Alumni mentoring: An approach to build community of learners

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Abstract

Mentors play a vital role in students' academic journey by providing guidance and encouragement to achieve ambitions and educational goals in future. What if the mentor is an alumnus? In this article, a case study of alumni mentoring in Postgraduate Studies at Middle East College, Sultanate of Oman is presented and proposes an alumnus mentoring framework with three major phases for a systematic implementation across the institution. The practice was implemented in a phased approach, starting with 1st semester modules, and further extended to higher semester modules based on student feedback. The survey conducted to review the effectiveness of alumni mentoring sessions confirms that the alumni mentoring practice contributes significantly to shaping students' journey to academic success and supports in creating a community of learners.

Keywords: Alumni, Community of learners, Mentoring, Postgraduate Studies, Sultanate of Oman.

1. Introduction

Students face several challenges during their academic journey due to lack of skills and motivation and issues in socialising with peers. These challenges create anxiety and may impact them negatively. Many institutions have implemented student mentoring programs to motivate and empower students as a means to support their career development. Peer tutoring is one such practice established at Middle East College (MEC) for undergraduate programs.

Most Postgraduate (PG) students at MEC are working professionals and have a long gap after completing their studies at Bachelor or Diploma level. Therefore, they face challenges in coping up with their academic life and work commitments. Alumni mentoring was an initiative in PG Studies to boost students' confidence to overcome the challenges faced during their educational journey. Moreover, student satisfaction rate is a KPI to be achieved by the Centre for PG Studies. Hence, among the innovative teaching and learning practices to boost the student's confidence and enhance the learning experience, alumni mentoring was one of the action strategies planned to achieve the KPI target. This article presents the practise, its implementation at PG level and the review of its effectiveness based on the feedback.

2. Literature review

Studies have shown that mentoring has a significant impact on enhancing graduate student success (Chu, 2019). The research study states that mentoring supports students in increasing self-confidence in their skills and subconscious competencies (Bolton-King, 2022). Alumni are an essential asset to the university, and the mentoring done by alumni significantly impacts current students to enhance their growth and development (Cajalne, 2012).

The alumni mentoring sessions support students' personal and professional growth, giving their studies a real-world meaning (Dollinger et al. 2019). The critical areas of alumni mentoring are career guidance, course advice, encouragement during the academic program, and opportunities to make professional contacts. The studies conducted among postgraduate students show that mentoring has taken a vital role in resolving many issues faced by students during their academic journey and substantially reduced the number of grievances raised by the students to the program counselors (Tripathy & Satapathy, 2020). Participation in the alumni mentoring program has positively impacted students' perception of the program they enrolled in with a deeper understanding of how the subjects covered in the program support their career growth. In addition, the research shows that students who participate in alumni mentoring programs have better career growth than those who do not (Priest & Donley, 2014).

Finding suitable mentors due to their busy schedules or time restrictions is a challenge in establishing a successful alumnus mentoring program (Corner, 2015). One of the research projects conducted to formalize alumni mentoring stated that if the student and alumnus have different expectations from these mentoring programs, it is difficult to achieve the intended objectives (Skrzypek et al, 2022). Creating motivation among students to attend the alumni mentoring sessions is also a key challenge in getting the expected outcomes (Akuamoah, 2015). Using an alumni mentorship manual with guidelines and sections focusing on the benefits of the alumni mentoring program will support overcoming the challenges faced during the alumni mentorship programs. To strengthen the alumni mentoring program, an online portal is used to streamline the activities including registration of participants and feedback collection (Fickenscher, 2017).

3. Design framework

The framework proposed for alumnus mentoring is in alignment to MEC's Teaching and Learning pedagogy in creating a community of learners. The framework is proposed based on the feedback from course team, students, and alumni. The framework includes three phases; Phase 1: Initiation, Phase 2: Execution and Phase 3: Review and Enhance. The proposed framework (figure 1) can also be implemented as an online portal that will facilitate streamlining the alumni mentoring activities. This can include the registration of alumni and students, discussion forum for collaborative set up between alumni and students, and feedback collection.

Phase 1: Initiation

This stage encompasses choosing the alumni, deciding the timeframe of mentoring sessions and planning the necessary resources for facilitating the sessions. Centre for PG Studies had identified a pool of potential alumni and maintained an alumni database for every module which facilitated the selection at ease. The course management team communicates the guidelines and expectations of the alumni mentoring sessions to the chosen alumni mentors. The timeframe and the resource requirement for the activity can be decided by the module leader with the inputs from the course team however aligned to the academic calendar.

Figure 1. Alumnus Mentoring framework
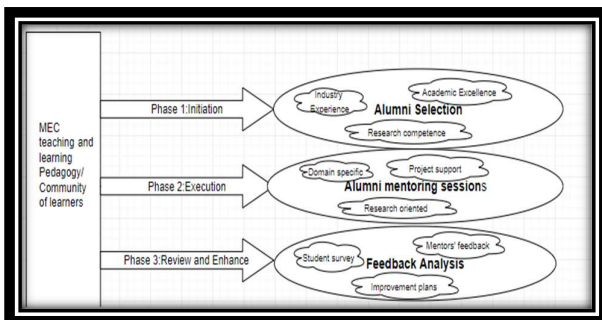
Phase 2: Execution

This stage ensures that the mentoring takes place and is fostering the needs of students. The alumni mentoring sessions were divided into domain specific sessions, project support sessions and research-oriented dissertation sessions. At this phase, alumni mentors deliver the sessions not only focusing on tips of approaching assessments in the module but also how well they could balance their work-study plan to successfully complete the modules.

Phase 3: Review and Enhance

This stage ensures that the effectiveness of alumni mentoring is formally reviewed, and recommendations are implemented for enhancing the practice. A formal mechanism to collect feedback from course team, students and alumni feedback is vital to further enhance the practice.

4. Implementation

The alumni mentoring practice was implemented in a phased approach, starting with 1st semester modules of MSc and MBA programs offered at MEC in affiliation with Coventry University, UK, in Spring 2018. The teaching plan of every 1st semester module comprised alumni mentoring session scheduled between Week 2 and Week 4. The choice of alumnus mentor for a particular module was based on certain criteria: he/she (i) possesses academic excellence in the module (ii) capable of sharing their success journey effectively (iii) willing to contribute to the alma mater. Perhaps, the criteria increased while expanding the practice to higher semester modules including Project and Dissertation. The additional criteria included their relevant industry experience, research competence and involvement in community engagement activities organized by Centre for PG Studies.

Various other platforms to facilitate alumni mentoring were also planned and executed. This included Meet and Greet event, Alumni Project exhibition, Alumni panel discussion on how to choose Project/Dissertation in the final year of study. This also gave students an opportunity for one-to-one discussion with alumni.

During the alumni mentoring sessions, the alumni shared their experiences in time management and the learning strategies adopted to complete the taught modules and Project/Dissertation successfully. The highlights of such sessions also included discussions on how they could transfer the module contents to their workplace, which is a crucial factor in their professional career growth. The alumni project exhibition created a platform for alumni to exhibit their project work to the current students. The alumni exhibition was an opportunity for prospective Project/Dissertation students to see the Project/Dissertation posters of alumni and hear from them on successfully completing their Project/Dissertation module. The interested students were allowed to select a mentor during this process for further support.

To promote a research culture among PG students, alumni mentoring sessions were executed for specific sessions with research objectives. One such was the PG Research Café where an alumnus shared her experience in winning in the national level UPGRADE award program which facilitates the conversion of graduation project to a start-up. This truly influenced a student who participated in the Café event, to participate for the same award program in the subsequent year and received the award.

With the support of the link tutor at our partner university (CU), an alumnus mentoring session by a CU alumnus was also conducted for MSc Project module. This not only benefitted students at MEC in knowing the experience of students who completed the same course from the same University at an international campus but also fostered a cross-community mentoring culture.
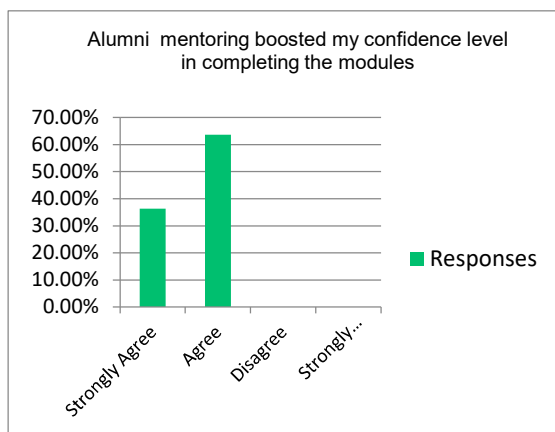
Feedback was collected after every activity. All students either strongly agreed or agreed to the question that the alumni mentoring was effective and to be continued for all modules.

Figure 2. Feedback-1
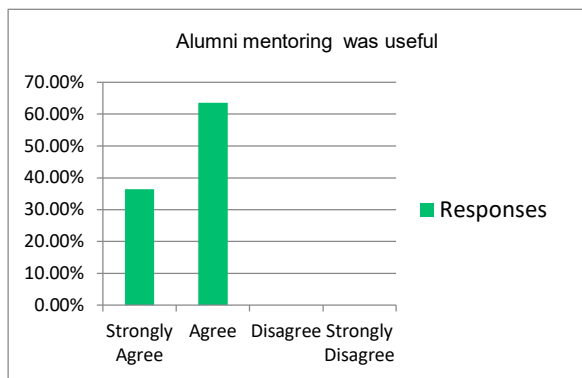
The feedback collected from the students shows that 36.36% of students strongly agreed and 63.64% agreed that alumni mentoring was useful.

Figure 3. Feedback - 2

Students agreed that alumni mentoring aided in boosting their confidence to overcome the challenges faced during their educational journey in completing the modules successfully (figure 3). Figure 4 shows that all students who participated in the survey recommended to continue the alumni mentoring practice in future semesters as well.

Majority of the mentors were rated as effective. They appreciated the alumni mentoring sessions which equipped them to know the challenges they may face during the academic journey and adopt strategies to overcome them. Database of alumni as mentors are expanding. This strengthens the practice and evidences the strong relationship of PG Studies with alumni.

This initiative had a high impact on the semester one module results. The results show that the batch who experienced the alumni mentoring activity could achieve an increase of around 3% in the results compared to the previous batch. This clearly shows the effectiveness of alumni mentoring practice in students' performance and achieving the intended course outcomes. Every session had an average of around 30 students.

Figure 4. Feedback - 3
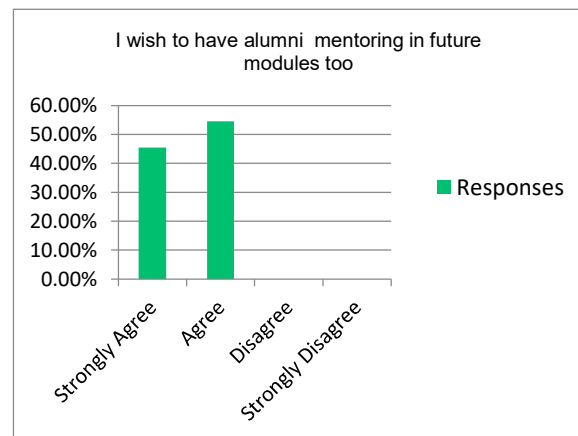
5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The learning environment created for students through alumni mentoring facilitated PG students to establish a network with alumni for further guidance and support in successful completion of the taught modules and Project/Dissertation. Hence, alumni mentoring was made the Centre's action strategy to achieve the target of student satisfaction rate under Education ecosystem in the strategic plan. The student satisfaction rate has been beyond the KPI target which also confirms that alumni mentoring is one of the aspects contributing to student satisfaction. This initiative that paves a way to support creating a community of learners is inspirational and crucial to students' success. The success of the practice motivated the authors to propose a design framework for the institution to facilitate a widespread adoption of alumni mentoring in undergraduate programs as well.

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