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STRUCTURED PEER MENTORING: ENHANCING LIFELONG LEARNING IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

Higher Education in developing countries is frequently restricted to students from privileged backgrounds, especially those from private secondary education. In Pakistan, access to Higher Education, while competitive, is more broadly based, with state universities particularly recruiting students from diverse backgrounds. Just as Widening Participation students in the UK face a challenge in adapting to the learning culture of universities, students in Pakistan face difficulties in taking the opportunities that university presents. In particular, the benefits of wider access and new ideas of peer-assisted learning are inhibited by a formal, hierarchical and teacher-centred university culture.

With the primary aim of introducing peer mentoring as a support service for students in Pakistani universities, a social action research project has been undertaken to explore the impact of students' peer mentoring on the culture of learning, to see if students involved in mentoring effectively transform the learning culture of the institution and promote skills for lifelong learning. The possibility is raised that such schemes, introduced widely, could provide a lever for social change in Pakistan.

A framework of structured peer mentoring was designed as a 'light touch support mechanism' for students in two universities, and evaluated to measure the impact on students' learning and experience. Feedback showed beneficial impact in improved results, progression and retention and in improved peer support across diverse groups within the university.

Introduction

The concept of one person helping another to develop their education or other aspirations has a long history (Roberts, 1999). Homer gave the name Mentor to a close friend of Ulysses who was entrusted with the care and guidance of Ulysses's son, Telemachus, during the 10 years of the Trojan War around 1200 BC (Fagles, 1996). When Telemachus set off to search for his father, the goddess Athena assumed the form of Mentor and 'mentored' him during the long voyage.

Mentoring has been established in many universities in the UK, USA and some other countries, primarily as a means of tackling underachievement and student retention (Phillips, 2009). Peer mentoring in this context is a strategy whereby more experienced senior students (mentors) help and advise their junior peers (mentees) with academic, career or personal development, sometimes under the guidance of a staff member (Miller, 2005). To be effective, mentors need to be clear about the purpose of their involvement with a particular student and to have received some training and an explicit agreement about nature and goals of the mentoring programme (Jacobi, 1991).

This paper presents a social action research project designed to explore the impact of students' peer mentoring on the culture of learning within universities in

Pakistan. As a former teacher and student from Pakistan, I was familiar with the context of research and of the problems students encounter in the Pakistani education system. This research explores the possibility of alleviating some of the student related problems in higher education in Pakistan through the introduction of peer mentoring.

Pakistan has an important strategic place in the world today, geographically and politically. The Pakistan government is committed to the belief that the role of education institutions is pivotal in the economic, political, social and cultural development of the country (Iqbal, 2011), although Pakistan remains a country with very low literacy rates, especially amongst girls in rural areas, and with a higher education participation rate of around 5% (*ibid.*). The level of participation in any form of education in Pakistan is well below international norms (UNICEF, 2011). Since 2001, the Higher Education sector in Pakistan has undergone a renaissance. Currently Pakistan has a total of 135 universities or degree awarding institutions, of which 74 are public/state run and 61 are private. In 1947 when Pakistan gained independence from Indian subcontinent, there were only two universities in the country (Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, 2011).

In Pakistan, universities do not offer mentoring to students and the concept of peer-mentoring is wholly new to students and to many staff. The presence of the extended family is supposed to take care of any support for students outside the standard provision of teaching. However, students' needs are changing. The modernisation and expansion of higher education, new learning and teaching strategies and social changes all impact on the student experience. These changes indicate that traditional support networks are inadequate to deal with the range of issues that might affect students and suggest the need for enhancing student support within the university. Furthermore, the expansion of higher education and the concentration of universities in major cities reflect that students are more isolated from background support – in one of the universities studied, 20% of the students were living on campus, in most cases a long distance from home and family.

Methodology

My approach to the project can be summarized as five steps to planned problem-solving change (Havelock, 1973); the need for change, defining the problem, searching for promising solutions, implementation of the solution and determining whether the problem is resolved satisfactorily. The essence of action research is to monitor change in relation to the planned implementation of a specific practice. In an educational context, an action introduced in this way may yield improvement or information about teaching and learning (Cars and Kemmis, 1986). Action research provides a framework for thinking systematically about what happens in social situations, implementing action for change, monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing the development. By using this framework, action researchers for a small scale project can not only improve what they do, but also their understanding of what they do (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982).

Miller (2005) describes peer mentoring as when people of similar age take on the role of mentor and mentee. He points out that 'a majority of programmes of this sort have been peer tutoring where the emphasis is often upon learning support in

the areas of basic skills or subject learning' (*ibid.*, p. 120). Peer tutoring involves educational support through meetings between advanced learners and less advanced learners (Saunders and Gibson, 1998). Herrmann (in Breen et al., 2001) suggests that, as societies become more and more complex and impersonal, the need for person-to-person mentoring is becoming more important. He claims that mentoring can bring about a culture of continuous learning that is open to differences, more creative and able to deal positively with change. These points emphasise on the need for Pakistani students to gain support from mentoring arrangements in helping them deal with some issues.

The introduction of the mentoring scheme provided a structured peer support system for first year students and the potential benefits to both mentors and mentees were monitored and measured. The hypothesis was that there would be recordable benefits to both students as individuals in terms of improving their personal and key skills, as well as to the university in terms of improved performance and retention. In addition, consideration was given to the idea that, if the students were introduced to community learning services within the university, they would make a positive contribution towards the wider culture. The students of today will become the decision makers and opinion leaders of the country, especially in a country where university education is limited to 5% of the population.

The action research framework had helped me, in an earlier study of mentoring in secondary schools in Pakistan (see Rachel, 2007), to develop an understanding of concepts of mentoring and peer support as they might be applied in the Pakistani educational context. The current project was collaborative action research whereby the position of the researcher is that of an outsider working with insiders who contribute to change in the organization (Anderson and Herr, 1999; Bradbury and Reason, 2001). This tradition of action research measures change, organizational learning and community empowerment (Freire, 1970). A key contribution that action research makes is in helping communities to perceive development not as a destination characterized by material conditions, but rather as a process of learning that results in social and economic advances (Nemeroff, 2008).

The fieldwork was carried out in one state and one private university in Lahore. These were selected to sample groups of students from contrasting backgrounds. While the private university had mainly middle class students, most of whom had studied in private English language schools, the large state university recruited widely across Pakistani society, and the majority of students came from Urdu speaking schools. In each university, a group of senior students were selected to participate in training workshops to prepare to be peer mentors. Also in each university, a group of new students was selected to form the sample of mentees. Selection of the mentees was made on the basis of representative student cohorts, with the assistance of university academic staff. Care was taken to ensure comparable representation in terms of gender, age and relevant variables. To achieve this spread of representation, students were selected from two contrasting departments at the state university, one of which had highly competitive entry, and had very able students and the other was much less competitive.

In university 1 (U1), a total of 60 mentors and 105 mentees were selected for the two participating departments: Department of Education and Research and the Department of Biochemistry and Biotechnology. In university 2 (U2) a total of 20

mentors and 40 mentees were selected. Male mentors were assigned male mentees and female mentors were matched with female mentees to minimise problems that could arise due to gender-related issues.

The project was monitored and evaluated throughout the year and feedback was received by all participants of the project. Focus groups of mentors and individual interviews with at least 5 mentors and mentees from each group at U1 and U2 were also conducted to ensure validity and reliability of the data (Cohen, *et al.* 2011).

Results

The interim and final reviews and feedback from students (mentors and mentees) confirmed the benefits of peer mentoring.

Some comments from the mentees from U1 were:

‘it was due to my mentor that I got good grades in my January assessments’, ‘I feel confident in talking to my tutors because of the encouragement from my mentor’, ‘I know the university credit and semester system better now’, ‘it is a good feeling to know I can talk to a friendly person on campus once a week, to discuss my problems or just to reflect on my studies, my assignments and classes – this has helped me to become more organised’ and ‘I am thankful to you for providing us help in the form of mentors as I was very shy and hesitant to go to tutors with minor issues because this is the first time I have studied in a co-educational institution and I don’t live local’.

One mentee from U2 said:

when I was informed about this facility at the university, I was not sure whether a fellow student could help me, but after my first meeting with my mentor I felt that this could be very helpful because I felt comfortable and my mentor was very supportive and encouraging. I discussed my problems regarding my tuition fee issue with my mentor and was encouraged to speak to the dean of students regarding my issue. I did exactly that - my issue was resolved and I found out that due to my financial situation I had qualified for a scholarship that could cover my tuition fee. I am ever so thankful for the advice and support of my mentor otherwise I think I would not have been able to continue to study at such a prestigious university (mentee, U2).

The mentors’ feedback from both universities on the progress of their mentoring meetings were: ‘it feels good to be valued’, ‘I am more confident and can explain concepts more clearly as this has helped me clear my own concepts on a few topics I have studied last year’, ‘my mentee was very shy but extremely talented I just helped her prepare and participate in a fashion show event held at the university’. ‘It was fun and I felt I had made a positive difference in someone’s life. This is a great feeling!’, ‘thank you for helping me explore my leadership and communication skills, this will help me throughout my life. I wonder if I had a mentor during my first year I could have adjusted to university life much more quickly as I see that my mentee is settling in with a greater ease than I am. Nevertheless, I am happy that I can be helpful to freshmen in the university’.

The problems the students had encountered were mainly minor issues of time keeping. A small percentage of mentees were not interested as they thought it was a waste of their time to meet every week.

Conclusions and Further Developments

Education for citizenship to promote lifelong learning has become an increasingly important part of the curriculum, and peer mentoring provides one obvious way in which higher education institutions can generate service learning opportunities. As Miller (2005) points out, it is important that research is carried out to investigate the most appropriate peer helping strategies for different kinds of student needs. The experience of this project and examples of good practice that were developed provide a sound basis from which to establish a generic model which can be applied in a variety of peer mentoring settings in the education system in Pakistan. In particular, the research findings imply that students who had mentored or been mentored were more receptive to student centred learning, and also took the ideas of continuing education through peer learning into their careers. In one of the universities, the scheme has been adapted to provide mentoring for all first year students. One student mentor from the other university has taken the model of mentoring and introduced it to career support for in-service teachers. In Pakistan, there is an increased demand for service learning and citizenship opportunities in education to promote peace and harmony (Ministry of Education, 2010). It is hoped that the Ministry of Education in Pakistan will include peer mentoring schemes as part of the policy to provide these opportunities and strengthen education across the whole country.

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