

2018

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Adusei-Asante, K. (2018, July). Do same-demography mentoring programmes make any difference to mentees' learning outcomes? Reflections on the Top Up programme. In Proceedings of STARS conference. Auckland: New Zealand. Available [here](#)

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Do same-demography mentoring programmes make any difference to mentees' learning outcomes? Reflections on the Top Up programme

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Abstract

Peer mentoring is considered an effective vehicle for addressing anti-social behaviours and improving students' academic achievement and retention. Consequently, discussions on the subject have received considerable traction in the education literature in recent times, most of which depicts its usefulness as well as factors that contribute to successful design and implementation. One issue that has not received adequate attention in the peer mentoring literature, which this reflection paper seeks to address, relates to whether demographic attributes such as gender, race and ethnicity influence mentoring outcomes for mentors and mentees. Drawing on the Top Up mentoring programme at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia as a case study, the paper argues that both same and mixed demography peer mentoring are mutually beneficial for mentors and mentees and that their usefulness should be viewed as situational.

Introduction

Peer mentoring has received considerable attention in the education literature in recent times. This is partially attributable to recognition that peer mentoring is an effective vehicle for addressing anti-social behaviours and improving students' academic achievement and retention (Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff & Dunlop 2010; Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2010; Sorrentino, 2016). As a result, most schools in Australia and other Western countries seem to have some form of peer support arrangement in place (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2010). Several factors that contribute to the success or otherwise of peer-mentoring programmes are also discussed in the literature (see Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016; Andrews & Clark, 2011; Long, 2004). Notwithstanding, discussions on the impact of same demographic characteristics on mentoring outcomes has not been adequately addressed in the literature. This paper begins to fill this gap, citing the Top Up mentoring programme from Edith Cowan University, Western Australia as a case study.

Peer mentoring: a conceptual overview

There is no current widely accepted definition of mentoring. The definition of mentoring in the literature is surrounded with ambiguity, as noted by Jacobi (1991) and more recently by Crisp and Cruz (2009), who identified 50 definitions of mentoring of various scope and breadth. Peer mentoring in higher education commonly includes a more experienced or knowledgeable student providing support to a less experienced student, with the aim of academic improvement (Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014) and increased engagement in university (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). Some universities also provide peer mentoring to early career researchers (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Peer tutoring and peer teaching are similar in nature to mentoring but focus exclusively on course content. Peer tutoring has been defined as 'those of the same societal group or social standing educating one another when one peer has more expertise or knowledge' (Colvin, 2007, p. 166), while peer teaching is 'an educational arrangement in which one student teaches one or more fellow students' (Cate & Durning, 2007, p. 546). Peer mentoring and tutoring programmes in higher education take on various forms, with differing target groups and delivery modes. Most peer-mentoring programmes have specific eligibility criteria and target certain groups of students. For example, some programmes are only available to first-year students (De Smet, Van Keer, & Valcke, 2008; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011), students from a specific ethnic group (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005), low-achieving students (Sorrentino, 2016) or students studying a course (Fox et al., 2010).

The mode of delivery of peer mentoring and tutoring programmes varies greatly and can range from formal instruction in a classroom setting to informal sharing of information in social settings (Colvin, 2007). Generally, peer mentoring occurs face to face (Sorrentino, 2016; Giles, Zacharopoulou, & Condell, 2016); however, there are also programmes that provide support solely online (De Smet et al., 2008). Some peer-mentoring programmes match a mentee with a mentor, who meet regularly through the semester or year (Collings et al., 2014). Other programmes provide mentoring in groups, where one or sometimes two mentors facilitate small study group tutorials (Giles et al., 2016; Fox & Stevenson, 2006; Chester, Burton, Xenos, & Elgar, 2013) or mentoring circles (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Mentors might facilitate sessions individually but be grouped in teams to meet and provide support to each other (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017). Positive outcomes of participation in peer-mentoring programmes have been found for both mentees and mentors (Collings et al., 2014; Fox & Stevenson, 2006; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Various challenges of peer mentoring have also been identified in the literature (Christie, 2014; Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; MacCallum, Beltman, Coffey, & Cooper, 2017).

Same-demography peer mentoring

Same-demography peer mentoring refers to a mentoring arrangement where the mentor and the mentee share the same or similar physical and ideological attributes such as gender, race, ethnicity, faith or ability (Blake-Beard, 2011; Long, 2004). The subject has been the focus of several studies, particularly from the 2000s, most of which present mixed evidence. For example, a study by the US Military Leadership Diversify Commission (n.d.) reported that mentoring relationships can be dysfunctional regardless of the demography of the mentee and mentor. However, the study also found that while overall women and minorities do not lack access to mentorship, they do lack access to mentors of the same gender or race and ethnicity and are therefore more likely to be in mixed mentoring relationships. The report found mentoring relationships were more likely to provide career benefits, whereas mentoring based on demographic similarity was deemed to provide psychosocial benefits (Military Leadership Diversify Commission, n.d.).

Studies in the field of education present similar mixed findings. For example, some research has found advantages of same-ethnic mentors, who were supportive in promoting personal and career development of mentees and provided greater programme satisfaction in comparison with non-matched mentees (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Ortiz-Walters and Gilson (2005) similarly discovered that students of colour were more satisfied with and received more psychosocial as well as instrumental support from mentors of colour. Blake-Beard (2011) studied 1,013 undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral scholars who participated in a science technology engineering and mathematics online mentoring programme. The online survey asked respondents their personal history and experiences with mentoring, their demographics and their academic details. Blake-Beard (2011) categorised participants based on gender, race, academic record and their preferences and experiences with mentoring and found that having a mentor of one's own gender or race was reported as important by many of the women and students of colour. Students who had a mentor of their own gender or race reported receiving more help. The study concluded that matching by race or gender did not appear to affect academic outcomes, although students were more pleased with their mentoring experience and believed race and/or gender matching to be important.

However, other research identified no differences in mentee satisfaction with mentoring relationship (Lyons & Oppler, 2004) and benefits of cross-cultural mentoring were found in relation to open-mindedness, cultural empathy, social initiative and cross-cultural friendships (Woods et al., 2013). Crutcher (2014) suggested that cross-cultural mentoring is a pathway to achieving more inclusive access to education. Differences in ethnicity, gender and age can influence needs and characteristics of mentees and a focus on individual differences is needed to create effective mentoring programmes (Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, & Sanchez, 2006). Walters et al. (2016) suggested including cultural competency, cultural humility and cultural safety in the training of mentors.

The Top Up programme and same-demography mentoring

The Top Up programme was introduced in 2015 and has since been funded by Edith Cowan University's (ECU) Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program allocation. The programme was designed as a targeted paid peer-mentoring initiative that addresses academic challenges of domestic African undergraduate students (DAUS) at ECU. Top Up targets both first-year and continuing DAUS who need intensive, culturally sensitive and person-centred academic support, which is generally not provided by existing student support services at the university. Students self-select to participate in the programme or are referred by academic staff. The programme is open to all DAUS studying at all three ECU campuses. Top Up students are buddied to mentors who provide one-on-one academic peer mentoring and support.

The Top Up programme has the features of both same- and mixed-demography mentoring models. The programme can be characterised as a same-demography mentoring initiative because over 90% of the mentors and all the mentees are of sub-Saharan African descent. The design of the programme to have African PhD and Master's mentors was influenced by ideologies presented above on the impact of same-demography mentoring (Blake-Beard, 2011; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Santos & Reigadas, 2002). At the same time, Top Up can pass for mixed- or cross-demography peer mentoring; there are female, male and non-African mentors involved in the programme.

In 2017, 11 mentors supported 40 Top Up students, consisting of five males and six females. Three of the female mentors were non-African and were recruited because of their expertise. Mentees and mentors do not have the right to choose who they work with. While the programme was conceived and implemented to support African students, 'Africanness' *per se* has not been a key factor in determining mentor–mentee matching. Considerations of who is best to mentor mentees has been driven mainly by mentors' expertise and availability and mentees' circumstances. As a result, female mentors worked with male mentees and vice versa. We also had situations where non-African mentors worked with African mentees.

Impact

In general terms, mentee–mentor relationships have been cordial and contributed significantly to positive mutually beneficial outcomes for both parties, as discussed above. The few exceptions where mentor–mentee relationships broke down involved matters that were not conspicuously related to demographic attributes; they involve issues such as availability of a mentor to mentee and vice versa or one party not playing their role for an assignment to be completed. Although a study is currently underway to collect empirical data from mentors and mentees involved in the programme, our findings to date suggest that race, gender and ethnicity have not been an issue in affecting the positive outcomes in the Top Up programme to date. Notwithstanding, some students in the programme have indicated in the data collected so far that having a mentor who looks like them is a motivating factor and provides psychosocial benefits, a finding validated by Long (2004) and Blake-Beard (2011).

Since its inception in 2015, Top Up has made inroads. Nine of the 10 students who participated in the programme in 2015 were retained. In 2016, 20 of the 22 students who participated in the programme were retained. Top Up supported 40 at-risk students in 2017, all of whom were successfully retained. The mentors reported a significant improvement in the academic outcomes of their mentees, some of whom were awarded high distinctions (80%) and distinctions (70%) for the first time in their academic studies. Top 10% of students, who were at risk of attrition in the 2015–2017 period, who participated in the Top Up programme all graduated in 2018. The model and outcomes of Top Up have been published in eight academic papers and at various national educational conferences, including the Students' Transition, Achievement Retention and Success conferences (see Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2017; Adusei et al., 2016). ECU's Academic Support Team used Top Up as the university's flagship case study and support programme for non-English speaking students at the 2017 Association for Academic Language and Learning Conference in Geelong, Australia.

Conclusion

This paper discussed peer-mentoring programmes and whether demographic attributes such as gender, race and ethnicity influence positive outcomes for mentors and mentees. Reflections from the Top Up mentoring programme implemented at ECU for sub-Saharan African students suggest that same- and mixed-demography peer mentoring are mutually beneficial to mentees and mentors. Same- and mixed-demography peer-mentoring programmes have their respective places and should be viewed as complementary and not as conceptual polarities or adversaries. The successful conception and execution of the Top Up programme as both same- and cross-demographic initiatives shows that peer-mentoring planners need to consider the context and the appropriate model. The need to start thinking of peer-mentoring programmes from a situational ideation perspective would help achieve successful outcomes, as demonstrated in the Top Up programme.

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