Issues in peer mentoring for undergraduate students in a private university in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This study explored peer mentoring among a group of students in order to reinforce our understanding of the process within a private university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Data collection and analysis were done by means of quantitative and qualitative strategies. The findings revealed that peer mentoring appears to be guided by both the apprenticeship and constructivist conceptions of the process. Further, the data indicated that peer mentoring is beneficial to the peer mentors, their colleagues and the university while the process can also be challenging. For instance, lack of recognition and difficulty in recruitment were identified as huge challenges to the peer mentoring process in this context. Lastly, the study suggested that peer mentoring can be strengthened with recognition, more training and clarification of expectations while implications of the findings on practice were also discussed.

Key words: Peer mentoring; undergraduate students; private university; United Arab Emirates

Introduction

The need to support students is imperative to their academic development and social well-being (Terrion & Leornard, 2007). A plethora of strategies have been devised to strengthen students' learning across the globe. One of these strategies is peer mentoring and it is increasingly gaining currency as a salient strategy to help students to adjust to university life, improve their learning experience and reduce attrition rates of those who are vulnerable (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Goff, 2011; Lynn, 2010). Additionally, the peer mentoring process is reported to have helped in positively transforming students' health, behaviour and attitudes to their studies and interpersonal relations (Power, Miles, Peruzzi & Voerman, 2011). Despite this, peer mentoring is not easily facilitated, as research findings indicate. For instance, George & Mampilly (2012) contend that a high-quality peer mentoring program is not easily implemented. Consistent with this, Lynn (2010) documents failed attempts to establish successful mentoring programs in a North American university. Thus, it seems indispensable to understand the needs, aspirations and perceptions of those involved in the peer mentoring process in any context for its goals to be achieved (Clutterbuck, 2004; Miller, 2005). Apart from this, research reports on peer mentoring among undergraduate students in the

United Arab Emirates (UAE) seem to be scant or non-existent. Searching databases such as scopus, sciencedirect and proquest, we found no study on peer mentoring processes within undergraduate students context in the UAE. In this study, we therefore explored issues related to peer mentoring among a group undergraduate students in a private university context in the UAE. We contend that this study provides insights into the peer mentoring process in the UAE where research on the subject of peer mentoring is limited.

Context

This small scale study was conducted in the context of a private university in the Dubai Emirate of UAE. At the university, a student peer mentoring group was established in 2011 to complement the Guidance and Counselling Center in supporting and guiding students. Peer mentors are drawn from the five colleges in the university. In doing this, volunteers are sought among students across the colleges and levels including first year students who have been in the university for more than one semester and are willing to share knowledge with their colleagues. In this context, admission takes place thrice in a year. That is, students can join the university during the fall, spring, or summer semester. So, students may be matched with their colleagues in the same level or different level in peer mentoring in this context. However, the most important attributes expected of the peer mentors are passion for supporting others and being open to collaborative learning with others. Although the peer mentors are expected to be academically sound, training is also given to them to prepare them for their roles. Meetings are regularly held between the peer mentors and the Guidance and Counselling coordinators to strategize on how academic and community development programs could be facilitated. Peer mentors also meet with mentees in the Counselling center or classroom for tutorials as may be requested by the counselling center or students who need some support.

In this context, students are allowed to attend classes with their counterparts of the opposite gender. However, there are limits to which students can mingle together as the culture and state religion forbid excessive closeness or intimacy between males and females that are not related either biologically or by marriage. So, peer mentoring pairs or groups may be of mixed gender for the sole purpose of sharing knowledge and promoting collective interests without excessive closeness. Robertson, Al Khatib & Al Habib (2002) explained that Arab culture values collectivism, where commitments to community and organizational development are given priority over individualism, where inidividuals think more about personal achievements. However, Wils, Saba, Waxin & Labelle (2011) report a break or disparity in the traditional Arab culture as some now place individual interests above collective interests as a result of learning from other cultures, modernization, multiculturalism and globalization. Perhaps this development may impact on peer mentoring relationships among students as some may not be willing to sacrifice their time for the development of others. Further, the majority of the students are in their twenties, married and working. So, students' commitments to their family and workplace may also impact on their peer mentoring activities. The majority of the students are native Emirati Arabic language speakers and many are from the neighboring Arab countries, while the rest are from non-Arab speaking African, Asia, European and American countries. It is also germane to note that the students' populace is dominated by males. This may also impact on mentoring process since there are cultural limitations to interactions between male and female students as explained earlier.

Literature Review

Conceptualization of peer mentoring

In the literature, peer mentoring is commonly described as a process through which more experienced, mature or senior students guide and direct their junior colleagues for their personal and professional development (Goff, 2011; Miller, 2005; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). However, over-reliance on this conceptualization may not give a comprehensive and accurate picture of activities involved in peer mentoring. Indeed, this conceptualization suggests a hierarchical structure that is underpinned by the traditional or apprenticeship approach to learning where a mentor presumes to be very knowledgeable and capable of guiding others to learn without their input (Author 1a, 2013; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Perhaps, this explains why Kram & Isabella (1985) contend that peer mentoring offers an alternative process to the traditional mentoring dynamic. Buttressing this, Ramsay, Jones & Barker (2007) argue that peer mentoring removes the typical hierarchy in a traditional mentoring context and offers opportunities for students to learn collaboratively with their peers. Similarly, Jacobi (1991) contends that peer mentoring relationships are reciprocal and helping processes. This dual-process conceptualization seems to be consistent with the critical constructivist perspective to mentoring where efforts are combined by the participants for their mutual learning and development (Aderibigbe, 2013; Aderibigbe, Colucci-Gray & Gray, 2014). As explained in the literature, the transformative capability of the constructivist means of facilitating learning with peers was grounded in the need for deeper understanding of self and others (Parker & Carroll, 2009). Consistent with the constructivist standpoint, we define peer mentoring as a collaborative learning process through which students share knowledge and support each other for their academic, socio-psychological and professional development.

Benefits of peer mentoring

Research indicates that peer mentoring is of immense benefit to those involved and also to institutions where implemented. Indeed, Power *et al.* (2011) argue that peer mentoring has the potential to help students who have failed to change through other forms of support to improve their health, interpersonal relationships and attitudes to life. In their study, Andrews & Clark (2011) contend that the first weeks of study in university are crucial to success and thus report that peer mentoring offers students a strong foundation to settle and excel in university. In a similar fashion, Colvin & Ashman (2010) report that peer mentoring offers students the opportunity to gain firsthand experience of handling responsibility, gain personal satisfaction by serving others, develop friendships and learn from their colleagues. Consistent with this, it is also documented that peer mentoring plays a significant role in helping students to form a supportive network and enhance their educational and personal development (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Kirkham & Ringelstein, 2008).

In their study, Power *et al.* (2011) found that participants were able to develop their leadership, communication and organizational skills through peer mentoring process. Additionally, peer mentoring helps students to develop skills necessary to work with people from diverse backgrounds with a range of needs through exposure to the entire student populace (Shotton Oosahwe & Cintron, 2007; Wilson, 2009 in Power *et al.*, 2011). Thus, it strengthens their communication skills (Andrew & Clark, 2011) and benefits the universities as some peer mentors serve as representatives on some institutional committees (Power *et al.*, 2011). In summarizing the benefits of a mentoring program, George and Mampilly (2012) contend that

student quality and retention rates are improved while absenteeism is reduced and institutions' reputation is promoted through peer mentoring process.

Conditions for effective peer mentoring

The effectiveness of peer mentoring depends on many factors. Kirkham & Ringelstein (2008) argue that commitment, clarity of purpose, communication and confidentiality are essential and instrumental in determining the success of a mentoring program. In their own study, Shotton *et al.* (2007) identified four key elements for establishing a successful peer mentoring program: (1) the peer mentor's commitment to the program and to the mentee; (2) the peer mentor's expression of genuine care for the mentee; (3) the mentee's perception of the peer mentor as someone to be admired, or a role model; and (4) the peer mentor's and mentee's ability to relate with each other. In order to develop the necessary skills as conditions for effective implementation of peer mentoring program, Lynn (2010) explains that there should be commitment from peer mentors and mentees and perhaps they could voluntarily enroll in mentor/mentee course(s) organized by a faculty or staff member with relevant expertise. In the same vein, it is reported that scholars hold the view that students can do well in peer mentoring if trained (Miller, 2005). Further, Jacobi (1991) adds that the nature and goals of peer mentoring should be made explicit to students involved in the peer mentoring process. It is also documented that careful matching of students (Little, 1990) and consideration of quality of peer mentors can make a difference in peer mentoring relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Niehoff, 2006).

Additionally, communication between peer mentors and mentees should be taken seriously as a condition for success in peer mentoring. Parker & Carroll (2008) report that being able to develop skills needed to attend to peers' interest such as respective and active listening skills can make a difference in the peer mentoring process. In Waters (2004, cited by George & Mampilly, 2012), it is reported that personality and openness in sharing ideas were essential factors in mentor-mentee agreement about the provision of support for each other. Time will however be needed for peer mentors and mentees to be able to have proper discussions about each peer mentoring relationship and what they intend to achieve through the process. In their study, Parker & Carroll (2008) explain that time was allocated for peer mentors and mentees to agree on procedures and goals of the peer mentoring so as to promote trust and confidence among themselves. As the literature indicates, institutional support in terms of recognition of mentors' involvement, motivation, funding and continuous appraisal of the peer mentoring program were identified as key elements that contribute to the success of the peer mentoring program (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Goff, 2011). The absence of the conditions for effective peer mentoring discussed could result in challenges in the peer mentoring process. Nonetheless, the results of literature conducted on peer mentoring were limited to countries outside the Middle East. Thus, this study sets out to find out the situation regarding peer mentoring among undergraduate students in an Emirati private university context. Thus, the following research questions were explored:

- How is peer mentoring understood by student peer mentors in this context?

- How beneficial is the peer mentoring process from the peer mentors' perspective?

- What, if any, are the challenges to peer mentors and how can the challenges be tackled?

Methods

Data Collection

In this study, data collection was carried out using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data was generated through a survey questionnaire while the qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions. In addition, the data collected was compared with the existing literature on peer mentoring. Thus, this approach provided the opportunity for us to triangulate data for a better understanding of the peer mentoring process in this context (Creswell, 2003). The data collection procedure complied with the general ethical standards approved by international educational organizations such as British Educational Research Association (BERA).

Participants and Instruments

For the quantitative phase, we distributed 36 survey questionnaires to students (peer mentors and intending peer mentors) during an orientation session for newly admitted students to the university in a spring semester. The orientation session was jointly organized by the Guidance and Counselling Center and the Department of Student Affairs to introduce the new students to the university community. We used a questionnaire as it offers opportunity for collection of data informed by standardized questions, thereby giving respondents equal opportunity to respond to the same questions (Converse & Presser, 1986). Out of the 36 questionnaires, 19 were completed and returned, accounting for 14 females and 5 male members of the group. However, the 19 questionnaires returned account for the actual active peer mentors who had been in the university for at least one semester or more. We acknowledge that the number is not that high but it is the total number of the active peer mentors when the study was conducted. More so, the purpose of our data collection using this measure was not for generalization, but rather to have a better understanding of the peer mentoring process in this context. Questions asked in the questionnaire included how peer mentoring is conceptualized, how beneficial is peer mentoring, what are the peer mentors' views about challenges or difficulties experienced in peer mentoring and potential ways forward to ameliorating the challenges if there are any.

At the qualitative phase, we conducted two focus group discussions. In the first instance, 6 student peer mentors were involved while 2 student peer mentors and 1 tutor took part in the second focus group discussion. However, data from student peer mentors were only reported purposively in this paper. As Patton (2002) explained, purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants with relevant information to their studies. We reported data from the peer mentors as it reflects their experience of peer mentoring process which was the focus of this study. Of the 8 students, 6 were female while 2 were male. In selecting the participants, student peer mentors completing the questionnaire were asked to indicate their willingness to be involved in a follow-up focus group discussion. We aimed and hoped to have at least 8 participating students in each focus group discussion, but in the end, we had 6 and 2 participants respectively. We admit this as a limitation, but we contend that a focus group discussion is a small group's dialogue and interaction aimed at generating rich data on a topic (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). Further, Israel & Galindo-Gonzalez (2011) argue that there is no minimum number of participant(s) required for focus group discussion as its main aim is to help in collecting rich qualitative data. Thus, we asked parallel questions to those asked in the quantitative phase to illuminate the findings from the questionnaires. The focus group discussions lasted for about 45-60 minutes. Our conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Validity and Credibility

In this study, we piloted the survey questionnaire used for validation purpose. In doing this, we gave the first draft of the questionnaire to 4 colleagues and 6 student peer mentors. Their feedback was used to revise the questionnaire after which it was administered. This process helped in ensuring that questions were clear to the respondents and also focused on the thrust of our paper (Patton, 2002). We thoroughly discussed the draft of the focus group discussion guide and we also compared the transcripts of the focus group discussions with the field notes taken. Further, the triangulation of the quantitative, qualitative and other secondary data in the literature also lends credibility to this study (Creswell, 2003). In addition, we sent the transcripts to the participants for their feedback (Patton, 2002) and they all confirmed the authenticity of the transcript. Peer debriefing about the whole report also took place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis

Quantitative data was descriptively analyzed using the frequency distribution, after which the data was presented in Table 1. On the other hand, the qualitative data were thematically analyzed following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six steps in thematic analysis. We read the transcript of our qualitative data severally so as to be more familiar (immersion) with our data after which we generated the initial codes. Furthermore, we looked for logical and common patterns in the participants' views with which we developed the themes. We then searched again for the themes in our texts and reviewed them iteratively. Then, we finally defined the themes and systematically organized them consistently with goals of the study. The focus group discussions were coded as FGD 1 and FGD 2 while participants were coded as P as can be seen in the qualitative data.

Findings

The study explored the views of a group of undergraduate students about peer mentoring processes in a private university context in the UAE. The findings are presented consistently with the focus of the study starting with the quantitative data, followed by the emerging themes from the qualitative data.

Research Question 1: How is peer mentoring understood by student peer mentors in this context?

Quantitative data indicated that a higher number (6) of the participants see peer mentoring as a one way process through which someone assists his/her colleagues to learn and be familiar with a context. Four participants believed that peer mentoring is a formalized collaborative or reciprocal process through which learning takes place between colleagues; while 4 participants also felt that peer mentoring involves a process through which some one can guide his/her colleagues in choice of careers. Four participants also indicated that peer mentoring is a personal relationship between friends with the sole aim of helping each other (Table 1). One of the possible explanations for this finding could be that peer mentoring is mostly thought to be a process through which assistance is given to others (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Kirkham & Ringelstein, 2008). Thus, this suggests that the peer mentoring process as experienced in this context is hugely influenced by the apprenticeship disposition to mentoring processes. However, some participants' beliefs about the peer mentoring process may also have been guided by the constructivist theoretical understanding that participants contribute and learn from each other. This finding may also have been influenced by the experience of the participants in the peer mentoring process.

Peer mentors' responses to the following questions:		Frequency	Percentage
How would you describe peer mentoring from your experience?	A formalized collaborative or reciprocal process through which learning takes place between colleagues/students.	4	21
	A one way process through which someone assists his/her colleague to learn and be familiar with a context/school.	6	32
	A process through which someone can guide his/her colleague in choice of careers.	4	21
	A personal relationship between friends with the sole aim of helping each other.	4	21
	No response	1	5
For how long have you been involved in peer mentoring?	One semester	6	32
	Two semester	5	26
	Three semester	4	21
	Four semester	3	16
	No response	1	5
How beneficial do you find peer mentoring whether as a peer mentor?	Very beneficial	14	74
	Beneficial	4	21
	Not beneficial	1	5
	No idea	0	0
In what ways have you been peer mentoring your colleagues?	Familiarizing with the campus and its facilities.	12	63
	Getting study materials	0	0
	Tips on how to complete assignments/home work.	3	16
	Revision in preparation for exams.	2	10
	Guidance on the right course to choose.	1	5
	Emotional and psychological support	1	5
Do you think the process involved in peer mentoring is difficult and challenging?	Yes	4	21
	No	12	63
	No idea	3	16
Do you think that the challenges are manageable or not?	Yes	8	42
	No	5	26
	No idea	5	26
Would you still like to be involved in peer mentoring activities?	Yes	16	84
	No	0	0
	No idea	3	16

Table 1: Frequency distribution of respondents' views on issues related to peer mentoring process (n=19)

As the quantitative data revealed, the majority of the participants (11) have less than 3 semesters' peer mentoring experience while 7 participants have over 3 semesters' experience (See Table 1). It may be possible that the views of the participants about peer mentoring could change as they garner more experience and have a better understanding of the whole concept. The qualitative data also revealed two major themes detailing the nuances of students' views about their understanding and conceptualization of peer mentoring process. The two themes are as follows:

Helping

Peer mentoring is conceived as a process through which a helping hand is given. This view is illustrated with the following comments:

> *In peer mentoring we are helping the new students and the students that are already here (FGD 1, P4)*
> *...the ability to help others (FGD 2, P2)*

However, one participant noted that for students to be helped, they also have to acknowledge that they need help and ask for help when necessary:

> *...having peer mentor who is ready to help but we need students who would ask for help (FGD 1, P1).*

This finding suggests that peer mentoring could provide a platform where students can help their colleagues. However, the finding highlights the needs for students who need help to acknowledge this; and ask for help as and when needed.

Learning

Peer mentoring is also conceived as a learning process for those involved in the exercise:

> *...we are learning how to work in a group (FGD 1, P4)*
> *Whoever we deal with, there is always things to learn about them. I am learning from everyone here (FGD 2, P2).*
> *I think they can share with us and we can share a lot with them (FGD 1, P6)*

From this finding, it seems fair to suggest that both peer mentors and mentees can learn in the process of peer mentoring. Perhaps, this explains why the participants overwhelmingly contend that peer mentoring is a beneficial endeavour, as the data below revealed. Drawing on the qualitative data, it also seems apparent that the participants' understandings and conceptualizations of peer mentoring are underpinned by both the apprenticeship and constructivist disposition to mentoring.

Research Question 2: How beneficial is the peer mentoring process from the peer mentors' perspective?

Quantitative data revealed that the majority of the participants (14 out of 19) consent that peer mentoring is very beneficial. Four participants thought it was beneficial while just 1 participant felt peer mentoring was not beneficial at all. Perhaps, the majority felt that peer mentoring was beneficial because they got to know more about the university campus and its facilities through the process, as 12 participants indicated. Three participants also identified being able to get tips on how to complete assignments as a benefit of peer mentoring; while 2 participants chose to use the mentoring as an opportunity to revise in

preparation for exams. Guidance on the right course and emotional support were subscribed to by 1 participant; whilst no one felt that peer mentoring could provide an opportunity for getting study materials (See Table 1 in the appendix). Lastly, just one participant indicated that peer mentoring was not beneficial.

In the same vein, the qualitative data revealed that peer mentoring is of benefit to the participants as well as the institution. The three themes that emerged are as follows:

Experience

The participants saw peer mentoring as a process through which they could acquire valuable experience in developing people, interpersonal and professional skills:

> *This is something for you...as experience, you are dealing with people, handling so many things, this is experience for you (FGD 1, P1).*
> *As a peer mentor, I am dealing with students. First of all, it helps me to have experience of how to deal with people (FGD 2, P2).*

It is explained further that the experience acquired through peer mentoring could also be useful in the future, as noted in the following comment:

> *This can be useful in your work as well. It's preparing you for the other world apart from the school (FGD 2, P1)*

This finding shows that students can gain valuable experience which could be useful for their personal and professional development at work, both now and in the future.

Skills

Peer mentoring is also believed to assist in the development of a variety of skills. This is illustrated with the following remarks:

> *It helps us with our leadership skills (FGD 1, P4)*
> *It involves getting to develop skills such as interpersonal skills and communication skills (FGD 2, P2).*

Another student explained further that developing these skills can foster their capacities to manage their studies and also to assist their colleagues:

> *It helps you to develop your management skills. So, you'll be able to manage everything in your studies and also in helping others (FGD 2, P1).*

It seems clear from this finding that peer mentoring provides opportunity for students involved to develop a variety of skills which could help them to organise their studies and also support their colleagues.

Reduction of pressure on university and Faculty members

The participants indicated that peer mentoring could also benefits the university and Faculty members by reducing certain pressures on them:

We help during registration; we help in giving background information to students. We also organize tutorials for our colleagues and that reduce pressure on the faculty members (FGD 1, P4). ...even the teachers if they need help... Being helpful in everything (Participant 1, FGD 2)

Apart from reducing pressure on the university and Faculty members, peer mentoring activities also have the potential to promote the university image, as the participants indicate:

If we have programs like autism campaigns, health campaigns, partnership and seminars with organizations from outside, I think that can promote the image of the university (FGD 1, P1).

The data indicated that peer mentoring helps in reducing pressure on university and Faculty members, especially when peer mentors engaged in coordinating some university activities and also organized tutorials for their colleagues. Peer mentors' involvement in humanitarian activities outside the university can also promote the image of university. However, the data also indicated that peer mentoring in this context is not immune to challenges, despite its benefits as highlighted by the results of the next research question.

Research Question 3: What, if any, are the challenges to peer mentors and how can the challenges be tackled?

Quantitative data showed that peer mentoring is easily facilitated as higher number (12) of the participants indicated that peer mentoring was facilitated with less challenges or difficulties, while 4 participants think it could be challenging or not easy to facilitate. This finding suggests less difficulty in peer mentoring process in this context. Perhaps this also explains why the majority (16) of the participants indicated their willingness to continue with their participation in peer mentoring activities. Not surprisingly, 8 participants also felt that; if at all, the challenges to peer mentoring can be manageable while 5 participants indicated that the challenges are not manageable (See Table 1 in the appendix). From these findings, participants seemed to downplay the existence of challenges/problems which could hinder them from facilitating peer mentoring easily and the possible negative impacts that such challenges could have on peer mentoring process. However, the qualitative data revealed a contrary outlook as the participants collectively acknowledged the existence of challenges hindering the effectiveness of peer mentoring process in this context:

Inadequate recognition and cooperation

The participant identified inadequate recognition and cooperation as challenges which affected the peer mentoring process in this context:

I think we are not recognized by some faculty members and some departments. Especially in activities, we find it difficult to contact them (FGD 1, P1).
Lack of recognition and cooperation from the higher management is another challenge... (FGD 1, P4).

It is explained further that these challenges culminated into other challenges such as lack of trust from their colleagues:

For example, if we go into class and we tell our colleagues that we offer help in tutorials, assignments or registration, some faculty members be little or look down on us and colleagues would not trust or respect us (FGD 1, P4)

It seems clear from the findings that inadequate recognition and cooperation from all departments (academic and non-academic) within the university could potentially constitute a huge challenge to the success of the peer mentoring program. This would also affect the level at which students would be willing to join the peer mentoring group.

Recruitment problem

Difficulty with recruitment of new members was also acknowledged as a challenge:
It is a challenge to get more people to join the peer mentoring team...We used to have friend volunteers but a lot of them left because of lack of cooperation and recognition (FGD 1, P1).

It is also explained that sometimes, getting mentees to show up for a peer mentoring session was sometimes a challenge:
The challenge for me is that you have to try to get them to show up when programs are organized to help them. For instance, sometimes when tutorials are organized, I'll manage my time, I'll be there and I have to wait for the students and they may not show up (Participant 1, FGD 2).

From the data, difficulty with getting students to join the peer mentoring team and also attend their programs could be frustrating to the peer mentors. That notwithstanding, the qualitative data revealed that the challenges to peer mentoring in this context can be minimized as shown below:

Recognition and support

An important finding was that recognition of the peer mentors and their efforts can foster the process. The following remarks illustrate this view:
We need contributions of all the departments, staff and faculty members (FGD 1, P1)
...if they recognize us, they'll help us to recruit and help us improve (FGD 1, P5)

Others added that support and recognition can encourage students to join and also foster the process of peer mentoring:
Something as simple as the 'sms' is one of the ways to recognize the group... the university needs to help in sending 'sms' to students to attend our programs (FGD 1, P4)
May be they should be treated differently in the university. For example, may be they should be given 5% discount in their tuition fee or the university can take them on trip at the end of the session (FGD 2, P2).

From the data, it seems clear that peer mentoring process can be promoted when recognition and support are given by all the departments of university. The data also suggested that incentives may also help in motivating peer mentors and encourage other students to get actively involved in peer mentoring activities.

Training

The participants felt more training was required to help the peer mentoring process become more effective:

> *Although we have some knowledge but we need more specific training like stress management, time management and others that can help us to improve (FGD 1, P1).*
> *It's good to do retraining and refresh our knowledge and we can always feel that we are growing. So, learning about mentoring generally is important (FGD 2, P2).*
> *We need to know more of something like job description. We need training about what we need to do (FGD 1, P4).*

From the data, more specific training needs to be considered as an important measure to promote and enhance peer mentoring programs.

Clarification of Expectations

It was acknowledged that clarification of expectations between those involved in the peer mentoring program has the potential to enhance the learning process:

> *It's important for us to clarify expectations as it can help us with planning our activities (FGD 1, P4).*
> *Of course we have to clear our expectations right from the beginning...Otherwise, we'll be working very hard but we may not achieve anything (FGD 2, P2).*

Another student echoed the need for expectations to be clarified right from beginning, as a way of measuring the effectiveness of peer mentoring:

> *...Some students when they come to you they think you'll do their assignments for them. So, I usually tell them from the beginning that I can teach you and show you how to do your assignments but you have to do it yourself (FGD 2, P1).*

This finding suggests that expectations need to be clarified by those involved in peer mentoring, as this could help them to plan effectively in order to achieve peer mentoring goals.

More members

Getting more students involved as peer mentors was thought to be necessary for the peer mentoring activities to be fostered:

> *I think we should increase the number of the peer mentors. So if some people cannot do something, some will do it (FGD 2, P1).*
> *I agree that we need more number and we shouldn't assign one person for one role. For one role, I think we need at least 3 or 4 persons. So if one person is not available, another would be able to carry on (FGD 2, P2).*

More so, the participants acknowledged that Faculty members could also assist in the recruitment of new members. A participant commented thus:

> *Faculty members can also help in recruiting peer mentors because if the faculty members can tell the students to join, it has big influence. If instructors tell them to do things, they will take it very seriously (FGD 1, P6).*

This finding indicates that getting more students involved as peer mentors can strengthen peer mentoring processes and activities. With more members, some assignments can be given to more than one person and in a situation where someone is available to discharge a duty, another person can step in. Further, the data show that the Faculty members can help in order to achieve this.

Discussion

In this study, the data we reported provided insights into the peer mentoring process among undergraduate students within a private university context in the UAE. A key finding is that peer mentoring is conceptualized from the apprenticeship perspective, as the quantitative data revealed. The notion of helping as expressed by participants in the qualitative phase is also consistent with the apprenticeship process through which a well-versed individual assists others (novice). This finding is not inconsistent with many research findings on mentoring (Goff, 2011; Miller, 2005; Terrion & Leonard, 2007), but it has implications for peer mentoring programs. As we earlier argued, this may lead to hierarchical relationships where one party may be dominant such that it may limit mutual learning and contributions from other parties. However, a good number of the respondents also see peer mentoring as a mutual learning process between two individuals in the quantitative phase. Consistent with this, the qualitative data suggests that peer mentoring is a process through which everyone involved can learn from each other. This conceptualization is in line with the critical constructivist strand and it may also impact on the manner in which the peer mentoring is facilitated. Essentially, we contend that conceptualization of peer mentoring as a collaborative endeavor can enhance mutual learning and could also help those involved to better understand themselves and others (Parker & Carroll, 2009; Power *et al.*, 2011). Thus, this study underlines the need for higher institution students to see peer mentoring as a collaboratively symbiotic process where everyone involved can make informed contributions and also benefit mutually.

From the data, peer mentoring is seen as a very beneficial endeavor. This finding is also consistent with the literature on peer mentoring (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). The quantitative data attests to this; while the qualitative data illuminates the specific benefits of peer mentoring programs in this context. Most importantly, peer mentoring is thought to assist students involved in gaining experience and developing leadership skills. This implies that peer mentoring is indeed pivotal for strengthening students' confidence and leadership skills in higher education context (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Furthermore, the data indicates that peer mentoring is also thought to be of benefit to the university and Faculty members, as it can reduce certain pressures on them. As the data revealed, peer mentors support their colleagues during the registration periods, help organize tutorials and guide colleagues to completing their assignments - and these reduce pressure on the university and Faculty members. Thus, higher education administrators may want to consider the development of peer mentoring programs as cost effective strategies to orientate students and also enhance their learning in non-hierarchical contexts.

Despite the benefits highlighted, peer mentoring in this context is said to be challenging just as reported elsewhere (George & Mampilly, 2012; Lynn, 2010). Although, the quantitative data indicated that peer mentoring is not challenging or difficult to facilitate, the qualitative data revealed that the participants were frustrated as a result of some challenges. The most frustrating challenge to the participants was inadequate recognition and support from different University departments as well as the Faculty members. In the literature, it is reported that the absence of institutional support such as recognition, funding and on-going

evaluation of peer mentoring group activities may hamper the peer mentoring process (Goff, 2011; Andrews & Clark, 2011). However, this finding suggests that the younger Arab generations are now receptive to individualism than collectivism as recognition for their efforts in peer mentoring is expected to be acknowledged (Wils *et al.*, 2011). This might be the case because of multiculturalism and cultural diversity as evident in the university under study (Wils *et al.*, 2011). Apart from this, the peer mentors may also have issue with recognition because they were underestimated and looked down upon by some Faculty members as FGD1, P4 explained. Perhaps, these Faculty members could be those who believe in the apprenticeship learning strategy where students need to only learn from their tutors or a more mature and experienced person. This study therefore underscores the need for higher institution authorities to provide an enabling environment through which the peer mentoring group's activities are well-supported and peer mentors given due recognition. This challenge and inadequate recognition earlier discussed made it difficult to get more students involved as peer mentors as they seem not be interested in joining the group because of inadequate recognition and support. As we pointed out earlier, the majority of all students in this context are males, but the majority of those involved in the peer mentoring activities are female. As we also explained, students are allowed to receive lectures together with their counterpart of the opposite gender and pairing in peer mentoring may be of mixed gender. However, there are limitations as to how they can mingle together for religious or cultural reasons. Perhaps, there is gender imbalance among the peer mentors because of cultural or religious reasons. More so, a lot of the students are working and also have family responsibilities. So, it is not surprising that difficulty with recruiting new members is acknowledged as a challenge in this context. However, this finding underscores the need for this issue to be further explored in the future studies.

These challenges were thought to be manageable by the participants in this study with a number of measures being put in place. The quantitative data indicated that the challenges of peer mentoring can be addressed. Perhaps, it is because of this notion that the majority of the respondents also indicated that they would still be willing to be involved in the peer mentoring activities. In the qualitative data, the participants agreed that peer mentoring can be strengthened if those involved are given recognition by university authorities (Goff, 2011; Andrews & Clark, 2011). It seems that recognition may help in gaining support of the different departments of the university and faculty members. For instance, it is believed that peer mentoring activities in this context can be promoted if the unit responsible for sending out sms/text message can support the group when necessary. Similarly, recognition on the part of the faculty members could mean that the peer mentors would not be looked down upon and this could boost their morale and confidence. With this, their colleagues would trust them and could also be willing to join the group if encouraged by the faculty members. Furthermore, this study is in agreement with previous studies (Parker & Carroll, 2008; George & Mampilly, 2012) that the developments of some skills are essential for effective implementation of peer mentoring processes and activities. For these skills to be developed, the participants reckoned that more training and workshops are required on a regular basis for them to keep pace with trends in peer mentoring programs in Higher Education globally. So, it seems necessary that those involved be equipped with more knowledge about peer mentoring, time and stress management. Lastly, clarification of expectations was highlighted as a necessary condition for peer mentoring processes to be strengthened in this context. Consistent with this, Jacobi (1991) argues that the goals of peer mentoring should be clear to everyone involved. It then follows that mentors and mentees should take the matter of clear expectations seriously before proceeding with the peer mentoring activities for such to be successful.

Conclusion and Implications for practice

In this article, we have explored peer mentoring among a group of undergraduate students in the context of a private university in the UAE. Drawing on our data, we contend that peer mentoring provides a platform for students to develop their skills for personal and professional purposes. Much as the peer mentoring process can be beneficial, our data also indicates that it can also be a challenging exercise. However, the challenges are thought to be manageable with students' commitment, recognition and support from university authorities, including management, faculty members and non-academic departments.

Drawing on our data, we hope that that the following implications can be transferrable to other Higher Education contexts for the purpose of improving peer mentoring practice, especially among students:
- Regular training and workshops should be given to strengthen peer mentors' knowledge and skills required in peer mentoring. Particularly, training should focus on peer mentor responsibilities, time and stress management. Also, training facilitators need to encourage students to see peer mentoring as a collaborative process for mutual learning.
- Recognition of the peer mentoring group by all sectors of the university, including management, Faculty members and other non-academic departments. In addition to recognition, the University can also help by providing the right resources to help support and strengthen the peer mentoring program. For instance, peer mentors must not be looked down upon and incentives such as invitation for a treat at the end of the session to motivate peer mentors may be considered. Student support units charged with sending 'sms' to students when necessary could also support the peer mentoring team in disseminating information to their colleagues if required. However, peer mentors also need to think more as collectivists than individualists as exemplified in their tradition, culture and religion.
- Recruitment of peer mentors (males and females) who are genuinely interested in supporting their colleagues through peer mentoring activities, who are also willing to learn from others. Doing this could help in increasing the number of male peer mentors, thereby reducing the gender imbalance among the group and also take care of some contextual cultural or religious conditions regarding interactions between male and female. On the other hand, students who are in need of support are to be constantly encouraged to ask for help and be open to learning from their colleagues.

Suggestions for future research

In this study, we reported the views of peer mentors only. So, future studies could explore the views of students who have been mentored, Faculty members and other university units to have a more robust snapshot of peer mentoring process. As we earlier explained, this is a small scale study focused on peer mentoring process in a private university within the Dubai Emirate with limited number of participants. Thus, large scale studies could also be considered in the UAE while comparison of peer mentoring activities across universities in the Middle East could also be considered. For wider participation, institutional campaign can be undertaken for more publicity and compensation such as 'thank you gift items' for participation may be considered in the future research.

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