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# Lessons Learned from Four Years of Peer Mentoring in a Tiered Group Program within Education

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## Abstract

*Peer mentoring programs are a key means of developing student belonging and engagement, facilitating transition to university, improving retention and academic success. Yet the benefits of peer mentoring can be difficult to measure and quantify. In this paper we present results of an evaluation of a 6-week peer mentoring program with first-year education students, after the first 4 years of operation. Analysis of quantitative data, from pre- and post-mentoring questionnaires, found moderate positive correlations between mentees' expectations and actual experience of coming to university with regard to finding satisfying friends ( $r = .462$ ,  $p < .001$ ), having a satisfactory academic experience ( $r = .400$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and worry about not belonging ( $r = .436$ ,  $p < .001$ ). After participating in the program, mentees reported significantly less stress about coming to university ( $p < .001$ ) and less worry about not belonging ( $p < .001$ ), but some reduction in their expectations of having a satisfactory academic experience ( $p < .05$ ), seeing academics as genuinely interested in teaching ( $p < .05$ ), and their studies preparing them well for work ( $p < .05$ ). Analysis of qualitative feedback identified five key themes concerning what mentees liked about the program and included the opportunity to ask questions, talk and discuss their experience; to meet others and make friends; to seek advice, help and guidance; the value of mentors; and how to survive at university. Overall, the benefits of increased belonging and engagement were clearly demonstrated, but it may take longer for academic benefits to be realised.*

*Keywords: students, university students, peer mentoring, retention*

## Introduction

Peer mentoring programs (PMPs) have demonstrated potential to facilitate the transition to university and improve retention and student persistence through enhancing student satisfaction, encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness, enhancing skill development, and providing role models (Green, 2008; Hansford, Tennent, & Ehrich, 2003; Nora & Crisp, 2008; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Peer mentoring may also contribute to decreasing levels of stress and anxiety amongst students (Gerdes & Malinckrodt, 1994) and to improving academic performance (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). The inherent benefits of PMPs also include their low cost, their potential to complement existing transition and retention strategies, and their benefits to both mentors and mentees (Hansford et al., 2003; Heirdsfield, Walker & Walsh, 2008; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008).

The recent release of the report and recommendations from the *What Works? Student Retention and Success program* (Thomas, 2012a), which examined the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions to improve retention and included seven separate research projects, one of which involved peer mentoring, provides some timely insights which are useful for evaluating transition initiatives such as the PMP described here. One of the key findings of this ambitious project, which involved 22 Higher Education institutions in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, was that “developing a sense of belonging” in students “is critical to both retention and academic success” (Thomas, 2012b, p. 1).

In this paper we present findings from the evaluation of the first 4 years of operation of a PMP, in the interest of sharing the lessons we have learned over this period. We begin with a definition of peer mentoring and a brief overview of the diverse range of PMPs within Australian universities, including within Education programs, to give an idea of the wide scope of peer mentoring available.

## **What is peer mentoring?**

For the purpose of this paper, the role of peer mentors is generally to support students through drawing on their own experience as students, and to act as role models. Peer mentoring encourages mentees to participate in co-curricular activities, and can be run in a group format, or one to one. A peer mentor in an undergraduate program is usually a student who has progressed to a more advanced year level, often in the same degree program. Peer mentoring should be differentiated from academic advising which is generally undertaken by professional staff such as learning advisors within a university, or peer-assisted learning programs such as the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), where trained student leaders are employed within universities to strengthen academic skills and mastery.

PMPs can be part of a complementary orientation and transition package designed to improve the student experience of coming to university and to facilitate student engagement. Complementary interventions might include, for example, the provision of First Year Advisors (FYA) as a first point of contact for student queries, or the use of “Common Time” in core first-year classes to address foundation components of academic life, for example, unpacking the first assignment question; however, discussion of these interventions is beyond the scope of the present paper.

There are many different models of peer mentoring within the Australian tertiary sector. They can be generic, targeting all students, most frequently first-year students, or selective, targeting identified student cohorts, for example, international students. Tiered mentoring models where peer mentors are supported by academic or professional staff are common. PMPs are variously coordinated by academic or professional staff such as Counsellors. Evaluation is typically qualitative via self-report questionnaires or satisfaction surveys. Payment of mentors is variable, with some being paid small honorariums, or in kind, for example, book vouchers; some mentors receive recognition through certificates or credit towards course requirements such as community service or service learning hours; while others are well paid.

Increasingly, PMPs are being offered within academic schools or faculties to enhance student engagement and strengthen students’ identification with their program and profession, or to address problems with retention. For example, there has been an increase in mentoring in nursing over recent years, to encourage self-care in what is a “caring” profession (Glass & Walter, 2000). Within our own university a PMP has been offered to first-year students in psychology as part of strengthening students’ identification with the profession as well as a transition initiative. Similarly, peer mentoring in education programs has become common practice (Kent, Feldman, & Hayes, 2007) and can be seen as part of the ethos of educating educators, as teaching and helping others will comprise their role once qualified.

A longitudinal study of a peer mentoring scheme within the School of Early Childhood (Education) at the Queensland University of Technology which initially targeted first-year students identified as at risk of attrition, and subsequently expanded to include all first-year students (Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008), reported significant social and academic benefits from participation in peer mentoring and benefits for both mentors and mentees, over the 3-year period that the program was evaluated. The researchers explored the mentees’ and mentors’ experiences using qualitative methods. In a related study (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008), an exploration of mentors’ experiences found that mentoring “works both ways” and was personally and professionally rewarding for mentors, despite also having some frustrating aspects.

## **Griffith University peer mentoring program with education students**

A tiered group PMP was developed and offered to first-year students within the School of Education and Professional Studies at Mt Gravatt campus of Griffith University from 2006 onwards. Griffith University is a large metropolitan university with over 43,000 students spread over five campuses. The diversity of the student demographic, including a large number of first in family and mature age students within this cohort, means that it is vital that first-year students are assisted in the transition to university and that they are offered the social and academic support to strengthen academic success.

## **Background to the program**

This program developed from the idea of extending and amalgamating two existing orientation and transition initiatives. One of these involved a Mentoring Program offered to first-year students in Education at Mt Gravatt campus during Orientation week, which was conducted by mentors (usually 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year students) taking a group of students from the same program (e.g., primary or secondary education) to provide an opportunity for incoming students to draw on the experience of their more senior “peers”. This program was coordinated by one of the co-authors of this paper. Focus groups with students and mentors consistently recommended extending the program beyond a one-off session.

The second initiative involved weekly groups for first-year students at Mt Gravatt campus offered by a Counsellor in Student Services. These groups, entitled *Surviving and Succeeding at University* and later, *First Year Success*, were offered to first-year students from Weeks 1 to 6 of Semester 1 and focused on supporting transition, including setting realistic academic goals, and developing confidence in their academic and organizational abilities. Just as importantly, the groups aimed at making students feel valued and supported by the university and facilitating the development of friendships with other students. While these groups were beneficial to students who attended, the advantage of offering peer mentoring groups within an academic school, rather than Counsellor-led groups through Student Services, was that it would increase access and acceptability to students, since it would mainstream the service and avoid the stigma often associated with a request for additional help.

Hence a decision was made to pool resources and to pilot a Peer Mentoring Program for First Year Students in Education that recruited students at Orientation and ran for a 6-week period in Semester 1, 2006. The program was coordinated by two Counsellors and the Coordinator of the mentoring program within Education. A small Orientation and Transition grant was obtained to partially fund the pilot with the balance being funded by the School of Education and Professional Studies.

## **Description of the program**

The PMP runs for 6 weeks for an hour per week from Weeks 1-6 in Semester 1 of first year and follows on from the one-off mentoring session offered to all first-year education students in Orientation. First-year education students are given the option of enrolling in the ongoing PMP at the start of semester and allocated to a mentor. Mentors (in most cases Orientation week mentors) are recruited and trained to deliver ongoing peer mentoring groups. Counsellors, FYA and the PMP Coordinator provide ongoing support to mentors through a tiered mentoring model. The development, implementation and evaluation of the PMP were influenced by experience gained from existing transition programs within the university including PMPs that had already been piloted and evaluated within the School of Human Services (Fowler, 2004) and the School of Applied Psychology (Muckert, 2002). Mentors are paid a small honorarium in the form of a book voucher and given a certificate upon completion of the program. In recent years the contribution of mentors has been recognized by the university at leadership events hosted by Mentoring@Griffith.

## **Recruitment**

Mentors were recruited by the Coordinator through recommendations from academic staff, emails to prospective mentors, and as the program progressed, from previous mentees asking to be involved as mentors. Recruitment of mentees occurred in several ways: through an application form sent out to first-year students as part of their enrolment pack; promotion by mentors at the one-off peer mentor session offered in Orientation; or promotion by Program Convenors and FYA in both Orientation and at first-year lectures. The application form briefly described the program and asked students to provide their student number, basic demographic data and contact details, as well as degree program to facilitate matching with mentors by program.

## **Training of mentors**

Mentors were given a 2-hour training session offered in Orientation, conducted by the Counsellors and the PMP Coordinator. FYA, and in some years Program Convenors, attended these sessions and

had input into the training. Training included information on the role of mentors, setting up and maintaining a group, conduct of mentoring sessions, managing boundaries, identifying students “at risk” and referral to other university support services. Mentors were given a handbook that contained resource material used as part of the training, contact details of key university support services and staff and copies of all the documentation relevant to the PMP. Where possible, students who had been involved as mentors in previous years shared their experience with incoming mentors as part of the training and in this way the program evolved and was refined over the years as a result of learning through shared experience. While 2 hours may seem short to undertake training of this sort, it was felt that education students already receive training as part of their degree program that prepares them for taking on the role of mentoring and therefore that this was sufficient. In addition, most mentors had already received an induction into the role to enable them to provide the one-off mentor session in Orientation.

### **Matching of mentors and mentees**

Since passing on experience is a key aspect of peer mentoring, matching mentors and mentees as closely as possible is highly desirable; however, in practice this is much more difficult to achieve. Matching by degree program and time--that is, availability to meet--was therefore the main criterion we used to match mentors with mentees. After the pilot year, we also decided to have two mentors per group and to have larger groups of 10 to 12 mentees to allow for the expected attrition within a 6-week transition program. Having paired mentors allowed for greater diversity in terms of age, experience and personality. However, mentors still had to be sensitive to differences in experience between mature age students and school leavers and foster a spirit of collaboration rather than competition between these two groups. Having mature age mentors paired with mentors who had come to university as school leavers assisted this. Pairing of mentors also meant that the workload could be shared and if one was absent the other could still conduct the session.

### **Evaluation**

The PMP was evaluated on an ongoing basis throughout the 6-week program as well as upon completion. Mentors were asked to submit weekly email reports to the Coordinator on the progress of their group, using a pro forma which sought information about attendance, topics covered in the session, any concerns about particular students and any difficulties in the conduct of the group. Mentors were also required to attend two review meetings, in Week 3 and Week 7, to report on the progress of their group and to review the program as a whole once the 6 weeks was completed. These meetings were conducted by the Coordinator and Counsellors and attended by FYA, and in some years, Program Convenors as well. Through hearing how other mentors conducted their groups and overcame difficulties such as finding a suitable venue or time to meet, enticing first-year students to an 8.00am peer mentoring session, or dealing with difficult or disruptive students, proved to be great learning experiences for everyone. Over time, knowledge gained could be passed on to new mentors at subsequent training sessions and the program improved in response to the lessons learned each year.

Formal evaluation of the PMP was undertaken using pre- and post-mentoring questionnaires that mentees were asked to complete, either as hard copies or from 2009 also available online. These questionnaires were adapted from the Institutional Integration Scales developed by Terenzini and Pascarella (1980). The questionnaires, consisting of 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 5 = *Strongly agree*), compared mentees' expectations of coming to university with their actual experience after the first 6 weeks. Expectations included aspirations concerning academic as well as personal and social experience. Examples of questions included in pre-mentoring questionnaires were, “I expect that I will be satisfied with my academic experience at Griffith University”; “I intend to stay at university until I complete my Program”; “I expect to feel stressed about university life”; “I expect that my interpersonal relationships with other students will have a positive influence on my intellectual growth and interest in ideas”. Questions included in post-mentoring questionnaires were identical except for minor changes of wording in some questions, for example, “I am satisfied with my academic experience at Griffith University”. Post-mentoring questionnaires included two additional items asking mentees to rate their satisfaction with the PMP

and how much they felt their mentors were similar to them in outlook, ideas and values. Post-mentoring questionnaires also sought qualitative feedback through four open-ended questions concerning what mentees liked about the program, anything they disliked or thought could be improved, what they thought they had gained from the program and whether they would recommend it to other students.

### **Description of sample**

The sample consisted of 200 first-year education students who participated in the PMP over the first 4 years of operation and provided demographic information on the application form or questionnaires. This comprised approximately 25% of enrolments each year. The majority of mentees were female (71.5%), and from the following age categories: school leavers (42.7%), young adults aged 19-21 years (22.3%) or mature age students, that is, 22 years or older (35%). Almost half of mentees (48.6%) were enrolled in primary education programs that included special education, while 36% comprised secondary education students and the remainder were enrolled in technology education (20%) or applied theatre (13%).

### **What have we learned?**

There were several operational changes made to the program in the first few years, such as having paired mentors and larger groups, as a result of learning from experience and through evaluation in review meetings and feedback from post-mentoring questionnaires. The system of tiered mentoring was streamlined so that mentors' weekly email reports were directed solely to the Coordinator of the program rather than to the Coordinator as well as other staff (i.e., Counsellors or FYA) designated to support them. This was done to reduce the workload on other staff, particularly FYA, and to centralise data-gathering and collection of feedback to avoid confusion and to make it more manageable. Having a single person receiving these reports also made it easier for common or systemic problems to be identified and addressed quickly. For example, in one year several groups reported difficulties with a particular tutor. The Coordinator passed on this feedback to the Course Convenor and there was a quick resolution of this difficulty.

Recruitment of mentees was improved by asking Program and Course Convenors to promote the PMP in Orientation, and at core first-year lectures in the first week or two of semester. In addition, FYA invited mentors into Common Time sessions at the start of semester to talk about the PMP and this resulted in further recruitment. Maintaining morale and attendance was enhanced by mentors' sending encouraging texts to mentees at the end of Week 1 to congratulate them on having survived the first week. Some mentors were proactive in setting goals and tasks for the group in response to identified concerns and conducted PMP sessions in the library, for example, to demonstrate the use of a reference tool, BlackBoard and so on.

Approximately 50% ( $n=102$ ) of the sample completed the four open-ended questions on the post-mentoring questionnaires that sought feedback about mentees' experience of the program. An analysis of this qualitative feedback found five key themes concerning what mentees liked about the program. These were the opportunity to ask questions, talk and discuss their experience; to meet others and make friends; to seek advice, help and guidance; the value of mentors; and how to survive at university. Interestingly the first three themes were each raised with equal frequency by 25% of mentees. Examples of the ask/talk/discuss theme included: *You could ask your Mentor and there was no such thing as a 'stupid question'*; *A chance to talk to people who had already gone through their first year*. Examples of the meet others/make friends theme included: *I loved meeting like-minded mature age students*; *Just knowing everyone is experiencing similar problems is a relief*. Examples of the advice/help/guidance theme included: *Made it a lot easier for me to understand what is expected of me*; *getting help with interpreting assessment*. An example on the theme of the value of mentors reported by 15% of mentees was: *Tips on how to cope with workload and time management*; and on the theme of surviving university reported by 11% of mentees was: *It helped me to settle in and it was good to have someone to talk to about things I didn't understand*.

Over the first 4 years of evaluation of the PMP, feedback from mentees on post-mentoring questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive with only a few suggestions made to improve it, most

notably related to extending the program to include more sessions or to run longer than 6 weeks. Ninety-six per cent of mentees ( $n = 99$ ) in this timeframe who responded on post-mentoring questionnaires said they would recommend the program to other first-year students. In terms of what was gained from participation in the PMP, mentees identified the following benefits listed in order of frequency of responses: confidence/motivation (17%), more understanding of university life (15%), friends/networks/ongoing relationships (15%), not alone/support/help (12%), mentoring very helpful (11%), helped with study/academic program (10%), helped with handling stress/coping with university (10%). Hence it would appear that the benefits of participation in the PMP were more personal and social rather than academic, yet strongly focused on increasing mentees' sense of belonging within the university. Some examples of what mentees felt they gained included: *A couple of people I knew dropped out as they found it overwhelming whereas I had the confidence (knowledge) to stick to it; I have gained an understanding of where my course is headed and it provided me with an opportunity to get to know older students as well as those in my course; Confidence and a sense that I belong here – it's not so scary.*

Approximately 40% ( $n=76-77$ ) of the sample (after excluding missing data) completed both pre- and post-mentoring questionnaires, which enabled mentees' expectations to be tracked and compared with their actual experience of coming to university, after completion of the 6-week program. Using Pearson's correlations, moderate positive correlations were found between pre- and post-mentoring responses regarding finding satisfying friends ( $r = .462, p < .001$ ), having a satisfactory academic experience ( $r = .400, p < .001$ ) and worry about not belonging ( $r = .436, p < .001$ ) (see Table 1). This suggests that mentees' expectations in these three areas matched their experience moderately closely.

Table 1. Pearson's Correlations of Expected and Actual Experiences at University.

Expected versus actual	N	r	p (2-tailed)
Satisfying friends	77	.462**	<.001
Satisfying academic experience	76	.400**	<.001
Relationships with other students positively influence intellectual growth and interest in ideas	77	.354**	.002
Lecturers and tutors genuinely interested in teaching	77	.264*	.020
Intend to stay and complete program	76	.052	.654
Able to do things as well as others	77	.266*	.019
Satisfied with program of study	76	.227*	.049
Feel stressed about uni life	77	.263*	.021
Worry about not belonging	76	.436**	<.001
Studies will prepare me well for work	77	.124	.281

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Interestingly, we found that mentees who reported higher similarity with their mentors in terms of outlook, ideas and values at the end of the PMP, were also more likely to report feeling good about their peer mentoring experience ( $n = 102, r = 0.63, p < 0.01$ ), being more satisfied with friendships at university ( $n = 102, r = 0.3, p < 0.01$ ), being more positively influenced in their intellectual growth and interest in ideas by these relationships ( $n = 102, r = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ), feeling that their lecturers and tutors were more genuinely interested in teaching ( $n = 102, r = 0.28, p < 0.01$ ) and that their studies were preparing them well for work ( $n = 102, r = 0.4, p < 0.01$ ). These findings suggest that careful matching of mentors and mentees to ensure there is similarity between them may be very beneficial to achieving good outcomes in mentoring. This finding is consistent with other studies that have also found matching mentees with mentors who are similar to them improves outcomes (Fowler, 2004).

Paired sample t tests comparing mean scores on pre- and post-questionnaires across the 10 items indicated that after participation in the PMP, mentees were significantly less stressed about university ( $p < .001$ ) and less worried about not belonging ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 2). However, they reported small

but statistically significant reductions in their expectations of having a satisfactory academic experience ( $p < .05$ ), seeing academics as genuinely interested in teaching ( $p < .05$ ), and studies preparing them well for work ( $p < .05$ ). These findings suggest that a PMP of this duration at the commencement of university may have more impact on alleviating the initial anxieties of incoming students and increasing belonging, and less impact on expectations about academic success, which may take longer to realise. It is worth noting that 6 weeks into first semester, many students would not have received results from initial assessments and therefore would have no objective idea of how they are performing academically. Hence it may be realistic for mentees to have some uncertainty about their capacity to complete their program at this stage in the semester.

*Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of Reported Ratings of Students' Expectations about University Life before and after Attending the PMP on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5.*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Pre Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Post Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Amount Changed</i>
Feel stressed about uni life	77	4.23 (0.86)	3.62 (1.04)	0.61***
Worry about not belonging	76	2.84 (1.11)	2.37 (1.00)	0.47***
Satisfying academic experience	76	4.30 (0.63)	4.01 (0.72)	0.29*
Lecturers and tutors genuinely interested in teaching	77	4.40 (0.73)	4.10 (0.74)	0.30*
Studies will prepare me well for work	77	4.45 (0.70)	4.10 (0.66)	0.35*
Satisfying friends	77	4.29 (0.70)	4.30 (0.74)	-0.01
Able to do things as well as others	77	3.91 (0.83)	4.10 (0.70)	-0.20
Satisfied with program of study	76	4.16 (0.71)	4.05 (0.69)	0.11
Relationships with other students positively influence intellectual growth and interest in ideas	77	4.38 (0.73)	4.21 (0.73)	0.17
Intend to stay and complete program	76	4.70 (0.67)	4.68 (0.66)	0.01

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*  $p < .05$

## Discussion

The personal and social benefits of peer mentoring, including increased sense of belonging, reduced stress associated with coming to university and improved social engagement, have been clearly demonstrated, as evidenced by our findings. The academic benefits of peer mentoring, including improving academic engagement and success, may take longer to emerge, based on the findings we have reported in comparing mentees' expectations and experience of coming to university. However it would be unrealistic and premature to expect a single intervention, limited to a 6-week program at the start of first semester, to achieve demonstrable academic outcomes at this point in the student life cycle. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from mentees, captured in the qualitative analysis of the program, speaks volumes in terms of the degree to which the PMP helped mentees develop knowledge and confidence to feel that they have the capacity to succeed at university. Feeling that they belonged at university was critical to this development and was clearly demonstrated in our analysis of quantitative data concerning their expectations on entry and experience after participation in the PMP. The fact that mentees also reported significant reduction in stress associated with being at university was pleasing, as it undoubtedly contributed to mentees' sense of satisfaction with their university experience and self-efficacy, which we expect should provide a solid foundation for further development and academic success in future.

Hence it would seem that the PMP we have described here has demonstrated success in one of the key areas identified in *What works? Student Retention and Success: Summary Report* (Thomas, 2012b), namely, enhancing mentees' sense of belonging. The results outlined in that report are heralded as a "radical new message" for institutions seeking to improve retention, especially given the increasingly diverse demographic of students coming into higher education institutions as a result of widening participation. Further, "finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution ... is the necessary starting point for academic success" (Thomas, 2012b, p. 1). Yet are these really radical new insights, or are they what we know of the student experience already? We would suggest, as evidenced in the Higher Education sector, that many academics, especially those who work at the coalface of teaching and learning and are involved with inducting



first-year students, as well as professional staff – Counsellors, learning advisors and other support staff – have known for some time that improving student engagement improves the student experience and in turn, retention. Perhaps it is as a result of their close involvement with students who are struggling personally, socially and academically as part of their day to day work, that they have been at the forefront of developing and participating in orientation and transition interventions, such as PMPs, for many years.

As with all programs, there have been many challenges in implementing the PMP and limitations as a result. One of the main challenges was attrition of mentees, both between applying to join and taking up the PMP, and progressively across the 6-week duration of the program. It is difficult to know exactly how many mentees were lost to the PMP through attrition, as failure to take up or continue the program may have been due to mentees' withdrawing from university altogether in some cases, and we did not have the resources to investigate this. It was a great source of frustration for mentors and for us, as coordinators of the program, as it meant that some mentors did not have the satisfaction of being allocated mentees, or of conducting a cohesive and viable group. Timetabling issues were another challenge, which meant that if mentees could not attend at the agreed time, they had to be reallocated to another mentor and this disrupted or delayed their participation into the program, or in some cases may have resulted in their withdrawal. Practical problems associated with having to train mentors, match mentors to mentees, mentors having to contact mentees to set up the first peer mentoring meeting at an agreed time, all within the space of Orientation week so that the program could be up and running by Week 1 or Week 2 at the latest, put a great deal of pressure on the Coordinator and mentors. Some, if not all, of these challenges and resultant limitations could be overcome if, as recommended by Thomas (2012b), the PMP was mainstreamed, that is, if it was offered to all first-year students with an "opt out" rather than an "opt in" method of recruitment. Better integration with other faculty transition initiatives, a commitment to ongoing funding, and greater involvement of senior academic staff would further strengthen this program and may improve the take up by first-year students. Practical problems like timetabling could also be overcome if peer mentoring in first semester was seen as a core transition initiative and scheduled into first-year timetables around core lectures, as Common Time programs currently are. Integration into Common Time programs could also be achieved beneficially by combining didactic and peer mentoring approaches within the same program. For education students, the extension of peer mentoring to assist students to prepare for practicums in later years could be another way of harnessing the experience of senior students as mentors to enhance student learning, engagement and academic success. This latter suggestion could particularly benefit students from non English speaking backgrounds (NESB), who are being admitted into Education and other professional programs in increasing numbers, and who often struggle to meet the more stringent requirements of practicums.

In this paper we have focused on reporting the benefits of peer mentoring for mentees, but it is clear from our own experience and that of others (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008) that mentors also gain a great deal from the experience. The eagerness with which previously mentored first-year students apply to become mentors in later years, demonstrates both the value mentees place on their own experience and their belief that it was pivotal in enhancing their induction into university life. The increasing recognition given to mentoring and other leadership activities within universities also demonstrates the importance universities attribute to learning from one's peers as well as the benefits of peer mentoring for improving student engagement and academic success.

## **Conclusion**

If governments and universities are going to continue to encourage and facilitate wider participation within the higher education sector, in the interests of enabling more people from diverse backgrounds to gain the benefits of higher education, then it is the responsibility of universities and governments to ensure that these new student cohorts are adequately supported. "Access without support is not opportunity" quotes Thomas (2012b, p. 4) from Tinto. PMPs are a proven means of providing support, and as such, should be an integral part of transition initiatives within universities.

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