

# MENTORING FIRST-YEAR DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS IN TAXATION STUDIES

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## I INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that the dropout rate for first-year students in universities is traditionally higher than for later years,<sup>1</sup> with external or distance students posing the highest risk of withdrawal from studies of any group.<sup>2</sup> This has been the case with the Bachelor of Taxation (BTax) in the Australian School of Taxation (Atax), Faculty of Law at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The BTax program is offered nationally in an off-campus delivery mode and focuses on teaching taxation and commercial law as well as economics and accounting. The majority of its students are in full-time employment, studying part-time; and generally students are in their late 20s to early 40s. A range of support measures, including student peer mentoring, has been successfully employed in Australia and elsewhere as a strategy to support first-year university students in their studies.<sup>3</sup>

Commencing in 1991, the BTax is a three-year degree program. It covers a wide range of courses but focuses on taxation and commercial law. The first course that students undertake is Principles of Australian Taxation Law.

In 2002, Atax introduced an ongoing peer mentoring program aimed at improving the adjustment of first-year students to studying at university. Mentors are selected from continuing postgraduate and undergraduate students and also include some recent Atax

alumni. Peer mentoring was already used as a support strategy in other UNSW programs but had not been employed for off-campus delivery before. The existing peer mentoring program was adapted to suit the demands of a student cohort studying at a distance.

The rationale for including student peer mentoring in the BTax program was to counter the high attrition rates for first-year students. The BTax program was no exception. High attrition rates can be due to many factors, but the ones that are of particular relevance to off-campus students and the BTax program include: feelings of isolation;<sup>4</sup> not understanding the best approaches to take when studying at a distance; problems which range from a lack of organisational skills, failure to understand the role of printed materials and other learning materials, to the lack of access to lecturers for advice;<sup>5</sup> and lack of knowledge of academic support available to the student.<sup>6</sup>

Student peer mentoring has already proved to be a successful support strategy for first-year students in other Australian universities<sup>7</sup> and so was seen as an appropriate addition for beginning students in the BTax program. In view of this, Atax introduced a peer mentoring program in 2002 aimed at improving the adjustment of first-year students to studying at university.

This article considers the impact of the peer mentoring program on two first-year BTax student cohorts (in 2002 and 2006). First, it explores the educational rationale for the introduction of a student peer mentoring program. In Part II, the particular circumstances of such a program as it relates to distance education is discussed. Part III describes the actual program that was developed; while Part IV analyses the feedback obtained from both the mentors and the mentees in the two student cohorts and evaluates the use of peer mentoring in a legal education context.

## II THE EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE FOR PEER MENTORING

### *A What is Student Peer Mentoring?*

Student peer mentoring has been widely adopted by universities as ‘a cost-effective way to promote good social and academic outcomes for commencing and continuing students’.<sup>8</sup> Student peer mentoring uses more experienced students to provide support for

new or less experienced students. In their role as mentors, the experienced students can assist with the social integration of new students into the university community and the academic integration of these students into their programs of study. This differs from study groups which usually consist of students participating in the same program who have a similar level of experience.

Student peer mentors have a similar role to that of a traditional mentor. Mentor derives from the name 'Mentor', a character in Greek mythology. Mentor was a wise and trusted adviser or counsellor who tutored Ulysses' son while his father was away on his travels.<sup>9</sup> The term mentor is often used to describe someone in the position of a role model or who has significant early influence on a person's professional career.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional mentor is typically older, of greater experience and more senior in the world so that they have the knowledge and skills to pass on to their more junior colleagues. This definition of mentoring is similar to the model of an apprentice learning from a master.<sup>11</sup> However, mentoring is now used to describe a variety of relationships that are more complex than that of the master-apprentice. A mentor is often referred to as a coach, guide, sponsor, friend and advisor.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the traditional master-apprentice mentoring model, these relationships are seen as part of a reciprocal process which usually includes a learning dimension. The learning is concerned with purposeful change and encourages a mentee to 'reach her or his God-given potential'.<sup>13</sup> It is this learning dimension that has made mentoring such a popular approach in education, the community and in business. For example, a survey of Fortune 500 companies in the United States found that 96 per cent of executives identified mentoring as an important developmental tool, with 75 per cent saying that it had played a key role in their career success.<sup>14</sup>

It is the broader, less traditional, definition of mentoring that is most relevant to student peer mentoring in the BTax context. The student peer mentor is someone who has a personal, long-term relationship with a student, the focus of which is to facilitate their personal growth. The relationship can encourage and enable learning in order to maximise the mentee's potential, develop their skills<sup>15</sup> and improve their performance.<sup>16</sup>

In this setting, the mentor is a continuing Atax student or a

recent Atax graduate who works with a commencing student.<sup>17</sup> The old and wise guide usually associated with mentoring is replaced with the student peer mentor who is likely to be only slightly older and more experienced in the culture of the university than the student they are mentoring. Klasen and Clutterbuck suggest that student peer mentors do not even have to be older than the mentee.<sup>18</sup>

In the university context, this kind of mentoring relationship has advantages over the more traditional model of mentoring. This is because it allows the student peer mentor to empathise more closely with the experience of the new student, as well as encouraging the kind of open, equal and trusting relationship that is possible amongst peers.<sup>19</sup> Another advantage is that younger mentors may be more competent at other skills; for example, in the use of new technologies.<sup>20</sup> This expertise could be of great benefit to the off-campus student who is likely to utilise online learning.

The personal qualities and the relevance of the experience of the mentor can often be more important to the success of the mentoring relationship than their status in an organisation.<sup>21</sup> In the next section, the characteristics of an effective mentor and the roles they can adopt will be further explored.

### *B What is the Role of an Effective Mentor?*

The role of a mentor has been discussed by many researchers and can be summarised as that of supporting, guiding and facilitating as opposed to telling, directing and restricting.<sup>22</sup> The most important role of the mentor is giving guidance, advice and counsel.<sup>23</sup> This can help all mentees to review and identify their own strengths and areas for further improvement, to develop skills and understanding, and to plan and implement their own professional development.<sup>24</sup>

The general role of a mentor involves passing on skills, assisting the learner in solving problems and providing personal support and motivation.<sup>25</sup> It can also involve providing resources and opportunities for development, helping learners to set high but achievable goals, making realistic plans, monitoring progress and providing feedback.<sup>26</sup>

To be successful, mentors need to possess certain qualities and skills that will help them meet the expectations of the mentoring

role; although these can vary depending on the actual situation. The common characteristics of a good mentor include intelligence and integrity, ability, a professional attitude, high personal standards, enthusiasm and a willingness to share accumulated knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

Parsloe believes that good mentors are:

- (1) Good at motivating, perceptive and able to support the objectives of programs and fulfill their responsibilities to the mentee;
- (2) High performers, secure in their position within the organisation and unlikely to feel threatened by, or resentful of, the mentee's opportunity;
- (3) Able to show that a responsibility for mentoring is part of their job description;
- (4) Able to establish a good and professional relationship, sympathetic, accessible and knowledgeable about the mentee's area of interest;
- (5) Sufficiently senior to be in touch with the organisational structure, sharing the organisation's values and able to give the mentee access to resources and information;
- (6) Good teachers, able to advise and instruct without interfering; and
- (7) Good negotiators.<sup>28</sup>

Poppy Husband and Pamela Jacobs, after reviewing the literature on peer mentoring, attempt to summarise further the roles that appear to be important for successful mentoring. They conclude that these are the ability to provide good social support (emotional, appraisal, informational and instrumental) and to have 'self-awareness, commitment, flexibility, patience and self-confidence'.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is not only the mentor who needs to take responsibility for the mentoring relationship. For the relationship to be truly reciprocal, the mentee must also be fully engaged in the mentoring process.

### *C The Relationship of the Mentee with the Mentor*

It is important that the mentee is aware that they are also responsible for the success of the mentoring relationship. They need to play a role in achieving the objectives of the program.<sup>30</sup> Important characteristics of the mentee are that they are eager to learn, to take on new challenges,<sup>31</sup> are open to feedback and improving themselves,<sup>32</sup> are able to see things from different perspectives,<sup>33</sup> and appreciative of the help they are being given.<sup>34</sup>

It is a good idea for mentees to talk to their mentors about what

they hope to gain from the experience.<sup>35</sup> The mentee should inform the mentor of his or her relevant education and employment background, ask clarifying questions, listen carefully and accept the mentor's advice.<sup>36</sup>

There needs to be regular meetings or contact (for example, email) between the mentor and mentee but just how often depends on the type of program and a range of other factors. Commitments will vary widely in terms of frequency and length of the meeting and will depend on the parties' expectations, the organisation of the mentee, their specific needs, work and family responsibilities, and how the relationship has developed.<sup>37</sup>

The coordinators of the peer mentoring program used the research information on student peer mentoring as a basis for the development of student peer mentoring in the BTax program.

#### *D The Rationale for a Student Peer Mentoring Program for First-Year Bachelor of Taxation Students*

'Distance education' or 'off-campus teaching delivery' covers any program of studies where the student does not attend formal institutional sessions on a regular basis. The student is required to learn independently, though guidance and structure are provided by the distance learning provider.<sup>38</sup>

The BTax is an undergraduate degree offered nationally throughout Australia in off-campus delivery mode. This means that the teaching delivery methods rely mainly on printed materials and online communications with students; although there are other forms of communication available to students, including audio conferences in each course (four to five per semester) and one-day regional classes in major capital cities. These regional classes are offered once per semester and only in centres where there were sufficient students studying in that course (usually around 10 students). Regional classes are taught by academics from Atax who travel to the city for the day. This teaching delivery mode, as with the majority of distance programs, means that it is possible that some students never see their lecturer and/or never see any of the students in their courses.

The geographical isolation of studying by distance causes additional problems for students, particularly those who have not

experienced tertiary study before.<sup>39</sup> The highest withdrawal rate amongst distance students is in the first semester, when they would be feeling the most isolated.<sup>40</sup> In fact, studies indicate that external students have the highest risk of withdrawal of any university group.<sup>41</sup>

There have been several studies, both in Australia and overseas, of the reasons behind attrition from university of off-campus or distance students. An analysis of the educational literature relating to the discontinuation of distance students, published in 1996, identified the following 12 contributing factors (not ranked):

- More time needed with family
- Difficulty of course
- Problems with course tutor
- Other courses available locally
- Problems in developing study skills
- Problems of time management
- Isolation/alienation
- Program/institution not suitable
- Financial problems
- Change of employment
- High fees
- Chance factors outside their control<sup>42</sup>

In 1995, Kevin Brown surveyed 148 of the 521 off-campus students who had discontinued their enrolment in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University in 1994.<sup>43</sup> These students were chosen randomly and were interviewed by telephone by currently enrolled students, which had the advantage of developing a rapport between interviewer and interviewee. The former students were asked to rate the above 12 factors in relation to their decision to discontinue. There were three significant research findings.

First, the major factor in the decision to discontinue their studies was 'difficulty contacting tutors'. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being 'very important', this was the highest rating factor, with a mean score of 3.6. The second highest rating factors were 'insufficient support from tutors' and 'course too time consuming', with equal mean scores of 3.5. 'Feeling isolated from the university' was ranked as the fifth highest factor with a mean score of 3.1. Second, a majority of students who took part in the survey (67.7 per cent) identified 'difficulty contacting tutors' and 'insufficient support from tutors' as major contributing factors to

the decision to discontinue. Third, even for those who discontinued primarily for family, or family and employment, reasons, problems with tutor interactions remained important factors.<sup>44</sup>

Earlier research suggests that the higher the integration of the student into the university's systems, the greater their commitment to the university and to completing their degree.<sup>45</sup>

Other studies strongly support the conclusions that distance students require an orientation to university study that:

- supports goal commitment;
- provides real and symbolic interaction between academic staff and students;
- provides informal as well as formal contact to promote social integration;
- acts as a living institution in which the student feels an integral part; and
- allows the student to develop the skills of independent learning and distance study using new forms of technology.<sup>46</sup>

A further American study found that the dropout rate for first-year students who were mentored was approximately half that of the control group who were not mentored.<sup>47</sup>

Student peer mentoring has been a successful support strategy for commencing students in Australia.<sup>48</sup> There is evidence that, when student peer mentoring is employed in a university context, it has resulted in reduced attrition rates and reduced levels of stress for commencing students.<sup>49</sup>

In view of this research, in 2002, Atax introduced an ongoing, social integration, student peer mentoring program aimed at improving the adjustment of first-year BTax students to studying at university. The development of this program was part of the wider 'First Year Experience Project' established by UNSW to improve the quality of the educational experiences and outcomes for first-year students.

### III THE MENTORING PROGRAM AT ATAX

Peer mentoring was offered as an option for students in the first semester of their study. However, the design of the program for distance education students needed to be different from the mentoring for the on-campus students. For example, the on-campus BBQ to meet the mentors was inappropriate for off-campus

students. The project was designed initially to operate in semester one, 2002, for the beginning of the year intake and semester two for the smaller mid-year intake. At the time, Atax had approximately 130 students commencing the BTax, ranging from school leavers to mature age, geographically spread mostly throughout Australia and concentrated in the capital cities.

The mentors were selected from current Atax students and recent graduates. The training of the mentors was conducted by the UNSW Student Counselling Service, who adapted the on-campus mentor training to meet the specific off-campus needs of the BTax students.

As part of the students' orientation to university study and studying with Atax, study materials for each course and a student guide were sent to each student at the beginning of the semester. In addition, a one-day face-to-face orientation was conducted by Atax academic and administrative staff in Sydney and in other capital cities where there were sufficient students. For remote students unable to attend this orientation, there was an audio conference link to explain the operation of Atax. This orientation session covered such things as how to work through the printed study materials, the workload to expect in each course, assessment, student expectations and accessing the university. Feedback from students was that this one-day session was extremely useful; however observations from academics and administrative staff indicated that there was too much information to absorb in one day and students often did not read the student guide.

It was therefore decided that the student peer mentoring program should not be aimed at academic assistance. Rather, it should help bridge the gap from school and/or work to university study by helping the student become familiar with the operation of Atax and the services available to them from Atax and UNSW in general. This perspective of mentoring is aligned with the principles of adult learning, which consider that adults should be self-directing and ultimately, with support, take responsibility for their own learning.<sup>50</sup>

The aims of the program were to provide mentors to first-year students who would support these students and assist them to become familiar with the approaches and operation of Atax. The mentors encouraged students to form study groups in the courses that they were studying and provided advice on the services

available to students by Atax and the university in general. This approach is called the social integration model of mentoring because its focus is on helping the commencing student adapt to university studies. It was designed 'to assist commencing students' transition to a tertiary environment by creating a more inclusive form of social and academic support'.<sup>51</sup>

### *A Appointment of Peer Mentors*

A call for student peer mentors was advertised in the Atax Weekly Bulletin. This is an electronic weekly newsletter that is sent to all Atax students. Application forms were then sent to all prospective mentors. This form asked students to provide a rationale for why they wanted to be a mentor, as well as requesting details of their academic record and personal interests. The applications were evaluated by two Atax academics, the Academic Support Coordinator and the Associate Head of School (Education), and the mentors were selected for training. One applicant who had previously failed an Atax course was not selected for a mentoring role. Thirty-four mentors were trained.

As part of the call for mentors, each person nominating as a mentor was provided with sufficient information to make them aware of the nature and extent of commitments involved in the program. This information identified:

- the aims, objectives and structure of the program;
- what was expected from students who participated as mentors and especially how much time would be required of them;
- the training requirements and the proposed dates and times of the training sessions;
- details of the ongoing support they would receive, beyond the initial training; and
- how their participation would be acknowledged. In this case, mentors were presented with a certificate stating what their participation as a student mentor involved. This was important to many mentors as it could be used to enhance future employment applications.

Not everyone who volunteers to be a mentor will necessarily be suited to the role. One important consideration is the mentor's appreciation of the value of mentoring. In addition, there are some characteristics that the literature informs us are likely to enhance

the mentor–mentee experience. Students who are to be involved in any mentoring program should feel a sense of commitment to it. Effective mentors are usually students who are interested in making a contribution and assisting their fellow students. In addition, if mentoring is to be effective, the mentors must be able to establish a good relationship with their mentees. This requires mentors to be responsible and personable. They should also have reasonably well-developed communication skills, be good listeners and be able to express empathy. Finally, the best mentors are not necessarily those who have the highest grades; however, to be effective they must be confident in their own study habits and academic progress. If not, participation in the mentoring program could potentially compromise their academic performance.<sup>52</sup>

Each mentoring applicant was interviewed by telephone by the program coordinator. This provided an opportunity to assess the applicant’s suitability for, and commitment to, student peer mentoring. It also allowed the applicant to clarify any outstanding issues. The important issues covered at the interview were: the mentoring role; skills and characteristics required for effective mentoring; and motivation for being involved in the program.

One mentor expressed their motivation:

When I first started, I thought that I was the only one panicking and I felt that I wasn’t coping. I wished that I had had someone to speak to regarding these problems, so I wanted to be the one to ‘be there’ for others.

### *B Training of Mentors*

After selecting the students who are suitable to act as mentors, they need to undergo training. Linda Jucovy suggests that appropriate training is central to the efficacy of any mentoring program.<sup>53</sup> The success of a program depends on the degree to which the students who assume the role of mentor have, and/or can develop, the appropriate expertise. This expertise includes both knowledge and skills,<sup>54</sup> as well as emotional intelligence.<sup>55</sup> The greater the level of skills, and the mentor’s own confidence in their skills and knowledge, the more likely it will be that mentoring will be effective.

The mentor training needs to address the skills required for facilitation or conduct of the mentoring sessions (including essentially generic, interpersonal communication skills) and issues

relating to the content of the mentoring program. In the case of Atax students, the latter included specific knowledge regarding study skills, requirements of distance education and services available both through Atax and UNSW.

The role of a student peer mentor is an unusual one; it is neither tutor nor friend. Mentors are expected to develop a relationship with each of their mentees, but this is a special kind of relationship. Student peer mentors must assume a level of professionalism in the role, be able to encourage and foster trust in the relationship, and be sure to avoid any abuse of power. Some mentor–mentee relationships will form easily and others will be more challenging. With some students, the student peer mentor will feel an immediate rapport but with others this may take time. The student peer mentor will be required to facilitate the initial meeting and develop a sense of understanding and commitment to the relationship. However, they will need to be able to step back, little by little, after every meeting as the mentee gradually assumes more responsibility for each mentoring session.

Mentors must also be sensitive to students with special needs, and know how to identify students who appear to be at academic or personal risk, and the steps that need to be taken in such situations. At the same time, mentors must be aware of their own personal boundaries, and know how to protect and ensure their own emotional health. Mentors must also lead by example as much as by the advice that they give.<sup>56</sup>

The Sydney-based mentors attended a one-day session funded by UNSW and conducted by UNSW Student Counselling Service. This was videoed and course notes were sent to other mentors, who were based outside Sydney, who then attended a half-day audio conference training session, also conducted by Student Counselling Service personnel. This was another example of how the usual university mentoring training programs were adapted for off-campus participants.

The skills training for the mentors covered such areas as: leadership, communication, interpersonal skills (such as active listening and how to build rapport), confidentiality, and when to refer to other UNSW services. Training student peer mentors was an important element of other UNSW university mentoring programs and was seen as a crucial factor in creating a successful mentoring program for BTax students.

### *C Commencing the Mentoring Relationship*

All first-year students commencing the BTax in 2002 were contacted by email, given information about the program and asked if they wished to take part. In 2002, 120 of the 130 students participated as mentees in the program with 34 mentors. On average, each mentor was assigned three students with a maximum of five to a mentor. The same format has been followed in each subsequent year.

The mentors were asked to make the initial contact and arrange a group face-to-face meeting. If this was not possible, a telephone meeting was to be arranged. This initial meeting would then be followed by further face-to-face, telephone or email contact depending on the student's needs and situation. The aim of the initial meeting was to ensure that students were coping with the study environment, that they were aware of the procedures and assistance available to them, and to discuss any problems that had arisen. This usually led to a discussion of a range of issues such as study skills and time management of assignment preparation.

One of the support systems that Atax offers all students in their programs is a student peer list in order to encourage students to form study groups. Many new students are reluctant to proactively seek this form of help and it is particularly difficult for students who are not meeting each other regularly during face-to-face classes to form networks with other students. One specific task of the mentor was to encourage students to form study groups within the course they were studying so they could utilise peer support to enhance their learning;<sup>57</sup> however, they could not compel students to take up the offer.

#### IV EVALUATION BY MENTORS AND MENTEES OF THE 2002 AND 2006 PROGRAMS

In 2003, an evaluation survey was emailed by the UNSW Student Counselling Service to all participants of the 2002 student peer mentoring scheme. Surveys/questionnaires are 'one of the most widely used social research techniques'.<sup>58</sup> In this case, the survey approach was chosen for gathering data because it could deal with different sized samples, required limited resources, allowed for the use of pre-coded answers to simplify analysis and

could be delivered online which was appropriate for collecting data from participants who were studying from a distance.<sup>59</sup> The 2003 survey collected quantitative and qualitative forms of data. It included closed and open-ended questions, scale rating, category and multiple choice items. A slightly different survey, designed in a similar format to the 2003 survey, was emailed in 2007 to the students and mentors who had participated in the program in 2006. The 2007 survey was adapted from a survey developed by Professor Ralph Hall at UNSW.<sup>60</sup> The findings from both cohorts were similar and have been integrated into the analysis below.

Nine mentors (26 per cent) and 14 mentees (12 per cent) responded in 2002. Although this response rate appears low, it is comparable to other student survey response rates at UNSW, especially where students are mature age, part-time and in the full-time workforce. For various reasons unrelated to the mentoring project, the number of participants in the 2006 peer mentoring program was significantly less than in 2002 and consequently the sample evaluated was small. There was only 1 response from the 24 mentors (4 per cent) and 5 of the 33 mentees (15 per cent) who participated in the program. Many of the mentors who were part of the 2006 program had already participated in previous programs and filled in previous surveys, which may explain why the response from them was so low. The small sample size means that the findings that emerged from the 2003 and 2007 survey data analysis are indicative rather than conclusive in demonstrating the impact of peer-mentoring on distance learning students in a law education setting.

From the mentees' perspective, the survey data analysis produced the following three key findings. First, in response to the question 'How useful has the mentoring program been in helping you adjust to university', 50 per cent of respondents considered that it was within the range 3 to 5 (being 'somewhat helpful' to 'most helpful'), and 86 per cent expressed a strong sense of belonging in the school/faculty. Second, the majority of mentees who used the mentors found them helpful or most helpful. Those students who found the mentors less helpful appear to have been the students who had less contact with their mentor. Indeed, 21 per cent of respondents did not use a mentor and either gave no reason or stated that they preferred to work alone. Third, the main challenges for mentees in coping with university study were family and work

commitments. These factors affected their motivation to study. The mentors were of assistance here; as one mentee commented, it was 'helpful having someone who understood the difficulties of combining work, family and study commitments, getting a sense of what to do and how to tackle the work'.

The first finding, which relates to the improved integration of students into university life, reinforces previous research findings. Ron Penner highlights how mentoring allows for a 'speedier adaptation to a new role and/or a reduced likelihood of frustration and failure' in mentees.<sup>61</sup> Clara O'Shea's research demonstrates that mentees believe that student peer mentoring helped them adapt to university life.<sup>62</sup>

O'Shea also found that 84 per cent of mentees in the 2002 cohort she monitored at the Australian National University believed their mentor 'helped with their experiences'.<sup>63</sup> This result supports the second finding from the BTax data analysis. There appears to be a difference, however, in the motivation and stress factors identified as being significant to the mature adult BTax students working from a distance and young adults attending university face-to-face on a regular basis. The competing needs of work and family are key factors that affect mature adult learners' ability to study, whilst younger students focus on study skills issues such as time management and dealing with assessment and workload.<sup>64</sup>

Overall, the majority of mentees found that the mentoring program assisted them to understand the university requirements, making social contacts and feeling part of the university community. However, some students did not consider that the mentoring program helped them to adjust to the teaching style at Atax. The reasons for this are not made explicit but may be related to the added difficulties and isolation of studying at a distance.

From the student peer mentors' perspective, two key issues emerged from the analysis of the 2003 and 2007 feedback. First was mentor skills development: the majority of mentors reported that being a mentor had improved their communication skills, self-confidence, social skills, school identity and employment skills. The highest level of skill development was self-confidence, where 55 per cent rated the improvement in their self-confidence as helpful and 35 per cent rated it as somewhat helpful. Second was the degree of assistance to mentees: the mentors were asked to rate such things as how helpful they were to mentees regarding their

learning styles, access to resources, navigating the university and developing a school identity. Again, the majority of mentors considered that this had been achieved. One mentor commented:

Overall I enjoyed the experience and found it a relatively easy role to take on and feel one of the mentees would regard me as a useful and helpful contact to have made. The other did not take advantage of the experience though did express gratitude that it was available.

The development of self-confidence and improved social skills have been seen by other researchers as being an important benefit of student peer mentoring programs. Kim Slack and Katy Vigurs, in their evaluation of a student peer mentoring program in schools, mention an increase in confidence as one of the key benefits for mentors.<sup>65</sup> John Hall also notes that rewards for mentors include ‘raised self-esteem, social insight and the development of social skills’.<sup>66</sup>

Penner stresses the reciprocity element of mentoring and highlights the mutual benefit that can be gained from such a relationship.<sup>67</sup> BTax mentors appear to have gained satisfaction from helping other students and from contributing to a supportive environment for study.<sup>68</sup> Mentors have also learned new organisation and management skills, which they recognise will benefit them in their professional development.

Off-campus study has particular challenges and student peer mentoring possibly mediates some of the problems that arise from this mode of learning. One student commented, ‘the difficulty of distance education is always likely to present challenges especially as the phone or emails are the only contact we have — this program helped enormously’.

Of the mentees who responded, three did not use the mentoring program after the initial contact with their mentor. These mentees also indicated that they had little to no difficulty coping with university but were positive about the usefulness of the Atax mentoring program with one commenting, ‘the program seems fine I just preferred to learn things on my own. The important thing being I knew it was available to me if required.’ Another added ‘although I didn’t use the mentoring program I believe it is a great idea as it would greatly help new students who don’t have other peers to discuss issues with.’ Only one mentee suggested that the reason they had little contact was because the mentor was too busy.

A further seven mentees had only occasional contact with their

mentors, again indicating they had little difficulty with adjusting to university life. One commented that they 'found the mentoring program very useful as a confidence booster. It really helped talking to someone who had finished the course and assisted with study tips', whilst another said that 'it was reassuring to know you had a contact person if required who has been through the system'.

This suggests that the mentoring program provided a support structure not only beneficial to those students who fully participated in the program but also to those students who accessed it occasionally and even to those who chose not to use it at all.

When introduced in 2002, it was hoped that student peer mentoring would reduce the attrition rates of students in the BTax program. Ros Hill and Peter Reddy suggest that student peer mentoring in a face-to-face study context can reduce attrition rates and stress, by fostering supportive relationships.<sup>69</sup> The attrition rates for the BTax program have reduced over the period 1999 until 2006; however, this may not be fully attributable to the mentoring program and they still remain relatively high. Attrition in distance student populations is often attributed to particular stresses and difficulties in off-campus study. This proposition is supported by the comments and feedback from all Atax off-campus students including those mentored. The competing factors of family and work commitments are the significant reasons why off-campus students decide to withdraw or defer.

## V CONCLUSION

This article has analysed the development and effectiveness of a student peer mentoring program for first-year BTax undergraduate students who are studying a degree in taxation law in off-campus delivery mode. A review of the recent literature demonstrates that student peer mentoring programs have been successfully implemented with first-year students in Australian universities and other universities elsewhere. This study contributes further to existing research through its examination of student peer mentoring with off-campus mature students studying taxation law. It highlights the impact of mentoring on the particular challenges of adult learners returning to study and doing so at a distance so they can combine work, family and study. This is in contrast to many of the current student peer-learning research projects which are

concerned with the experience of younger, first-year undergraduates, studying face-to-face at university.<sup>70</sup>

The findings that emerged from the analysis of survey data from two BTax student cohorts (2002 and 2006) who participated in a student peer mentoring program can be seen only as indicative as the research sample was small. The value of this analysis is evident in the way it reinforces and adds to existing research on assessing the effectiveness of peer mentoring but also in evaluating the first-year university experience for students. For example, the BTax research findings suggest that the benefits that student peer learning programs have been shown to have on younger undergraduate students at university are, in many ways, equally applicable to adult and distance learners.

The key benefits of the BTax mentoring program to mentees were the help it offered students with their adjustment to university study and the program's ability to engender a sense in students of belonging to the university. Mentors reported that the program improved the mentees' learning approaches and confirmed that it aided their integration into the university. In addition, the relationship between mentors and mentees was seen as reciprocal; mentors believed that they had also benefited as the program increased their own self-confidence, social skills, communication skills and organisational abilities. All these findings reinforce previous research findings.

The information that emerges from this study is the impact of mentoring on the additional stress that mature adult students experience when studying and especially when studying in a distance learning mode. The competing demands of work, family and study is peculiar to adult learners<sup>71</sup> and, whilst student peer mentoring programs may add a level of support to first-year adult students, the BTax feedback indicates that they cannot mitigate the other stress factors such students experience outside the university context. This means that the BTax peer learning program may be less effective in reducing attrition rates amongst mature students studying at a distance; although it does appear to add a valuable layer of support and mutual learning for those mentors and mentees who participated in the program.

The student peer mentoring scheme continues to be included in the BTax program. However, the authors believe that further research needs to be conducted and are investigating how this

might be approached. Research funding is currently being sought to conduct in-depth interviews with students and mentors who took part in the mentoring program to provide further information on the Atax peer-mentoring program. Future research should also investigate the requirements of a wider support strategy for mature, postgraduate students studying off-campus in a law education context.

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