EFFECTS OF PEER MENTORING ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FIRST-YEAR ACCOUNTING STUDENTS

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Abstract

Universities around the world deal with problems of high first-year student failure and dropout rates. Universities also experience challenges related to poor academic performance which also contribute to students prematurely cancelling their registrations. South African universities also experience these challenges. Hence, peer mentoring is implemented as an intervention strategy to improve students’ academic performance and reduce student turnover. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of peer mentoring on academic performance of first-year accounting students at a South African university. An interpretive qualitative research approach was undertaken, and the sample comprised eight participants, namely two mentors and six mentees who were purposefully selected. An open-ended questionnaire was employed to collect data which were examined using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that both mentors and mentees benefited from the entire peer mentoring process. Furthermore, the results suggested that through peer mentoring program, the students had acquired success-oriented studying skills which developed meaningful and productive learning. Students were intrinsically motivated, and those who actively participated in the program showed signs of academic improvement. Moreover, academic performance of mentees also improved. The peer mentoring program has built self-confidence of mentors and mentees, hence good quality academic outcomes. The study suggests that to minimize the challenges of poor academic performance of first-year accounting students and high turnover, the university should make participation in peer mentoring program compulsory. Mentors should be continuously developed to keep abreast of current developments in peer mentoring at universities globally. Accounting lecturers must recognise and acknowledge the constructive role played by the peer mentoring program and encourage all first-year students to participate in its activities.

Keywords: Academic performance, accounting student, mentees, mentors, peer mentoring, student turnover

1 INTRODUCTION

Every year, at institutions of higher learning worldwide, enrolment of first year students to further studies after graduation from high school occurs (Mudhovozi, 2012). These enrolments include students from all walks of life and corners of the world who register at the university of their choice. Similar enrolment or admission processes take place at South African universities. Coming into a university for the first time, the undergraduate student is exposed to a new environment, and sometimes a very big environment as compared to the one he or she has come from. Hence, some students become highly intimidated (Kam-Fong, Chin-Siang & Genevieve, 2019). Transitional demands and adjustment are of a great deal from young people attending university for the first time, it is an experience of changes in their lives which prove stressful for them and may demonstrate an inability to cope (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Lowe & Cook,
2003; Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Carter, Bishop & Kravits, 2006; Zepke, Leach. & Prebble, 2006; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Kwaah & Essilfie, 2017).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring programs describe a relationship between two people who are similar in age but who differ in terms of time, life experience, and educational background and those that are at-risk are supported to succeed (Bruce, & Bridgeland, 2014; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Together, mentor and mentee work to meet a variety of goals, either formally or informally through mentoring programs (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007). As there is a transfer of knowledge and experiences from mentor to mentee, the mentoring relationship promotes an improvement in cognitive, affective, and skill-based learning outcomes (Lee, Krauss, Saudi, & Hamzah, 2016).

The cognitive skills that the mentor imparts to the mentee include motivating and preparing the first-year student and assisting them in making wise choices regarding time management and self-organisation skills for academic activities and adjusting to university life (Paglis, Green & Bauer, 2006). Seniors transfer and talk with freshmen about their experiences.

According to Hamlet (2015:301), a peer mentor can act as a first-year student's resource, helping hand, sounding board, and referral service. Peer mentors' duties also include supporting, motivating, and educating students in their department who are just starting their graduate program (Hamlet, 2015). Peer mentoring aids first-year students intellectually and socially while enhancing learning and personal growth. Peer mentoring is also backed by theorists, such as Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. According to this notion, first-year students can benefit from peers' expertise in providing suggestions on the cognitive level of learning. As a result, it is thought that students' social integration into learning could be a factor in their academic success (Jackling & Mcdowall, 2008).

Students’ target group (mentees) interacts with mentors, who exchange expertise and experiences with them (Snowden & Hardy, 2012). Third-year accounting students at the University of Dundee in the UK were selected as mentorship program volunteers to help first-year students. They aided in addressing the concerns of writing proficiency, study skills, and test-taking strategies (Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff & Dunlop, 2010). Students who might be failing were identified based on the grade they received for the course. The university and the accounting department launched a mentoring program to help those vulnerable accounting students.

The primary goal of the university's mentorship program was to raise first-year students' academic standing and minimise high dropouts from universities (Collings, Swanson & Watkins, 2014). Fox et al. (2010:150) compared the first-year accounting students' pre- and post-mentoring examination results to determine the effectiveness of a university intervention (peer mentoring) (mentees). The study's conclusions showed that the peer mentorship program had a favorable impact on the performance of first-year accounting students. The same encouraging findings were also made at two separate Australian universities, RMIT University and Deakin University (Jackling & Mcdowall, 2008).

The university's motive for introducing the mentorship programme was mainly to improve first-year academic performance. Fox et al. (2010:150) measured the effectiveness of university intervention (peer mentoring), by comparing pre- and post-mentoring examinations of the first-year accounting students (mentees). The findings of the study indicated that the peer mentoring scheme has shown a positive effect on first year accounting performance. The same positive results were also found at two different universities in Australia (RMIT University & Deakin University) (Jackling & Mcdowall, 2008). From these universities mentors gave an assurance that through their mentorship process they contributed to students learning and understanding of accounting concepts. Confidence was developed through generic skills such as discussions, debate, and presentations for undergraduate accounting students. The mentees in this study confirmed having benefited from the mentorship programme in terms of practical information on motivation, study skills and time management.

3 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design is used in this study to ascertain the opinions of participants and the meaning they attach to successful implementation of peer mentoring program. A phenomenological approach is used as it describes the meaning of lived experiences of participants in the study. With phenomenology, the researcher puts aside all prejudgement and collects data on how individuals make sense out of a particular experience or situation. The researcher attempted to understand participants experience a phenomenon from each person’s own standpoint. Purposive sampling was used in the study to gather detailed information about the
phenomenon under investigation from participants. The eight participants, who included two Mentors and six mentees (second year students who went through mentorship program), were chosen through a purposeful sampling process from the institution of higher learning where the study took place. An open-ended questionnaire was employed to collect data which were examined using thematic analysis. Participants are indicated as Mentor 1 and 2 and Mentee 1 to 6.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Here are the main research findings that arose from the study questions. Included are direct quotes from participants to support and validate significant results. As a result, the study's findings and the answers to the research questions provided strong support for earlier studies (Lee, 1999; Leidenfröst, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon, & Schabmann, 2014; Mokhampanyane 2018; Swart, Coughlan, & Joannou, 2019), which suggest that first registration to university could be threatening to some of the students. Support is crucial for students’ intellectual and social success in university life, according to research. Participants in the discussion below claim that the treatments they receive from the institution help them develop their personalities and improve various aspects of their lives. This what the mentees have to say:

Mentee 1 “Being new at the university was frightening for especially one from a small town. But when I got here, I was allocated a very nice mentor who indeed hold my hand. He taught me how to conduct myself at the university. Even though I sometimes become lazy to attend my sessions because of friends who are not in the program. But shame, I have gained a lot from the program”.

Mentee 4 is resonating with the views raised by mentee 1 above by saying:

“My mentor helped with every advice that I needed, if it was not because of her I think I would have dropped university. He was in the situation with me. He made himself available when I needed that kind of support most. He taught me how to access reserve shelve books for assignments introduced me to other supporting centres of the university.” Mentee 4 further said: “our mentor was also assisting us with the course content because he was doing accounting. Sometimes he would stand in as a tutor when we were doing assignments.”

The other participants supported the above responses by saying:

“I had a privilege of being under the mentor who gave me a chance of learning through her experiences. If she was not going to attend the session she also reports in advance and that taught me to be responsible of communicating in advance., I am sure I obtained the marks that I got because of her. She was really caring for the wellbeing of everyone who was under her care”. Mentee 6

Participants perceived the support that they got from the mentors as contributing factor towards the academic performance.

Mentee 3, “I have obtained good marks in accounting because she was always encouraging us to attend our classes and introduce us to other intervention programmes that were on campus such as reading classes”. And the other participants said:

“Through the program I was introduced to another support structure of the university where we were equipped with the study skills, navigated this big university through the support as well as time management in our studies”. Mentee 5. In support mentee 2, “through the peer mentoring session understood the difference between university demands and the high school workload”.

Mentee 5, “I was supported emotional through this program. my mentor I attend the counselling sessions and being assisted through wellness centre. I lost my parent in the second week of the reopening and I was depressed, my mentor and rest of the mentor and the coordinator they stood by me”.

Even though they find peer program so helpful. But there are still obstacles that needs to be addressed. This is what the participants had to say.

“The only challenge, I have been time table clash”. In support, the other participants mentioned that: “having classes during the sessions is makes me to skip sessions”. Mentee 2. Mentee 6 “as much as we are sometimes lazy to attend sessions but, some of the mentors are not reporting to us if they are not going to have sessions”.

It is clear from the mentees' responses above that the peer mentoring program has been beneficial to them. They benefited from the initiative. Despite occasionally mentioning difficulties, they were able to adjust to university life thanks to the help they received and the type of mentors they had. In the end, they were
successful. The mentorship program is not evaluated based on how well students perform; nonetheless, students affirm that the program helped them succeed academically. The finest instructor is the one who has experience. According to Bruce & Bridgeland, (2014) students with mentors are likely to report engaging in positive behaviour and do succeed academically and there is a possibility that those students who completed the mentorship program might inspire others to sign up.

As much as mentees indicated their satisfaction of the peer mentorship program same applies to mentors, they confirmed that they could see the program helping the first years, but they said they also became beneficiary of the program that is how they benefited. The participants below are indicating that he was a mentor and he gained through the process and now as a mentor he benefited, that is what the participant had to say:

Mentor 2: “Through the program I have learned how to deal with other students and my communication skill has improved, time management because I had to be always in time for my sessions and train my mentees to be on time. I shy person by nature but through the process I became a communicator and share with others some information, now I can hold meeting with my mentees and be able to share the knowledge I have with everyone. I am now a team player”. To support what was indicated by mentor 2 that is what mentor had to say: “through the mentorship program, I have gained self-confidence, self-esteem, communication skills”. Mentor 1 further said during sessions Leadership skills is displayed during the meetings, even during the guidance that we are offering to our first years during the initial stages of their university time”.

Mentors also confirmed that lack of attendance of their mentees was worrying.

Mentor 1 “you cannot believe it once they have friends, they do not attend their peer mentor sessions regularly. In support, Mentor 2 said our mentees are sometimes just not attending sessions.

According to mentors, imparting topic information to their mentees improved their cognitive abilities and helped them put the university’s graduate attributes into practice (Centre for innovation in learning and teaching 2021 -2025). They become better people because of their practice of academic virtues. The program seems to be well received by mentors and mentees, and the institution makes sure that deserving students have access to the institution in all interventions that may be implemented. The difficulty, however, is low attendance.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The current study shed light on the impact of peer mentoring programs on academic achievement, as well as the advantages and difficulties participants experienced. Mentors from this university confirmed that through their mentoring program, they have helped students understand and comprehend accounting principles. They have also benefited themselves by being able to recognize the qualities of a university graduate attributes. Confidence was built among undergraduate accounting students through shared abilities like presentations, discussions, and debates. The mentees and mentors in this study agree that the mentorship program gave them useful insights on time management, study skills, and motivation.

This suggests that having good relationships with peers, participating in constructive classroom activities and pro-social behaviour, and forming relationships with outside sources who promote academic performance will improve one’s academic and leisure experiences at university. Even though they face difficulties, some students view enrolling in university as a positive move. However, the institutions’ support systems, like mentorship programs, are quite beneficial. The mentors via the program have revealed the hidden curriculum. Some people go so far as to say that these difficulties were a necessary part of their maturation process since they were able to develop some independence and maturity and stop depending on their parents and teachers.

More mentors may be introduced to first-year university students, and academics could be encouraged to assist first-year students wherever they can. Workshops on time management, the workload at university, and how independence may occasionally be detrimental to academic wellbeing could be introduced by the wellness centre. Peer Mentors should also continually advance to stay current with peer mentoring trends at universities throughout the world. Accounting lecturers must appreciate the beneficial function that the peer mentorship program serves and urge all first-year students to take part in its activities.
REFERENCE LIST


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