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Supporting Non-School Leaver Students in Their First Year Of University Study: Results of a Transition Focused Peer-to-Peer Intensive Mentoring Program Trial

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Ashleigh Larkin and Angela Dwyer

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of an intensive mentoring program trial designed to address retention issues with first year students in Justice degrees. The purpose of the program was to reduce student attrition, specifically for non-school leaver Justice students, by creating a culture of student cooperation and support. In line with previous successful programs, first year non-school leaver Justice students were supported by students who had progressed at least to second year in their degree and had achieved a grade point average of at least 5. This paper discusses the benefits of the program for both the mentors and mentees, along with whether the program assisted non-school leaver students' transition into university. It concludes with recommendations on how the program can be improved in the future to further support non-school leaver students.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the benefits of an intensive peer-to-peer mentoring program (herein, the program) that was trialled as part of the suite of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Bachelor of Justice degree programs in semester one, 2015. The Bachelor of Justice is broadly recognised as a social science degree focused on the areas of criminology, policing, and governance (Bartels, McGovern, & Richards, 2015). This paper defines a peer as "an individual who is viewed as having an equal standing with another" (Crawford, 2010, p. 114). In line with this, peer-to-peer mentoring programs are defined as programs that provide opportunities for new students to be guided and supported by more experienced students (Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008). The aim of the program was to assist non-school leaver students in their transition into Justice degrees by matching them up with a mentor, who was a second or third year Justice student and had achieved a Grade Point Average (GPA) of at least 5. The program matched the mentors and mentees according to common demographics (where possible) and required the mentors to meet their mentees at least once a fortnight, either face to face or online. This paper analyses both survey and interview data collected from the participants in relation to the benefits of the intensive program. In order to demonstrate how the program helped first year

students have a smooth transition into university life, this paper initially reviews the literature on student attrition and the use of peer mentoring as a way to address this. This paper then provides an overview of the program as well as the methods used to implement and evaluate it. An analysis of evaluation feedback is provided to demonstrate the positive benefits both the mentors and mentees derived from the program. Finally, discussion turns to how the program might be improved in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section critically analyses literature that looks at the relationship between mentoring programs and student attrition according to the following key themes: first year students and attrition; positive first year experience and engagement; creating a supportive student culture; and intensive mentoring as a means to address student attrition. This literature shows how implementing an intensive peer-to-peer mentoring program supports a positive first year experience for non–school leaver students. This creates a student culture of collaboration and support, which increases the likelihood that students will successfully transition into university life.

Almost all of the literature reviewed in this section applied the same definition to determine which students were at risk of disengaging from university study. These are students who are experiencing financial hardship, are from culturally or ethnically diverse backgrounds, did not commence university study straight after they finished school, and do not feel a sense of connection to the university community and therefore do not engage with the resources that the university makes available to them (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Menzies & Nelson, 2012; Morrison & Brown, 2006; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006; O'Brien, Llamas, & Stevens, 2012). These factors mean that this group of students is vulnerable to not succeeding academically, which again makes them more likely to disengage from their studies during their first year. In addition to this, the literature in this area examined factors such as attendance rates, academic performance, and engagement in extra-curricular activities to determine whether a student had not positively engaged with the university environment and therefore was at risk of attrition (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Menzies & Nelson, 2012; Morrison & Brown, 2006; Nelson et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2012). It should be noted that there is very little discussion in the literature in regard to the issue of student attrition specifically from social science degrees. However, the literature that does provide consideration of this issue focusses on attrition from postgraduate criminology degrees (Chamberlain, 2012; Martin & Hanrahan, 2004). This paper therefore contributes to existing knowledge about issues faced by non-school leaver social science students in their first year of university study.

First year students and attrition

Student attrition is common in the first year of university study, especially among mature age students, students from ethnically or culturally diverse backgrounds, and students who are experiencing financial hardship (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). Overall, the literature argues that these groups of first year students are more likely to leave their degree in the first year if they do not become integrated into the university community, if they do not engage with

the university resources that are available to them for academic or personal assistance, or if they do not remain engaged with the curriculum, meaning the work was too challenging or not challenging enough (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006; Kift, 2009a; Lightfoot, 2007; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). However, those students at greatest risk of withdrawing are those who feel isolated or disconnected from the university environment (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; O'Brien et al., 2012). These issues are specifically relevant for students in rural or regional areas, students from diverse backgrounds, and non-school leaver students (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). This is because these students are often more likely to be external students, which means they are less likely to engage with the resources that are available to them on campus (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2012).

There are a number of circumstances that are specific to non-school leaver students that make them more likely to disengage from university study within their first semester. Students in this group are often balancing significant work and family commitments with their engagement in university study (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). This often means that these students find it difficult to connect with their younger first year peers, who have less complex life circumstances (Heirdsfield et al., 2008), compounding the other stressors that are present in the lives of non-school leaver students. This can result in non-school leaver students not fully engaging with the university resources that are available to them, which in turn means they do not achieve the academic results they expected (Dickson, 2000). Again, these factors increase the chances of students withdrawing from their degree during their first semester (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009b; Lightfoot, 2007; Menzies & Nelson, 2012).

Positive first year experience and increased student engagement

Despite the lack of literature examining student attrition from social science degrees, there is a large body of literature that demonstrates how having a positive first year experience increases student engagement with their degree through developing a university culture around student collaboration and support (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). Recent literature has noted an increase in the number of students who keep to themselves and are hesitant to become involved in extracurricular activities available to them at university (Baik et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2012). The 2014 First Year Experience study found a decrease in the number of students who were socially engaged in their university community or who indicated that they made friends during their time at university (Baik et al., 2015). This study aligned with previous research and concluded that mature age students continued to feel like they did not belong to their university community (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Glaser et al., 2006; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; James, Karuse, & Jennings, 2010). This study emphasised that these students were most likely to disengage with their studies unless steps were taken to help them connect with the university environment in a positive way (O'Brien et al., 2012). Peer mentoring programs can help to facilitate this process as the most prevalent influence on the personal and academic development of university students are their peers (Clerehan, 2003; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). This means that there is a need for universities

to capitalise on this peer influence and actively use peer mentors from diverse backgrounds in order to engage first year students (Menzies & Nelson, 2012).

Creating a supportive student culture

There is a large body of literature that demonstrates how peer-to-peer mentoring programs provide an effective way to facilitate a positive first year experience and increase student retention, especially for students who are at risk of disengaging (Barefoot, 2000; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Allowing first year students to participate in a mentoring program provides them with a peer contact within the university community (Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009b; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). This ensures that first year students have someone to turn to when they require assistance or when they need someone to talk to outside of the academic staff. This is one of the key advantages of peer mentoring programs, as students, especially first year students, are often hesitant to approach academic staff to ask for help (Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009b; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Established peer mentoring programs allow academic staff to use mentors to ensure that students are referred to the appropriate support resources despite the students being hesitant to approach academic staff in person (Baik et al., 2015).

Peer mentoring programs also provide a positive way for universities to address the particular needs of non-school leaver students. The literature argues that non-school leaver students often have more complex life circumstances in comparison to their school leaver counterparts, which makes their transition into university more challenging (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). These students are often balancing their studies with family and work commitments which take priority (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). This means that non-school leaver students are sometimes more likely to be external students, which further isolates them from the university community and can compound any issues experienced during their first year of study (Barefoot, 2000; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012).

Research shows that participating in a mentoring program with other university student peers provides a way for non-school leaver students to balance their university transition with other facets of their lives. It also helps them develop the skills needed for academic success and provides them with someone outside the academic staff to contact should they start to feel overwhelmed with the university process (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Clerehan, 2003; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). Scholars in this area suggest that even when mentoring programs are not available, students will often turn to other students for help during their transition process, and having a formal mentoring program in place maximises the effectiveness of this (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2012). A formal mentoring program provides a way for first year students to form social connections with more established students, especially where they may be hesitant to make these connections themselves, which increases their chances of remaining engaged with their degree (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2012). Research has confirmed

this argument, with multiple studies showing that students participating in peer mentoring programs leave university degrees at half the rate of non-participants (Glaser et al., 2006; Martin, Collier, & Carlon, 2009; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

Intensive mentoring and addressing attrition

Although mentoring programs are generally effective in increasing student engagement, literature indicates that intensive mentoring programs are particularly effective in reducing student attrition (Glaser et al., 2006; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). These programs involve matching students with a one-on-one mentor. This allows them to be distinguished from non-intensive mentoring programs where mentors can be responsible for mentoring large groups of students (Glaser et al., 2006; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Such programs are most effective at reducing student attrition as they provide students with one-on-one support from a student who has successfully completed the studies that the first year student is currently completing (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). In addition, they allow students to develop positive relationships with their mentors, especially if they are of similar age, helping students integrate into the university environment and develop connections with other successful students (Glaser et al., 2006; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Facilitating an intensive mentoring program is especially beneficial for non-school leaver students, as they are the group most in need of this kind of intensive support. This is because non-school leaver students may be returning to academic study after a long period of time and may need additional assistance to develop their study skills (e.g., academic writing), engage in independent learning, and successfully negotiate the university environment (Harper & Quaye, 2009). They are therefore the group set to benefit the most from participating in an intensive, one-on-one, peer-to-peer mentoring program (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

The issue of attrition among first year students, and ways to minimise this, is something that has received significant attention through academic scholarship (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Lightfoot, 2007; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). In Australia, over one third of students who enrol in university degrees do not graduate, with student attrition in the first year typically around 30–40% (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). In order to address this, QUT has focused on developing a specific First Year Experience Retention Policy, which aims to improve student retention and engagement and ensure that students have a positive first year experience (Menzies & Nelson, 2012). This policy refers to a whole university approach focused on developing an engaging first year curriculum and monitoring students so that the relevant interventions can take place should a student show signs of disengaging (Kift, 2009a; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). Creating a positive first year experience means helping students transition into university life, making students aware of the university resources available to them, and increasing student interaction with both their peers and academic staff (Barefoot, 2000; Kift, 2009b). Prior to the implementation of the intensive program, statistics indicated that the attrition rate of first year students in Justice degrees at QUT was at 26.9%, double the university average of 13.3%. Overall, the degree is similar to other social science degree programs that experience high levels of student attrition (Lightfoot, 2007). Furthermore, those students with the highest rate of attrition in Justice degrees were non-school

leaver students. Non-school leaver students are defined as any first year Justice student who has not commenced university study in the first 12 months after finishing high school. It should be noted that although this literature clearly establishes a relationship between peer mentoring programs and a decrease in student attrition, due to the nature of the project analysed here, a causal relationship between the program and a decrease in student attrition cannot be established and therefore will not be explored in this paper.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM
In line with literature supporting the use of peer-to-peer intensive mentoring programs, the School of Justice at QUT developed an intensive peer-to-peer mentoring program aimed specifically at non-school leaver students (Barefoot, 2000; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). The aims of the program were:

1. to reduce the numbers of non-school leaver Justice students leaving the degree during their first year;
2. to provide timely support and address the immediate issues and needs of non-school leaver Justice students; and
3. to foster a sense of belonging among Justice students as a community of peers through peer-to-peer support between first year and more established, successful Justice students.

In order to recruit both the mentors and mentees to participate in the program, a two-pronged approach was taken. First, an email was sent to those second year students that were eligible to participate (i.e., who had achieved a GPA of 5 and above) detailing the introduction of the intensive program and asking for expressions of interest to be a mentor. Targeting students who had achieved a GPA of 5 or more at the end of their first year meant that approximately 20% of the cohort was invited to be a mentor in the program. A demographics form was attached to this email and only those who returned the demographics form were added to the program as mentors. In addition to this, all of the non-school leaver first year students were sent an email with details of the intensive mentoring program, which also had a demographics from attached. As with the mentors, those who replied to the email and returned the demographics form were added to the program. As a trial program with only limited trained mentors, the non-school leaver students could indicate their interest to participate in the program up until all of the mentors had been allocated a mentee, at which point the students were told that there were no more places available in the intensive program.

The program followed the approach taken in the literature and used demographic matching between participating first year students and successful student peer mentors according to common characteristics (where possible), such as age range, gender, area of employment, or whether or not they had children (Barefoot, 2000; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). The program coordinators provided support to mentors and mentees via email when requested and provided free coffee vouchers to all mentors to facilitate face-to-face participation and ensure

they did not have to pay for face-to-face meetings. Before being eligible to participate, the mentors were required to complete a university centralised peer mentoring training program which was specifically tailored to the need of the intensive mentors but also promoted the development of generalised mentoring skills. In addition to this training, both mentors and mentees were provided with detailed role descriptions which outlined what participating in the program required as well as a list of expectations concerning the purpose and scope of the intensive program and the boundaries of the mentoring relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The program was implemented according to the following methodology. Upon the commencement of semester one, 2015, all of the non-school leaver students were invited to participate in the program and those who agreed to participate were also required to fill out a basic demographics form. The mentor and mentee pairs were matched according to their common demographics where possible. In line with this, the majority of the mentors were female and aged 18–30. Half of the mentees identified as male and the other half identified as female, but like the mentors, the majority of the mentees fell into the 18–30 age bracket. However, the mentors and mentees were not just matched according to age and gender. Information was also collected about relationship or marital status, whether or not they had children, field of employment, and type of employment (i.e., part-time, full-time, or casual). Common characteristics between the mentors and mentees were identified and they were matched accordingly.

It should be noted that some characteristics were prioritised over others. For example, those mentors and mentees who indicated they were single parents were matched together, as were those engaged in a similar field or type of employment. This meant that the mentors were able to more effectively help their mentees transition into university life, as they could relate to the challenges their mentees were experiencing. Specific information was not collected on how long the mentees has been out of school; however, in order to be eligible for the program the mentors needed to have been out of school for at least 12 months. This process resulted in a cohort of 10 intensive mentors and 10 intensive mentees. Although this is a small cohort, the program was a pilot study, which aimed to collect feedback from the program participants as well as some baseline data to be used for future program evaluation. The mentors were then introduced to their mentees via email, and the participants were required to set up their first meeting. Check-in emails were sent to the participants every four weeks to monitor their progress and ensure that emerging problems were addressed in a timely manner.

The participants were asked to evaluate their experiences and provide feedback on the program at two stages during the semester in order to determine whether the participants felt they were benefitting from their participation. First, preliminary feedback was collected from both the mentors and mentees in week six, which was around the halfway point of the intensive program. The mid-semester evaluation was made up of three short questions that centred on the mentor-mentee relationship, their experiences in the program to date, and any preliminary feedback on how the program could be improved. Second, a

comprehensive formal evaluation survey was conducted at the end of the semester. This survey focused on asking the mentors and mentees both open and closed ended questions about their experiences in the program, any elements that could be improved, as well as specific things they liked or did not like in relation to the way the program was conducted. The end of semester survey was conducted online, and all of those who completed the online survey were given the chance to go into a draw to win a $200 bookshop voucher. Both mentors and mentees were also given the opportunity to participate in a research interview to discuss their experiences in the program further. In addition to this, informal feedback was sought from the mentors at a thankyou event that was held at the end of the semester. Although the evaluation data was not cross checked with the participants themselves, the data collected across the semester was cross checked, and all of the data was subject to analysis by the two program coordinators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall program satisfaction and general feedback from participants

This section integrates the results collected from mid- and end of semester surveys, interviews, and informal mentor feedback. The end of semester survey solicited responses from five mentors and seven mentees, while five mentors and five mentees responded to the mid-semester evaluation. Interviews were conducted with two mentees, and informal feedback was collected at an evaluation event with all 10 of the intensive mentors. The evaluation feedback that was collected from both the mentors and mentees in relation to the program was overwhelmingly positive. Only one mentee disengaged with the program during the semester. Every other participant continued to engage in the mentoring process until the end of the semester. Furthermore, some participants indicated that they would stay in contact with their mentor or mentee after the program had finished. Overall, the feedback from the mentees indicated that they liked having someone to talk to or having someone from within the university community that they could contact in the event they felt overwhelmed or isolated. This aligns with the arguments made in the literature suggesting mentoring programs are an effective way to help students develop a connection to their university community and remain engaged in their studies (Barefoot, 2000; Kift et al., 2010). The following sections highlight specific benefits that both mentors and mentees derived from their participation in the intensive program.

Benefits for the mentees

Both the mid-semester and end of semester evaluations indicated the main benefit mentees derived from their participation in the intensive program was having a mentor that they could readily contact and ask for help when needed. For example, in the end of semester survey, some of the mentees stated:

> It is nice to know there is someone to talk [to] when you have a question or have someone [to] reassure you that it is okay when it all becomes a bit overwhelming.

> [The intensive program was] very rewarding. It is nice to be able to talk to someone who has done what you are currently doing.

A few of the mentees indicated how glad they were to have signed up to the intensive program, especially when they were initially unsure about their decision to participate. For example, one participant stated, "I would encourage you to twist people's arms that are reluctant about doing it. I know I was at first, but I'm glad I did." In addition to this, the end of semester survey data also demonstrated that being part of the mentoring program helped many of the mentees feel part of the university, helped them adjust to university study, and encouraged the mentees to use the resources that were available to them at QUT, all of which are points raised in the mentoring literature in relation to improving student outcomes (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). For example, when asked about the fortnightly meetings, one student indicated they were "extremely helpful" as they "helped me to adapt to uni life and get involved in all of the intensive programs and activities available at QUT."

Finally, feedback from the mentees showed that participating in the program had helped them successfully transition into university life (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Glaser et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). This was because having a mentor provided them with reassurance, meaning the mentees felt less unsure or overwhelmed by the university process, which are again points noted in existing literature (Barefoot, 2000; Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Glaser et al., 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). A number of participants emphasised the benefits of having a mentor to talk to about how to manage assignment deadlines or how to keep up with the course materials or just having someone to contact if they began to feel unsure or overwhelmed (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). For example, one mentee indicated they particularly liked that the mentoring program gave them "someone else to talk [to about] uni and other issues," while another indicated that they liked being "able to contact [their mentor] instantly in a no pressure environment." Overall, the feedback provided by the mentees concurred with the arguments made in the literature, with mentees stating that participating in the mentoring program helped them settle into university study, influenced how they approached learning, and helped them to stay connected to their studies (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). However, the evaluation also indicated that the mentors derived significant benefits from their role in the intensive program.

Benefits for the mentors
As with the mentees, mentors also indicated positive relationships with their mentees and felt their mentees were comfortable asking them questions and would ask for help when it was needed. Some were surprised at how much they could help their mentee and how much difference their advice made in helping their mentee settle into university, which they found to be very rewarding (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). One mentor stated, "I also feel it has been a self-rewarding experience; through what I see as such a small contribution on my behalf, yet my mentee is so thankful for the time I spend assisting him." In addition to this, some of the mentors indicated that they could see the benefits that the

fortnightly meetings were having on their mentee and commented, "I found the fortnightly meetings to be helpful [for the mentee] during exam/assignment times, however when the mentee did not have much work on the meetings were quite short."

Other feedback centred on the fact that both the mentors and mentees were becoming more confident as the semester progressed. Comments made in the end of semester survey included:

> I found that the mentee was quite shy when he first started mentoring with me, however he came out of his shell and was more confident as we met throughout the semester.

> Helping my mentee was extremely self-rewarding.

> [My experience has] been really positive; I was able to build my own self confidence and interpersonal communications skills and felt that I was doing well in providing extra support to my mentee.

These results align with arguments in existing research, which indicate that both mentors and mentees find participating in peer mentoring programs to be a very rewarding experience (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Glaser et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). Finally, some of the mentors also indicated that participating in the program allowed them to feel like they were a part of the broader QUT community, and they enjoyed being able to help new students feel connected to university in this way (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). This was evidenced in the end of semester evaluation survey through comments like, "I found it [the program] to be fulfilling and another way to become part of the QUT community and play a positive role." Again, this feedback illustrates how the mentors were able to develop a positive relationship with their mentee and derive their own benefit from the intensive program while helping their mentees settle into university life.

The mentoring relationship

The evaluation feedback also demonstrated that both the mentors and mentees felt they had established a positive mentoring relationship, meaning the relationship progressed smoothly throughout the semester with minimal issues. In particular, the participants liked that the mentors and mentees had been matched according to common demographics, as this gave them something in common and meant that they were able to relate better overall, something noted in existing research (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). For example, the participants stated:

> I have also found given we are of similar age and experiences in relation to school/university, such common traits has helped us get along well.

> I liked that we were both at similar stages of life, in terms of our age demographic as we had common topics to talk about.

> I liked that an effort has been made to match a mentor and mentee who were very similar in age which made it easy to relate to each other.

Further to this, none of the participants experienced any conflict during the mentoring relationship, though we acknowledge it was only a small cohort of students. Some of the participants had some initial issues making contact with their mentor or mentee and others indicated that external commitments made it difficult to regularly meet face-to-face, but all of the participants stated that the mentoring relationship progressed with minimal conflict.

The mentoring process
The participants were also asked how they experienced the mentoring process, especially in relation to the flexible approach to the fortnightly meetings. This refers to the fact that there was no formal approach required by the fortnightly meetings and each mentor and mentee could decide when, where, and for how long they met. In addition to this, the content of the meetings was also flexible. Although the mentors were provided with a list of topics and discussion points to use at their fortnightly meetings, which included reminders about upcoming assessment, QUT resources that may be of assistance, as well as reminders to make sure the mentees knew how to access the unit materials, assessment information, and online lectures, use of these was not mandatory. This aligns with arguments made in the literature (see for example, Rodger & Tremblay, 2003; Ware & Ramos, 2013) which suggest that a flexible approach provides a positive experience for participants. This was evidenced by one mentee who stated, "I liked the lack of oversight/micromanagement as it allowed for the participants to organise the times and places that suited them."

The evaluation data also showed that although the frequency and duration of the mentoring meetings tended to drop off in the busier parts of the semester, the participants liked having someone that they could contact if they felt like they needed help or reassurance as the semester progressed. For example, one of the mentees stated, "I found that I could really ask the mentor for [study] tips." Another mentee said that their mentor "helped me feel really confident in asking questions that I would not necessarily feel confident asking a tutor or lecturer about." In relation to the fortnightly meetings another commented that "[they were] extremely helpful, it encouraged me to adapt to uni life and get involved in all of the different programs and activities at QUT." This feedback aligns with existing literature and demonstrates that peer mentoring programs are an effective way to help students transition into university, become part of their university community, broaden their social networks, and achieve academic success (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Glaser et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012).

Although the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, the participants did highlight some difficulties that arose out of the mentoring process. These specifically revolved around the role of the mentor as well as the expectations of the mentee. At the commencement of the program, some of the mentees were unclear about the role that the mentor played, which resulted in them asking their mentors to do things that were over and above the requirements of the

program. Some examples of this include: mentees wanting to meet with their mentors multiple times per week; the mentees thinking they were matched with a career mentor as opposed to a peer mentor; the mentees thinking their mentor worked for them; and the mentees asking their mentors to read drafts of their assignments. In each of these situations, the mentors had to work with their mentees to clarify the purpose and scope of the role and to make it clear when the mentee was asking the mentor to do things that were outside the scope of the program. Interestingly, these issues emerged despite the provision of clear guidelines and rules documents to all participants that clearly communicated the boundaries of mentoring relationships in the program. There were also minor initial difficulties for both the mentees and mentors gaining and maintaining contact with each other. This often occurred when either the mentee or the mentor would not respond to their emails as quickly as was initially expected. In each of these cases the mentors were able to work with their mentees to overcome these initial difficulties and develop a successful mentoring relationship for the rest of the semester (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). The issues around the scope of the program and clarification around the mentor/mentee role can be improved in the future.

How the program can be improved
In the end of semester evaluation, both the mentors and mentees were asked how they thought the program could be improved. Suggestions from the mentees revolved around the role of the mentor, particularly around assessment feedback; increased interaction between the program participants; and more detailed demographic matching of the mentors and mentees. Although some of this can be incorporated into the program, such as conducting more meetings during the semester to increase interaction between the participants, other suggestions fell outside the scope of the program. For example, one mentee said it would be helpful if the mentors could help the mentees to understand assessment criteria sheets, as students find it difficult to determine whether they have adequately addressed the assessment criteria. However, this would be difficult for the mentor to do without first reading assignment drafts, and this moved outside the scope of the role description for the mentors. Finally, the mentees stated the program could be improved by matching mentors and mentees according to more specific demographics and matching the mentees with third year students. Although efforts can be made to incorporate this feedback, the ability of the program to incorporate these elements in the matching process depends on which students volunteer to be either mentors or mentees. Furthermore, this program only involved a small cohort, which limited the capacity to match the mentors and mentees according to more specific demographics.

In addition to this, the mentors also suggested some areas where the intensive mentoring program could be improved. These included increased advertising of the program, especially around who could sign up and when, as well as the benefits of participating in the programs; more workshops for the mentees so they can broaden their study skills; and mandatory meetings for the mentors so they can get together during the mentoring process to discuss any tips or issues

they were experiencing. These suggestions align with points made in the literature around successful mentoring programs and are all things that can be incorporated into the program in the future (Fowler & Muchert, 2004; O'Brien et al., 2012; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003).

Finally, there are a number of limitations to this evaluation. First, as the program was run as a pilot, only a small number of mentors and mentees participated, meaning that the evaluation data reflects the experiences of a small sample. Second, the small sample size means that this evaluation data is not generalisable to the broader first year student cohort. Therefore, conclusions cannot be drawn in relation to how the first year experience can be improved for this cohort as a whole. Finally, as the program had only run for one semester, the evaluation data cannot be used to draw conclusions about the impact the program had on reducing the attrition rate of non-school leaver first year students. Should the program continue to run, future research may be able to more conclusively determine any impact the program had on student attrition.

CONCLUSION: OVERALL BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM
This article outlined the results of an evaluation of a trial intensive peer-to-peer mentoring program aimed at non-school leaver first year Justice students. The results of both the mid-semester and end of semester evaluations indicate the program was beneficial. The feedback from both mentees and mentors demonstrated that both groups had positive experiences and benefited from their participation. These preliminary results align with the literature and indicate that participation in a peer-to-peer mentoring program helps non-school leaver students have a positive first year experience and a better supported transition into university life (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Glaser et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Muldoon & Wijeyewardene, 2012). Although this research data cannot conclusively determine that participation in the intensive mentoring program had a direct impact on the Justice School's rate of attrition, the evaluation data suggests that participation in the program supported a number of the intensive mentees to continue engaging with their studies to the end of their first semester. It is hoped that by continuing to run this program in the future, additional data can be collected to more fully determine the impact that the program has on both overall student attrition and non-school leaver student attrition.

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