education, 40,* 350-367.

Jackson, D. (2016). Developing pre-professional identity in undergraduates through work-integrated learning. *Higher Education.* DOI 10.1007/s10734-016-0080-2

Jackson, D., & Wilton, N. (206). Developing career management competencies among undergraduates and the role of work-integrated learning. *Teaching in Higher Education, 21,* 266-286.

Maellaro, R. (2013). The learning journal bridge: From classroom concepts to leadership practices. *Journal of Leadership Education, 12,* 234-244.

Murtagh, N., Lopes, P.N., & Lyons, E. (2011). Decision making in voluntary career change: An other-than-rational perspective. *Career Development Quarterly, 59,* 249-263.

Niles, S. G. (2011). Career flow: a hope-centered model of career development. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 48,* 173-175.

Smith-Ruig, T. (2014). Exploring the links between mentoring and work-integrated learning. *Higher Education Research & Development, 33,* 769-782.

Spence, S., & Hyams-Ssekasi, D. (2015). Developing business students' employability skills through working in partnership with a local business to deliver an undergraduate mentoring programme. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, 5*, 299-314.