

RESEARCH PAPER

From homeland to home: Widening Participation through the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) Program

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Mentoring is often conceptualised as a one-to-one interaction between peers, or as an academic to student interaction, with the aim of developing self-esteem, connectedness, identity, and academic attitudes within one party. While various researchers have provided support for effectiveness of mentoring in fostering the aforementioned qualities, limited studies have looked at the impacts of outreach mentoring programs. This article examines the impact of the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program on high school students from refugee backgrounds who are mentees on the program and on the university students who are mentors on the program. A qualitative study was completed involving five focus groups, individual and semi structured interviews with 54 mentees and diary analysis of 45 mentors. Transcripts of interview and focus groups were analysed using a grounded approach. Key findings highlighted that the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program supported both mentors and mentees in making a smooth personal, social, and academic transition from high school to university, helped them develop leadership potential, and provided them with a connection to community.

Keywords: mentoring; refugee backgrounds; mentees; mentors

Introduction

“Repeat business or behaviour can be bribed; Loyalty has to be earned”

Janet Robinson

In the marketing literature, it has been highly researched that retaining existing customers and building strong customer-provider relationships is a more cost effective approach than continually seeking and acquiring new customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Over the years, peer to peer mentoring has been part of universities' initiatives to foster smoother transitions as part of the university experience and to increase student retention. The retention of students is now considered equally as important as the attraction of them (Helgesen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) especially with the increasing diversity amongst recent university student cohort.

Applications to Australian universities have been on a substantial increase from students from refugee backgrounds between 1994-2014 with majority of the students from Middle East (Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan), West Africa (Sierra Leone, and Liberia), Central Africa (South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda and Congo) and Asia (Burma, China, Nepal, and Indonesia). In 2013, the largest proportion of the humanitarian visa applications was in the age group of 15-19 years (DIAC, 2013) with majority of them coming from disrupted schooling over the years. It is therefore of critical importance that universities explore

strategies and programs to facilitate a smoother transition to higher education for students from refugee backgrounds. Macquarie University's LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) comprises a variety of outreach initiatives that raise aspirations, create possibilities and actively support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to successfully participate in higher education. One of the programs LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) is a partnership, recognizing the need for ongoing support of targeted high school students from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds to enable and support their successful transition into higher education. The program is run in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC).

There is a small body of work that addresses the educational experiences of refugee youth (Tregale & Bosanquet, 2011; Joyce et al, 2010; Earnest et al, 2010; Matthews, 2008) however research on mentoring programs for students from refugee backgrounds is an underdeveloped area of research. In this context, the study evaluated the impact of the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program both on university students and explored the role the program played on student transitions and retention and the impact of the program on high school students to broaden social inclusion and encourage participation in higher education.

Progression to Higher Education through Mentoring Support

Students have been academically assisting peers in college and university campuses since the 1700s (Allen & Eby, 2011). Peer mentoring programs assist students in their transition to university and success in their program of choice (Tregale & Bosanquet, 2011). Rhodes & DuBois (2008) defined mentoring as a purposeful friendship or partnership with a strong connection or emotional and knowledge bond between individuals whereby a mentee may identify goals, but it is the mentor who provides structure and guidance to achieve those goals. In the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth, the researchers analysed the impact of mentoring on educational aspirations of participants and found that on-going peer mentoring significantly impacted upon student intentions to enrol in a university course (Curtis, Drummond, Halsey & Lawson, 2012). The idea of student progression can be visually mapped to show the interconnections between the various contexts and stakeholders, individual motivating factors, choice of pathways over time, and the educational outcomes.

Figure 1 Student progression via multiple pathways (adapted from A.B.S. 2010, 22).

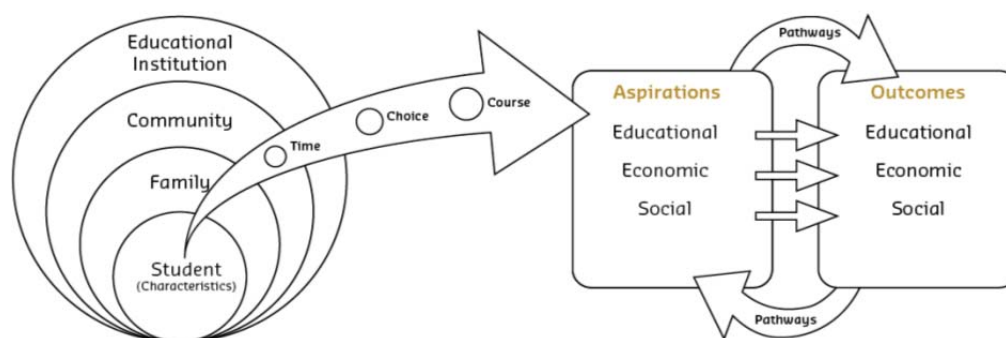


Figure 1 highlights that the learning context does not begin and end with school, but rather is informed by the capital accessible to students from family members, community and educational institutions. This can be seen in terms of their own human capital, such as goals

and aspirations and the cultural capital of their families and communities, such as educational expectations and financial situation. The social networks which can ease the way into higher education and which shape aspirations and outcomes are also a vital component. The majority of university outreach programs focus on improving engagement and achievement at school, increasing aspirations and increasing transition and retention at university (Gale, Sellar, Parker, Hattam, Comber, Tranter & Bills, 2010). Anderson & Vervoorn (1983) identified achievement, aspiration, accessibility and availability as the crucial axes along which intervention and support programs have typically been established. The practice implications of this are establishing university-led intervention programs, targeting students and parents to increase student motivation and self-confidence, and increase their awareness of higher education possibilities (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013).

Often, however such programs do not take into account the complexities in the family and community dynamics of students from refugee backgrounds. Uncertainty regarding household income, employment instability of family members, disrupted schooling and fragmented community are only few of the challenges faced by students transitioning through school to higher education (Gifford, Correa-Velez & Sampson, 2009). Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay (2012) have discussed other significant challenges such as language barriers, lack of content specific knowledge and inappropriate study spaces at home. Mathews (2008) identified schools as an ideal institution in providing opportunities to students from refugee backgrounds to build social networks and learn about everyday life and social norms in Australia. Johnson (2007) identified mentoring as a crucial element in building confidence, resilience and aspirations amongst youths, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; Allen & Eby, 2011).

Studies have highlighted that key benefits of mentoring are its social outcomes, which included an enhanced sense of connectedness (Joyce, Earnest, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010) and inter-cultural friendships (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Other studies have demonstrated personal outcomes, such as a sense of satisfaction and achievement through helping others and increased self-awareness and confidence (Mathews, 2008; Gale et al., 2010)

Devlin et al. (2012) identified mentoring as the most effective program in supporting all students regardless of their background in accessing higher education. However, the Australian education system is not well equipped to meet the needs and expectations of students from refugee backgrounds given the diverse nature of the complexities facing the students (Joyce et al., 2010). Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) in their study noted the critical need of mentoring programs in schools. However, this requires careful consideration, appropriate mentor training and consultation with various stakeholders. Gale et al. (2010) proposed that effective transition support requires collaboration across schools, tertiary institutions, non-government organizations, families and communities.

LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring)

In this context, the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program works closely with Refugee Student Programs Advisors at the NSW Department of Education and Communities in the delivery of the program objectives. Since its establishment in 2011, the program has engaged 754 high school students from refugee backgrounds who have connected with 357 Macquarie University student mentors. The mentoring program runs twice a year over an 11 week time frame at nine schools across West and South Western Sydney. The program includes a university campus visit and on-campus activities for mentees' parents and/or caregivers.

According to Tregale & Bosanquet (2011) the stated aims of this program are:

- develop confidence, resilience and agency
- raise aspirations towards further study
- develop social and cultural capital to navigate the tertiary education system
- develop study and research skills, including ICT skills
- develop awareness of school and university cultures and expectations in the Australian context
- develop an understanding of available educational pathways and make decisions regarding appropriate pathways
- increase refugee parents' and communities' understanding of tertiary education pathways

This study examined the impact of the program both on mentors and mentees and the benefits associated with the mentoring program in terms of increasing overall sense of belonging, engagement and loyalty with the university.

Method and Data Analysis

Five focus groups with 42 mentees in the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program were conducted in 2014, with eight to ten participants in each focus group recruited using convenience sampling strategy. Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by an independent party. Individual, semi structured interviews were completed with 12 mentees which were also audio recorded. Each mentor kept a diary, received prior to the mentoring session and returned at the end of the semester. Thematic analyses of focus group data were undertaken using the process described by Clarke & Braun (2013). This process enabled the researcher to identify and analyse patterns that appear within the data. In order to label the emerging categories and concepts, first the focus groups transcripts were transcribed and analysed. Second, the diaries were segmented into the framework developed through the transcription analysis of the focus groups.

The data analysis procedures were framed around inductive analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Coding for qualitative data was conducted using Nvivo 10.0 software and transcripts were subjected to blind coding and a review by the primary author. After discussion with the e authors, categories were developed from the analysis with the view of finding integration between these categories which resulted in the identification of themes and their relationships with each other. Using this grounded theory approach and correlation of analysis allowed the authors to build theoretical frameworks from the data rather than be guided by existing models or variables.

Discussion

Demographics

The participants in the individual interviews were eight females and four males all from Year 10. Of the 42 mentees in the focus groups, 60% were males, and majority of the participants were in Year 11. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics categorised into gender and year groups for the focus groups.

Table 1 Focus Group Demographic Profile

Focus Group #	Males	Females	Year Groups
Group 1 (n=8)	6	2	Year 10
Group 2 (n=8)	5	3	Year 11
Group 3 (n=8)	4	4	Year 11
Group 4 (n=10)	6	4	Year 10
Group 5 (n=8)	4	4	Year 11

Students' Identification with Universities

University outreach programs are well-established as a key method of raising aspirations and awareness about higher education. University led programs commonly engage with secondary schools in order to raise interest in particular fields, provide information about university courses, financial resources, student services, and career advice, particularly through one-off events, school visits by university staff and students, mentoring, and on campus tasters held at the university (Gale et al., 2010; Naylor et al., 2013). For the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) mentees, the program increased their knowledge and provided them with information on how to access higher education. Qualitative comments from focus groups included:

- *It made me feel part of university already and provided me good tips about support available for students at university.*
- *I have a clear idea how to study and prepare for enter a university.*
- *I've now done more search about uni life. I have been doing my maths homework and improved a little.*
- *It helped me realise I am now part of university too even though I am in high school.*

Involvement and interaction with faculty and staff members at university allowed mentors to feel better about themselves as they felt part of the institution, supporting the findings of Goodlad (1998) study. For mentors the program was consistent with their expectations of a university mentoring program which created a conducive environment of mutual values being shared by both parties. This was supported by the discussion in the focus groups with mentors. Comments included:

- *Seeing mentees more confident about what they are doing and their future career goals.*
- *Helping others to achieve their goals. Helping myself to gain better communication skills.*
- *Has given me a broader understanding of students within a refugee background and has provided me with the ability to help those who truly deserve it.*
- *Helping out those in need and encouraging them to be their best and to create goals and always strive to achieve them.*

This finding makes a theoretical contribution towards the concept of “consumer-organisation identification” (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) in the higher education context and has implications for universities. Bhattacharya & Sen (2004 pg 64) defines social identity as,

“that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership in a social group(s) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”. Social identification might therefore be interpreted as an individual’s perception of belongingness and sense of oneness with a group.

Consumer-organisation identification may be regarded as a type of social identification that occurs when a customer perceives a sense of belonging and oneness with an organization. In this context, the authors highlight a “student-university identification” process whereby potential future students (mentees) have begun to associate themselves with the university. In the interviews one of the mentees commented:

I saw the university students come to my school. I was surprised to see them. They looked like me (sic) age and were here to talk to me about university. I didn’t hear about Macquarie University before but now I feel I am a very special part on the university. I came on a campus visit and felt I knew this place. I belong here.

This finding supports the claims of Einwiller et al. (2006) that individuals can identify with organisations in the absence of formal membership.

Sense of Purpose and Belonging

Focus group data from mentees highlighted the program increased their academic skills, interest in higher education, sense of direction and purpose about their future. Eccles (1983) identified academic self-efficacy (beliefs in one’s ability to accomplish one’s goals) as a key feature of mentoring. This was illustrated in the following quotes:

- *The program has made me research and work way harder to reach my goal. It has also made me finish my assignments rather than leaving it to the last second.*
- *The program has really helped me a lot in my time management, I have learnt that managing time and studying more is really important to achieve my goals.*
- *Makes me look at things in a more positive view. Very inspirational.*
- *I want to be a civil engineer when I grow up and I know I can do this in future.*

Feedback suggests that the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program is having direct impacts on mentees academic results, especially in time management and goal setting. Mentees’ feedback suggests they were doing better at school:

- *I am more organised and am getting better at setting goals. I have started to study more and my time management has been better before exams.*
- *The program has made me think a lot about what I want to become. It has also taught me all about goal settings and it has helped improve my time management. The program has encouraged me to try hard and be who I want to be.*

In the interviews one of the mentees also commented:

I wasn’t sure where my life was headed. What I wanted to do in the next 10 years. Talking to the mentors has given me a direction what I can do to achieve my dreams. I have a passion in medicine. But I didn’t think I was good enough to be a good doctor. I didn’t know what to study to become a doctor. My mentor discussed about time management and goal setting. I have seen an improvement in my school work and I feel confident my dream of becoming a doctor can become true.

Mentors also indicated that having shared values and interaction with faculty staff members made them aware of their purpose in life, that university increased their academic skills, and their positive perception about the value of higher education and overall provided a sense of satisfaction. Peer mentor and peer assisted study programs, in which later-year students mentor earlier year students or run study groups, are well-established, and effective in building a student community of practice, improving achievement, and reducing attrition. Best practice includes training and support for mentors, which enhances their personal development and employability as illustrated by the following quotes from the mentors:

- *It gives me an opportunity to give back to the community and in return my mentees provide me with new perspectives.*
- *Seeing the value the mentee gets from their participation, formal recognition of participation in the program useful for job applications, testing my own communication and planning skills.*
- *Giving back and broadening my horizons.*

The process of going to university for mentees and mentors is not a simple, linear transition but is a fragmented process that requires support from all stakeholders. For both mentor and mentees this process is made smoother by understanding the new university environment and making them feel part of that environment. This underpins students overall engagement with higher education.

Positive Intentions towards Higher Education

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described an ecological transition, in which students experience challenges as they are separated from most high school friends and former school life, and have to adapt to a new environment at universities. For mentees who are not sure of life after high school, university offers them a place where they can belong, something they can be a part of, and this increases their desire to seek higher education in that institution. This was illustrated by the following quotes in the focus groups:

- *When I was young I was kind of scared to go to university. But when I learnt more about the university I feel excited about going to university and I think its really fun.*
- *Meeting the mentors is an amazing chance for us to express how/what we want to do in future. We got really good advice. I want to finish Year 12 and go to university.*
- *I wasn't as confident as before about my future or where I wanted to go, but now I'm more confident and into what could lead me there. I feel positive about higher education now. I am no longer scared. It's a great feeling.*
- *Learned that there are more than one path to achieving my goal. Learned about different courses and how we can do them. More clear view of my future and what I need to do to achieve it.*

Mentees reflected on the many ways in which participation in this project has increased their awareness of higher education and career pathways, including thinking about new career options as result of meeting new people through their mentor.

- *I am now seeking lots of options for my career. I didn't realise there were other fields of study I could do too.*
- *I am now very positive about my future and my career. Life has become more meaningful as I now have a goal.*

- *The program has as really made me research and work way harder to reach my dream.*
- *It gave me insights of career choices and a view of university life.*

Mentees noted that the program had positive impacts on developing their academic skills and on their understanding of the purpose of higher education and its importance for some career paths. Through targeted activities, students gained an understanding of admission criteria and deadlines, the types of university assessments, and the different courses provided at the university. It is also evident through feedback on the program that mentees have increased confidence and feel more positive about their future. Mentees reflected on this change, and the impact that this is having on academic results and engagement, as well as on increasing leadership and interaction skills. When asked about their experience in the program mentees responded:

- *I can talk more now in class and I feel confident putting my hand up in class and not getting worried the answer might be wrong.*
- *Being part of the program has helped me in my communication skills and now I am my class captain. It was a huge achievement for me because it made my parents very proud.*
- *I have made more friends in school now as I am no longer scared about my future. I now know there are many pathways to university.*

Motivation has increased for mentees towards both higher education and high school. Many mentees reported that they are now trying harder at school because they see where it can take them in the future. Mentees said that they are “focusing now more on my studying” and that they “have to try hard every day to go into uni. It is very good place for my future career.” Mentees reflected on the value of their mentor, “I liked our perfect mentor and I liked the way I got help and I feel much more confident now” and “[I] am looking forward meeting these two wonderful girls next year if I do this or if it runs.” The role of university mentors in the mentoring program has been significant in raising aspirations of mentees towards higher education.

For the mentors, the mentoring program created a sense of belonging to the university. Satisfaction is important in predicting student intent to withdraw from the university. Mentors reported feeling “a sense of satisfaction” that they are contributing towards the community and “are part of something bigger”. The mentoring program is thus deemed to be an important, useful and valuable aspect for university and overall community, which the mentors are “proud” to be part of. Both mentors and mentees found value in the program. This was illustrated by the following quotes in the focus groups:

- *When I was young I was kind of scared to go to university. But when I learnt more about the university I feel excited about going to university and I think its really fun (Mentee).*
- *Keeps me grounded, and provides great experience out of my own comfort zone, makes me so grateful for the blessings I have been given (Mentor).*
- *It's a great chance to help others at a critical point in their lives where they are thinking about what they want to do when they leave school (Mentor).*

- *Because I use to think it is impossible to make it because I'm from a different background however I was surprised when I seen a lot of mentors from different backgrounds (Mentee).*

Pitkethly & Prosser (2001, p.196) wrote that “successful programs need to be university-wide and focused on students’ social and academic wellbeing”. Such findings offer universities validation for the strategy of supporting current and future students. Table 1 provides an overview of the responses from focus groups and diary analysis discussed in above section.

Table 1 Themes Related to the benefits of the Mentoring Program for University Mentors and High School Mentees (S = strong; M=medium and W= weak)

Theme	Mentors	Mentees
Mentoring program increased confidence	M	S
Mentoring program increased motivation	S	M
Being part of mentoring program made me feel empowered	S	M
Mentoring program helped me gain knowledge	W	S
Mentoring program helped provide access to university	W	S
Mentoring program helped increase interactions with staff at universities	S	W
Values are now aligned to university values	S	W
I know what to do in future	S	S
Mentoring program has helped me improve my academic skills	M	S
I understand now the importance of studying	M	M
Mentoring program has increased satisfaction with university	S	M
Mentoring program has given me a sense of belonging	S	S
I am more engaged with higher education now	S	S
I would like to continue with higher education	S	S

Mentors were given a diary to record their weekly observations and reflections as the mentoring sessions progressed. A key feature that emerged from the diary analysis was reflections of how the mentoring program helped mentors progress at university as shown below. Aliases have been used in the below extracts from diary analysis:

Sarah's Diary: We did the goal setting section today and I made my own list too that I shared with my mentee. I want to finish my degree and apply for post graduate certificate. The aspirations my mentee has inspires me to dream higher too.

Oliver's Diary: Today I realised my communication skills are improving because of this mentoring program. I used to struggle before in my group work at university because I am an international student and I couldn't make my points clear to my group members. Talking to these school students weekly, I have learnt to express myself more clearly and in simple language.

Wong's Diary: When my mentee asked me how I manage my time I couldn't answer her. I am very bad in time management. I decided I will work on it, make a priority list and meet my deadlines. Next session we shared our time management ideas. I feel I am a good mentor now but I am getting to be a better student.

This highlights two key results: first, that engagement of mentors in outreach mentoring fosters a sense of belonging and that mentors should be seen as co-producers in creating the overall university experience; and secondly that this research contributes to the existing literature on peer mentoring by incorporating relationship marketing elements of trust and loyalty. The authors suggest universities should focus on the development of higher education services which meet and potentially exceed students' expectations, and which provide students with an enriching educational experience. A community spirit within the university is critical in shaping a student's journey at university.

Conclusion and Further Research Opportunities

The LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program helps develop sustained and meaningful interactions between university students and high school students from refugee backgrounds. A heightened concept of a community spirit within the university will help attract new students. The evidence indicates that the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee Mentoring) program provides mechanisms to provide sustained, goal-directed support to students for higher education. The use of university student mentors is a key factor that is influencing outcomes for high school mentees. Mentees are able to form a relationship with their mentor who can provide advice based on their own experiences. This helps to change preconceived ideas that students may have about the type of students who go to university. Many of the mentors are from refugee backgrounds, or have parents from refugee backgrounds, and they act as role models so that mentees can see that university is for people like them and are inspired to go to university themselves. The program is also flexible and responsive to student needs. This means that mentors can modify the delivery of the program to maximise outcomes for mentees. However, the research is not without limitation, relying on a relatively small sample obtained through convenience sampling strategy. Future research could focus on a longitudinal approach to assess the impact of the program on university student's academic skills and impact on grades.

Gaining new knowledge is empowering and the knowledge exchange between mentor and mentee has been a fundamental process within the program, an outcome of which has been that the mentees have become better equipped to make informed decisions about their educational pathways. More importantly, the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring (Refugee

Mentoring) contributes to the development of educational and social capital for students to develop confidence, resilience and agency.

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