

The Impact of motivated volunteerism on peer-mentoring educational programs: evidence from Western Australia

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Abstract

Volunteerism is a longstanding practice, known to provide benefits to both the volunteer—in terms of skills acquisition, employment opportunities and general life satisfaction—and the host institution. However, the sustainability of volunteerism is being questioned in the face of evidence that people seem to be losing interest. Within the context of social exchange theory, this paper discusses the impact of motivated volunteerism on the outcomes of a peer-mentoring programme aimed at improving retention and educational outcomes for domestic African undergraduate students in higher education at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. We argue that peer-mentoring educational programmes modelled on paid volunteerism achieve good outcomes for mentors and their mentees.

Introduction

At the 2016 UNI-STARS conference in Perth, we presented a paper on a peer-mentoring programme at Edith Cowan University (ECU) designed to support domestic African undergraduate students (DAUS) at risk of attrition (Adusei-Asante, Awidi, & Doh, 2016). We argued that, while it was ongoing, most of the students in the programme had been retained, and were demonstrating enhanced academic learning skills. As a follow-up, this paper presents one of the key factors underpinning the success of our programme—motivated volunteerism. We seek to show that volunteerism is changing, and that educational institutions that rely on volunteers need to find ways of motivating them, both intrinsically and extrinsically, to achieve good outcomes.

Literature Review

The extent to which a person volunteers without extrinsic incentives remains unanswered in current debates on volunteerism (Cuskelly, 2004; Schusterschitz, Flatscher-Thöni, Leiter-Scheiring, & Geser, 2014; Zappalà, 2000), because of the range of motives for volunteering (Engelberg, Skinner, & Zakus, 2014; Zappalà, 2000). Engelberg et al. (2014), for example, proposed three key levels of motivation for volunteering: the core level, the primary level and the secondary level. Each of these levels has implications for a person's commitment towards volunteerism. Engelberg et al. (2014) argued that the core motive for volunteering is seeking to help, largely driven by altruistic tendencies. The primary motives are based on personal needs and interests, which highlight the egotistic tendencies of the volunteer. The secondary-level motives are the social and personal development motives of the individual. From this

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three-layered model, it is important to recognise that sustaining volunteerism requires harnessing these different layers in order to achieve the best impact. It is acknowledged, however, that motives for volunteering are dynamic and context-related.

Within the context of social exchange theory, human interaction is defined by the level of exchange of social and material resources (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013; Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2016). Khalid and Ali (2017) argues that social exchange theory rests on the exchange of cost and rewards. Viewed this way, in any given social interaction, including volunteering, consideration of cost (the altruistic consideration) and reward (what one stands to benefit) are critical for maximising commitments to and outcomes of volunteering. Hunter and Ross (2013) refer to this approach as stipend-paying volunteering or motivated volunteer scheme, and draws synergy between cost and reward systems.

Most models of educational peer-mentoring programmes operate on unpaid volunteerism (Advocates for Youth, n.d.; Casey, 2013; Reynolds, 2003). The effectiveness of peer-mentoring in improving educational outcomes for students is well documented. For example, Casey (2013) found that students buddied with mentors in their first year learned more about resources available to them and had better experiences than students without peer mentors. Reynolds (2003) also argued that students who mentor their peers perform well academically (see also Topping, 1996). However, discussion on how paid mentoring programmes translate into opportunities and educational outcomes for both the mentor and the mentee respectively have not been adequately explored in the literature—a gap this paper seeks to fill.

DAUS in higher education in many parts of Australia are confronted with academic challenges, ranging from disengagement to poor educational outcomes (see Gately, Ellis, Britton, & Fleming, 2017; Samani & Lozeva, 2016). For example, on average, 20% of African students withdraw from undergraduate programmes (ECU, 2015). Gately et al. (2017) found that the failure rate of Sudanese students in all units they enrolled in between 2010 and 2014 at ECU was almost 50%, citing socio-political factors as key barriers (see also Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Turner & Fodzar, 2009, 2010). Unfortunately, to the authors' knowledge, there have been no targeted programmes to reverse this trend.

Top-Up Programme

The Top-Up programme was implemented in 2015. The one-on-one peer-mentoring initiative supports DAUS at ECU, providing them with the skills to excel in and complete their academic journeys. Specifically, the aims of the initiative include, but are not limited to, supporting ECU's DAUS to (1) improve their English language and conceptual learning skills; (2) manage academic work, family and work commitments; (3) develop clear career pathways; and (4) adjust to the Australian way of life. Students are referred into the programme by academic staff or self-select to participate (see Adusei-Asante et al., 2016; Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016). Top-Up is funded under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), through ECU's Strategic Engagement Office.

Top-Up has three components. In the first component, each student participant is matched to a volunteer mentor. Mentors dedicate two hours per week to each of their mentees, although in practice, they work 3.5 hours on average weekly with each of their students. Aside from their personal preparation and reporting on the progress of their mentees, mentors meet their mentees once every week (preferably face-to-face) to discuss academic issues and either directly support them or point them towards the relevant services within the university. Most of the discussion focus on mentees' lecture contents, developing plans for assignments, draft essays and feedback, rehearsing presentations and preparing for mid- and end-of-semester examinations. We encourage mentors to meet their students on an ECU campus, although sometimes extenuating situations have led to meetings at a local library or a location convenient for both parties or a meeting via Skype. In order to achieve the best outcomes in each meeting, mentors are encouraged to obtain copies of mentees' unit plans for all units they have enrolled in for the semester. The agenda for each meeting is driven by the mentees' needs and priorities for the semester, although mentors also influence issues to be discussed. Mentors support their mentees to realistic targets for each semester, key ones being the mentee passing all their units and being retained.

The second component requires that students participate in an hour-long weekly compulsory plenary session, in which they are taught academic language and conceptual learning skills as well as job-ready competencies. Different facilitators (mostly mentors) lead these plenary sessions (see Adusei-Asante et al., 2016). Topics discussed include semester planning, academic reading and writing skills—subject-verb agreement, parts of a paragraph, essay writing and plagiarism—and preparing for an examination. Towards the end of the semester, a session is dedicated to job application and interview skills, as well as an inspirational talk on careers. The plenary sessions are designed to be hands-on, providing participants with opportunities to practice what is taught. As a result, each session involves a practice component and an opportunity for ideas sharing. Refreshment is served at the plenary sessions, and students are encouraged to socialise; these are aimed at community building.

The third component of the Top -Up started this year. Referred to as the 'walk-in option', this aspect of the Top-Up Programme supports non-mentee DAUS with immediate learning needs. This component is flexible and enables DAUS who do not need intensive on-going support. Most of the DAUS who have used this service were independent students, and only sought support when they were dealing with crucial assignment deadlines or needed educational and or pastoral assistance.

Mentors provide a report of up to one page on each of their mentees, highlighting their respective achievements and areas that need improvement at the end of each semester. The programme manager reviews the reports, after which s/he meets the mentee(s) to discuss whether the mentee(s) should continue in the programme or become self-supporting. Former Top-Up students are encouraged to become mentors. So far, three of the 10 students that started the programme in 2015 have become independent students, and one has accepted to work in the program as a mentor after completing her degree. The programme manager collates the mentors' reports for the funding body at the end of each year.

Approach to Sustaining the Top-Up Programme

Given the enormous commitment required of mentors and associated demands on their time, we found that, to achieve the desired outcomes, the Top-Up programme needed greater than ordinary levels of volunteerism. As a result, we designed our programme as a motivated volunteer peer-mentoring programme. Mentors participating in the Top-Up programme are paid casual rates. The wages cover over 85% of the actual time they invest in the programme. The intention of this approach is to induce altruistic motives in peer mentors, and to induce ownership of the mentoring process, while providing minimal incentives. Aside from monetary benefits, mentors are recognised as university staff and given access to subsidised parking fees and other ancillary benefits. Additionally, mentors who facilitate the weekly plenaries are paid at 100% of the lecture rate, aside from enjoying a free lunch. Provision is also made for the professional development of the volunteer mentors. They also have opportunities to contribute to publications on the programme, which enhances the resumes of those interested in academia.

Mentors in the programme have a minimum of (or are enrolled in) a master's programme; currently, almost 90% are ECU PhD candidates of African descent. They apply to participate in the programme through an expression of interest to the programme manager, subject to availability of students and funds. Mentors accepted into the programme are taken through a briefing session (includes cultural awareness), and assigned to students based on their competencies. On average, each mentor is assigned between two and five students. As of December 2016, there were seven mentors supporting 22 students. The programme is currently being expanded to assist 50 students across three schools in 2017 at ECU.

Findings

Top-Up has been successful largely because mentors working in the programme are paid and enjoy many benefits. As a result, all seven mentors have been enthusiastic and demonstrated an enormous commitment to the programme. Some of the mentors have gained university teaching experience through the programme, while others have learned skills they can transfer to other endeavours. Top-Up has positioned the mentors for other casual academic jobs, such as research assistantships, and many of them have taken advantage of these opportunities. Some of the mentors who have completed their PhDs have moved on to secure permanent jobs in the education sector, citing our programme as a reference and/or track record. The success of Top-Up is making news across the university. We have recently received several expressions of interest from master's and PhD students from Western Australian universities wishing to be employed as mentors in the programme, a clear indication that motivated volunteerism works. As of April 2017, almost 10 potential mentors have applied to the programme and are on a waiting list, pending admission of more students to the programme later in 2017.

Over 90% of the students who participated in the programme in 2015 have been retained. We also observed that:

Except for one student, whose personal circumstances did not permit him to be present all the time, most of the participants attended the plenary sessions regularly. Attendance averaging seventy per cent was recorded. The sense of community created in the sessions played a role in the sustained patronage of the plenary discussions. The atmosphere enhanced sharing of ideas, sense of belonging and networking among the students. Through the project, the students have formed study partnerships, which are improving their academic skills (Adusei-Asante et al., 2016, p. 4).

Twenty of the 22 students that participated in the 2016 programme were retained. Generally, there was significant improvement in academic outcomes for most of the mentees. Most students participating in the programme have expressed their satisfaction with their mentors and the programme in general, writing ‘thank you’ messages to their mentors such as:

Excellent news I have for you, I ended up achieving a Distinction in Social Policy!

Thank you so much, God bless you for all the academic support throughout this semester!

I got HD, two Distinctions and a Credit ... So delighted and making progress.

The level of commitment of mentors and mentees to the mentoring process in 2016 was commendable. However, academic writing skills remain a key area requiring attention for most mentees. As a result, most sessions of the 2017 plenary sessions have focused on supporting the mentees to improve their academic writing competence.

Conclusion

This paper discussed how motivated volunteerism influences outcomes of educational programmes. The text drew on a peer-mentoring programme (Top-Up) that seeks to retain and improve educational outcomes for domestic African undergraduate students at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. We found a strong correlation between paid volunteerism and the positive outcomes witnessed in the Top-Up programme. We learned that while the programme provided opportunities for mentors to support students needing academic assistance, it also enabled them to build on their teaching competence. Aside from positively influencing educational outcomes for the students they supported, some of the mentors have used these experiences as a track record to secure permanent jobs, while others have obtained casual positions within the university. The approach is therefore recommended for settings where volunteer morale is low or volunteers are involved in demanding or outcome-driven initiatives.

Question for discussion

What been your experiences with volunteerism and outcomes in your respective institutions?

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