Peer mentoring: An effective approach to enhancing first-year student engagement and success

Author

Catherine Ross and Ron Grant, *The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand*

Introduction

Tertiary student success is of strategic importance (Ministry of Education, n.d.), and success in terms of course and qualification completion is a key requirement of the Government's funding regime. Yet many students do not complete their courses and qualifications successfully. Currently, around 25 percent of New Zealand tertiary students do not complete their qualifications (Scott, 2009) and in a distance learning environment this figure is often higher (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010; Smith, Wellington, Cossham, et al., 2011). High non-completion rates provide strong incentives for tertiary education organisations (TEOs) to do as much as possible to promote student success. Targeted support programmes can achieve this end (Grant, Olivier, Rawlings & Ross, 2011).

In this paper we describe one such targeted support programme – a peer mentoring programme – and discuss how it impacts positively on the engagement and success of first-year students studying at a distance.

Background: Why provide a peer mentoring programme?

A sense of isolation, coupled with a weak sense of connection to the learning community, means that some students struggle to maintain their motivation and engagement in learning when studying at a distance (Ross, 2009). Furthermore, studying can be just one of a variety of activities students are involved in. Most Open Polytechnic students are in full- or part-time employment, which means they have less time to devote to their studies. In 2011, 96 percent of Open Polytechnic students were studying part-time and 70 percent were in the workforce (Open Polytechnic Annual Report, 2011).

Tertiary student engagement and success is of strategic importance (Ministry of Education, n.d.). While an increased level of success in terms of course and qualification completion is a key requirement of the

Government's funding regime, many students, particularly part-time students, do not complete their qualifications (Scott, 2009). In addition, more first-year students drop out of study than do returning students and so the first-year experience is critical to student success (Earle, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008). Early and appropriate learning support in the first year of study has a positive and lasting effect on student success outcomes (Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008; Earle, 2007; Gibbs, Regan & Simpson, 2007).

Peer mentoring is well established as an effective learning support strategy in tertiary education (Tahau-Hodges, 2010; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Not only do mentoring programmes for first-year students contribute to increased self-esteem, confidence and academic achievement (Dewart, Drees, Hixenbaugh & Thorn, 2006; Potter, & Hampton, 2009), but also students who participate in such programmes report increased feelings of belonging and a successful transition to university (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006). Furthermore, mentoring programmes have been proven to have a positive impact on the engagement and success of distance learners (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010).

In an effort to improve the successful course completion rates, initially of students in selected courses and afterwards of first-year students in all courses, in 2005 the Learning Centre at Open Polytechnic developed a student peer mentoring programme and have subsequently further developed and refined it. It was at the request of the Open Polytechnic Executive in 2010 that the programme began its focus on first-year students; in 2011, 5400 first-year students participated in the programme. The programme's development has been informed by work carried out by Ormond Simpson at the Open University (UK) and it is his model of Proactive Motivational Student Support (Simpson, 2008) in particular that has informed the most recent delivery of the mentoring programme.

Simpson (2008) found that the combination of phone-calls and a strength-based approach, using positive psychology, had a significant positive effect on the successful course completion rates of distance students. He argued that the traditional method of concentrating on weakness was not an effective way of improving student performance and that research suggests people do best when they focus on their strengths. Louis (2009) concurs, and asserts that students who use their strengths more report increased engagement in, and intrinsic motivation for, learning. Furthermore, helping students become aware of their personal strengths boosts their self-confidence and contributes to their development as autonomous learners (Macaskill & Denovan, 2011). One of our Open Polytechnic mentors had this to say about the strengths approach:

> *Listening to students with the objective of finding their strengths and reflecting these back to them makes a difference. Students are often gratified to discover they have made progress despite not getting much actual study done because they've only just put in place the things they need to organise their life around their study. When I reflect this back to them and say that by putting all of these strategies in place they are already showing the signs of being a successful student, I can hear the smile in their voice as they acknowledge that this is progress.*

Peer mentoring: The Open Polytechnic model

The Open Polytechnic peer mentoring model takes the concept of peer mentoring, where experienced students provide guidance and support to less experienced students, and tailors it for a distance learning environment using a strengths-based framework and a 'low tech' approach. The programme offers support to all first-year students via telephone during weekday evenings, when students are most likely to be available to discuss their study. It is a programme of proactive contact with students rather than one which relies on student self-referral. Peer mentor contact occurs at key points in students' progress through their courses and is aimed at providing

timely and appropriate support to enhance learning engagement and encourage persistence. Key points of contact are within two to four weeks of the course start date, mid-course and prior to exams.

The conversation in the first phone-call focuses on getting started, confirming students' goals for study and identifying strengths and how these can be applied to learning. The peer mentors also focus on drawing out students' past successes, and validating and encouraging effort rather than achievement; only then do they talk about uncertainties, fears or lack of skills. Where appropriate, a discussion on preparing for and tackling the first assessment task might be included. Subsequent contacts (up to two) are made to see how students are progressing and, if necessary, give reassurance and encouragement to help keep them 'on track'. Mentors emphasise the positive throughout and are always looking for opportunities to be upbeat and encouraging.
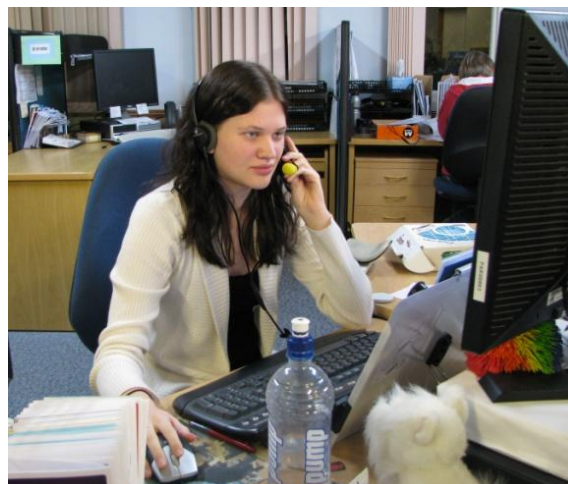
The peer mentors are specifically recruited and are paid for the work they do. They must be current students or recent graduates but do not need to be studying in the same discipline as the students they support. They are chosen for their ability to empathise with diverse students as well as a mature attitude to cultural differences. Mentors receive training in the strengths-based approach and work from a script (Appendix A), which provides a guide for conversation rather than a prescription for it.

In our experience, an effective peer mentor has a successful tertiary background, self-confidence, enthusiasm, cultural awareness, empathy, flexibility, patience and excellent communication skills. In the words of one of the mentors:

> To be a successful peer mentor you must be positive and empathetic. You need to be adaptable to the student on the other end of the telephone, gauge their situation, circumstances and perhaps even their lifestyle in a short space of time, and then be able to direct your mentoring skills in the direction that the student needs it most.

Programme outcomes

The student response to the mentoring programme has been very positive. Students tell us, both during conversations with peer mentors and through solicited feedback, that contact with the mentors is encouraging and motivational; it boosts their self-confidence and helps them to feel less isolated in their study. Students also report that the phone-calls help them to develop a sense of belonging to a learning community, which they say is important for their learning.

An online survey conducted at the end of 2011 gathered feedback from 550 students (10 percent) who participated in the peer mentoring programme during the year. The survey questionnaire contained six items: five Likert-type items, comprising three choices: 'a lot', 'a little', and 'not at all', and one free text item for comments. Combining the responses 'a lot' and 'a little', results revealed that 93 percent of the students found the phone-calls from the peer mentors encouraging and motivational; 87 percent said it helped them to feel like they belonged to a learning community; 83 percent said the phone-calls motivated them to keep going; 67 percent said the mentors gave them confidence to contact their teachers; and 65 percent said the mentors helped them with study skills.

In the free text box students said:

> The phone-calls seem perfect to me as a first-time student. Fantastic support helps keep you motivated, especially the home calls at night when I seem to struggle.

> It was an unexpected surprise when I received my first phone-call. It was brilliant. The people who called were always very easy to talk to and very helpful and supportive. They had a positive and practical outlook. It really made me feel as though I was part of the Open Poly community.

> It was nice to be contacted in person by someone who is interested in making sure that I am feeling okay about my studies and managing to keep up with them. When you're a distance learner it is easy to feel that people on the other end of the computer aren't 'real'. Every time I've been phoned the person calling has sounded genuinely happy for me that I am doing well with my study, and has always asked me if I know what to do/where to go if I need help.

The peer mentoring programme has had a positive impact on successful course completion rates too. During 2007 this programme, which involved approximately 2000 students, delivered a six percent average increase in successful course completion rates. The six percent increase was measured by the percentage of students within the group contacted, and the increase in completion, against a pre-peer mentor contact baseline. There were no other significant initiatives in action at the time across the courses that students in the mentoring programme were studying.

Course completion rates were measured again in 2011. Results revealed a 17 percent higher successful course completion rate of the students who were contacted at least once by the peer mentor team compared to those who were not. However, in 2011 there was no pre-peer mentoring baseline against which to measure results, nor were we comfortable about withdrawing support from a number of first-year students in order to establish a control group. Results, therefore, must be interpreted with caution. The students who were not contacted were those who were on the list to be contacted but who could not be reached despite three attempts, and not a control group.

Open Polytechnic academic staff are supportive of the mentoring programme and recognise its positive contribution to student engagement and success. Staff tell us:

> *A number of students have contacted me as a direct result of being contacted by the peer mentoring team and this has resulted in a good outcome for the student. Many have commented about how welcoming and inclusive it was to receive a phone-call. I particularly like the way mentors focus on motivating and encouraging students with their studies. I know that other members of faculty also appreciate the work the peer mentor team does.*

Finally, the mentors themselves are positive about being mentors. Not only do they feel positive about being able to help and support other students but also about the impact on them personally. They say:

> *My main reason for wanting to do mentoring was to consolidate my own learning. I am studying ECE with the Open Polytechnic, so I really enjoy calling the ECE students. I know that I have helped many students and I have also gained a very practical approach to breaking down assignments for my own study.*

> *The biggest advantage of being a mentor for me personally has been the fact that it's kept me motivated with my own university studies as well. Also knowing that in some way I am making a difference in other students' lives by encouraging them and keeping them motivated has given a sense of job satisfaction as well.*

> *Talking to students from the Open Poly means I'm in contact with a wide range of people from different backgrounds and situations and also a few that I can specifically relate to, such as those studying with young children. It also helps to keep me aware of the very different backgrounds people come from and this is helpful on a more personal level as an everyday reminder.*

Conclusion

The Government has challenged the tertiary education sector to lift educational success and has introduced performance-based funding. Organisations need to ensure that the majority of students succeed in their study, are retained and progress to higher levels of learning. This direction brings challenges for both institutions and staff. However, these challenges can be overcome through the provision of relevant and timely student support programmes. Such programmes contribute positively to improving student success outcomes.

As more TEOs move into distance learning, institutions and their educators can be challenged to meet the student support demands of this environment. In campus-based situations, where students report being time-poor and spend a decreasing amount of time on campus, the support programmes based there can be inaccessible to them. Therefore, a programme which uses an evidence-based model of student support, is not campus-dependent, and relies only on a 'low tech' (telephone) solution has the potential to contribute to student support practices across the tertiary sector. The Open Polytechnic peer mentoring model is cost-effective and can be delivered at scale. The model could be developed quickly and easily by institutions and delivered to students in a timely and appropriate manner to enhance their success; it is easily customised to suit a variety of tertiary education contexts.

References

Boyle, F., Kwon, J., Ross, C., & Simpson, O. (2010). Student-student mentoring for retention and engagement in distance education. *Open Learning, 25*(2), 115-130.

Crosling, G., Thomas, L., & Heagney, M. (2008). Introduction: Student success and retention. In G. Crosling, L. Thomas & M. Heagney (Eds.), *Improving student retention in higher education* (pp. 1-13). Oxford: Routledge.

Dewart, H., Drees, D., Hixenbaugh, P., & Thorn, L. (2006). Engaging first-year students at a metropolitan university: Is electronic mentoring an effective strategy? First year in higher education. Paper presented at the First-year in Higher Education Conference, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus.

Earle, D. (2007). *Te whai i nga taumata atakura: Support Maori achievement in bachelors degrees*. Wellington, New Zealand: Tertiary Sector Performance Analysis and Reporting, Ministry of Education.

Gibbs, G., Regan, P., & Simpson, O. (2007). Improving student retention through evidence-based proactive systems at the Open University. *Journal of Student Retention, 8*(3), 359-376.

Glaser, N., Hall, R., & Halperin, S. (2006). Students Supporting Students: The effects of peer mentoring on transition, belonging and retention amongst first-year university students. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association, 27,* 4-18.

Grant, R., Olivier, G., Rawlings, C., & Ross, C. (2011). *Enhancing the engagement and success of distance students through targeted support programmes.* Lower Hutt, New Zealand: The Open Polytechnic.

Krause, K-L., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(5), 493–505.

Louis, M. C. (2009). A summary and critique of existing strengths-based educational research utilizing the Clifton Strengths Finder. Internal paper, The Gallup Organization.

Macaskill, A., & Denovan, A. (2011). Developing autonomous learning in first-year university students using perspectives from positive psychology. *Studies in Higher Education.* First published on 18 May 2011 (iFirst). doi 10.1080/03075079.2011.566325.

Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015.* Retrieved August 14, 2012, from http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/TertiaryEducation/PolicyAndStrategy/TertiaryEducationStrategy.aspx

Open Polytechnic. (2011). *Annual Report 2011.* Lower Hutt, New Zealand: Author

Potter, J., & Hampton, D. (Eds.). (2009). Students supporting students. *SEDA Special, 26.*

Ross, C. (2009). *Culturally relevant peer support for Māori and Pasifika student engagement, retention and success.* (Ako Aotearoa Report). Retrieved from http://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/ako-aotearoa/ako-aotearoa/resources/pages/culturally-relevant-peer-support-mper cent C4per cent 81ori-and-pasifika-studen

Scott, D. (2009). A closer look at completion in higher education in New Zealand. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 31*(2), 101-108.

Simpson, O. (2008). Motivating learners in Open and Distance Learning: Do we need a new theory of learner support? *Open Learning, 23*(3), 159-170.

Smith, S., Wellington, S., Cossham, A., Fields, A., Irvine, J., Welland, S., & Innes, M. (2011). Obtaining high retention and completion rates in a New Zealand ODL environment: A case study of strategies employed by Information and Library Studies faculty at the Open Polytechnic. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning, 15*(1), 31-45.

Tahau-Hodges, P. (2010). Kaiako Pono: Mentoring for Maori learners in the tertiary sector. Retrieved 18 January, 2011, from http://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/kaiako-pono-mentoring-for-maori-learners-in-the-tertiary-sector---full-report.pdf

Terrion, J., & Leonard, D. (2007). A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: Findings from a literature review. *Mentoring & Tutoring, 15*(2), 149-164.

Appendix A: Peer mentor script/conversation guide

Introduction: Kia ora ⁄ Hello, I'm [name] a student mentor from the Learning Centre at the Open Polytechnic.

I'm calling about your [course]. Is this a good time to call?

> *Emphasise early in conversation that you are a student (or have been recently)*

How are you getting on with the course so far?

Ask about student's goals for study – long-term & short-term

> *Why are they doing subject, what is their desired outcome?*

Enquire about past successes in study (or anything else)

> *Mentor to discuss persistence - encourage effort as well as past achievement and make point that effort is a key to achievement*

Can also discuss (as appropriate)

- Organisation/time management, etc/breaking-up subject into manageable portions
  - o Are you feeling comfortable with the level of work required in your course?
  - *If yes – continue; if no – explain options: discussing course with tutor; referral to the Learning Centre; withdrawal; or transfer to another course/lower-level course*

- Using online course pages and forums
  - o Have you logged on to your online campus course pages yet? Posted a comment in the course forum? *(Explain why/how if needed)*

- Using the Library/the Learning Centre
  - *Let all students know that the Library/Learning Centre are there to help*

- Contacting tutor/lecturer
  - o Do you know who your lecturer/tutor is? S/he would like to hear from you *(explain)*

- Preparing for the first assessment
  - o Do you know the due date for your assessment? Are you clear about requirements?
  - *Encourage students to contact lecturer/tutor early if not clear about requirements*

Let student know that you will be contacting them again