Relational Barriers and Benefits of Peer Mentoring Programs: Focusing on International Social Work Students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of international students in Australia calls for increased attention to these students' adjustment to ensure their transition experiences are smooth and supported. This study investigates the impact of peer mentoring on international student transitional experiences by focusing on a pilot Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) which was implemented in a social work graduate program in Australia. Data obtained from focus groups with students revealed that differences in cultural backgrounds and languages caused relational challenges in peer mentoring groups. Additionally, it was found that the PMP is beneficial for both mentors and mentees. Through peer mentoring relationships mentors not only reflected on their social work profession principles, learning and values, but also developed their social work skills.

INTRODUCTION

International students can be defined as "a group of individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their county of citizenship in order to participate in international educational experience" (Kambouropoulos, 2014, p. 350). Many educational institutions in Australia have experienced a significant increase in the number of international students over the past decade. From 2005 to 2015, the number of full-fee-paying international students enrolled in Australian educational institutions doubled, from approximately 350,000 to 650,000 (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2016). Student enrolments in the higher education sector have shown the highest increase and, in 2015, a quarter of all students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions were from overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016; DET, 2015a).

International education is Australia's third-largest export industry, generating AUD$18.8 billion in 2014-15, and this is expected to continue in the coming decade (DET, 2015b). In April 2015, the Australian government released the National Strategy for International Education, which aims to double the number of international students by 2025 (Australian Trade Commission, 2015). Given such government-driven initiatives, an increased focus on, and discussion of, international students' successful transition into the Australian community is expected in coming years.

This research explores international social work students' experiences of peer mentoring. The focus of this research is on how the participants build and attain their mentoring relationships, and how such relationships benefit both mentors and mentees. Previous research has indicated that peer mentoring can alleviate psycho-emotional difficulties faced by international students in their transition to a new country (Menzies, Baron, & Zutshi, 2015; Outhred & Chester, 2013; Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami, 2012; Ragavan, 2014). Moreover, a peer support program is beneficial for students who need to meet clinical practice requirements in order to complete their studies in such degrees as medicine and nursing. It relieves those students' psychological distress (Yamada, Klugar, Ivanova, & Oborna, 2014) and enhances their academic confidence (Robinson & Niemer, 2010; Taylor et al., 2013). However, there has been little discussion of two key issues: why peer mentoring is under-utilised by international students and how it can benefit mentors (i.e., not only mentees) (Outhred & Chester, 2013). In order to better understand the impact and potential of peer mentoring programs, this research examines the challenges and benefits experienced by both groups. In order to promote peer mentoring programs, this research focuses on impeding factors in mentoring relationships as well as mentoring benefits for mentors and mentees.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THEIR TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCE

Arthur (2004) suggests that international students share unique experiences within the context of "cross-cultural transition," which encompasses deciding to leave home and adjusting to a new country. A transitional process involves being affected by differing cultural norms and values between home and the host countries, while interacting with, and adapting to, a new environment (Arthur, 2004). During this period, international students face a range of challenges (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010; Kambouropoulos, 2014; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Ozer, 2015; Poyrazli, 2015). A significant number of inter-

national students in Australia have issues with their studies, inadequate accommodation and with interpersonal relationships; these can cause psychosocial issues such as loneliness, depression, homesickness and anxiety (Kambouropoulos, 2014; Poyrazli, 2015). Although international students often share similar, stressful, transitional experiences, their situations and needs might vary depending on a range of factors. Thus, they should not be simply considered as a homogenous group. It is only by taking a close look at differences between them that their needs may be effectively met.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Social work is one of the skilled occupations which is credited for skilled migration to Australia under a few visa programs—e.g., Regional Sponsored Migrations Scheme (subclass 187) (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016). While this indicates an increase of international students in the field of social work, only limited research to date has focused on social work students and their wellbeing in Australia.

Social Work Field Education

Students pursuing a master's degree in social work (MSW) in Australia are required to successfully complete a two-year intensive course (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2012). To successfully graduate from the course, social work students are required to complete two 500-hour-blocks of field education over the course of two years, amounting to approximately 50% of the postgraduate curriculum (AASW, 2012; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012). Given that even local social work students experience pre-placement anxiety (Baird, 2016; Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Baum, 2010), it is not surprising that international social work students might undergo even more severe psycho-emotional distress than their local counterparts (Topping, McCowan, & McCrae, 1998). International students enrolled in a MSW program are expected to successfully complete their first field practice within the first 12 months of their arrival in Australia. This period is found to be the most stressful for international students as they transition into a new country and culture (Kambouropoulos, 2014). Therefore, international social work students face considerable challenges in terms of both course requirements and acculturation.

An issue that complicates the situation further is international students' English proficiency. Considering the intensity of postgraduate social work programs, some international students' limited English proficiency is a shared concern, not only among universities, but also among placement agencies (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). Agencies' preference for students who can communicate effectively in English may explain why some agencies are reluctant to host international students' field education placements (Zuchowski et al., 2014). Such a tendency among social work agencies can be viewed in conjunction with international students' dissatisfaction with their placement opportunities (Blackmore et al., 2014; Patrick et al., 2008). As discussed in the next section, in order to alleviate international students' stress and enhance their communication skills, providing social support through peer mentoring is suggested.

Previous Research on Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring has been widely acknowledged by educational institutions as an effective complementary approach to traditional classroom learning (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Zuchowski et al., 2014). Despite this, assistance is still under-utilised by international students, and little attention has been given to international students' experiences of these programs (Outhred & Chester, 2013). Previous research (e,g., Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Ugrin, Odom, & Pearson, 2008) has suggested that social exchange theory (Foa & Foa, 1974) could explain relational challenges in mentoring relationships. Social exchange theory suggests that unmet needs between mentors and mentees are detrimental to building or maintaining successful peer mentoring relationships (Ensher et al., 2001). However, this does not sufficiently explain why peer mentoring is less utilised by international students than by local students (Outhred & Chester, 2013).

In addition, previous research into peer mentoring has focused on its benefits mainly for mentees, rather than to mentors (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Indicating that only few studies have focused exclusively on the program benefits to mentors, Beltman and Schaeben (2012) argue that the peer mentoring relationship is beneficial for mentors' altruistic, cognitive, social and personal development. Further, the peer mentoring relationship allows mentors to obtain a sense of helping others and to develop friendships (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). These findings, however, outline benefits of peer mentoring to mentors only in a general sense, rather than in a specific context, such as international students in a social work program.

The Peer Mentoring Program: A Pilot Program for Social Work Students

To assist newly arriving first-year social work students at Monash University, the author initiated a pilot Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) in collaboration with another international student. The author was one of the international students in the course at the time. Monash University is a research-intensive, urban university in Victoria, and belongs to the Group of Eight coalition of universities in Australia. The purpose of the program is underpinned by Tinto's (1998) theory that supportive peer groups encourage students to learn more as they spend time together both inside and outside of the classroom. It is important to note that, although there are resources available, simply having access to the resources is not sufficient (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Thus, international students, who are likely to have less local knowledge and/or the skills necessary for their successful settlement, should be carefully introduced to a new community with adequate social support, such as that provided by peer mentoring (Furnham & Bochner, 1982).

The PMP was funded by an internal university grant for learning and teaching initiatives. To observe how students build mentoring relationships according to their own preferences, the PMP was designed to be natural and informal (Colley, 2003). Twenty second-year students and 30 first-year students participated in the program as mentors and mentees respectively. Each mentoring group consisted of two mentors and three mentees, comprising a total of 10 mentoring groups. A two-hour compulsory mentor training session was held in order to develop their understanding of the mentor's role prior to the beginning of the PMP. In the following week, on the mentoring integration day, mentors and mentees met for the first time and started their three-month long mentoring relationship. There was no expected number of mentoring meetings as a group, but the participating students were

encouraged to meet freely as they needed. After three months, they were guided to end their mentoring relationships.

METHODS

Sampling

The PMP participants were notified on the mentoring integration day that evaluation research would be conducted following the completion of the program. The students were informed about the evaluation process and agreed to receive an invitation email. Two months after the completion of the program, a focus group invitation email was sent to mentors and mentees with an explanatory statement. Among the 30 mentors and 20 mentees, nine mentors and eight mentees voluntarily participated in the evaluation research. While most of the evaluation research participants were international students, one from each group was a local student. Mentors and mentees were invited to participate in the focus group regardless of their nationality. However, as the current research focuses on international students' experiences in social work education, the data of local students are excluded from this analysis.

Data Collection

To encourage participants to describe their own views and experiences on the program, focus group discussions were undertaken. Focus group discussion is distinguished from individual interviews as it sets up negotiated meanings through intra- and inter-personal debates (Cook & Crang, 1995). It is also differentiated from a group interview as it explicitly treats group interaction as research data (Liamputtong, 2013). To ensure the comfort of participants, an option of personal interview was also provided, which two students requested. In total, three mentor focus group discussions were held with three participants in each session, and for mentees, two focus groups of two participants each were held as well as four individual interviews (two of them on request and the other two were due to the absence of other participants). Each focus group meeting lasted around 45 minutes, and individual interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to one hour.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured discussion is useful for gathering information from students' different perspectives, as it allows new issues and perspectives to emerge, something which rarely happens in structured interviews (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2010). Although a pre-set questionnaire is not required for semi-structured focus group discussion, it is still important to have relevant topics ready prior to a discussion or an interview (Neuman & Robson, 2012). The focus group discussion topics for mentors were: a) mentoring relationships; b) learning; c) skills development; d) reflections on community contribution; e) general experiences; and f) suggestions for the program (see Table 1). The topics for mentees were: a) mentoring relationships; b) learning; c) support received; d) general experiences; and e) suggestions for the program (see Table 2).

Table 1. Focus Group Discussion (or Interview) Topics and Questions for Mentors

DISCUSSION TOPICS	IF MENTORING INTERACTIONS OCCURRED	IF THERE WAS NO MENTORING INTERACTION
Relationship	How was your relationship with your Mentees?	What were the barriers?
	What were your expectations when you joined this program?	What could have been helpful in building a better relationship?
General	Did you have any specific positive or negative experiences? Any examples?	
Learning	Through the Mentoring relationship, have you had any chance to reflect on your social work learning?	What could you have linked from your social work learning to your Mentoring relationship?
Skill development	Did the PMP have any impacts on your skill development? If so, how?	How could have the PMP impacted on your skill development?
Contribution	By participating in this program as a Mentor, what changes do you think you brought to the community?	
Improvement	Do you have any suggestions to improve this program?	
	Would you recommend this program to other students?	

Table 2. Focus Group Discussion (or Interview) Topics and Questions for Mentees

DISCUSSION TOPICS	IF MENTORING INTERACTIONS OCCURRED	IF THERE WAS NO MENTORING INTERACTION
Relationship	How was your relationship with your Mentors?	What were the barriers?
	What were your expectations when you joined this program?	What could have been helpful in building a better relationship?
General	Did you have any specific positive or negative experiences? Any examples?	
Learning	Did the program help you gain a better sense of learning? Any examples?	What could you have learned?
Support	Did the program provide you with any support? Any examples?	In what area did you need support from your peer Mentors?
Improvement	In your opinion, what are the positive and negative aspects of this program?	
	Do you have any suggestions to improve this program?	
	Would you participate in this program again as a Mentor next year?	

Data Analysis

Focus group discussion and individual interview recordings were transcribed and coded by the author and a research assistant using NVivo™ software. The themes align with the discussion topics, provided earlier. New themes and subthemes were identified as unexpected topics / emerged during the data analysis process. Although the focus groups were conducted according to the discussion topics listed above, the results were distinct from the initial topics. Frequently and commonly discussed themes were: 1) relationships; 2) expectations; 3) program benefits for mentors; and 4) program benefits for mentees. Each theme had sub-themes, which allowed us to further explore factors affecting mentoring relationships.

Ethical Considerations

The main ethical consideration of this research is the impact of the author on data analysis and the focus group participants. The author was also an international student in the MSW program when she developed and implemented the PMP. Thus, the collegial relationship between the author and research participants was carefully considered, and also stated in the ethics application as the main ethical concern. In order to ensure the voluntary participation of the mentors and mentees, three other research students (who were not involved in the PMP), mainly facilitated the focus groups. In each focus group, the facilitators made it clear to participants that they could withdraw at any time and that their discussions were confidential. Working with those research students was also helpful for minimising bias in data analysis.

The language diversity of the participating international students was also carefully considered. Given the fact that the students were accepted into the MSW program with a certain level of English proficiency (IELTS Speaking 6.5), the focus group sessions were held in English without special language assistance. Still, the facilitators were mindful of the participants' various native languages and levels of English proficiency.

The ethics application was submitted to, and approved by, the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The findings of this research can be broadly classified into two categories: mentoring relationships and program benefits for mentors and mentees. With regard to mentoring relationships, the issues most often addressed were meeting frequency and barriers. It is noteworthy that cultural factors, language differences, and financial incentives (coffee vouchers granted to some of the program participants on the mentoring integration day) were key elements that impacted on the mentoring relationships. In addition, the benefits of the PMP to mentors and mentees were closely discussed from various aspects, including academic, placement experiences, as well as professional development.

Relationships

Meeting Frequency and Arrangements
Of the total 17 mentor and mentee participants, seven responded that they regularly met with their mentoring groups following the mentoring integration day. The frequency of mentoring meetings varied, but generally occurred once a month. Two participants advised

that their groups met only once after the integration day. Another three students stated that their groups built their relationships via online messenger platforms and mobile texts alone. The final five did not have any kind of contact after the mentoring integration day.

The use of social media was frequently cited as a form of contact throughout all of the focus group discussions and individual interviews. With the exception of five participants whose groups never had any contact after the mentoring integration day, all of the remaining participants reported continual use of mobile messengers, such as Facebook and WeChat (a social network service application widely used among Chinese students).

Relationship and Communication Expectations

The findings indicate that there were mismatched understandings between mentors and mentees regarding relationships and communication. Four mentors who had no, or less than a couple of, interactions with their mentees explained that the reason for their inactive relationship was because their mentees did not need support: "They haven't asked any questions or haven't approached me. I am assuming they are doing a lot better than I think" (Mentor 4). Another mentor agreed: "I think they don't have any questions. We don't know which to talk about" (Mentor 5). One of the mentors said that she "expected that [her mentees] would approach" her first (Mentor 4). This indicates that some mentors did not approach mentees as they assumed their mentees would initiate contact if they needed help. The mentors' passive stances can be interpreted as a limited understanding of a mentor's role and the mentoring experience.

In contrast, mentees expected their mentors to take an active approach, with one mentee stating: "I was assuming that he [the mentor] would follow up with me or give a text" (Mentee 1). Mentees stated that they did not, or were reluctant to, contact their mentors first because they did not want to "bother them" (Mentees 2, 3, 6). To be more specific, one mentee stated she did not think she and her mentor "were close enough to ask a favour" (Mentee 4), and this was echoed in another mentee's comment: "I would feel a bit embarrassed to ask too many questions" (Mentee 3). It was also found that some mentees hesitated to approach to their mentors due to cultural reasons: "I don't know how it works in the Western style, but I think in the Asian culture, it is not like really easy … kind of barriers to the juniors to keep contact to the senior" (Mentee 6). Given that most of the mentees were Chinese, their expectations that mentors take the lead and approach them first may be linked to Chinese cultural norms. In Confucianism-influenced culture, one which values hierarchical social relationships, those in senior positions are expected to be more proactive in providing guidance and information to the junior in the relationship (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). In addition, the "embarrassment" cited by Mentee 3 can be interpreted in light of Chinese culture's focus on saving face, which is similar to upholding social integrity (Cheng, 1986; Zane & Yeh, 2002). Mentees from a Chinese background tend to conceal their troubles and problems, as exposure might cause a loss of face, and thus, having close relationships is crucial for mentees in asking for help from their mentors (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). In contrast to the mentors' assumption that mentees would contact them if they needed help, mentees' responses showed that there were various relational barriers on the mentees' side.

The Impact of Language Differences

Cultural factors are found to be both a relationship enabler and barrier. Among the research participants, five out of nine (55%) mentors and six out of eight (75%) mentees were Chinese. Most Chinese mentors cited that they actively used WeChat during the mentoring: "It is called WeChat. They [mentees] prefer to use that and they prefer to speak in Mandarin" (Mentor 2); "Mentees asked questions through WeChat" (Mentor 5). The only exception was a Chinese mentor who held frequent mentoring meetings with another Australian mentor. While mentors understood that Chinese mentees felt more comfortable speaking in their own language, they also showed concerns that they might exclude non-Chinese students: "Mentees talking to you through WeChat, and in that situation, you are kind of excluding the other Mentor" (Mentor 2). One mentor shared her experience of being the only non-Chinese speaker in her group: "Somehow they spoke in Chinese, so I felt kind of excluded but I was okay" (Mentor 8). Thus, the positive and negative impact of language factors should be carefully considered. While having the same language background can bring mentors and mentees who speak the same language together, it can also isolate other group members who do not share the same language background.

Financial Incentives: Coffee Voucher

One of the most noticeable findings from the data is the positive correlation between financial incentives and the successful continuation of offline mentoring relationships. On the mentoring integration day, five mentoring groups won the group "selfie" contest for the best group photo and were awarded a $20 coffee voucher, which could be used at a coffee shop on campus. It was found that the mentoring groups that won the voucher were more likely to meet at least once after the mentoring integration day to use the voucher together, and this first meeting led them to the continuation of their relationship. One mentor shared how she used the voucher to organise the first meeting: "I posted the voucher on Facebook to say 'okay this is the thing we need to share with everyone' … that is why we met together in the coffee shop that day and used that voucher" (Mentor 3). Another mentor had a similar experience: "That voucher, our goal was to use the voucher" (Mentor 2). This suggests that the coffee vouchers successfully initiated the mentoring meetings, showing a positive relationship between financial incentives and sustaining mentoring relationships.

Program Benefits for Mentors

Critical Reflection on Social Work Learning

The focus group discussions indicated that peer mentoring assisted mentors to critically reflect on their previous social work learning; in particular, professional boundaries and group work. According to the *AASW Code of Ethics* (2010), it is critical that social workers set and maintain clear and appropriate professional boundaries in all forms of communication with clients. In the training session for mentors, students were guided to be mindful of professional boundaries with their mentees, as their relationships would be based on mentorship, rather than friendship. In focus group discussions, one mentor shared her reflection on her mentoring relationship analogous to professional boundaries: "You are friendly to your clients but you are not their friend" (Mentor 5). Another learning area was group work. An ability to work with groups is one of the attributes AASW requires from social work graduates (AASW, 2012). It was found that some mentors used their mentoring group as a case study for their group work observation assignment. One mentor cited that she could reflect on her

learning from the group work unit as her mentoring group provided a chance to observe group dynamics through all stages of group development (Mentor 1). This indicates that the group-based, peer-mentoring program helped mentors to reflect on and apply their social work learning.

A Sense of Helping Others

Mentors also shared their reflections on helping their mentees and how it affected them. One mentor cited: "I asked have I helped her out and she said yes" (Mentor 2). Similarly, another mentor also stated what her mentee said to her: "I remember one of the girls said that just sat down here and had chat regularly [was] helpful [sic]. Don't know why but just helpful. One of the mentees said that" (Mentor 1). Mentors also shared their views on their contribution to their mentees and the MSW community. One mentor said she felt good, because she was giving good advice and information to someone else (Mentor 8). Another mentor also said: "For the mentees, I can't say I changed or whatever, but I think definitely she was influenced by our experience" (Mentor 7). All mentors who had active mentoring relationships felt that they had contributed at a certain level to their mentees' smooth transition to study in Australia.

Professional Skills Development

All mentors agreed that the PMP allowed them to develop and use social work practice skills to a certain extent, in particular interpersonal and communication skills. These skills are critical for counselling and working in and with groups, and thus, are expected from social work program graduates (AASW, 2012). One participant emphasised how being a mentor was helpful for developing her facilitating skills: "It made me felt [sic] capable to do a facilitator job, made me more confident in the position or in the future similar position just more confident" (Mentor 1). Another mentor shared a similar learning experience: "I observed that mentors and mentees were disengaged, I started to organise some activity for our group" (Mentor 2). Some mentors stated that they could hone their counselling skills, as they encouraged and guided their mentees who were stressed about assignments and placements (Mentors 7, 8). This shows that taking on the role of mentor is helpful for developing social work students' critical professional skills.

PROGRAM BENEFITS FOR MENTEES

Academic Support

During the mentor training session and the mentoring integration day, the facilitator clearly stated that mentors should not help their mentees with their assignments. Instead, mentors were encouraged to redirect their mentees to their academic tutors and lecturers, as this would provide them with better academic support and more accurate information. This rule was aimed at minimising the risk of intended or unintended plagiarism. While some mentees thought this placed "too much restriction [sic]" on their mentoring relationship (Mentee 2), mentors felt that having such a policy made them feel comfortable (Mentor 3, 8).

Despite the assignment policy addressed above, it was found that mentors still provided their mentees with academic support, not directly with their assignments but indirectly with their anxiety and frustration. One mentee stated how her mentor alleviated her

academic stress by describing what would happen: "Our mentor told us we didn't need to be so anxious. We would have some opportunities to practise in tutorial and [if] we just do what we do in tutorial[s], then it would be fine" (Mentee 4). Another mentee said her mentor's sharing of previous experience helped: "[My mentor] said that 'okay, no worries. I didn't prepare for that but I still got C. So you can do it!' and it was kind of settling down, because… things won't be fail… we will all good [sic]" (Mentee 5). Further, it was found that mentors helped their mentees by "suggest[ing] some place to study" (Mentor 1) or encouraging them "to look for someone in our faculty to ask for help" (Mentor 3). Mentors were providing academic support to their mentees by sharing their experiences of overcoming difficulties.

Placement Support

The topic of supporting mentees with their placement issues was raised in all focus group discussions and individual interviews. The mentees shared their pre-placement anxiety which was caused, not only from the placement itself but also from the placement allocation process, as it often required them to wait in uncertainty. According to one mentee, she and her friends "were very worrying [sic] about the placement" (Mentee 5). Mentors supported them by providing an opportunity to take on a volunteer activity (Mentee 2) or giving an approximate timeline of the placement process, such as "what is happening" and "when the interview [is] going to happen" (Mentee 5). Other mentors shared their experiences of placement and information, such as what they did in their placement at what kind of agencies (Mentee 4, 7). In addition, some mentors assisted their mentees to be better prepared for their first placement. One mentor stated: "I helped her, 'maybe they will ask this kind of thing, so you should be better prepared in this area'" (Mentor 7). Another mentor shared a similar experience: "I tried to guide her. 'Maybe they may ask you certain questions, so prior to attend the interviews, try to go to their website and get as much information as you can'" (Mentor 8). That mentors shared their own placement experiences seemed to have had both practical and emotional effects as it provided placement information as well as relieving mentees' pre-placement anxiety.

Adjustment Support

Beyond the issues related to academic and placement support, it was found that mentors supported their mentees in a broader context. As most mentors and mentees were international students, issues about life in Australia were most frequently discussed. Mentors also shared the challenges they faced and achievements they made as well as which way would be the "best to tackle [the] challenges" (Mentee 5, Mentor 1). Some of the mentees cited that simply "know[ing] there are [people who] could help" (Mentee 2) was useful in their transition period, and this made them feel they were "connect[ed] with the faculty" (Mentee 6).

Discussion & Conclusion

The findings reveal that the main barrier in mentoring relationships is the mismatched understandings of mentoring relationships between mentors and mentees. Developing an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of international students is essential for gaining insight into this issue and making suggestions for future peer mentoring programs. It is noteworthy that mentors and mentees have different ideas about the importance of the mentor–mentee relationship. While mentees felt that a close relationship was a critical condition for asking for help from their mentors, mentors assumed that mentees would approach them first if they needed

help, regardless of their degree of closeness. Mentors who had little or no interaction with their mentees came to the conclusion that their mentoring relationships were unsuccessful because their mentees did not need help. Further, the mentors viewed the mentoring relationship as solely relying on mentees' needs, rather than reciprocal expectations. For those mentors, the mentoring relationship was valid only when their mentees were in need of their help. In this case, social exchange theory (Foa & Foa, 1974) cannot fully explain the relational barriers in peer mentoring relationships, because those mentors did not have, or recognise, any needs to be traded, and thus were not motivated to build a mentoring relationship. Therefore, it could be argued that, for a successful peer mentoring relationship to develop, mentors should clearly understand how mentoring could benefit them. Based on this understanding, mentors and mentees need to agree that building a working relationship is vital in peer mentoring. A further barrier in the mentoring relationships in this program is mentees' exceptionally careful approach to initiating mentoring relationships, something that was often witnessed among Chinese students. As shown earlier in this research, mentees take a passive approach in order to avoid "bothering" their mentors. This could be interpreted as resorting to their Confucianism-influenced cultural backgrounds, which value hierarchical social relationships and saving face (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012; Zane & Yeh, 2002; Zhang et al., 2005). Cultural differences should not cause issues if the mentor and mentee share the same cultural norms. However, in the PMP, mentors and mentees are from different countries, where cultural and social norms vary. It was not possible to identify and compare the cultural factors of each country in this research, and this is a possible direction for future research. It is crucial to acknowledge the cultural differences among international students when organising PMPs. The main focus should be how to assist participating students to develop successful mentoring relationships beyond their potentially different cultural backgrounds. Cultural issues should be clearly addressed and appropriately shared with, and by, participants throughout the program. With adequate guidance which clearly delineates the role of mentors and mentees, both parties can build mentoring relationships more actively and efficiently.

The results showed that the PMP was beneficial not only to mentees but also to mentors. Broadly, the benefits to mentors discussed in the focus groups overlap with findings in previous research; including a sense of contribution and developing friendships (Colvin & Ashman, 2010); and altruistic, cognitive, social and personal growth (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). However, it should be emphasised that the mentors in the current study linked their learning experiences specifically to the social work profession. Throughout the peer mentoring, the mentors reflected on professional boundaries, group work theories, and social work skills. This shows that it is necessary to identify mentoring programs' benefits to mentors in relation to each participants' professional skill development. Specifying the various benefits of peer mentoring programs in different contexts is important, as this can promote uptake of PMPs by encouraging mentors' participation.

The PMP discussed in this research is distinctive from those discussed in previous research as it upholds the value of empowerment. Contrary to other PMPs that are implemented by schools in a top-down approach, this PMP was initiated and organised by two international students who wanted to support their peers (Ravagan, 2013). Rather than simply projecting international students as a special needs group, the platform of the PMP encourages international

students to support each other. It is important to have a learning community where they can share their perceived weaknesses and challenges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). By doing so, mentors can feel valid in the group as they help junior international students who are going through the issues they have already experienced. Mentees gain access to role models who have already overcome many of the transitional challenges of moving to another country.

This research is limited in two ways. Firstly, the sample may be biased, as it is possible that those who received positive impressions were more likely to voluntarily participate in the evaluation research. This could affect the results by suggesting that the PMP had more positive impacts on the students than it actually had. Secondly, the relationship between the researchers and participants might have affected the focus group discussions. Considering Chinese hierarchical culture, the focus group sessions facilitated by second-year student researchers may have made the first-year mentees feel uncomfortable due to a perceived power imbalance.

Based on the findings of this research, future studies could focus on how relational barriers in peer mentoring relationships can be identified depending on the cultural backgrounds of the participants. In this research, attention was given to Chinese culture. Future research could survey international students from other cultural backgrounds in order to understand how different social norms affect international students when seeking help in a new country. In addition, along with the benefits of peer mentoring as explored, various approaches should be carefully considered regarding the learning experiences of international students. For example, a social work program may embed internationalism in the curriculum in order to encourage its international students to engage and contribute by sharing their international experiences. With a comprehensive understanding of various needs and cultural backgrounds of international students, it is possible to improve their learning experiences with adequate assistance.

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