

An Evaluation of a Student Peer Mentoring Program

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Abstract : This paper reports on the development of a student peer mentoring programme at a higher education institution. The programme is dependent on volunteering senior undergraduate students who are trained to mentor first-year students studying towards an engineering degree. The evaluation of the programme took the form of first-year students completing a self-report paper questionnaire at the onset of a lecture and mentors completing their questionnaire electronically. The evaluation yielded mixed findings. Peer mentoring clearly benefited some students in their adjustment to the institution. Specific mentors' personal attributes enabled the establishment of successful mentoring relationships, where encouragement, advice and academic assistance was provided. Gains were reciprocal with mentors reporting that the programme contributed towards their personal development. Confidence in the programme was expressed in mentors feeling that it was an initiative worth continuing and first-year students agreeing that it be recommended to future first-year students. This was despite many unfavourable experiences of mentors where their professionalism and commitment to the programme was suspect. It is evident that while mentors began with noble intentions they appear either to lose interest or become overwhelmed with their own workload as the academic year progresses. On the other hand, some mentors reported feeling challenged by the apathy of first-year students who failed to maximise the opportunity available to them. The different attitudes towards mentoring that manifested as a mentoring culture in some departments were particularly pertinent to its successful implementation. The findings point to the key role of academic staff in the mentoring programme who model the mentoring relationship in their interaction with student mentors. While their involvement in the programme may be perceived as a drain on resources in an already demanding academic teaching environment, it is imperative that structural changes be put in place for the programme to be both efficient and sustainable. A pervasive finding concerns the evolving institutional culture of student development in the faculty. Mentors and first-year students alike alluded to the potential of the mentoring programme provided it is seriously endorsed at both the departmental and faculty level. The findings provide a foundation from which to develop the programme further and to begin improving its capacity for maximizing student retention in South African higher education.

Keywords : engineering students, first-year students, peer mentoring

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