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Ragavan SK. [Peer Mentoring for International Students in a UK Law School: Lessons from a Pilot Case Study](#). *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 2014, 51(3), 292-302.

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* (2013), available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2013.785254>

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Further information on publisher website: www.tandfonline.com

Date deposited: 2nd May 2014

Version of file: Author final

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Peer Mentoring for International Students in a UK Law School: Lessons from a Pilot Case Study

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This qualitative study discusses the impact of a support network for international students of culturally diverse backgrounds using a peer mentoring scheme. The scheme focused on facilitating cultural integration in the international student community in Newcastle and sought to engender a co-operative community among new students. Data obtained from focus groups revealed the success of the mentoring scheme in facilitating integration of first year international students, engendering a community of international students in the school, and subsequently increasing the percentage of passes in the first year examination while reducing the attrition rate.

Keywords: international students; mentoring relationships; qualitative analysis via focus group discussion; undergraduate law curriculum; integration.

The internationalisation of higher education curriculum in today's global world is crucial in facilitating better interactions and engagements between all students in any institution (Leask, 2009). The integration of economies, societies, and cultures in the

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ever-expanding process of globalisation has contributed to a sudden upsurge in the number of international students in educational institutions worldwide. Globally, higher education institutions have come to recognise that there is a need to ensure that international students integrate within their particular curricula, and understand the significance of higher education institutions incorporating efficient techniques to ease integration (Leask, 2009). The main focus of this research was to assess the impact of a mentoring scheme in facilitating integration amongst first year international students who come from different ethnic, cultural, socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds so that they become effective learners.

The kinds of experiences that international students confront while in an institution far from home are a factor in deciding their success. It is common to find students withdrawing from their proposed study when faced with negative experiences (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2007). International students are a diverse group carrying with them a variety of cultural and social backgrounds; thus learning patterns and academic expectations differ significantly from one international student to another. The transition is not just about acclimatising their educational pursuits in the new country. Students' expectations of the new institution and the stories recounted to them about overseas experiences put pressure on them to perform. For obvious reasons, this expectation can cause anxiety within these students, who may then lose interest in their studies. Typically, host institutions "benchmark" these new international students to perform as well as local students. This also increases pressure on them to succeed. Lawrence (2000) observes that some of the initiatives set up by various

institutions to facilitate transition of students of diverse backgrounds do not address adequately the negative experiences.

The need to address diversity-related concerns and to recognise international students' individual experiences during their academic study was essential in achieving the objectives of the mentoring scheme at Newcastle. A myriad of mentoring schemes have been developed worldwide to address concerns faced by international students. The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, 2008) has come up with its own practical guide on developing mentoring schemes.

Consistent with the promise of high quality education and with the partial objective of addressing international students' negative experiences, in 2004 Newcastle pioneered a support programme for international students which addressed cultural differences and vulnerabilities through the International Student Intensive Guidance and Development Programme (ISIGP) (Ragavan, 2009). An appointed International Student Tutor (IST) was responsible for designing and further providing weekly sessions for international students to facilitate their transition into the new academic environment. The sessions consisted mostly of academic support. Pastoral support was provided on a one-on-one basis outside the academic sessions. Following many requests from second and final year international students for further continuous support and particularly recurring comments from previous international students that there was a certain sense of "awkwardness" and isolation in the institution, a mentoring scheme was initiated in September 2008. The mentoring scheme was a second strand of support for international students and complemented the support already provided by the IST. Both strands played an important role in enabling international students with similar interests and goals to

meet and interact. The Newcastle mentoring scheme was instrumental in facilitating integration of international students in environments culturally different from their own. The aim of the scheme was also to encourage a sense of belonging for the international student community in their new academic environments, resulting in better social and academic integration. The scheme was funded by Newcastle University's Teaching and Learning fund.

Mentoring was thought to be an ideal strategy with which to address the concerns faced by Newcastle's international students and which was established as "a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or more experienced person with a less skilled or less experienced one, with the mutually agreed goal of having the less skilled person grow and develop specific competencies" (Murray and Owen, 2001). For this reason, the scheme facilitated better transition of international students into the curriculum, and further integrated them into a single student community whereby they might "empower" each other to prevent isolation, disorientation, and homesickness (Benn, 2000, p.9). Further, the scheme aimed to develop ongoing emotional resilience against the insecurities and vulnerabilities that often hinder students' aspirations to be successful learners (Cohen and Hoberman, 1981). The importance of the initial experience of learning for first year international students was fundamental, and a positive initial experience did indeed help overcome or at least reduce any subsequent negativity faced by these students.

The Newcastle Law School Mentoring Scheme

Typically, there are two types of mentoring: natural and facilitated (Colley, 2003). The former relies on the process of mentoring being simply “allowed to happen” (Premac Associates, 1984), whereas the latter embraces a planned structure with clear objectives. At Newcastle, a combination of both types was employed: although there was some structure in place, this was approached flexibly and naturally. Both mentors and mentees had the prerogative to manage their relationship with each other in the manner they saw fit. This included deciding on times of meetings, modes of communication and the extent of the relationship. In essence, the style of mentoring adopted here helped to facilitate and manage individual expectations of the mentees from the mentoring scheme.

The major objectives in implementing the mentoring scheme were:

- (i) To recognise the diverse social and academic backgrounds from which international students come, and the need to facilitate integration into the new social and academic surroundings. International students must actively engage, academically, socially and culturally, in the academic environment.
- (ii) To recognise the vulnerabilities faced by these students and to promote better student interaction to prevent isolation, homesickness and intimidation.
- (iii) To ensure that the quality of education provided was rewarding for both students and staff.
- (iv) To provide continuing support to second and final year international students (mentors) in the undergraduate programme.

- (v) To provide mentors with a high quality education. It was also necessary to ensure that mentors were equipped with general transferable skills that would enable them to thrive in a work environment (KRagavan, 2011).
- (vi) To create a community of international students.
- (vii) To cultivate an environment that engendered mutual support and co-operative learning among students.

The size of the mentoring group in Newcastle was small, consisting of 17 mentees of first year and 8 mentors of second and final year international students in the undergraduate law degree programme. Mentors appointed had strong academic backgrounds and good time management and organisational skills. More importantly, the scheme required strong communicators. Following the appointment, each mentor was paired with one or two mentees. The suitability of the pairings was discussed with the mentors beforehand to ensure that the mentors were happy with their assigned mentees.

Training sessions were held two weeks after the selection of mentors. The key objective here was to develop the appointed mentors' knowledge and understanding of the types of concerns that their mentees might raise with them. Mentors were asked to keep a record of all meetings. This was important for two reasons: to enable them to reflect on the sessions with their mentees, and to enable them to advise more strategically. Mentors had the responsibility of inviting mentees to meet with them once a week.

The research study was assessed using the four themes below:

- (1) Mentors' and mentees' experiences in the institution/ country.
- (2) The support provided under the mentoring scheme, including the effectiveness of the scheme, the suitability of the mentor, and training sessions provided to mentors.
- (3) Segregation or marginalisation in the institution.
- (4) Diversity as a common ground to allow new cultural bonds to be created among international students.

Method

The research method used was focus group discussion. This method promoted interactive discussions between the participants in articulating their views, as it provided a platform for participants to describe how they perceived the scheme and whether it worked. It was accordingly more sensitive than questionnaire- or interview-based strategies (Bryman, 2008). However, the significance of focus group discussions in this study and further reasons for the choice are shown below (Kitzinger, 1994):

- (1) Since the group was small, this encouraged a greater variety of discussion and participation from all levels.
- (2) It provided an insight into the workings of the group.
- (3) It encouraged open discussions on uncomfortable experiences which typically would not be revealed in interviews or questionnaires.
- (4) It revealed more issues than the study originally envisaged. An example of this was the issue of segregation and isolation from other students in the institution.

Eight mentors were appointed and seventeen mentees participated in the scheme. Both the IST and the Research Assistant facilitated the running of the focus group meetings. Two focus group meetings were held in the academic year—one in December 2008 and one in April 2009. Each focus group meeting lasted slightly over two hours. A copy of the questions was provided at the start of the meeting, followed by an explanation of the purpose of the study. Groups were also informed of how their views would be used in the research. The design of the questions at the focus group meetings was semi-structured. Although a focus group does not guarantee confidentiality in the views extracted, in the present case participants were given an option to discuss issues in private with the International Student Tutor (IST). However, none of the participants felt this was necessary. Another cause for concern was the potential for a few participants to over-influence the views of others at the focus group meetings; participants were thus advised to be aware of this. Participants were also informed the importance of providing their genuine perception of how the scheme ran that consisted of both positive and negative attributes.

Findings and analysis

Generally, the responses documented from the mentees had been very positive, as all of them indicated benefitting from the mentoring scheme in facilitating integration into the curriculum and belonging to a community of students with similar concerns and interests. Some of the selected qualitative comments are mentioned and discussed below:

1. Students' experiences in the new institution

P9 *"I don't see my parents for three to four months. I get home-sick and face culture shock. I don't even understand the humour."*

P3 *"I felt really confused and I wanted to change university."*

P2 *"I find the academic culture here very different."*

P1 *"I find it very hard to cope with the other students. Many international students face the same thing if they haven't lived in the UK for long."*

P19 *"I was racially abused in a store in my first year here."*

P15 *"I tried very hard to fit in with them. It turned out alright at the beginning, and they liked me. However, I felt I am not being myself. I am forcing myself to be someone that I am not."*

Most participants agreed that the first few weeks in the institution were difficult. Only one student mentor disagreed. (P17 had an English parent, and had lived in England for a few years). Some (P2, P3 and P9), experienced a higher amount of anxiety, frustration and isolation due to differing social and academic expectations in the new institution. For example, P19, a mentor, explained how she had been racially abused in a store. Despite the incident taking place two years ago, her emotional outburst reinforced the need to support international students, and demonstrated that negative experiences can have a direct impact on the emotional wellbeing of international students (Leask, 2009).

P1 found himself isolated from other students. He expressed difficulty in making friends so he had attempted to "squeeze" his identity in order to fit in with other students. The consequences of this "squeezing" had a detrimental effect on his identity (Lawrence,

2000, p.4). The aim of the scheme was not to encourage international students to adopt the new culture, but to be receptive to it. Students from an educational system that is less similar to the UK's will experience more stress than a student from a similar model, but the experience of adjusting and working together with the new educational system will help international students become versatile learners (Lawrence, p.8). The less the resistance to the new culture or expectation, the quicker the learning process becomes.

2. Support under the mentoring scheme

P16 *"My mentor has now become a friend and flatmate."*

P6 *"I was getting in touch with another mentor since I wasn't personally happy with mine. This other mentor is from my country and I felt very comfortable speaking to her."*

P2 *"It was really good especially in the first few weeks since you don't know what the university expects."*

P5 *"I am a mature student, but it doesn't follow that just because you have graduate experience that you don't need a mentor."*

P6 *"My mentor never smiles."*

P14 *"My mentees were not comfortable with the lecturer's accent so I sent an e-mail to the lecturer on behalf of the mentees."*

P2 stated that the support from his mentor in the first few weeks of term was very beneficial and said he was happy that he received continuous support thereon. This type of directed and continuous support is important for international students, as many institutions rely exclusively on their induction curriculum to expose students to the new academic expectations. Typically, induction at most institutions in the UK does not last

more than two weeks. Hence, this “unrealistic” expectation leads to student frustration (Ragavan, 2009).

P8 assisted his mentee, P16, to the extent of helping him find suitable accommodation. As a result of this, P8 and P16 became flatmates. The response from P5 illustrated that the age of his mentor did not affect his relationship with her. Their relationship was based on mutual respect and appreciation, and each had their own experience to share, which enriched the relationship. By contrast, P6 was unhappy with her assigned mentor, and sought the advice of another mentor from her country. P6 explained that the other mentor understood her better and was able to advise her in a way that she was familiar with.

P17 was asked if gender differences between her and her two male mentees (P4 and P9) could be a factor as to why her mentees were uninterested in meeting with her. P17 disagreed, and the same was recorded from P4 and P9 (that the gender of their mentor was not a factor in their resistance to meet with her). Following this, P17's mentees were asked about their reluctance to meet. P4 responded that commitments elsewhere and the demands of study were the main reasons for absence. P9 explained that although he found her unapproachable, this was not the main reason for his absence. He stated that he had football practice on Wednesday afternoons, and this coincided with the mentor meetings assigned from 1-2 p.m. on the school premises. The research study revealed that strict adherence to a fixed time and location was not conducive and it would be better to allow mentors the flexibility in deciding frequency of the meetings, the times of the meetings, and the venues at which meetings were held (Mc Lean, 2004).

Instead of challenging his mentee with his concern, P14 dealt with the concern directly. P14 was asked by other participants during the focus group meeting if he should have left this to be dealt with by his mentees. All mentors were of the view that he had crossed his line of authority, although he felt that, because the lecturer had appreciated his comment, this had worked in favour of his mentees and thus had been of benefit to them. P14 further stated that it is up to an individual mentor to use his or her skills and discretion in taking action. P13 argued that this “pro-active” behaviour may not always work in P14’s favour, and it was only by chance the lecturer conceded.

The two mentees (P5 and P9) who felt their mentor applied a more rigid approach also agreed that the scheme facilitated transition, but recognised that they would have benefitted more had their mentor been more approachable. One of the difficulties mentors confronted was to maintain the enthusiasm of their mentees and to encourage them to attend meetings. Mentors found that attendance of their assigned mentees to the meetings in the first term were very encouraging compared to the following term. The absent mentees attributed the cause of absence to the intensity of the work and also felt more comfortable in the institution and better understood the academic expectations of the school.

3. Segregation

P3 *“In the lecture, you will find international students sitting together. It is the same in seminars. I don’t think they [students] respect my ideas or points of views.”*

P7 *“You need to have the same kind of experience with your mentee to be able to advise appropriately.”*

P6 *“I agree to have a mentor from your own country. He was able to advise on careers because we come from the same legal system.”*

P13 *“Problems and priorities of the students are not the same. You need to have that experience to understand another person facing the same experience.”*

The research study also assessed if a mentoring scheme *for* international students *by* international students resulted in further segregation from “other” students. This was a concern particularly since the support given to international students was intended to help them integrate into the mainstream curriculum, and that new international students ought to be given the opportunity to socialise with other students in order to do so. They indicated that they were keen to integrate but found it difficult. They stated that they could not find common interests with other students. A suggestion was made to the mentees at the focus group discussion meetings regarding the possibility of including other students in the mentoring scheme alongside with international students, and only P2, P7 and P17 indicated their preference for this. Participants were asked in the focus group if perhaps they did not wish to integrate with other students more than was absolutely necessary. All participants challenged the question and indicated preference for mentors to be international students. All mentors and mentees except one mentor (P17) found other students were less inclined to welcome them into their social circle. They found it difficult to engage in both academic and social settings as most of the other students had developed their own circle of friends, and did not wish to include them in it (De Vita, 2007).

For obvious reasons, separating a small group of students from the larger cohort may not permit the necessary transition to take place, when integration into the new

curriculum was pivotal. However, researchers have revealed that there is a general tendency for people to identify or associate themselves with people who share common interests, and sometimes even common problems (Cropper, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) states in her study that people from the same culture or social upbringing tend to assimilate with each other as they find the bond created raises their self-esteem and confidence. When confronting the two “evils,” (i.e. successful transition into the curriculum and the need to develop confidence and self-esteem in the new international students), the latter is thought to be necessary for the new international students. Tatum observes the importance of placing people of similar interests in the position of a mentor so they can assist with concerns relating to vulnerabilities (Tatum, 1997). In a similar vein, Antonio (2004) who conducted a study in America on women of colour, observed that such persons seek others like themselves. It was observed from the study that matching mentors and mentees on the basis of similar interests or demographics could enhance the success of the programme. Villalpando states that “peer groups empower and nourish academic success and foster the development of a critical cultural consciousness by understanding the members’ condition as racialised students within the academy” (Villalpando, 2003, p.629).

4. Cultural diversity

P12 *“Most international students are not in the same age group.”*

P17 *“Home students also have the same financial trouble.”*

P12 *“It’s got to do with the sense of belonging to a group of people that can be traced to the distinct culture, age and other social factors.”*

P19 *“In some respects I have been able to relate better with my mentee, but cannot confidently attribute this to our cultural similarities.”*

Awareness of cultural diversity helped mould students to become better learners as they became receptive to other cultures in the classroom (Atkins, Beattie & Dockrell, 1993). This awareness also promoted maturity, tolerance, openness and altruistic values (Hsiao, 1992). Students seemed able to share similar experiences and to relate to those experiences. Two participants (P8 and P16) who originated from developing countries were surprised at how similar their two countries were and believed this was a common factor that brought them closer together.

Stemming from the discussion above, one mentor (P12) disagreed with the proposition that cultural diversity was a key factor to be taken into account. He suggested that international students were so diverse in their origins and culture that the one common thread that they might have with one another was that they were both on new ground. Could it be that that commonality between all international students—the sense of being on common ground—made them integrate better with each other? P19 expressed that she could not “confidently attribute” her relationship with her mentee to cultural similarities. She said that her mentees were different culturally from her and this did not prevent them from establishing a bond with each other. P7 also stated that being in a new country was only one factor, but the main factor was that they shared similar interests and successes or failures, despite their cultural backgrounds. The vast majority of mentors explained that other students were not in a position to understand international students and their concerns. Although it was difficult to explain the general resistance from mentors, it perhaps originated from their initial (often negative) experience when they

first arrived at the institution. Alternatively, they were asked if they felt their position might be threatened by opening the role to others. They unanimously disagreed. They again reinforced their views that the common concerns and isolation that mentors had experienced in their first year of study placed them in a unique position to assist other international students with their concerns.

Lessons learned

Drawing from the four main themes, the findings of this research project indicated that international students suffer from acute disorientation in their new institution. They find the new academic and social culture daunting. Accordingly, the need to manage expectations becomes essential. The following records the lessons learned:

- International students are a diverse group of students coming from diverse backgrounds. A mentoring scheme brings together a group of diverse students with potentially similar concerns and interests, but it is important to recognise that each student is an individual with his or her particular issues.
- The need to assess individual student experience is as important as the need to ensure successful integration into academic study. For this reason, the scheme needs to be flexible. The study reveals that, generally, the mentees found benefits in the scheme, in particular at the start of their first academic year.
- New international students feel isolated from other students, which contributes to their frustration and anxiety in the institution. Although there were some reservations as to whether placing a group of students together would amount to segregation from other students, the unanimous response was that the need for a

community of students who shared common concerns and interests overrode the concern of segregation from the rest of the student populace. They identified with other international students and found it almost empowering to have that type of support from the beginning.

- The scheme now (after the pilot) encourages mentees to pick their choice of a mentor (as opposed to assigning mentors to particular mentees) following an informal gathering with the appointed mentors. The study reveals that although most mentees did not find the assigned mentors unsuitable, they nevertheless thought that having the option to choose their own mentor benefitted them in the course of the relationship.
- The scheme has now opened doors to other student mentors to participate in the scheme in order to encourage better integration into the new culture found in the institution. However, to preserve the element of community within the international student cohort, a majority of the appointed mentors are international students.
- Mentees should be encouraged to speak to other mentors and to work together as a community when possible.
- Another feature of the scheme that has since changed is the flexibility of mentors meeting their mentees at their preferred times and at a preferred venue. The weekly meetings sessions in an allocated room in the law school has thus been abandoned.

Conclusion

Although the scheme started as a pilot scheme in September 2008, it is now integrated into the curriculum. The lessons learned from it, as outlined above, together with many of the suggestions which emerged from the focus group discussions, are included in the current mentoring scheme. The success of the mentoring scheme facilitated the transition of first year international students, encouraged a sense of community and actually created a community amongst the international student cohort. This has been found to be empowering to all the participants of the scheme. The indirect benefit of the mentoring scheme also saw the general percentage of passes in the first year cohort increase and has reduced the percentage of drop-outs or transfers to other disciplines within the university.

Acknowledgments

Ian Dawson, Ian Ward and Richard Collier for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to Ann Sinclair for her research assistance, to all the participants who generously contributed their time to this project, and to Newcastle University PVC Teaching and Learning Fund for their generosity in funding this scheme. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the UK Centre for Legal Education, Learning in Law Annual Conference, Warwick University, January 2009.

Notes on Contributor

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