Inspire, Support, Connect

START Mentor Program Report
Semester 1, 2013

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Executive summary
In 2013, the START Mentor Program provided a student mentor to new Curtin first year students to assist in their transition to university during their first semester of study. Student mentors are senior students from the same school or faculty as their mentees. Mentors provide ongoing guidance, support, important and relevant information and referral to Curtin support services where appropriate. The program is designed as a broad scale, opt-out model, meaning that all new students are assigned to a mentor (on a typical ratio of 1 mentor to 15 new students) and can choose their own level of engagement with the mentoring process.

Results from a survey of 2398 first semester students indicate that the provision of a peer mentor supports new students in their transition to tertiary study. The results also indicate that mentors play an important role in the retention of new students in their first semester, with 17% of students who had considered withdrawing acknowledging the impact of their mentor on their decision to remain at Curtin. New students also recognised the role of their mentor in connecting them to resources and events at university, and helping create a sense of belonging to the broader Curtin community.

As well as providing peer pastoral care to new students, the mentor program provides a leadership development opportunity for senior students. Mentors are students in the second or subsequent year of their degree, recruited within their school or faculty for the role. They are required to attend training, and are also provided with professional development opportunities in collaboration with the Careers Centre and the Curtin Leadership Centre. Mentors are encouraged to develop reflective skills and to apply their experience in the role to their broader learning experience at Curtin and its alignment with the Curtin Graduate Attributes. Results from the mentor evaluation suggest that students value the opportunities provided by the mentor program, in particular the development of effective communication skills.

Recommendations for the 2014 program include managing the expansion of the program to include alternate entry pathway students, new schools, and the Kalgoorlie Western Australian School of Mines (WASM) campus. Other recommendations include ideas for communicating and engaging with new students effectively across a variety of media.
Acknowledgements

There would be no mentor program without the active and enthusiastic participation of the student mentors. We would like to acknowledge the 640 students who shared their time and their expertise in helping new students transition into study at Curtin University in semesters one and two of 2013.

The success of the program also depends heavily on the support and participation of the school mentor program coordinators who manage the program in each of the areas in which it is run. We would like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of the following staff:

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1.0 Introduction
The Student Transition and Retention Team (START) Mentor Program was implemented in 2008 as part of a key retention strategy. Since 2011 the program has been run across all schools and faculties on the Curtin Bentley campus. The objective of the program is to provide all new to Curtin students with a peer mentor. Students who have completed a minimum of one year of study are recruited and trained in the role of mentor. Mentors are then matched to a small group of mentees entering the same course of study. Mentors provide support via frequent email contact and occasional face-to-face meetings throughout the course of the semester.

Extensive research has shown that peer-to-peer mentoring is one of the most effective ways of improving both student engagement and retention. Evaluation of the Curtin mentor program supports this research. As a consequence of the positive impact the mentor program has had on student retention and engagement, the decision has been made to expand the program. In semester 1, 2014, the program will be expanded in an effort to provide a peer mentor to all students who are commencing their study at Curtin for the first time. This will include the traditional cohort of first year students, but will also capture alternate entry pathway students commencing their studies at Curtin at various points in their degree.

Each semester the mentor program is evaluated in order to assess its effectiveness. Mentors are required to complete a comprehensive online evaluation as a part of their participation on the program. Mentee data is also captured via evaluations completed by students in first year units. The results of these surveys also indicate the mentor program serves a far greater purpose than merely improving retention results. It provides both new and senior students with a network of support, the opportunity to develop professional skills, and a sense of belonging within the community of the university.

This report details the feedback from both the mentees and the mentors. Both cohorts evaluate their experience of the program, its impact, and possible areas for improvement. The report then goes on to provide a look at the program’s impact in the broader community, and recommendations for the future direction of the program.

2.0 Mentee Feedback
Toward the end of semester one each year, new students are surveyed on their experience of the mentor program. In semester one, 2013, a total of 2398 surveys were obtained from mentees completing their first semester of study at Curtin. These responses were collected in lectures, tutorials and online from students studying across all the schools and faculties with an active mentor program in place.

The purpose of this survey is to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the mentor program on the transition experience of students who are new to study at Curtin. Of particular interest are the questions related to attrition and retention, which
assesses the influence of a mentor on a new student’s decision to persist at university. The survey also evaluates the type of support provided by mentors, new students’ perceptions of the mentor program, and areas for improvement.

2.1 The impact of mentors on mentees’ decision to persist at Curtin
One of the primary objectives of the mentor program is to improve student retention. In order to assess the impact of the program on retention, a persistence question is asked directly of mentees. Students are asked “Were you at any point considering withdrawing from Curtin?” They are then asked the follow up question, “If yes, did your mentor make any difference to your decision to continue at Curtin?”

Of the 1995 students who responded to this question, 13% confirmed that they had considered withdrawing from Curtin during the course of their first semester. Of those, 17% indicated that their mentee had influenced their decision to remain at Curtin. This data is consistent with results obtained in the 2012 mentee survey.

If these results are extrapolated to apply to the entire cohort of approximately 7000 new students, it can be inferred that the mentor program had a direct and positive influence on the decision of at least 155 students to remain at Curtin.

It is difficult to calculate a precise dollar value of this impact. However, if a student drops out, the university receives no further income associated with that student – from international student fees, domestic student fees or Commonwealth support. Further, the funds spent on recruiting these students have been largely wasted. The savings as a result of preventing student attrition could be safely predicted to be in the range of millions of dollars per annum.

2.2 The impact of mentors on mentees’ first year experience
As well as assessing the impact on student retention, the evaluation also explores the impact mentors have on new students’ experience of transition to tertiary study. In the mentee survey, students are asked to rate a series of statements about the benefits of having a student mentor during this transition period. Statements were rated from 1: strongly agree to 4: strongly disagree, with 5: unable to judge.
From Figure 1 it is evident that new students have a strongly positive response to the support provided by mentors. The statement that received the highest response of agree or strongly agree was “My mentor provided me with useful information about Curtin”, which reflects the training received by the mentors prior to commencing in their role. The second most significant statements were the ones addressing the provision of both confidence and reassurance in commencing at Curtin. The third statement that received significant positive evaluation was “My mentor helped me feel I belong at Curtin”.

The fact that the mentor program serves a significantly larger purpose than simply improving retention becomes obvious when evaluating this feedback. Providing new students with structured peer support during their first semester at university helps them settle in to the new environment and supports them during this transition.
The mentor program also helps create a sense of belonging, connecting the new students to the broader Curtin community.

### 2.3 Areas of support and qualitative feedback

In the survey mentees are asked to identify the common areas where they required and were provided with support by their mentors.

![Figure 2: Areas where mentors provided assistance](image)

Figure 2 indicates that the single most significant area where assistance was sought was in course related queries. Students also rated campus information and general study tips as areas where support was provided. It is interesting to note that students are seeking peer support related directly to their study far more than they are seeking health and wellbeing or social and community support. This endorses the structure of the program, which matches a senior student mentor with new students in the same field of study. In this structure mentors are well equipped to respond to the primary concerns of the new students.

As a part of the survey students were also asked to comment on the positive aspects of the student mentor program and/or their student mentor. More than 50% of the respondents took the time to provide this qualitative feedback, with comments addressing both the merits of the service provided, and the quality of the student mentors participating on the program.

Comments about the quality of the mentors focused largely on how friendly and accessible they were. These included statements such as:
‘Very easy to talk to and I can easily call my mentor a friend’
‘They were very approachable and easy to contact’
‘She was very friendly. Made me feel comfortable, gave me some great tips and showed me things that probably would have taken me years to discover’

Comments about the program mainly centered on the usefulness of the information provided, and the benefits of having someone with more experience available to answer questions and provide support. Examples of these responses include:

‘Having someone there with experience who is around the same age made the transition to uni more comfortable and encouraging’
‘Helped me out with a lot of things I was struggling with throughout the semester and always made himself available and approachable. Continues to stay in touch’

Students also acknowledged that access to a mentor was beneficial in that they could take questions or concerns to a peer prior to seeking answers from a staff member:

‘Provides help for students without needing to approach tutors’

Even students who did not use their mentor acknowledged the advantages of having that peer support available:

‘Personally I did not feel the need for a mentor but the fact that I had one was reassuring in terms of potential assistance I could have needed to settle in’.

2.4 Further feedback and areas for improvement
The mentee survey also provides the opportunity for new students to offer feedback on how the mentor program could be improved. Of the 2398 respondents, 37% completed this section. However, a significant number of comments in this section were also positive, relating to the fact that they enjoyed the experience and had no suggestions for improvement.

The most common theme in suggested improvements centered on the amount and quality of contact with the mentor. Students would have liked more frequent email contact, faster responses to their queries, and overwhelmingly, more face to face contact with their mentors during semester.

One of the biggest challenges in running a broad scale, opt-out mentor program is managing the quality and level of engagement between mentors and mentees. In most schools and faculties the program is initiated during Orientation Week, where an event is organized to connect the mentors with their mentees face to face. In order for this to be truly effective, attendance at Orientation is a pre-requisite. Figure 3 indicates that of the students surveyed, 88% attended some or all of their school Orientation events.
Students who do not attend Orientation, or who do not meet their mentor at Orientation, are still provided with a mentor. Mentors are given a list of their mentees and are asked to contact them via email within the first week of semester. Figure 4 indicates that 85% of all new students were contacted, at some point in the semester, by their mentor, with 70% of that first contact occurring, as requested, by the end of Week 1.
This result suggests that 15% of new students do not have contact with their mentor during their first semester. The reasons for this are varied, and difficult to measure. One indication is that the percentage of students who do not attend Orientation is similar to the percent that do not connect with their mentor. It is also possible that some mentors fail to engage in the program as desired. There is also the issue of administrative errors, with wrong contact details provided for students resulting in an inability to make the connection. As the program continues to grow and develop one of our aims will be to significantly improve this result.

The final question asked of students on the mentee survey was whether or not, having experienced the mentor program as a mentee, they would consider becoming a mentor themselves. Of the 1966 responses, almost 40% confirmed that they would. As the mentor program has now been running for six years, the students who volunteer to mentor were once mentees. The hope is that students find the experience a positive one, and see the benefits of participating in the program not just as a mentee, but also as a mentor. While 40% is a significant response, the aim in future iterations of the program would be to improve on this result.

3.0 Mentor Feedback
Mentors are required to complete an evaluation survey at the end of each semester as a part of their engagement on the mentor program. These surveys are completed electronically in the final weeks of each semester. The surveys collect both qualitative and quantitative data from the mentors on various aspects of their experience on the mentor program. In semester one, 2013, 398 surveys were completed by the student mentors.

The purpose of the mentor evaluation is two-fold. The first is to assess various elements of the program, and to explore areas for improvement. Of particular interest is the correlation between the data received from the mentee survey and the responses provided by the mentors on the impact of their role on the mentees’ experience. Similarly, it is useful to evaluate the efficacy of the mentor training and the support provided by both the START mentor program coordinators and the school mentor program coordinators. The second purpose of the evaluation is to encourage the mentors to reflect on their experience of the program. They are encouraged to articulate the positive aspects of mentoring, for both themselves and their mentees. What is working well on the program, and areas requiring further improvement are also examined.

3.1 The impact of a mentor on a new student’s transition experience
One of the original objectives of the mentor program was to improve student retention. In light of this, a key question asked of both mentors and mentees is the impact that having a mentor has on a student’s decision to persist in their studies at Curtin. Mentors are asked to assess if any of their mentees were considering withdrawing from Curtin during the semester. Of the 394 students who completed this question, 15% responded that yes, one or more of their mentees had considered
withdrawing. This result correlates very closely to the results of the mentee survey, in which 13% of new students answered that they had considered withdrawing. This correlation suggests that mentors are actively engaging with their mentees, and are aware of students who are struggling with the transition to tertiary study. Further research is required to assess the reasons students consider withdrawing in their first semester of study, and to determine how a mentor will impact on that decision.

Mentors are also asked to evaluate various aspects of the support that they provide in their role as mentor. Figure 5 illustrates the mentors’ responses to statements about their role.

**Figure 5: Support provided by mentors to new students**

The three areas that mentors rated their effectiveness most highly were in their approachability, availability and their ability to direct new students to the appropriate support services and resources as required. These results clearly reflect the information and training provided to new mentors in the ‘Mentor Role’ section of the mentor training (See section 3.2 Mentor training and support). The primary purpose of a mentor is to be a first point of contact for new students. They are not expected to be able to address all the concerns of their mentees. Rather, they are
trained to direct new students to the various support services across campus as needed. These results also correlate clearly to the feedback received from mentees outlined in section 2.3 regarding the benefits of having a senior student available to provide guidance and support.

### 3.2 Mentor training and support

Mentors are required to attend a half-day of face-to-face training prior to commencing in the role of mentor. This training takes place in the week prior to Orientation week. Online training is provided for distance mentors, and as required for internal mentors who are unable to attend the face-to-face training. As well as training, mentors are supported in their role by both the START mentor program coordinators and the staff member or members who act in the role of school mentor program coordinators.

Mentors evaluated the mentor training extremely positively, with 98% of the participants rating the training as useful for their role as a mentor (see Figure 6).

![Bar Chart: I found the mentor training useful for my role as a mentor](image)

**Figure 6: Usefulness of mentor training**

While the mentor training is consistently positively evaluated, in 2014 it will be revised to make it a more collaborative, facilitated learning experience. The training will provide more activities, group work and peer interactions in the transference of the required content. The revised training will be evaluated both immediately after delivery, and again in the end of semester mentor evaluation to assess the efficacy of these changes.

Mentors also provided extremely positive evaluations of the level of support provided to them by the School Mentor Program Coordinators. Figure 7 illustrates the response to this question.
3.3 The benefits of mentoring

As previously noted, the original purpose for establishing the mentor program was to provide support for new to Curtin students and improve the first year retention rate. While the program serves this purpose, as illustrated in section 2.1, the benefits of the mentor program extend far beyond its original scope. The students who participate in the mentor program as mentors also benefit from the training, the professional development opportunities, and the role itself.

Curtin Teaching and Learning has identified and defined nine Curtin Graduate Attributes. These are the skills that Curtin aspires to equip their graduates with, and includes attributes such as the application of discipline knowledge, and the ability to think critically and evaluate knowledge. While the development of these attributes is embedded in to the Curtin curriculum, there is also ample opportunity for students to develop these attributes through participation in extra-curricular activities. Mentoring provides students with the opportunity to apply and develop many of the Curtin graduate attributes in a ‘real world’ setting. As a part of the end of semester survey mentors are asked to evaluate how their participation on the program has contributed to the development of these attributes (see Figure 8).
‘Effective communication skills’ was the graduate attribute that mentors overwhelmingly evaluated as being developed as a result of participation on the mentor program. Other attributes ranked highly by mentors were the appropriate use of technology and the utilization of lifelong learning skills. Overall, mentors positively evaluated the development of all nine of the graduate attributes through participation in the mentor program.

Mentors are also asked to provide qualitative feedback on how they have benefitted from participation on the mentor program. Many of these comments reflect on the development of their communication and leadership skills, for example:

‘Being a mentor has increased my social confidence, pushing me to be more outgoing in communicating and interacting with others.’

‘I’ve learnt great communication and leadership skills which have been instrumental in writing resumes and selection criteria for jobs which I am now applying for.’
Students also acknowledged the intrinsic rewards inherent in providing help and support to others:

‘I found it really fulfilling to pass on my experiences and hints on getting the most from the degree – just getting a couple of ‘thank you’s’ from my mentees made me feel like I had really made a difference.’

Of particular interest in the mentor responses was the number of mentors who articulated that participation on the mentor program had helped increase their sense of belonging at the university. One of the objectives of the mentor program is to help new Curtin students develop a sense of belonging at the university, and the results in section 2.2 demonstrate that this goal is being achieved. However, it appears that one of the flow-on benefits of the program is that participation as a mentor also increases students’ sense of belonging at the university:

‘The experience has made me feel more connected to the university and has given me more confidence in my ability to connect with other people.’

3.4 Further feedback and areas for improvement

As a part of the survey, mentors are asked to provide feedback on areas where the mentor program could be improved. Many of these responses relate to the structure of the program, and the fact that a broad scale, opt-out program faces the ongoing challenge of engaging the mentees in the mentoring process. The biggest frustration expressed by mentors was the lack of response from the mentees. Some mentors had little to no engagement with their mentees, and as a result questioned the impact they were having in the role.

In comparing the mentor and mentee feedback it is interesting to note that both cohorts express frustration around the lack of contact on the program, in particular face-to-face contact. Mentors reported that mentees were failing to attend designated meetings, despite expressing a desire for more face-to-face engagement. In order to address this issue, in semester 2, 2013 a mentor/mentee social event was hosted by the mentor program coordinators.

Traditionally mentors are provided with at least one opportunity to socialize and network post training per semester. However, prior to semester 2, 2013, these meetings were exclusively for mentors on the program. This semester mentors were encouraged to invite their mentees to attend a social event hosted by the mentor program coordinators. This provided mentors with the opportunity to network with their peers, while also bringing their mentees together in an informal environment. Informal evaluation of this event indicated that it was a success, and it will therefore be included as a regular activity in the mentoring calendar.

Another area for improvement is the participation of particular student demographics on the mentor program. Traditionally recruitment for the mentor program is highly successful, and evaluation of the program extremely positive.
However, when the demographic breakdown of the student mentors is examined, some discrepancies become apparent. Mentors on the Curtin mentor program are overwhelmingly domestic, female students. Of the 394 mentors who completed the question related to gender, 68% were female. From that same total, an overwhelming 84% were domestic students. These percentages are not representative of the demographic breakdown of the Curtin student body, and one of the objectives identified for the mentor program moving forward is to increase the engagement of both male students and international students in the role of mentor.

While students expressed frustrations about the program and were able to identify areas for improvement, the feedback from the mentors was extremely positive. The final question of the mentor survey asks students if, having experienced the mentor program, they would consider being a mentor again in the future. To this, an extremely significant 92% of mentors responded yes, they would consider participating in the mentor program again.

4.0 Outstanding Mentors
Another indicator of the positive impact of the mentor program on new students is the outstanding mentor nominations. At the end of each semester, mentees are able to nominate their mentor as outstanding. This is an opportunity for new students to acknowledge the hard work of their mentor, and the value that they added to their student experience.

In semester 1, 2013, we received 94 outstanding mentor nominations. A total of 69 mentors were nominated, with some of these students receiving as many as 4 nominations. Most of the nominations referred to the excellent level of support provided by the mentor in responding to queries, helping new students feel more connected to the university, and providing a friendly point of contact within the university, for example:

‘She has been an amazing communicator and an amazing source of information. Her communication with the group is infallible, and she always covers events and things we may need to be aware of in depth. I don’t know how she does it, I barely find time to respond to her with my work load.’

‘She has been outstanding in providing relevant informative emails which are very detailed and I would imagine take a lot of time to write. She always offers her time to help us out too which I really appreciate.’

5.0 Conferences and Publications
In the years that it has been run, the Curtin mentor program has established a reputation as a successful broad scale intervention strategy. The program has been written about and presented at various national and international conferences. In 2013 the mentor program was presented in the Compendium of Effective Practice in Higher Education showcasing its effectiveness in providing student support. The
program was also presented at the ISANA International Education Association’s 24th Annual Conference in Brisbane. This paper showcased the benefits international students receive and value from engaging with the mentor program.


6.0 Recommendations for the 2014 Mentor Program

The Curtin mentor program continues to be an outstanding initiative, providing positive experiences and opportunities to both new-to-Curtin students and senior students. In 2014 the program will be introduced in new courses, such as Law and Paramedicine. As a part of the Transforming Learning at Curtin (TL@C), CurtinLife Retention and Engagement project, it will also be expanded to include all students who are new to Curtin, rather than just the first year students it has traditionally focused on. The program will be introduced to the Curtin Kalgoorlie campus, the first expansion of the program beyond the Bentley campus. In order to accommodate this program expansion and to continue to improve on the success of the program, the following recommendations will be pursued:

- Implement and utilize a CRM system as a means to manage the administration of the mentor program and to track and streamline mentor program records
- Maintain flexibility with regard to how the program is implemented within each school/faculty, and as to how much support to provide each individual school
- Continue to update mentor training to better respond to mentor needs, including accommodating the CurtinLife project expansion to the post-first year, new-to-Curtin cohort of mentees and enhancing the specific training information provided to online/external mentors
- Include the mentor program in a First Year Experience policy if and when such a policy is developed
- Explore the potential to engage with the EnrolNow process (Curtin’s online enrolment tool) as a means of promotion, ensuring all new to Curtin students are aware of the mentor program
- Continue to promote the role of mentors in Orientation Week activities
- Expand promotional strategies to raise awareness of the program amongst new-to-Curtin students
• Develop and provide additional professional development workshops and opportunities for mentors
• Revise and update mentor program website and printed material
• Introduce an online mentee evaluation process
• Ensure new students are aware that they will meet their mentor at Orientation through increased engagement with pre-Orientation communications
• Assess and consolidate all administrative and process-based aspects of the mentor program
• Contribute to achieving the goals of the Leadership Development aspect of the TL@C project through collaboration with other leadership programs including AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentor Experience), Next Step mentor program, Guild postgraduate mentor program and the Curtin Leadership Centre.

7.0 Conclusion
The Curtin Mentor Program was initiated in 2008 with the stated objective of improving first year student retention. Over the six years that the program has run on the Bentley campus it has been implemented in all the schools and faculties on the campus. Results from the annual mentor and mentee surveys consistently support the argument that the retention of new students is aided by the provision of a peer mentor. The results of these surveys also indicate that the mentor program serves a far greater purpose than merely improving retention results. It provides both new and senior students with a network of support, the opportunity to develop professional skills, and a sense of belonging within the community of the university. As the mentor program expands in 2014 to service all new-to-Curtin Bentley students and the Kalgoorlie campus, these benefits will be provided to an even broader range of students, ultimately improving their student experience.