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Community education and youth mentoring: how to build good practice?

Robyn Broadbent and Theo Papadopoulos
Victoria University

In 2008, the Helen Macpherson Smith (HMS) Trust commissioned Victoria University to conduct an evaluation of the Mentoring and Capacity Building Initiative's Regional Coordination Projects (RCPs). The RCPs are founded on a model of community education and collaboration that aims to enhance cross-sectoral and whole-of-community approaches to mentoring and community building. Their specific objectives are to:

- *coordinate effective regional delivery of new and existing mentoring programs and related activities*
- *identify, document and share best practice mentoring models*
- *strengthen community partnerships and collaboration, and the capacity and skills delivery of mentoring programs*
- *develop cross-sectoral and whole-of-community approaches to mentoring.*

The aim of the evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the RCPs in achieving these objectives, including the monitoring of program outcomes and strategic partnerships supporting these projects. This paper reports on some of the key findings of that evaluation.

Introduction

In 2008, the Helen Macpherson Smith (HMS) Trust commissioned Victoria University to conduct an evaluation of the Mentoring and Capacity Building Initiative (MCBI) Regional Coordination Projects (RCPs). The MCBI is an initiative of the Office for Youth (OFY), Department for Planning and Community Development, aimed at young people between the ages of 12 to 25. It has two key elements – MCBI Targeted Projects and MCBI Regional Coordination. The purpose of the MCBI is to provide an integrated, coordinated and evidenced-based approach to improving the quality of community-based youth mentoring programs in Victoria.

There are 12 area-based Targeted Projects which aim to increase the number and capacity of youth mentoring projects in communities with high levels of disadvantage and to build on existing models, practices and networks in communities. In addition, there are six RCPs managed by community organisations to build greater coordination and linkages within communities and across mentoring projects, agencies and related service activities. The 12 Targeted Projects are funded by OFY, while the six RCPs are jointly funded by OFY and the HMS Trust.

The youth mentoring programs that operate at a community level are commonly focused on individuals being matched to adult mentors and subsequent role models. These programs have been built around the knowledge from the adult learning sector; they are underpinned by notions of being practical and experiential, and filtered through Mezirow's work on transformative learning that challenges young

people to walk alongside their mentor, consider their previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives, and question them so as they may become more open, permeable and better validated (Mezirow 2000).

The RCPs are founded on a model of community collaboration and support, and aim to develop and enhance cross-sectoral and whole-of-community approaches to mentoring and community building. Their specific objectives are to:

- coordinate effective regional delivery of new and existing mentoring programs and related activities
- identify, document and share best practice mentoring models
- strengthen community partnerships and collaboration, and the capacity and skills delivery of mentoring programs
- develop cross-sectoral and whole-of-community approaches to mentoring.

Policy at both a state and federal level has seen a renewed emphasis on community-based approaches to promoting community and social change as well as economic development. The MCBI capacity-building initiative has relevance to this environment. This nexus is highlighted by the recent release of the Australian Government's National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability which mentions many of the key elements of this initiative. The plan refers to the principles and practical application of 'education for sustainability' as being recognised internationally and fundamentally important to addressing the critical global challenges we all face. Through information and awareness, but more importantly by building people's capacity to innovate and implement solutions, education for sustainability is essential to re-orienting the way we live and work and to Australia becoming a sustainable society (Australian Government 2008).

Chaskin (2001), in his paper on establishing a definitional framework for community capacity building, states that the notion of community

capacity building is both explicit and pervasive in the rhetoric that describes the missions that guide and, to a greater or lesser extent, the activities that embody these efforts. He suggests that there is a commonality in the key elements of the term capacity building as it used in the MCBI. They include the existence of resources (ranging from the skills of individuals to the strength of organisations to access financial capital), networks of relationships, leadership and support for mechanisms or processes of participation by community members in collective action and problem-solving (Chaskin 2001).

The aim of the evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the MCBI Regional Coordination Projects in achieving these objectives, including the monitoring of program outcomes and strategic partnerships supporting these projects.

About the MCBI Regional Coordination Projects

The RCPs were established to build communities of practice using youth mentoring as the focal point. In effect, through the provision of professional development, quality assurance and building networks, the HMS Trust in partnership with the Victorian Government aimed to strengthen the capacity of communities to deliver local youth mentoring programs.

The RCPs cover all eight Victorian Government regions[1] depicted in Figure 1 and encompass all 79 Local Government Areas. The HMS Trust and Office for Youth partnership provides financial support for six RCPs. The HMS Trust funds RCPs in Barwon South West, Hume and Loddon Mallee. The OFY funds RCPs in Gippsland, Grampians and metropolitan Melbourne.

1 Metropolitan Melbourne is covered by one of the six RCPs, and incorporates the three government regions of North West, Eastern and Southern Metropolitan Melbourne.

Figure 1: Victorian Government Regions

The RCPs provide direct and ongoing assistance to youth mentoring organisations by providing:

- direct one-to-one phone advice and face-to-face support when required
- information and resources to improve practice
- referrals to appropriate agencies and departments
- practice-based forums (such as Child/Youth Safe Organisations, Youth Participation)
- youth sector consultations (such as Training, the National Youth Mentoring Benchmarks)
- peer networking
- professional development.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the number of programs supported by the six RCPs as at December 2008, and the number of mentees and mentors supported by these programs. This provides a sense of the breadth of support provided by each of the RCPs (noting that the Metropolitan Melbourne Youth Mentoring Implementation and Coordination Project incorporates three metropolitan government regions).

Table 1: Details on the six Regional Coordination Projects

MCBI RCP (Region)	Number of mentoring programs supported	Number of young people in programs	Number of mentors in programs
Grampians Regional Mentoring Network (GRMN) (Grampians)	25	226	158
Gippsland Mentoring Alliance (Gippsland)	16	180	167
Loddon Mallee Youth Mentoring Coordination Project (Loddon Mallee)	11	114	80
Barwon South West Mentoring Regional Coordination Project (Barwon South West)	13	162	167
Make Mentoring Matter Project (Hume)	16 (+9)	137	98
Metropolitan Melbourne Youth Mentoring Implementation and Coordination Project (MMYMIC) (Melbourne)	69	3714*	3550
Totals	159	4533	4220

Source: December 2008 progress reports *1300 from one program

A snapshot of relevant literature

This section provides a review of current literature offering a context for this study that looks beyond local experience to include national and international research. From the outset, the work of Freire and Mezirow set the context for mentoring that frames the learning principles by which young people can gain benefit. The intention of the review was to consider briefly the literature on the link between

the learning that can be gained through mentoring and increasing protective factors and improving social capital in young people.

The literature review assisted in identifying good practice principles for youth mentoring programs. It was the identification of good practice that located this study within the body of work linking coordination of program resources to the delivery of quality youth mentoring programs. This snapshot of literature scans across those key themes to assist in the development of a strong framework of practice for the future development of regional coordination that aims to better support community workers, projects and volunteers across metropolitan Melbourne and regional and rural Victoria.

Youth mentoring and adult learning theory

Mentoring works to encourage the mentee to consider their current course of action, reflect on the information to hand and transform that learning into alternative courses of action. It is a practice that is framed by adult learning principles. According to Dirkx, 1998, Freire theory of adult learning aims at fostering critical consciousness among individuals. Critical consciousness refers to a process in which learners develop the ability to analyse, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives. Learning helps adults develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which social structures shape and influence how they think about themselves and the world. This process consists of action and reflection in transactional or dialectical relationships with others (praxis). Dirkx outlines that Freire argues education, through *praxis*, should foster freedom among learners by enabling them to reflect on their world and thereby change it. For Freire, transformative learning is emancipatory and liberating at both a personal and social level. It provides us with a voice, with the ability to name the world and, in so doing, construct for ourselves meaning.

Similarly, Jackson discusses transformative learning as a process in which we question assumptions about the world and ourselves that make up our worldview, visualise alternative assumptions, and then test them in practice (Jackson 2008). Mezirow outlines transformative learning as the process whereby we transform problematic frames of reference; mindsets, habits of minds, meanings and perspectives, sets of assumptions and expectations – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally open to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

The impact of good practice

The rising interest in mentoring owes much to research findings over the past two decades highlighting the positive contributions non-parental adults can make in the lives of young people (Walker 2005, Baker & Maguire 2005). More broadly, the research focuses on the link between mentoring and the health and well-being of young people.

The importance of programs facilitating the bonding of children and adolescents with pro-social groups that encourage self-acceptance, healthy self-esteem, positive self-standards and expectations has been demonstrated by Glantz (1995). Resnick, Harris and Blum (1993) and Fuller (1998) have discussed the importance of consistent community connections and inter-agency linkages as central to increasing the protective factors for young people in any community. In their synthesis of almost 800 research studies, Scales and Leffert (1999) concluded that young people's connection with caring adults accounted for a range of developmental benefits, including higher self-esteem, greater engagement and performance in school, reduced delinquency and substance abuse and better mental health. Similarly, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, involving adolescents who were first assessed when in grades 7–12, found those

who reported having experienced a mentoring relationship since the age of 14 exhibited better outcomes in mental health, problem behaviour and connection to general health outcomes (DuBois & Silverthorn 2005).

The mentoring concept has particular appeal in working with young people, particularly those for whom opportunities for positive interaction with adults may be limited. Bellamy *et al.* (2004) states that their research has validated the importance of even one positive adult relationship as a protective influence in the lives of children vulnerable to problem behaviours and bad outcomes, such as alcohol and other drug abuse.

In Australia, MacCallum and Beltman (1999) note that mentoring is a strategy with the potential to meet the individual learning needs of a wide range of students. It can provide regular individual attention to a student or group of students that is not always possible in the standard classroom. MacCallum and Beltman (1999) and Bean (2002) agree mentoring can lead to a range of enhanced learning outcomes for students – academic, motivational, social and personal – at the same time providing benefits to the mentors, the school and the community. It is this diversity that also challenges the notion of what is mentoring.

Shiner, Young, Newburn & Groben (2004) also focus on diversity in recognising that mentoring programs have multiplied and diversified and are designed to suit a range of purposes for an equally diverse group of young people. Mentoring is being used to describe many different types of relationships, and there is no simple definition. They classified different forms of mentoring according to their:

- origin: whether they occur 'naturally' within families or communities as distinct from 'artificial' or professionally promoted relationships

- relationship type and program structure: one-to-one; one-to-group mentoring; peer mentoring
- location and context: whether the mentoring program takes place in a school, workplace or local community setting (Shiner *et al.* 2004).

It is this diversity in the structure and context that partly accounts for the inconsistency of the evaluation results of mentoring intervention programs (Shiner *et al.* 2004) and complicates researchers' attempts to discern which models work and why, and to design and implement practical interventions that incorporate the essential principles of effective mentoring.

Good practice youth mentoring

Notwithstanding the limited research, existing evidence does suggest a set of good practice benchmarks that could inform the development of an evaluation framework. Research indicates that there are a number of critical factors that are reasonable predictors of success. Hollin (1995) and McGuire (1995) linked process to a program's integrity. The processes underpinning implementation, according to both these researchers, have recently been identified as a key influence on the development of successful interventions. This notion covers a range of distinct but related issues, including program design, management and staffing. In essence, according to Hollin, program integrity is less concerned with program content than with the process by which it is implemented, delivered and managed. Rohrbach, Graham & Hansen (1993) utilised a framework of strength and fidelity when undertaking evaluations of youth mentoring programs. Summerfeldt (2003) identified program fidelity as the processes by which the intervention is actually implemented as planned, also described as program adherence (CSAP 2002).

Mentoring Australia (2000) listed the following core program elements as benchmarks of good practice:

- a well-defined mission statement and established operating principles
- regular, consistent contact between mentor and mentee
- establishment under the auspices of a recognised organisation
- paid or volunteer staff with appropriate skills
- written role statements for all staff and volunteer positions
- adherence to Equal Opportunity requirements
- inclusiveness in relation to ethnicity, culture, socio-economic background, gender and sexuality as appropriate to the program
- adequate ongoing financial and in-kind resources
- a program plan that has input from stakeholders
- a rationale for staffing arrangements based on the needs of all parties
- program evaluation and ongoing assessment.

Rhodes (2002), Keller (2005) and Sipe (2005) identify a wide range of conditions and processes that should be important in mediating and moderating the impact of mentoring relationships on youth outcomes. They include the following:

- attributes that the mentor and youth each take to the relationship, such as the mentor's skills and confidence and the youth's relationship history and current level of functioning
- characteristics of the relationship, such as the extent to which mentor and youth form an emotional bond characterised by feelings of trust, empathy and positive regard
- contextual factors, such as pre-existing network linkages to other important persons and relationships in the lives of both the youth and mentor, and the characteristics of the program or other settings in which mentoring takes place.

Similarly, DuBois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn and Tebes (2006) conclude that, although largely neglected to date, the types and value of resources used to provide mentoring are also important determinants of success and must be elucidated in order to conduct cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses and accurately gauge the potential cost-saving benefits of mentoring to social and health service.

Linking good practice with regional coordination

Regional coordination is an innovative approach to supporting mentoring by building mentoring capability within communities and thereby the capacity to maintain effective programs. As a recent innovation, there is limited research on the prevalence and therefore effectiveness of this regional approach. There is nonetheless a range of literature that reviews related elements of project coordination. It is to this literature that we now turn. The current literature explores the importance of resource coordination that builds skills of workers and volunteers and improves the capacity of communities to respond to the issues as they arise. More importantly for many, the inclusion of volunteers in a community has been identified as an important community networking strategy for those individuals, improving their own health and well-being and connection to their community.

The National Crime Prevention report, *Pathways to Prevention*, outlined the need to link protective factors for young people with community capacity building. No one agency or program can be expected to deliver all the services required which influence the full range of risk and protective factors identified in the community appraisal process. The report concluded that partnerships and coordination will be essential, involving service deliverers already involved in the community and perhaps new kinds of services (Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department 1999: 40–41).

Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson's (2001: 136 & 269) concept of partnership implies that no one individual, group or agency has the knowledge, skills and resources to provide the breadth of support necessary to promote wellness in young people. Rather, the collaboration of multiple and diverse stakeholder groups is necessary for a coordinated and comprehensive approach.

A review of the Local Learning and Employment Networks in Victoria concluded that:

> The data shows that social partnerships develop and are sustained because participants engage in partnership work. Effective partnership work embraces and harnesses the contributions of local partners and external agencies, their interactions and the changes they make in the collective work of realising shared goals. The processes of working together allow:
>
> - communities to identify and represent their needs and to secure quality partners and partnership arrangements that will enable them to achieve their objectives, and
> - government and non-government agencies to understand and respond to local needs, to utilise local resources and to enhance capacity for local governance (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, quoted in Office for Education Policy and Innovation 2007: 3).

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2007), in their report on local youth services, also noted the importance of building networks. Currently, many services within the youth sector have established very effective models of collaboration. This collaboration can be extended and strengthened to better support young people and improve service responses. Building networks and improving collaboration between agencies to enable improved service linkages and integration is dependant on both resources and cultural change.

The importance of community and project coordination that is focused on building the skills of workers and other community members is highlighted in an initiative such as mentoring that is highly dependent on volunteers. According to Volunteering Australia (2007), traditionally there has been an artificial distinction between working with volunteers and community development. This distinction has been based on the perception of volunteers as being managed and working for the 'less fortunate' while community development was perceived as engaging with people to build their communities. However, many volunteer programs have indeed been

informed by and reflect effective community development practice and many volunteer programs have grown out of endeavours by people to build their communities.

The Manager of Education and Research at Volunteering Queensland, Mark Creyton, suggests that, in programs that aim to build capacity of individuals and communities, working with volunteers is an important part of community building. It is perhaps more appropriate to see all those who contribute to our work as community members rather than differentiate between the roles of volunteers, staff and community workers (Creyton 2008).

The Department of Planning and Community Development (2004) in Victoria outlines in its community building strategy that government helps build stronger communities by investing in a more linked-up, integrated approach to planning, funding and delivery of services at the local level. Strong communities understand and work with their most disadvantaged populations to ensure good quality service provision for all. To do these things, members of a strong community need to be engaged, involved, feel capable of working through issues and be supported through external partnerships.

Volunteering Queensland, through its connection to the peak body Volunteering Australia (2007), also argues that government has a significant role to play. Beyond mentoring there are a range of programs that use volunteers to work with people and likewise must be supported to develop quality benchmarks. The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2007) argues that, to promote capacity building, collaboration and coordination at community-based level, organisations need to have access to resources about their region and about innovation and programs in other regions.

The literature established elements from government policy, community practice and program management that contribute to the delivery of good quality youth mentoring programs. The review

demonstrated the links between good practice youth mentoring programs and enhancing the health and well-being of young people. Noted was the importance of effective cross-sectoral and whole of community approaches. It was evident that, within this context, the use of resources to coordinate program development, community partnerships, build the capacity of volunteers and professional development resources was essential.

This literature has informed the RCP model and the evaluation. The model has focused on being pro-active, building the capacity of programs and establishing partnerships in communities and across regions. The evaluation framework utilised in this research sought to explore the effectiveness of the contribution of RCPs to strengthening the elements identified in the literature – in particular, informing communities and programs of good practice and building on those elements that are acknowledged as critical to the success of sustainable youth mentoring programs.

Methodology

The evaluation approach consisted of five stages: a literature review; interviews and focus groups with RCP coordinators, mentoring program coordinators and mentors; observational analysis of all quarterly coordinator meetings and/or teleconferences of the RCP coordinators and Project Reference Group; case study analysis; and finally, an online survey of mentoring program coordinators supported by the MCBI RCP.

A summary of the evaluation method and the sample size for each element is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the evaluation method and sample sizes

Method	Participants
Online survey of mentoring program coordinators	43
Focus groups – mentoring program coordinators	28 (12, 8 and 8 in each focus group)
Mentoring program coordinator interviews (one-on-one)	7
Mentor interviews	8 (one-on-one) 20 (informal conversations at mentoring celebration day)
Observational analysis of MCBI RCP coordinator quarterly meetings	8 (inclusive of OFY and HMS Trust representatives)

Impact of regional coordination

The importance of embedding quality principles into programs cannot be underestimated. The very fact that mentoring now attracts large numbers of volunteers who develop close relationships with young people means that overall program quality assurance should be the focus of every community.

Each regional coordinator evidenced their understanding of the range of essential ingredients to establishing quality youth mentoring initiatives including: organisational capability and capacity, including financial and human resources, an effective model, sufficient lead-time to develop and launch a program, and the importance of establishing community partnerships.

The range of strategies and activities identified to best support programs are typically those already undertaken by MCBI RCP coordinators. The feedback serves to crystallise our focus and inform a coordinated and systematic approach to supporting mentoring programs and building collaboration across the

community service sector. The following list provides a checklist of support valued by mentoring program coordinators:

- Mentor training and matching
- Program coordinator training
- Resources, including information on maximising benefits from collaboration
- One-on-one support, including site visits for observation and feedback
- Email and telephone advice
- Moral support
- Advice on funding and other support
- Liaison between mentoring programs to provide more targeting referral for young people (e.g. location, target group)
- Facilitation of practice-based network meetings
- Organisation of networking events
- Organisation of community forums
- Liaison with local schools
- Primary advocate for mentoring in the region
- Promotion of the benefits of mentoring and local programs to key stakeholders
- Organisation of local events to showcase the benefits of mentoring – to promote support and involvement
- Building of community and business partnerships
- Production and maintenance of a list of regional youth service providers
- Being a conduit for engagement with other regional youth service providers, and facilitating regular forums to explore cross-sectoral collaboration to support existing and fund new initiatives.

Mentoring program coordinator responses reveal that regional coordination has facilitated linkages between mentoring programs within regions and between mentoring programs and local business,

government service providers, schools, business, community-based services and other services (including training and professional development providers).

Regional coordination has delivered benefits for local mentoring programs by supporting program coordinators via strategies and activities that include networking, resources, trainers, knowledge transfer, advice, moral support, sounding board for new ideas, and targeted referrals.

The following from a mentoring program coordinator highlights these dynamics:

> We have been liaising with the regional coordinators in Melbourne, Loddon Mallee and Gippsland. Each has been extremely helpful and proactive in organising forums and seminars and identifying program-specific linkages and/or valuable resources. The regional coordinators have also provided guidance in implementing new programs and best practice mentoring. Involvement in the RCP has proved a great networking opportunity and, while probably not directly resulting in the development of linkages with other community groups, has helped to facilitate this process. Given this is a new initiative, it will probably take time for the coordinators to directly identify linkages and notify the relevant organisations for the purposes of collaboration. [Name of program] fully supports the initiative, especially for isolated communities.

This support for and satisfaction with the MCBI RCP initiative was typical of many coordinator responses. Coordinators also provided several examples of linkages developed with a local business as an important source of both mentors and funding.

> Many local businesses have become aware of the work that we do with young people and have decided to partially fund our programs within their local communities.

Regional coordination has facilitated regional networks that bring together commencing and established programs alike and enables the sharing of knowledge and good practice among mentoring program coordinators. This peer support structure is seen as a major strength of regional coordination:

> Following conversations at a meeting, I contacted another organisation to follow-up on advertising opportunities in Melbourne for recruiting volunteers. I also was able to firm up links with [the] Shire Council during a workshop on partnerships in October. This may lead to cooperation between their developing mentoring service and our established service in [name of suburb/town]. There are also talks about a council initiative where staff are encouraged to become mentors in our program.

The online survey provided an opportunity to explore the key guiding questions for the evaluation as perceived by mentoring program coordinators who were being supported, including: the development of linkages between mentoring programs and other community organisations, including strengthening collaboration and partnerships with other service providers; the nature of support services provided by regional coordination, including strategies to better support and enhance the effectiveness of mentoring; perceived barriers to success and strategies for their mitigation; and enablers that enhance program delivery and success.

Table 3 presents a list of activities and services actually accessed by these coordinators to date. These are ranked in order of frequency with the percentage of respondents utilising these support services presented in the last column.

Table 3: MCBI RCP activities or services utilised (n=35)

	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Information through regular emails, newsletters and events	29	83
Access to resources on mentoring	28	80
Forum for networking and sharing practice with other mentoring coordinators in your region	26	74
Web resources	23	66
Professional development or training	22	63
One-one-one support or advice via telephone or email	19	54
Needs-based support or advice as required	17	49
Referral to other youth services and support	16	46
Site visit by MCBI RCP coordinator	14	40
Recognition or celebration events	13	37
Partnership opportunities	11	31
Funding opportunities	9	26
Mentor induction or training	9	26

Clearly the most common activities/services utilised are the provision of information through regular emails, newsletters and events (83%), followed by access to resources on mentoring (80%). Around three quarters (74%) of respondents indicated that they had participated in a forum for networking and sharing practice with other mentoring coordinators in their region, and two thirds had used web resources. Sixty-three percent had received professional development support and/or training, while 54% had received one-on-one support or advice and 40% had received a site visit from a MCBI RCP coordinator. Importantly, around half (49%) of the respondents reported that they received needs-based support or advice as required.

Critical success factors

A critical success factor in the development of the MCBI RCP was the establishment of a community of practice among the six regional coordinators. The regular quarterly meetings and teleconferences provided an opportunity to share knowledge, experience and resources and to seek timely advice from peers. An important supporting role was played by the project sponsors (OFY and the HMS Trust) to coordinate the community of practice and facilitate quarterly meetings and teleconferences. This has been particularly valuable in developing ideas and strategies to better support regional mentoring. The following quotes from two regional coordinators are instructive:

> I regard the RCP (coordinators) as my team.
>
> If there was an occasion where I didn't know the answer to something or where to find a particular resource, I could discuss this with one of the other (RCP) coordinators.

Likewise, the breadth of experience of RCP coordinators is seen as a critical enabling factor – including knowledge of education, health, community development, adolescent health and welfare, publicity and communication.

The development of training and resources has been a key focus of regional coordinators during the establishment phase of the MCBI RCP, a task made easier by the partnership between the HMS Trust and OFY. As previously noted, it is this partnership that has contributed to the growth of key program resources. The good practice guide, the guide to engaging business in youth mentoring, celebrations such as youth mentoring week and the establishment of the Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance, have all been part of a systematic approach and strategy to build mentoring capacity across Victoria. This is the platform from which regional coordinators could launch more localised and customised responses.

Enablers: factors that enhance program delivery and success

Mentoring program coordinators were asked to identify three factors that have enabled them to run a successful mentoring program and to briefly explain how these factors enhance their practice. What follows is a summary of the key themes emerging from the survey, including related sub-themes or enabling factors:

- A supportive and active steering committee or reference group
  - utilise contacts, networks, expertise
- Organisational support
  - management commitment, supportive staff, source of mentors
- Program coordinator skills, attributes and experience
  - knowledge of service sector, professional development, succession planning, perseverance
- Strong relationship with mentee referring organisation
  - cooperative partnerships, program champion
- Networking
  - Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance, regional coordination, practice forums, peer support, training, workshops
- Funding
  - certainty, independent of government, corporate support
- Committed and supported mentors
  - effective recruitment, screening and selection, timely training, careful matching, ongoing support, peer network
- Program model
  - established, clear procedures, evaluated, high profile, reputable

Barriers to success and strategies to remove impediments

Respondents were asked to list up to three barriers to running a successful mentoring program. They were asked to explain briefly why these factors impede good practice and, for each barrier identified, to specify what they believe is required to remove or reduce that barrier. Table 4 presents edited responses to provide a clearer connection between the barrier, its cause and possible mitigation strategy. The barriers and mitigation strategies have been organised around several themes or categories emerging from the responses.

Table 4: Reported barriers, perceived causes and mitigation strategies

Funding and resources

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Funding is our biggest barrier	Program cannot run without a coordinator. Presently part-time (19 hours per week) and often not available for school liaison staff and mentors	This position should be full-time; ideally with two coordinators for it to be run at its full potential
Short-term funding		Seek sustained commitments from various funding sources
Lack of staffing		Build an understanding in government and business about the value of mentoring and the need for sustainability
Funding for activities, research and extension of the program	Knowing what funding is available and how to go about applying	
One mentor coordinator in the state, who supports over 200 mentors	Although our wider team of staff supports the students, this is a very large quantity of people to be responsible for and places a great deal of pressure on the mentor coordinator	A greater number of staff dedicated specifically to supporting the mentoring programs within our organisation

Funding and resources

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Isolation	I am one program coordinator in a service which runs other non-mentoring programs	Resources
Lack of resources to enable coordinator to have sufficient contact with mentees in program	Difficult when providing training and managing all the demands of a program–administrative and face-to-face practice	Collaborate with another mentoring program to combine training and mentor support groups. Additional 0.2 position to enable someone else to do admin. tasks
Lack of time to do run all aspects of the program	Time to manage promotion, training, assessment, accreditation, mentor matching and supporting the match	Resources

Organisational support and commitment

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Lack of commitment from the High School	Program is not valued for the benefits it can provide to young people Committed school welfare officer has moved on	Continue to build the relationship between the High School and the Youth Centre through dialogue
Accessing schools	Identifying key people and capturing their interest	Planning a school staff breakfast for early 2009
Continued organisational support (often discuss discontinuing the program)	Lack of mentor interest, lack of community support and referral to the program Making schools aware of the students' need for this service	An increase in community awareness Discussion with teachers and principals has helped to alleviate this
Support from organisation	Some areas have found it hard to obtain manpower, time and resources	

Funding and resources

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Support from local council/agencies/ community		

Mentor recruitment, matching and ongoing support/retention

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Mentor attrition	Difficulty in their life's circumstances	No solution
Limited time	Impossible to get everyone matched up at the start of the semester	Need more staff on the mentoring program
Mentor availability	Mentor attrition	Better screening of mentors
Delay in screening volunteers	Can only process a number at a time	Delay in screening volunteers
Misunderstanding roles; communicating expectations, boundaries and what we are trying to achieve	Lack of skill in communicating need	More targeted and specific pre-training
Mentors not responding to catch-up requests; getting mentors to provide feedback		Can be overcome with regular contact and support
Mentor recruitment, lack of suitable mentors	Small population to draw from	
Mentor training	Cost and expertise to deliver training	Training organised and paid for by an external organisation

Mentor recruitment, matching and ongoing support/retention

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Professional development: there needs to be more offered on youth issues and the impact on the family	Constant focus on young people while ignoring role and impact on family	
Mentors and mentees not communicating with program manager		Need more time to follow up
Generation gap	Challenging to ensure one recruits appropriate community members, employees to participate in the program as they do not often have an understanding of how schools operate and sometimes find it challenging to work with students from today's generation	Reduce this barrier by spending more time during training to improve volunteers' understanding of schools and the cohort of students they will be working with
Volunteers need to commit to the entire length of the program	Disappointing when mentors let the student down as they could not attend the session	Consideration for a possible MOU between our organisation and the volunteer, or a signed agreement might be an option
Recruiting more male mentors	Notion that mentoring is demanding and more of a fitting role for females	Communication strategy to dispel the notion
Recruitment for both mentees and mentors	Mentoring is uncommon in the Arabic community	A lot of work was conducted to educate parents on the concept of mentoring

Geography

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Limited opportunities for staff training and development	Geographic dispersion of program	Bundle mentor training with other training being delivered
Large number of referrals	Sometimes waiting lists are closed	
Rural isolation can create difficulties for both mentor and mentee	Daily bus services and mentors without private transport: limits access to mentees	Cannot be readily addressed
Distance, distance, distance!	It is a big ask for a volunteer mentor to maintain regular, fortnightly contact with a young person for a minimum of twelve months	When the young person moves from their placement, it is sometimes to another placement or independent living further away which makes contact more difficult
Finding mentors for young people in other regions is an enormous challenge	Working on a program which covers the entire state of Victoria	This barrier may be removed if I was able to learn extra skills in accessing networks in an area. I don't know anything about learning about advertising and recruiting mentors in different areas of Victoria, and about targeted recruiting and getting the mentors I want rather than the mentors I don't need

Evaluation and research on the benefits of mentoring

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Lack of information about the effectiveness of mentoring Lack of (or lack of my awareness of) Australian-based research into mentoring and its short-term and long-term outcomes for young people	Absence of evaluation processes in our program Lack of awareness of latest research on mentoring more broadly	Would be great to receive some readable and volunteer-friendly up-to-date information to assist in recruitment, training and regular communication with mentors
Evaluation	Developing efficient and effective techniques for data collection tailored to meet the needs of the target groups	Consultations and relationship development

Miscellaneous

Barrier	Perceived cause	Mitigation strategy
Early mentee attrition and disengagement resulting in wasted resources and time	Having young people engage in our programs without fully understanding program purpose or genuine interest	Looking internally at how best to prepare students for the program, to ensure we are limiting it to only those who are very willing and truly wanting the assistance of a mentor
Expectation that mentor programs will eventually be owned by the community	Nice in theory. In reality, they cost money, need a facilitator and, with the necessity to have mentors police-checked (as they should be), I cannot see how a mentor program could be successfully community owned	Ongoing funding

Conclusion

The HMS Trust and the OFY have made a serious commitment to supporting and developing the provision of quality mentoring programs to young people around the state. The establishment of the MCBI RCPs has been an effective element in a strategy aimed at improving the practice of youth mentoring. The RCPs have evidenced their effectiveness at improving the quality of youth mentoring programs and increasing the capacity of communities to deliver them.

The funding of the MCBI RCPs was in broad terms a 'line in the sand' that identified the importance of delivering quality youth mentoring programs in communities. Currently, community programs are delivered by a wide range of organisations with relatively small amounts of funding whilst achieving some very significant outcomes for young people. Government has developed a strategic initiative – the MCBI – to build on this fervour for youth mentoring and harness the energy, resources and community commitment to improve quality, better connect and coordinate service provision, and adopt a holistic approach to supporting young people.

Ensuring that volunteers are equipped to deliver the programs for young people to have access to them, ongoing funding for programs, setting benchmarks through the good practice guides, celebrating mentoring through Youth Mentoring Week and establishing a policy framework for youth mentoring were all elements of the strategy of maximising those outcomes. The narratives contained in the previous section demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategic approach.

However, youth mentoring is fraught with challenges which also mean there is still room to respond to new opportunities. Youth mentoring programs currently have large numbers of volunteers who are encouraged to develop relationships with vulnerable young people. It is heartening to acknowledge the large numbers of people who want to contribute to their communities and to young people.

However, it is imperative that we, government and community ensure that all of the right guideposts are in place.

Volunteers need training and on-going support, and program coordinators need to ensure mentors are aware of good practice principles so that young people, volunteers and communities can optimise program outcomes. The MCBI RCPs, as evidenced in this study, have made an impact on that quality assurance, however, it is also up to government and private funders to demand quality benchmarks are embedded within programs as a condition of monies. Such elements as the training of volunteers, program management of matching mentors with mentees and evaluation of programs are essential. Currently this occurs both implicitly and in some instances explicitly.

This evaluation found that the MCBI RCPs have been successful in guiding, advising and supporting both existing and new mentoring projects. Regional coordination has delivered benefits for local mentoring programs by supporting program coordinators via strategies and activities that include networking, resources, trainers, knowledge transfer, advice, moral support, sounding board for new ideas, and targeted referrals. It has facilitated regional networks that bring together commencing and established programs alike and enable the sharing of knowledge and good practice among mentoring program coordinators.

Regional coordination has likewise enhanced links across projects, related agencies and community groups. The benefits for regional programs are pronounced and extend beyond regional coordination to state-based activities that are seen as a vehicle for providing a more holistic approach to supporting young people in their local communities. Linkages across the community service sector are proving to be critical to facilitating greater integration and maximising service access for young people. In one example, regional networks have enabled a better coordination of mentoring demand

and supply, with new referrals forwarded to other programs when capacity constraints prohibit additional matches.

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About the authors

Dr. Robyn Broadbent *has been active in the Youth and Community sector for a period of 25 years. She has worked in the community sector, for local government and then at Victoria University. Robyn combines both her practitioner expertise with her academic role and has published widely. She has continued to be singularly focused on the issues impacting on marginalised groups of young people and has devoted all of her work to improving the life chances of young people who have not shared in the rich resources of a wealthy society.*

Dr. Theo Papadopoulos *is an accomplished researcher in the field of economics and a member of the Australasian Evaluation Society. Theo applies leading contemporary methodology to the evaluation of a range of programs across education, government and the not-for-profit sectors. He is actively involved in a number of youth development and community building programs, as a member of the project management team or commissioned to conduct evidence-based evaluation of program efficacy and outcomes.*

Contact details

Victoria University, School of Education, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, Victoria 8001
Tel: (03) 9919 4861 *Fax: (03) 9919 4646*
Email: Robyn.Broadbent@vu.edu.au