

## Developing a Quality Mentor Program: Creating Positive Change for Students in Enabling Programs

**Authors :** Bianca Price, Jennifer Stokes

**Abstract :** Academic and social support systems are critical for students in enabling education; these support systems have the potential to enhance the student experience whilst also serving a vital role for student retention. In the context of international moves toward widening university participation, Australia has developed enabling programs designed to support underrepresented students to access to higher education. The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a mentor program based within an enabling course. This study evaluates how the mentor program supports new students to develop social networks, improve retention, and increase satisfaction with the student experience. Guided by Social Learning Theory (SLT), this study highlights the benefits that can be achieved when students engage in peer-to-peer based mentoring for both social and learning support. Whilst traditional peer mentoring programs are heavily based on face-to-face contact, the present study explores the difference between mentors who provide face-to-face mentoring, in comparison with mentoring that takes place through the virtual space, specifically via a virtual community in the shape of a Facebook group. This paper explores the differences between these two methods of mentoring within an enabling program. The first method involves traditional face-to-face mentoring that is provided by alumni students who willingly return to the learning community to provide social support and guidance for new students. The second method requires alumni mentor students to voluntarily join a Facebook group that is specifically designed for enabling students. Using this virtual space, alumni students provide advice, support and social commentary on how to be successful within an enabling program. Whilst vastly different methods, both of these mentoring approaches provide students with the support tools needed to enhance their student experience and improve transition into University. To evaluate the impact of each mode, this study uses mixed methods including a focus group with mentors, in-depth interviews, as well as engaging in netnography of the Facebook group 'Wall'. Netnography is an innovative qualitative research method used to interpret information that is available online to better understand and identify the needs and influences that affect the users of the online space. Through examining the data, this research will reflect upon best practice for engaging students in enabling programs. Findings support the applicability of having both face-to-face and online mentoring available for students to assist enabling students to make a positive transition into University undergraduate studies.

**Keywords :** enabling education, mentoring, netnography, social learning theory

**Conference Title :** ICTLHE 2018 : International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

**Conference Location :** Paris, France

**Conference Dates :** June 25-26, 2018