

Hallam, G. and Gissing, C. (2003) Mentoring fosters personal growth - and membership growth. In *Proceedings World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council*, Berlin, Germany

Mentoring fosters personal growth - and membership growth

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Abstract:

An innovative partnership was established in 2002 between the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to provide a mentoring program for students in the Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) course. The program was offered to students enrolled in the capstone Professional Practice unit of the course, which aims to prepare graduates for entry into their new careers. In addition to the benefits gained by students through the close professional and social interaction with experienced practitioners, the program also increased the students' awareness of the value of the professional association and led directly to an increase in new members. Many new professionals have accepted committee roles, bringing youthful energy and enthusiasm to the association. The program is the focus for a research project into learning and professional development outcomes from mentoring and has won a university award for innovation in teaching.

Introduction

In July 2002, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) embarked on a partnership with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to develop and implement an innovative new program to support postgraduate Library and Information Science (LIS) students enrolled in their final semester of study. The QUT/ALIA Student Mentoring Program proved to be a very successful pilot program in 2002 and will be repeated in 2003 to provide support for the next generation of new graduates. This transitional program, on one level, offers positive evidence of the value of a collaborative approach between QUT and ALIA to prepare students for entry into the workforce, and on another level, it highlights the unique role played by the program to bring together four key groups of the profession: the professional association, the educators, practising professionals and potential new members of the profession.

This paper describes the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program and presents some preliminary findings gathered from the pilot program about the benefits to individual participants and to the professional association. QUT has funded a research project to examine the perceived personal and professional development outcomes for both students and their mentors and to formally evaluate the QUT/ALIA

program. At the time of writing this paper, the research project is still a work-in-progress, but more complete findings drawn from the research data will be presented at the conference itself.

The benefits to the professional association, ALIA, through this program are potentially very high. New professionals are eager to join ALIA when their awareness is raised as to what ALIA has to offer and its importance as a facilitator of networking. There are further benefits to ALIA as existing professionals are encouraged to not only join the association or renew their membership, but also to become actively involved in professional activities. The program therefore creates a 'stickiness' factor, where new professionals feel welcomed and included from the start of their careers and where existing professionals feel re-invigorated about the benefits of their professional body and the value of the contributions they can make.

Background to the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program

The seeds for the mentoring program were sown by Kelly Meaney of the QUT Careers and Employment Office and Gillian Hallam, a lecturer and co-ordinator of Professional Practice, the capstone unit in the QUT Graduate Diploma of Library and Information Studies (GDLIS) course. To engage ALIA in the project, Chris Gissing, as Co-ordinator of the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee, was invited to join the discussions. With the endorsement of the National Office of ALIA, the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program was established as a partnership between the Faculty of Information Technology, QUT Careers and Employment Office and ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee. From that point, the collaborative commitment of the planning team led to the development of the pilot program which was launched in July 2002.

The pilot program ran from July 2002 to June 2003. With students finishing their final semester of the GDLIS course in November 2002, the mentoring context provided support in the transition from study to job seeking, and potentially into their first position in their new career. Considerable planning went into the design and implementation of the program, with great ideas eventually turning into reality in July 2002 when 27 of the 51 eligible students elected to participate in the program. Through ALIA special interest groups, ALIA e-lists and personal networks, mentors were found for all student mentees and the matches of mentor:mentee were made. As with all mentoring programs, the process did not go without some difficulties, although on the whole very strong partnerships were established. These included one example of 'virtual mentoring' of a student in Brisbane with a mentor in outback Australia and the linking of mentors and mentees in highly specialised areas such as music librarianship.

The program itself involves introductory sessions on how to develop a strong mentoring relationship, on the value of reflective practice to focus on personal development, as well as social functions and professional development events. The mentors and mentees get together in their own time and in their own ways: some in the workplace, some more socially over coffee or lunch. Some students are also able to undertake one of their two compulsory fieldwork placements in their mentor's organisation.

Communication between members of the group is encouraged and supported by the program's own community website. Through this site mentors and mentees are alerted to events of interest, relevant professional readings and can exchange ideas and views through the discussion forum. Involvement with the community web forum ensures that communication channels extend comfortably and naturally beyond the university context.

The significance of the project has been recognised through the award of a QUT Faculty of Information Technology Teaching & Learning Grant. Objective 1 of the QUT Faculty of Information Technology Strategic Plan 2001-2005 outlines the importance of "optimising the learning experience of students by fostering their capacity to become lifelong learners and meet their diverse professional needs, in courses relevant to and which meet the needs of industry" (QUT, 2001). The mentoring program consequently offers a valuable opportunity for collaboration between the University and industry to align the students' learning environment with the professional context in which they will be employed. It is hoped that the current project can be developed as a model for other collaborative mentoring programs both within the LIS profession in general and within other courses at QUT itself. The mentoring program was also recognised by QUT as the winner of the Faculty of Information Technology Director of Teaching and Learning Innovation in Teaching Award 2002.

Benefits to mentors and mentees involved in the program

The QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program has resulted in strong positive outcomes for the individuals involved in the program. Fisher's (2002) U.K. based research on the future for LIS professionals highlights mentoring as a one of the tools to ensure that individuals not only have the requisite skills but are also able to promote these adequately to non-LIS professionals in gaining work. One of the strong indicators from mentoring programs in general is the increase in confidence of mentees and self awareness of skills and abilities (MacCallum & Beltman, 1999; Rolfe-Flett, 2002; Hale, 1999; Shea, 1992).

One of the key reasons that the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program has had such success in its first year is the gap that it has filled in the needs of new professionals. Research results to be discussed at the conference will identify specific benefits gained by the mentees in the program, in the three categorised areas of professional, learning and personal development. The survey of mentors and mentees has been conducted in both Queensland and in Western Australia, where ALIA runs a group mentoring program for new graduates, so that the findings from one-to-one mentoring can be compared with the findings from the group mentoring program.

Comments such as these are common from mentees highlight the value of the program:

- *Being able to bounce off ideas/problems with a more experienced person was valuable*

- *The program offers a great opportunity for those of us who have just entered or recently entered the profession to gain insight and experience from those who know the ropes*
- *My mentor has helped me make some big decisions, as well as provide me with great suggestions on how to handle issues in my workplace*
- *I have become more confident, learnt tricks about the profession and made educated decisions about my career*
- *It is great to talk to my mentor – I have taken great deal of wisdom from her*

In parallel to the experiences of the mentees, the mentors have also experienced substantial gain for their involvement in the program. Literature on mentoring describes many gains to mentors including but not limited to (Beyene, Sanchez and Ballou, 2002 ; Garvey, 1996; MacCallum and Beltman, 1999):

- the expansion of professional networks
- active use of reflective practice
- improved self-worth
- improved problem solving skills
- enhanced leadership skills
- reaffirmed commitment to lifelong learning.

It is anticipated that the research findings to be presented at the conference will confirm these experiences for mentors in the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program and support their relevance in the specific context of the LIS profession. To date, comments gathered to date from ALIA mentors include:

- *It is interesting to see the profession from a different point of view*
- *I now have a deeper understanding of a recent graduate's experience, perceptions and expectations*
- *I have gained insight into the management and purpose of another type of library*
- *I have gained from my mentee's technical tips and tricks*
- *I have developed a great new friendship.*

Over and above these individual benefits, mentors talk in forums about the increased richness of their experience in the profession not only through the one-on-one interaction with their student, but also through the opportunities to get to know and talk with other mentors. These interactions are not always about mentoring, but often lead to a strong network amongst the mentors for their own support and collaboration on professional issues. The added dimension of getting to know the lecturers at QUT and the highly evolving curriculum offered to LIS students has broadened the mentors' understanding of not only the development of the professional skill base, but also the type of graduates they can expect to be hiring.

Overlaid upon the mentor's individual relationship with their mentee, the broadened network with other mentors and the interaction with QUT is the net of the professional body, ALIA. With increased professional interaction and involvement in broader professional issues, mentors are then linked with the professional association both as an organisation which can support them, as well as becoming, in turn,

supporters of the issues and challenges being progressed by the organisation on behalf of the LIS profession.

Benefits to the Australian Library and Information Association

The benefits of mentoring programs in general have been explored in the literature (Daresh, 1995, Hallam & Gissing, 2002; Ritchie, 1999). However, research in the LIS field has not been well documented and scant evidence exists about the benefits of a program which links a professional association with educators and students. The current research project examines the benefits of the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program for all groups and individuals involved. The research indicates that the professional association, ALIA, gains significant benefits from this program. In addition to the fact that the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program enhances ALIA by contributing to an increase in membership, particularly by attracting new graduates to the association, there is evidence of increased engagement of members in the activities of the association.

ALIA seeks to ensure its objectives are met through its relevance to the profession, which includes the strength in both numbers and diversity of its membership base. ALIA saw personal membership increase in the last financial year by 6%, with an increase in numbers of members from 4789 in 2001 (ALIA, 2002) and to 5071 in 2002 (ALIA, 2003). While this is a positive sign for the organisation, there is also recognition of the fact that there are potentially 17,000 professionals in Australia to recruit from, so further membership growth is an important issue for the association..

ALIA's Key Initiative 1 is "To develop and market new services for students/new professional members, and strengthen the participation of a new generation of library and information professionals in the Association". One recent strategy developed by ALIA aims to specifically engage new professionals in the professional association: the New Generation Policy and Advisory Group (2002a) was established in 2002 to help strengthen the participation of a new generation of library and information professionals in the association. One role of the Group is therefore to advise the ALIA Board of Directors on issues and services of relevance to students and new professional members.

A team of enterprising young professionals organised the New Librarians' Symposium, held in Brisbane in December 2002 – a very successful event, attracting more than 150 'bright and funky' information professionals. A number of the mentoring program participants (mentors and mentees) were actively involved in the planning committees. The New Generation Group used this forum as an opportunity to survey the delegates (NPAG, 2002b), with 121 responses received, to ascertain which services and activities were important to this group of new professionals. The idea of a special interest group for new professionals ranked the highest in the survey, with the need for an ongoing and relevant professional development program and the significance of mentoring programs coming in with very similar rankings. On a scale of 1-8 (1 being the highest), the results indicated (NGPAG, 2003):

- 80.9% rated the New Graduates Group high (1-4 on the scale)
- 66.9% rated Professional Development high (1-4 on the scale)

66.1% rated Mentoring high (1-4 on the scale).

16 of the 121 respondents gave Mentoring the rating of 1, being the most important idea for them. Mentoring is clearly highlighted as one of the important issues for engaging the new generation, both for members generally and for the New Generation Group specifically. The QUT/ALIA Mentoring Program therefore successfully dovetails with the expectations of both the new generation and the professional association by creating the linkages and the framework to engage new professionals.

Queensland has seen steady growth in new members in the past few years, especially in terms of younger members, as illustrated in Table 1:

Date joining ALIA	Date of birth 1980-1983	Date of birth 1970-1979	Date of birth 1960-1969	Date of birth 1940-1969	Total
1/8/02-25/5/03	7	21	11	10	49
1/8/01-31/7/02		15	22	16	53
1/8/00-31/7/01		10	8	21	39
1/8/99-31/7/00		6	6	15	27

Table 1: New members by age, Queensland, 1999-2003
Source: ALIA National Office

In the period 1 August 2002 to 26 May 2003, there were 28 new members born after 1970 (7 of these born after 1980), compared with 6 people born after 1970 becoming new members in 1999-2000. This means that 57% of new members joining ALIA in Queensland in 2002-2003 were aged 33 and under, and 15% were aged between 20 and 23. Current members in Queensland who were born after 1970 represent 17.3% of the total Queensland membership base, which compares favourably with 6.2% in New South Wales and 10.8% across Australia. In conjunction with the numbers of young people joining the association, many of the new members have been ready to accept committee roles, bringing youthful energy and enthusiasm to the association.

Membership statistics from the July 2002 to May 2003 demonstrate that of the 27 students enrolled in the QUT/ALIA Mentoring Program, 16 joined ALIA during the period of their mentoring program. While these statistics alone do not support the fact that the mentoring program was the primary contributing reason for joining ALIA, anecdotal evidence and preliminary research indicates that the Mentoring Program is a key reason for creating a positive perception of ALIA with new graduates and significantly influences them to engage with the professional association. More detailed findings from the formal research in this area will be presented at the time of the conference.

The participation of existing LIS professionals in the QUT/ALIA Mentoring Program also shows benefits for ALIA. Mentors who have been absent members from ALIA

have rejoined the Association and those who may have had paid up memberships but not attended ALIA events or contributed ideas and opinions on issues for the profession have reengaged in a meaningful way with the Association and the issues affecting the profession. While time to be involved in professional activities is constantly seen as a scarce resource for industry professionals, evidence from mentors is that they see the benefits of mentoring as a worthwhile commitment of their time both for their own development as well as their mentee's development.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the benefits from this innovative transitional mentoring program are experienced on both a personal and a group level, enhanced through the collaboration between the university, industry and the professional organisation. Accordingly, mentoring proves to be a richly rewarding experience for all involved, yet culminates in very tangible benefits for the professional body, ALIA. The Executive Director of ALIA, Jennefer Nicholson (personal communication, October 1, 2002), has commended the mentoring program for the way in which it successfully meets three of the association's five Objects:

- To promote and improve the services offered by all kinds of library and information agencies;
- To ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations;
- To encourage people to contribute to the improvement of library and information services through support and membership of the profession.

The QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program demonstrates that a partnership between the professional association and the educational institution, which engages individuals from industry and students entering the field, becomes a highly beneficial proposition to all stakeholders in the program. The partnership is based on a clearly defined need to provide an extremely valuable program to support the development of new professionals. While the program in itself fulfils the important need of developing the strengths of highly skilled professionals in the LIS industry, it has the added advantage of creating a bond between significant sectors of the industry and therefore providing renewed and added vigour to the professional association, ALIA. In the context of the world-recognised trend of an aging LIS profession, the need for workforce and succession planning to help the 'new' to take over from the 'old' is critical to the advancement of the profession as a whole. The professional association will be a key organisation to support this new generation succeed in their chosen careers. The QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program therefore represents one possible framework that can help the professional association maintain, and indeed increase, its relevancy to all its stakeholders in a rapidly changing information environment.

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