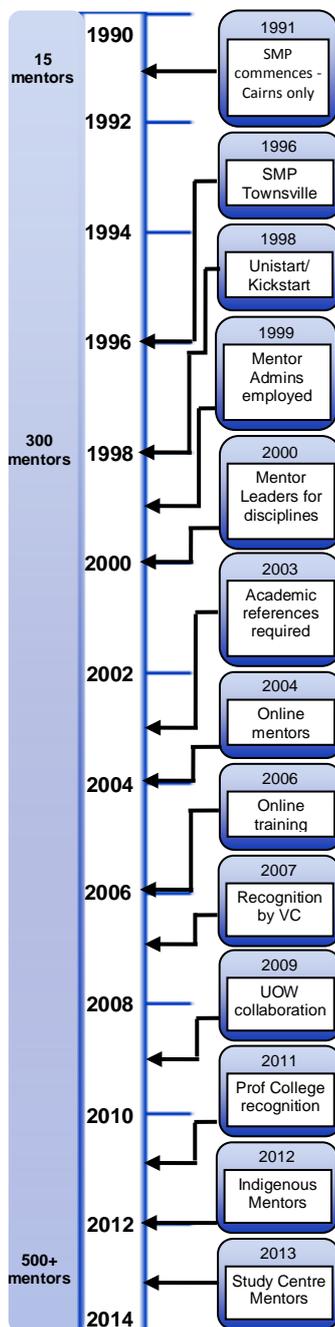


**For 21 years of an institution-wide program of student peer support that has adapted to the challenges of, and engagement with, increasingly diverse learners.**

#### OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

**Figure 1: An overview**



The James Cook University (JCU) Student Mentor Program was the first peer support program of its type in Australian higher education and began as a 'buddy' program at the fledgling Cairns campus in 1991. All JCU first year students, including external students and those attending Townsville, Cairns, Singapore, Brisbane and remote study centres, now have the opportunity to be linked up with student mentors from their discipline on the first day of their academic journey. This institution-wide initiative was first reported to the sector at the First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) conference by Hanley<sup>1</sup> and was followed up with a FYHE conference paper by Treston and Hanley<sup>2</sup> and Treston's<sup>3</sup> seminal article in the journal *Innovations in Education and Training International*. Subsequent FYHE literature<sup>4</sup> validates this early work while at the same time informing the ongoing and evolving innovations in this student peer support program over the past 21 years.

The mission of the program is to provide a welcoming and supportive environment at JCU for new students and to link them with successful role models. The program motivates new students and assists them to improve academic performance while promoting a cohesive university culture and learning community. The program recognises that all new students need and have a right to be part of an inclusive, responsive and friendly academic community and it is designed to encourage confidence in underrepresented groups. These groups may include students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and those from rural and remote communities.

The Student Mentor Program informs and supports all first year transition initiatives at JCU and the innovations that have been developed as a result are consistent with the third generation approach to student learning, engagement and the overall student experience<sup>4</sup>. Figure 1 tracks some of the key milestones in the evolution of the program such as scenario-based online training, expanded student support through social media and a learning management system, peer facilitated transition courses (Unistart), systematic recruitment processes, Indigenous mentoring, and formal recognition for mentor training and participation through the JCU Professional College. As an innovative student support initiative, particularly relevant to the development of students as individuals, the program has gained international and national recognition for its contribution to learning and engagement through the publication of over 12 peer reviewed papers and conference presentations.

#### CRITERION 4: RESPECT AND SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

**Effective and empathetic guidance and advising:** The conduct of the Student Mentor Program is systematic and thoroughly documented. A comprehensive

handbook provides role descriptions, rationale, objectives, mission statement and general information regarding the nature of the mentoring relationship, performance indicators and other material that informs the practice and training of mentors. Reviews and evaluations of mentee experiences<sup>5</sup> confirm the importance new students place on receiving empathetic guidance and advice from students 'who have been there'. Over time, and as new modes of communication have developed, considerable effort has been made to ensure all mentor training modes (print, face-to-face, online) are equipped to provide quality advice to students studying in diverse contexts. The outcomes of this strategy on student engagement are illustrated in the following mentee reflections:

*"I began to become unsettled with uni. [Mentor Name] encouraged me to keep my motivation and that it would pay off in the long run. So far it has. I am well prepared for exams and handed in all assessment on time. For anyone who knows me, that is an accomplishment in itself for me. I think I would have given up if I didn't have my mentor encouraging me and helping me along the way. Family and friends are encouraging and great but talking to someone who has been through it is even better" (First Year Student, 2008).*

*"My mentor kept in contact and knew when all our major milestones were coming (assignments, exams etc). I cannot speak highly enough of her. She was always available for a quick chat and willing to help out. I will myself become a mentor due to my wonderful experience" (First Year Student, 2012).*

A further dimension to quality empathetic guidance and advising involves ensuring that mentors have a sound knowledge of university support services and that they know when they should refer mentees to appropriate professional support services and academic staff. This is achieved through extensive institution-wide collaboration in the training process and scenario-based learning tasks that are completed and assessed in mixed mode formats to ensure a strong pedagogical base for the program's activities.

**Assisting students from equity and other demographic subgroups to participate and achieve success in their courses:** As the widening participation agenda has emerged, the program has responded and evolved taking an evidence-based approach. An extensive evaluation of the impact of the JCU Student Mentor Program on commencing students' academic self-efficacy, self-esteem and academic self-concept conducted in 2005<sup>5</sup>, provided valuable information about the demographic subgroups who typically choose to be linked up with a mentor. The study found that by the end of their first semester, newly enrolled female students who had the academic and social support of a student mentor had significantly higher self-esteem than female students who did not have a mentor. An additional finding indicated that new students who had a mentor, had a significantly higher academic self-concept at the end of the first semester than new students who did not have a mentor. It was also found that mature aged students of both genders found mentors most helpful. The Targeted Buddy Mentor Program was initiated in 2007 and in this innovation, 90 mentors volunteered to provide specific support to new students who identified as being from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from rural and remote areas. The Student Mentor Program has maintained its close links with the Office of Equity and Student Engagement over the years through the inclusion of equity awareness as part of mentor training and through the recent addition of the Indigenous Student Mentor Program. An Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning explains how the program has assisted students from diverse backgrounds in the health sciences:

*"Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds have welcomed the introduction of Indigenous mentors who understand their worldview and look forward to giving back to the program themselves in later years. Similarly, new Australians whose first language is other than English, students from remote areas, mature age students and those from equity groups can find someone amongst the mentors to whom they can relate and who they can contact for support" (Dr Felicity Croker, 2013).*

**Influencing the overall academic, social and cultural experience of higher education:** The influence of the program has increased exponentially over time, based on the increasing numbers of active mentors in addition to the evolution of improved mentor selection, training and processes. The increasing influence of the program has now moved into a further phase of official recognition in the JCU Professional College, which provides extra-curricular personal and professional development for mentors. From 2011, mentors have had the opportunity to hone their leadership, engagement and cultural competency skills through the training and recognition provided by the College. A new mentor recently observed how the experience and training she received in the College supported her to take on a further leadership role in the new Indigenous "Deadly Mentor" initiative:

*"Being a role model for a first year Indigenous student has built my self-esteem and confidence as a leader so my leadership skills have expanded" (Indigenous Student Mentor, 2013).*

Other mentors have reflected on the influence the Student Mentor Program has had on the academic, social and cultural experiences of higher education at JCU:

*"Even in the workplace, the skills I have developed will last a lifetime and there is nothing better than watching those you have mentored go on to be mentors themselves" (Law/Business mentor, 2002).*

*"The mentor program helped me not only through academic challenges but also in developing life-long skills and creating life-long friendships" (Arts mentor, 2005).*

#### EVIDENCE

**Influenced student learning, engagement and the student experience:** The Student Mentor Program's role in welcoming new students has been continually evaluated as being one of the most valued Orientation activities that students undertake. Since 2003, on-campus students have been asked to rank the benefits of up to 15 activities in Orientation Week, with sample sizes exceeding 100 students. The percentage approval rate (strongly agree or agree that the mentor introduction and tour was a useful and informative activity) has consistently been 90% or greater. Over a number of years, mentee survey responses indicate that the type of support students receive from their mentors is evenly distributed amongst six categories of helping: meeting other students, understanding about university learning, emotional support, subject content, referring, and just having someone to talk to<sup>5</sup>.

*"The Mentor Program for me was a life saver. There were a number of times we tried to meet for coffee, but I have a very busy schedule with fulltime work (40 hours per week) and fulltime Uni (3 subjects). It was hard to meet so we communicated via email & facebook almost daily at some stages" (First Year Student, 2008).*

*"My mentor, [name], is such a lovely, warm, caring, intelligent and hardworking individual, she serves as a great role model to us all. She intuitively seems to send an email or catch up for coffee, just at a critical and much needed time. I really appreciate her taking the time out of her busy schedule to provide this added support, which helps me to accomplish my goals. These people who volunteer to be mentors, and do the job as well as [mentor name], should be highly commended for their efforts" (First Year Student, 2010).*

*"I have been a student, a mentor, mentor leader, tutor and I am now a Learning Adviser while completing a Graduate Certificate of Education. My career has been significantly influenced by JCU's Mentor Program. I use the skills I learnt as a mentor every day" (Learning Adviser, 2013).*

**Recognition from fellow staff, the institution and the broader community:** The Student Mentor Program has been widely and regularly recognised from diverse sources for its contribution to the respect and support for the development of students as individuals. In 2013 the Program received a *JCU Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning* and additionally, was honoured with the *Overall 2013 JCU Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning*.

When addressing the student mentors at the 2004 Mentor Presentation Night, JCU Chancellor, Lt-Gen John Grey (Ret'd) illustrated the broad community recognition the Program enjoys:

*"This is one of the first programs that I looked at when I became Chancellor and I was very impressed with it. And, that's five years ago and it's improved greatly, I know, over those years".*

More recently a former mentor experienced this broad community recognition:

*"I'm very grateful that the Mentor program is available not only to the students I help, but also as a tool to be used in improving my employability. After appraising my interview I can't help but feel that the reputation of the Mentor program preceded me and helped to secure my future employment within that firm" (Student Mentor, 2012).*

Dr Maree-Dinan Thompson has observed the evolution of the program since she began her academic career at the University in 1999:

*"Our mentors, who volunteer their time, have constructed a sense of belonging, a community of learners who can ask the 'silly questions' and be directed to support structures, and a collaborative relationship with academic staff. They keep the motivation and enthusiasm alive through timely communication and advice with cohorts, and utilise a variety of methods, e.g. lecture breaks, discussion boards and Facebook. The wash of coloured MENTOR shirts across the campus demonstrates JCU's commitment to learning - to guide, advise and support students in their academic journeys. Thank-you Mentors, Mentor Leaders and TLD for your sustained efforts to influence academic, social and cultural connectivity between students, institution and staff" (Dr Maree Dinan-Thompson Associate Dean Teaching & Learning, 2013).*

Further evidence of the success of the program and its impact on student learning was noted in a commendation in the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Audit Report:

*“AUQA commends JCU for nurturing a student-centred teaching and learning culture and environment. Specific Teaching and Learning initiatives which in the Audit Panel’s opinion have been particularly conducive to the creation of this culture and environment are the Mentor Program introduced for first year students...AQUA commends the JCU Mentoring Program for first-year students...”(Commendation 5, 2004)*

The Student Mentor Program at JCU is a national and international leader in student mentoring and has informed the creation of peer support programs at other universities. The Unistart course, where mentoring underpins a successful transition initiative, has informed the development of peer transition and mentor programs at the University of Newcastle and University of Wollongong<sup>6</sup>. Professor Gina Wisker, Head of Higher Education from the University of Brighton notes:

*“This JCU programme has most recently inspired the PASS programme work at my current university, Brighton in the UK. It is a model of its kind, an early example and much to be commended” (Correspondence, April, 2013).*

The program also boasts a sustained scholarly publication record. These publications have reported on developments in the use of learning space<sup>7</sup>, transition<sup>8</sup>, learning communities<sup>9</sup>, scenario-based learning<sup>10</sup> and online mentoring<sup>11</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The James Cook University Student Mentor Program has grown from 15 to over 500 volunteers who demonstrate a measurable impact on the quality of the student experience of JCU’s commencing cohort. The FYHE literature has informed the development of the program and a sustained scholarly output of over 12 peer reviewed papers and conference presentations has demonstrated how an institution-wide program of peer support can adapt to the challenges of, and engagement with, increasingly diverse learners. The influence of the program has grown to be far reaching, with external students and students from diverse backgrounds having access to the same respect and support for their development as individuals as those 250 students in 1991 who were the first to benefit from having a mentor at James Cook University. Ultimately, some of the most powerful evidence as to the Student Mentor Program’s influence on student learning comes from the students who credit the program as being the key factor in their **retention**, *“If it wasn’t for the mentor program I wouldn’t be here” (Nursing Student, 2007)* and in their **success**, *“I would not have succeeded at Uni if it wasn’t for the mentor program” (Education student, 2010).*

1. Hanley, P. (1996). Mentor involvement in a university orientation program: The James Cook experience. Paper presented at *2nd Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Melbourne, 3-5 July 1996*.
2. Treston, H., & Hanley, P. (1998). Mentor involvement in the first year of university - the James Cook experience. Paper presented at *3rd Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Auckland, 5-8 July 1998*.
3. Treston, H. (1999). Mentoring: Making a positive difference for individuals and institutions. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 36(3), 236-243.
4. Tinto, V. (2000). What have we learned about the impact of learning communities on students? In *Assessment Updates: Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education*, 12 (2), 1-2; Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R. & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Canberra: AGPS;
5. Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition Pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1-20.
6. JCU. (2004; 2005; 2007; 2012). *Mentor Reports*. Townsville: author; JCU.
7. O’Shea, S., Vincent, M., Calder, A., & Hanley, P. (2009). Peer transition programs: Run by students for students. Paper presented at *12<sup>th</sup> Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Townsville, 29 June-1 July 2009*.
8. Calder, A. (2002). Providing space for a learning centre. *Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Student Services Association*, 19, 3-17.
9. Calder, A. (2004). Peer interaction in the transition process. *Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Student Services Association*, 23, 4-16.
10. Anders, D., Calder, A., & Treston, H. (2005). Encouraging collaborative learning communities: Interaction patterns in the Learning Centre at James Cook University Cairns. Paper presented at *Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference: Canberra, 24-25 November 2005*.
11. Taylor, P., & Worsley, J. (2010). Using scenarios to train peer mentors online. In E. Errington (Ed.), *Preparing graduates for the professions using scenario-based learning* (pp 159-167). Brisbane: Post Pressed.
12. Calder, A., & Menzies, V. (2011). Online early childhood education mentoring: Peer support strategies for success. Paper presented at *14<sup>th</sup> Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Fremantle, 28 June-1 July 2011*.