The postgraduate mentoring program at Deakin University and international student transition

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ABSTRACT: This study adds to the literature as it examines the experiences that international postgraduate (IP) students have with a peer-mentoring program at an Australian University. To analyse transition and peer mentoring thirty-four (34) semi-structured interviews with IP students from Indian, Chinese and other national cohorts were conducted. The study found that transitioning IP students who had a mentor, benefitted as it provided a variety of support mechanisms so that IP students could transition to the next stage. Transition was important for mentors who were able to develop greater self-confidence, graduate attributes and other employability skills.

Keywords: International postgraduate students, transition, peer mentoring programs; experiences

It is important that all students transition successfully into their university studies, so as to ensure that they gain a benefit out from their studies. The transition of international students may be more difficult and complex than their domestic counterparts because international students are separated from their social and cultural context and English being their second language (Guilfoyle, 2006; Prescott & Hellsten, 2005). One contributing factor to the success of international students’ academic performance is how well they transition from the education system in their home country to the Australian education system. One way to assist international student transition is involvement in a mentor program (Chew-Lin, 2007; Goodlad & Hirst, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to examine the transitional experiences faced by international postgraduate (IP) students commencing at Deakin University, and how the issues they face are addressed by their involvement in a peer-mentoring program. Deakin University is a new generation Australian university which has a strong commitment to continuous improvement in teaching and learning. The University is committed to providing a quality experience for students, and in doing so has committed considerable resources to the provision of a peer mentor program.

In regards to transition, IP students face a wide range of challenges when entering university. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) identified a number of difficulties for IP students not normally encountered by local students, including gaps in background knowledge, inefficient study techniques, language difficulties, housing and finance issues, and homesickness. Other experiences may include culture shock, disorientation, lack of awareness of university policies or practices, differences in teaching, learning and expectations of the lecturer, (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002). Transition of
sojourners has been described by Lysgaard’s (1955) U-curve adjustment model, where the first stage of adjustment is characterized by positive feelings, followed by a stage of maladjustment, with the final stage being adjustment. In the Gullahorn and Gullahorn model (1963), the U-curve model is extended to a W-curve, and takes into account the U-shaped readjustment journey of sojourners, returning to their home country. The model described by De Cieri, Dowling and Taylor (1991) is similar to the W-curve model and is presented in Figure 1, and assists in identifying what student’s mood may be during different periods of transition. At pre-departure mood will be neutral and on arrival students may feel a sense of excitement, which is often referred to as the ‘honeymoon stage’. This period lasts a number of weeks, until students experience shocks with the new environment, where they find themselves at the ‘party’s over stage’, where they may feel depressed, or have stress (Chen, 1997). Students are supported through the ‘party’s over stage’, by learning about the environment and through support. They will then transition to the ‘healthy adjustment stage’, and their mood returns to neutral. This process repeats for students returning home; they experience reverse culture shock and the ‘party’s over stage’ is replaced with the ‘what’s next?’ stage.

It has been recognized that transition is a learning process, therefore learning theory by Illeris (2002) can be used to explain how IP students adjust. Illeris (2002) states that there are three dimensions to learning and they include: the **content dimension** of knowledge, understandings, skills, abilities, and attitudes; the **incentive dimension** of emotion, feelings, motivation and volition, and the **social dimension** of interaction, communication and cooperation-all of which are embedded in a situation. Applying Illeris’ (2002) dimensions to IP student transition the **content** that IP students need to learn includes Australian culture, how university operates, lecturer’s expectations, assessment and academic conventions. IP students have a strong **incentive** to learn because not learning will mean that they will fail their studies, which will result in a loss of potential career outcomes. IP students are able to learn through **interactions** with university staff, peers, and friends they make.
Mentoring

Mentoring can be described as a specific set of activities conducted by a “mentor” (e.g., Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Brown, Davis & McClendon, 1999) and it can be defined as “a helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling some combination of functions that are career-related (e.g. information sharing, career strategizing) and psychosocial (e.g. confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, friendship)” (Terrion & Leonard, 2007, pg 150, based on Kram, 1983). Kram (1985) suggests that mentors can provide two-levels of help including: psychosocial help and instrumental help. Psychosocial help, consists of those ‘culture shock’/social issues discussed above while instrumental help provides information and assistance to students with their academic work. A peer mentoring relationship can assist new students with getting to know the University, and provides relevant information that will help students with their studies.

Mentoring also provides role modelling (Brown et al. 1999) as mentors usually have more experience then their mentees (Barker & Pitts, 1997). Attributes of mentoring include helping, teaching-learning, reflecting, career-development, coaching, sponsoring (Roberts, 2000), a host or guide, an exemplar to admire or emulate, and a counselor who provides moral support (Levinson, Carr, Klien, et al., 1978). Given these attributes, Universities can utilise student mentors to help IP students with their transition, and strengthen IP students’ sense of connectedness with their community (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2007). A sense of community then increases the commitment of students to both the institution and their educational goals (Tinto, 2003).

How does formal peer mentoring influence transition of IP students?

Chew-Lim (2007) found that mentoring was a way for students to get over their culture shock, and to develop positive feeling associated with being in the “healthy adjustment stage”. It can be used as a pedagogical tool to extend and augment the educational experiences of students (Abate & Eddie, 2008), and this form of teaching may have more impact on students then lecturers themselves (Goodlad & Hirst, 1998). Mentoring programs go some way toward meeting the basic transition needs that IP students have (Prescott & Hellsten, 2005) and can be a solution to transition problems IP students face in first few months at University in a new cultural environment (Robertson, Line, Jones
Pairing IP students with other IP students assists new students through the adjustment process, and serves a more personal mechanism for providing information about campus life, and it initiates a social support network (Poyrazli & Grahane, 2007). Past research by Lacina (2005) demonstrates the benefits of an email mentor program where students can help answer questions about adjusting to life in the United States before they come.

Research demonstrates that peer mentoring results in greater satisfaction with their study abroad (Alexander & Shaw, 1991), higher academic averages (Westwood & Barker, 1990), and improved attitudes toward the host society (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). Mentors also benefit from the mentoring relationship as they can develop an improved cultural awareness and sensitivity to other students (Zahi, 2002). This prior research identifies a role for mentors. Mentoring can also provide benefits for a diverse group of students, as incoming students get exposed to other IP students who increase the student’s cross-cultural awareness. This multicultural contact enhances the future employment prospects of students. Mentoring also helps students interpret academic expectations, roles/responsibilities of students and soft skills (Treston, 1999). Some authors cite increased learning outcomes, as students participating in peer mentoring programs are more confident, closely connected with the university and have reduced stress levels (Terrion & Leonard, 2007).

Little research has been conducted on IP students, their transition and involvement in peer mentoring and therefore this research is timely and adds to the research literature. Most research on mentoring has concentrated on undergraduate students, however postgraduate students differ from undergraduates as they are more mature, older, depart from well paid positions and status, care for children/families, have attained previous academic degrees, and have well developed learning styles (Wang, 2004). Having, said that, the IP students at Deakin University, do not always fit this categorisation as they are aged 21-35, have completed an undergraduate degree in their home country, they may have some work experience, they do not have family in which they care for and are often away from their parents for the first time. This may mean these IP students are quite similar to their undergraduate counterparts, with the exception that they have a bachelor’s degree under their belt.

Based on the literature presented above, the research question for this study is “what are the transitional experiences of IP students using the peer mentoring program at Deakin University?” The
The postgraduate mentor program at Deakin University

The Postgraduate Mentor Program (PMP) has been running since 2007 across the Faculty of Business & Law. It is designed to be a student focused support for the social and academic transition of new IP students during their first trimester (Baron & Carr, 2008). The mentor program is run in this Faculty, because the majority of IP students are recruited to this Faculty; in 2009 Deakin University had 3138 IP students, and 72% were located within the Faculty of Business and Law (Allwood, Personal Communication, July 07 2010). In the PMP senior students act as mentors on a voluntary basis and provide support on a 1:3 (1 senior student to 3 new students) basis and is primarily used by commencing IP students. The program aims to support all students by: a) improving the student experience for new students; b) improving the sense of Deakin community and identity; and c) providing opportunities for current students to develop graduate attributes through mentoring such as communication, teamwork and leadership skills. In relation to transition, volunteer mentors support academic and social transition by: a) interpreting academic expectations, b) creating awareness of key concepts of time-management and independent learning, c) linking students to support services in the Faculty/University; and d) increasing levels of confidence of students (Deakin University, 2011). The mentor program runs each Trimester, and hence three times a year. To ensure that mentors know what is expected of them, they are required to participate in an 8-hour training program, which includes a comprehensive training and resource manual. The PMP includes a number of events; including reflections on the mentor process and their own personal and professional development; and continuous program feedback and development. The PMP requires a large amount of planning and administration, and this is carried out by a Program Manager and paid student co-ordinators. It is expected that mentors and mentees engage with one another at least once a week over the six-week program, which can include face-to-face, telephone, email and online messaging. Since its inception in 2007, there have been approximately 500 mentor and 1200 mentee registrations. In addition, one third of mentees become mentors.
METHODS

The study was exploratory, qualitative and used in-depth interviews (Yin, 2009). The research was conducted in August to December 2009 and research participants were IP students who were enrolled in the Faculty of Business and Law and had participated in the PMM. Ethical approval was granted to the researchers to conduct the project, and students were recruited through the PMP. Participants were provided with information about the project, through an explanatory statement, and they gave their informed consent to participate. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each interview ranged from 35 minutes to 60 minutes. Participants were given a movie ticket to thank them for their participation. A thematic approach to interview analysis was taken where interviews were examined for major themes, experiences and occurrences. Once these themes were identified other transcripts were examined to determine if those themes also existed. NVIVO software was used to thematically code the transcripts. The results, discussion and analysis presented here focuses on insights that have emerged in relation to key themes, experience and events.

Participants were asked a number of broad questions to investigate IP students’ transition experience: “Can you please explain what your transition has been like into Deakin University”, and in relation to the mentor program: “Were you involved in the PG Mentor program as a Mentor or Mentee?” and “Did this influence your transition into Deakin University?” In terms of the sample a total of 34 students were interviewed for the study 17 were male, and 17 female. A majority (18) of the IP students were 20-24 years old, and 16 were 25-29. Eight of students had been studying at Deakin University for 0 to 6 months, 11 for 7 to 12 months, nine for a period of 13 to 18 months, and a further six for 19+ months. This meant that all students would have had an opportunity to transition, and they are likely to be in the healthy adjustment stage. Students were chosen to be included in the sample on the basis that they would have transitioned by this stage, and were able to reflect on their transitional experience. All students were completing a business course. The sample is split into three cohorts including Chinese (9), Indian (14) and miscellaneous nationalities (11), which comprised students from Africa, Europe, Asian (other than Chinese) or South American students. Of the 34, 19 were mentees, 3 were solely mentors, and 12 had been both a mentee and later a mentor.
RESULTS

What transitional experiences did IP students have?

There was a mixture of responses in regards to transition. Overall students rated their transition as good (14 out of 34) and that they were in the ‘healthy adjustment stage’. Students had reported negative experiences and this related to missing family and friends and hence loneliness. Students found their experiences tough in the first few weeks but improved as time went by: “It was pretty tough in the first week. I’ve cried more down here than I’ve ever done in my whole life”. Transitional experiences related to getting used to the culture, finding accommodation/food suited to their preferences, and understanding the transport system in Melbourne. Students also had to get used to the teaching and learning style in Australia:

In terms of education and study matter, I think Australia is definitely different from Malaysia. So I feel somehow shocked because the education system is definitely different. Because I am so used to teacher-oriented, not student-oriented.

Students experienced transitional issues in regards to assessment as one student points out: “One is assignments, in China we don’t have assignments, we just have exams. So at first, I don’t know how to write assignments”. Other students had experienced differences in the way Australian lecturers conduct teaching: “It’s a bit difficult where the lecturer’s here expect the students to think out of the box. Because of the differences in culture and customs, I even call lecturers here Madam and Sir, which apparently, the lecturers do not prefer it.” Other transitional issues related to language: “It was a challenge for me because of the language. I had to adjust to the language. I had to learn how to express my thoughts, how to change the structure compared with German sentences.” Students struggled with understanding Australian culture; “When you move to some new places, you have to get used to the different lifestyles, different cultures and somehow, at the very beginning you’ll feel some kind of helpless. Most of the time you have to figure out all the things by yourself.”

How did the mentoring program help in transition?

When asked about the peer mentor program IP students who had a mentor stated they assisted them in their transition; this included general guidance, and the importance of having one when a student first arrives: “To be a mentee, was the best thing that could have happened to me, and it was
something that actually played a very important role in my transition being a very smooth process”.

Students reported that mentors provided practical support, including telling mentees about University support services, how to use public transport, how to do assignments, referencing, use the online learning environment and where to access language and learning services. Mentors also assisted in explaining academic expectations to their mentees particularly in relation to how to write assignments:

*It really had a big impact because the mentor I spoke to, she was very helpful. She went the extra mile to help me with an assignment. She was also in one of my groups so she actually told me the right ways of doing an assignment, what you need to reference and what method to choose.*

Similarly, another student mentioned:

*If you find some senior students it is really useful. Sometimes I don’t know if my way to study is right or wrong. We might go to the examination. I just want to pass the examination. I don’t know if I do it in that way, if it is wrong, because I never had that experience. And to be honest, first I don’t know what assignments mean. Teacher always says, “Assignment, assignment.” And I thought, “What’s an assignment?” So I asked my classmates. They are the same as me. They are fresh in this university, but ask some senior students, like mentor [sic], they have already finished this course. So they really can give me a lot of good advice.*

Mentors also assisted in the social transition of students, as some befriended their mentees, and introduced them to other friends. This was helpful in developing a bond between one another, and hence a sense of community. The following example was inspiring for the mentor program; “*I developed a life long friend in my mentor*”. Mentors had introduced their mentees to other students from diverse backgrounds:

*I think if I had not been involved in this program, I would not have got to meet so many people as I did, and from different backgrounds. So that was a very instrumental factor in me getting to know people from different cultures, and learning how to speak to them.*

Other mentors had encouraged their mentees to speak in English, and be more confident, which assisted in transition: “*Yes, it has. I’ve been forced to speak a lot in English. That’s one of the things.*
I’m more open now too. I speak to a lot of people, even though they don’t want me to speak to them. I approach them”. The following mentee, claimed that he had better support than students who did not have a mentor:

I got to know more than what an average person at the same semester would know, for instance, in regards to resources available, facilities I can really make use of, and people I need to speak to if I am facing a particular challenge.

The other key issue seen by this student was the need to manage their time. This is something that incoming students need to learn about, and is something that mentors can provide excellent advice and support for: “I’ve got a lot of valuable advice on how to adjust, how to manage my time, because that was the first question I raised because I was a bit worried. “Oh no! I’ve got six assignments. How am I going to manage my time?” She advised me on quite a lot of stuff.”

On the other hand, a mentor had commented on why they became a mentor in the first place. This example is particularly powerful, in demonstrating the importance of mentoring for incoming students:

The very fact that you’re able to help somebody, because you know exactly what that person has been going through when you learned it first. I didn’t know how to use the transport system. How do you validate a Met Card? And what is a Met Card? All those silly things that you’re scared to ask, for fear of an embarrassing situation. You keep it to yourself. But it just grows, the insecurity, the whole idea that if you don’t ask people, you sort of tend to accept situations. But the idea that you could help in that initial first six weeks, that is bang on to what it is about.

DISCUSSION

IP students had a range of transitional experiences that were expected as per the literature (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Prescott & Hellsten, 2005). IP students commented on academic, social, cultural, getting used to the Australian way of life, language and practical transitions that they had to make. One major issue in the transition was loneliness as result of being away from family and friends. IP students talked about the problems encountered when they first arrived and how their experience improved over time, which is similar to what has been found in previous literature (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Prescott & Hellsten,
2005). This suggests that students, had experienced the ‘party’s over stage’ as described by the De Cieri et al. (1991) model, and were moving into the ‘healthy adjustment stage’. Some striking transitions related to IP students was getting used to Australia’s student orientated education system, having and writing assignments, referencing and the higher expectations of lecturers for students to “think outside the box”. These new academic expectations required students to learn what these are, and implement new ways of thinking and studying.

The student narratives in this paper revealed that the mentors assisted the commencing students with this academic transition. Therefore, the mentees interaction with the mentor assisted with them learning and hence transition to the Australian academic system. One student explained that the “mentor program was the best thing that could happen to him”, and that it resulted in a smooth transition process. This indicates that the program meant a lot to IP students, and helped them to transition to a “healthy adjustment stage”. Mentees supplied evidence that mentors had provided legitimate forms of instrumental support, which assisted the person in need, which is one of the roles of a mentor as specified by Kram (1983). Mentors did a lot of work in assisting mentees to understand the academic expectations of Deakin University, and this was important because IP students had come from diverse educational backgrounds, and they needed to learn the academic system in Australia. According to Illeris (2002) learning occurs where there is content provided, for example information, and also interaction. While the university can provide support, mentors can assist the new students in learning of the system, through their interaction with the mentee and their dissemination of their own past experience.

Students reported on the positive elements associated with the program. Mentors took on the roles of being a helper, and adviser (Roberts, 2000). Mentors also encouraged their mentees to learn the system, by telling them about academic expectations, articulating university processes and systems. Mentors also assisted IP students with making friends and developing social networks. These friends can be a form of psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). In addition, developing new friends enhances their social transition and past research demonstrates that those students who are socially integrated tend to perform better academically than those students who are not (Evans & Peel, 1999). Friends and social networks will also reduce depression and isolation, which assists the IP student in
getting over the ‘party’s over stage’. Meeting people also allowed IP students to get used to the culture and language. For example, introductions to other students, encourages IP students to speak in English, which assists in transition.

An interesting finding of the study was that the peer mentor program was described by one student as being better than any of the other programs offered at the University. This is important because it highlights the beneficial qualities of personalised peer assistance as opposed to non-personalised everyday University support. Therefore, a stronger case is made for Universities to devote resources to peer-support programs. In addition mentees learnt about how to manage their time better at University and therefore this added to the personal and professional development of students. Students also commented on affirmation support they were able to get from their mentor; knowing that other students have gone through similar experiences allows mentees to normalise the experience of transition.

The study found that senior student become mentors for a variety of reasons. Some of these were altruistic, such as the mentor who wanted to reduce the stress and confusion associated with arriving in a new country to study for an IP student. As a new student themselves, they had negative experiences associated with their transition and change, and they wanted to use this experience to reduce problems for subsequent incoming students. This suggests that students are not just concerned with how much they can get out of their study, but also what they can contribute. Apart from altruism, mentor’s reported that they gained professional and personal development skills, which concurs with findings from Goodlad & Hirst (1998), who describes that being a mentor develops graduate attributes. So this means, that not only mentees learn, but mentors also learn new skills as a result of the interaction.

**PRACTICAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

The study has some implications for university administrators, who either already run mentor programs, or are considering developing one. It is suggested for Universities who have large cohorts of IP students and who want to enhance their overall experience should consider developing a peer mentor program based on best practice, and devote enough resources to achieve that. Overall, for international students the mentor program assisted them with their transition, which is good, however
there are improvements that could be made to the program. One is that it is difficult for mentor’s to schedule meetings with three mentees, and therefore one improvement could be decreasing the mentor – mentee ratio. This would likely have the effect of improving the transition of mentees as they have more access to their mentors. In terms of research implications, this study was exploratory and was a study of the support mentoring programs can provide to IP students in transition. Further study using quantitative methods could compare IP student’s who are involved in a mentor program and those who are not to determine its influence on transition. In addition comparing perceived value of the mentoring program to other transition programs in the university such as the Faculty orientation program, conversation clubs, language and learning classes, student societies and others would be useful to determine which is the most influential. One limitation of the research was that students who were involved in the mentor program were examined in the study. Future studies, should examine the transition experience of international students who have been and have not been mentored, to determine if in fact that the mentor program is beneficial.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion this study examined the transitional experiences of IP students involved in a mentor program at a new generation university in Australia seeking to improve the experiences of students. The study found that IP students had stressful transition experiences in the beginning, which included a lack of social networks, difficulty in understanding academic expectations, culture/language problems and not understanding how things operate in Australia, which is reflective of the ‘party’s over stage’. The study found that being in the mentor program assisted IP students with their transition. Mentors assisted incoming IP students with their academic, social, language, cultural, and time management transitions, and this suggests that students were assisted into the ‘healthy adjustment stage’. Mentors assisted in transition, as mentees learnt off their mentor through their interactions with them. It is recommended that Universities who seek to enhance the experience of IP students should consider implementing similar peer mentoring programs to assist in transition.
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Figure 1: Adjustment for international students