

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Professional Mentoring in Student Affairs: Evaluation of a Global Programme

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Abstract

In January 2016, the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) offered a global professional mentoring programme that would link student affairs leaders internationally with new graduates and early career professionals in student services. Protégé participants were primarily new graduates of preparatory programmes in student affairs, or practitioners with less than two years' experience in roles ranging from international services and admissions, academic success, student advising and career services, to new student services Directors. This paper presents the outcomes of the evaluation of the 2016 pilot programme, and recommendations for development of this mentoring initiative. It argues that the programme successfully contributes to advancement of the student support and enrichment components of higher education worldwide, and provides an excellent mentoring experience for the professionals who are shaping the future of student affairs globally.

Keywords

mentoring, professional development, student affairs, global programme, capacity building

Background

The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) was officially founded in 2010, with the purposes of promoting international standards for student services, professional growth of practitioners, and development of students in higher education. It provides a platform for the global sharing of best practice, internships, conferences and research, and has assisted developing countries as they create their student services systems. IASAS was formally chartered in 2013, under the European Union in Belgium.

Towards achieving its aspirations to develop the student affairs profession globally, a multinational research report was released in 2014 profiling the educational backgrounds, functional roles and professional development of student affairs practitioners from 36 countries (Seifert *et al.*, 2014). Respondents across all regions reported that they primarily engaged in conferences and workshops, and utilised online resources to maintain currency with developments in student affairs. Also notable was the consistent reference to

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networking, the importance of connection with colleagues, and the role that professional associations play in providing those essential contacts and peer learning opportunities.

The practice of e-mentoring for continuing education and to facilitate global communities of practice and development is increasingly well documented (Botero, 2015; Hines, 2007; Singh, 2010). In 2015, the IASAS Board resolved to establish an international mentoring programme that would connect student affairs colleagues across the world, and overcome issues of practice isolation due to remote locations or few local professional peers. New and early career practitioners would be linked with established student affairs leaders internationally, utilising online mentoring, video chat, social media, email and/or telephone for regular connection that would enhance participants' experience and understanding of international issues in the global workplace.

Participation

The new Global eMentoring programme was broadcast on the IASAS website and via email to members, for commencement of a pilot programme which would run from January to June 2016. This was met with a positive response worldwide, and over 40 applications were received from prospective mentors and mentees, with 20 pairings achieved.

Tips for successful partnerships were included in a set of brief programme guidelines on the IASAS website, and the multiple mutual benefits of mentoring were promoted, including:

- Linking with an experienced and collaborative network of peers who are knowledgeable experts interested in developing the skills, capability and confidence of emerging student services leaders;
- Increasing personal effectiveness and success;
- Exploring career advancement opportunities and ideas;
- Accessing different perspectives around strategic issues based on the career experiences and professional insight of peers;
- Guidance in specialised fields or technical disciplines;
- Being challenged to develop or integrate new practice.

Although computer-mediated, the pilot programme was intentionally low-tech, informal and unstructured. It was guided by the diverse personal backgrounds, locations, expectations, digital resources and capacity of both individuals in the mentoring partnership.

Mentors were required to have at least five years' relevant experience, be interested in developing emerging student services leaders, and available to volunteer for regular mentoring communication. Over 20 mentor applications were received from student services professionals at higher education institutions in America, Australia, Canada, Egypt, England, Greece, Kuwait, Liberia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines and Qatar. The mentors came from a variety of top institutional leadership posts across the globe. Many mentors had over 20 years' career experience and were either past or current serving vice-presidents for Student Affairs, dean of students, or student services directors. This provided an exceptional resource of professionals to draw on, bringing rich experiences and perspectives to their mentoring partnerships.

Mentees were required to be new student services/affairs graduates or early career practitioners, typically with less than five years' related experience, and seeking personal and career development and growth through partnership with a professional mentor. Over 20 mentee applications were received from IASAS members in America, Cambodia, Canada, Lithuania, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and Qatar. Graduate students comprised 35% of the applicants, with a further 35% having two years or less experience in their current student affairs positions. They ranged from roles in international services and admissions, academic success, student advising and career services to new student services Directors.

Evaluation

Following conclusion of the IASAS eMentoring programme in June, mentors and mentees were invited to provide anonymous feedback about their experience in the pilot programme and suggestions for future improvements. A brief online survey, with two free-text questions, was distributed via email link. In particular the two questions were:

- Questionnaire question 1: What were some positive outcomes for you?
- Questionnaire question 2: How can we improve the IASAS eMentoring programme in the future?

Responses were received from 16 participants in total (40%). Of these, the majority had initially heard about the eMentoring programme via email from IASAS, rather than other promotional avenues such as social media, the website, or print material.

Ten mentors, constituting a sample of 50% of the total mentors who had participated in the eMentoring programme, provided feedback about their experiences. While their responses were predominantly positive, it was apparent that some partnerships had experienced difficulty due to mentees being unclear about the outcomes they sought from the mentoring partnership. For around half of these respondents, where commitment to the programme was not strong, or time differences made synchronous connections difficult, the frequency of mentorship meetings was less than once a month. Only 40% of respondents felt that their mentees had clear goals in mind.

This can be illustrated by means of the following quotes from the survey.

eMentees should be encouraged to have clear goals for participation; we should have guidelines for ending and or continuing the e-mentoring relationship.

I suggest having more deliberate items to accomplish, that way both can feel they benefited from the programme.

Have mentees identify as part of the application process what goals and outcomes they hope to accomplish and sharing these with the Mentor upon pairing.

Although mentees were asked in the application form to broadly articulate why they were interested in the global professional mentoring programme, key outcomes were not requested. In the future, determining specifically what a protégé would like to learn, and

how a mentor could best assist them, will also facilitate matching them with the ideal person for a successful mentoring partnership.

Mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship, and its value through the exchange of objective insights and perspectives can be a key element to professional growth and job satisfaction for student affairs practitioners (Clifford, 2009). Mentors were asked to provide comment about how the programme provided value for them in their established careers. While the motivation for participating in the programme was to ‘pay it forward’ and support less experienced colleagues, what mentors learnt from mentees was also significant. Mentors felt that their skills in supervision were enhanced, they reflected on their own professional pathways and future, and they broadened their understandings of student services in the international context.

Six mentees (30% of mentees participating in the programme) completed the feedback survey. The lower response is likely a reflection of the varied levels of commitment of mentees (as noted by some mentors): only three respondents recorded that they had had definite goals in mind for their mentoring partnership. Half of the mentees reported meeting with their mentors more than twice per month, and these mentees also rated their overall experience of the programme a staggering 9.6 out of 10. They reported that they had achieved the following aspirations:

- Learning more about student services practices in other countries;
- Connecting with professional colleagues globally; and
- Gaining guidance in navigating the higher education sector and career opportunities.

One mentee reported that he had been invited overseas to shadow his/her mentor in the workplace.

The sometimes polarised experiences that were described by the protégés are consistent with assessments of other professional mentoring programmes. One of the key learnings for Hines (2007), in a review of Librarian mentoring, was the acknowledgement that (like mentors) protégés are busy people with complex lives too, and this can impact on their participation and commitment to the partnership.

New practitioners in resource-limited settings are keen for connection with the global student affairs community. This was demonstrated in a most telling comment responding to how the mentoring programme could be improved:

By connecting aspiring members from developing countries more and more, and helping them to participate in international conferences.

This recognition of the capacity-building potential for the mentoring programme emphasises the value of the new initiative. It is making an important contribution to the core goals of IASAS, through fostering and enabling inclusive collaboration in the practice, scholarship and professionalisation of student services.

Notably, the mentor and mentee groups were in accord regarding two issues. The first, timing of the programme – both groups were equally divided when asked about the

ideal timeframe for a professional mentoring partnership. Half felt that six months was appropriate, with the remainder preferring an extended programme of twelve months. The second, both groups gave an overall rating of 6 on a Likert-type scale of 10 for the pilot programme – a positive experience but leaving room for improvements – with the highest scores (10) provided by respondents who had identified clear goals for their mentorship.

Mentorship for Enhancing Professional Development: Recommendations

The IASAS pilot programme attracted mentee applications from key target groups where IASAS seeks to build professional and community capacity: early career practitioners, and institutions developing their student affairs and services systems.

To enhance the eMentoring programme in its next iteration, the evaluation of the pilot programme suggests the following improvements as recommendations:

- The time period for the mentoring programme should be extended to eight months.
- Mentees ought to articulate clear goals for participation in their application form.
- A structured discussion guide should be provided to mentors and mentees for the initial meetings and goal setting.
- The Coordinator of the eMentorship programme should have regular contact with the programme participants in the first months of pairing.

Overall, both mentors and mentees indicated that the programme was valued and worthwhile; however, many participants felt that clear goals and greater structure were required for them to maximise the partnership. The requests for structure could indicate benefit in utilising a formal computer-based mentoring platform in the future. Overall, the enthusiastic international response to the programme, and feedback obtained from this initial mentoring experience, have provided valuable insights that will inform improvements responding to universal accessibility, and mentor and protégé aspirations.

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