The Effects of Paid Volunteerism on Peer-Mentoring Educational Initiatives: A Case Study of the Top-Up Programme*

Kwadwo Adusei-Asante, Daniel Doh

(School of Arts & Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia)

Abstract: Volunteerism provides benefits to both the volunteer — skills attainment, employment openings and fulfilment — and the host institution. However, in recent times, the sustainability of volunteerism appears to be waning — people seem to be losing interest. Situated within the framework of the social exchange theory, this paper discusses the effects of a paid volunteerism strategy on the outcomes of the Top-Up Programme, a peer-mentoring initiative aimed at improving retention and educational outcomes for domestic African undergraduate students at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Based on our experience, we argue that paid volunteerism achieves good outcomes for a results-driven targeted educational programme.

Key words: African-Australian students, paid volunteerism, result-based educational programmes, social exchange theory, volunteerism

1. Introduction

We recently published a conference paper on Edith Cowan University's (ECU) Top-Up Programme, a peer-mentoring initiative designed to support domestic African undergraduate students (DAUS) at risk of attrition (Adusei-Asante, Awidi & Doh, 2016). We argued that most of the students participating in the initiative had been retained, and were showing improved academic learning competence. The current paper discusses one of the key factors underpinning the success of the Top-Up Programme so far — paid volunteerism. The key message presented in this paper is that volunteerism is changing, and therefore, educational organisations that rely on "unpaid workers" need to find strategic ways to incentivise their volunteers, particularly if the work required of them is result-driven.

2. Literature Review

Volunteerism has been acknowledged as an important practice, with enormous potential for shaping the future of society (Rochester, Paine, Howlett, Zimmeck & Paine, 2016). Volunteering is a process of harnessing skills, energy, expertise and local knowledge in addressing everyday social problems to benefit humanity. Rochester et al. (2016) identified three models of volunteering — unpaid work/service, activism and serious

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leisure. Penner (2002) stated that volunteerism is concerned with adhering to acceptable social behaviour, with the aim of providing benefits to humanity, including strangers; thus, the essence of volunteerism is to provide services to society. This is driven by several factors outlined by Rochester et al. (2016), including altruistic tendencies, activism for self-help and mutual aid, and a need to pursue "serious leisure".

In the wake of perceived weakened interest in volunteerism, concern has turned to understanding why people volunteer without being extrinsically motivated (Cuskelly, 2004; Schusterschitz, Flatscher-Thöni, Leiter-Scheiring & Geser, 2014; Zappalà, 2000). Studies have demonstrated various reasons for volunteering (Engelberg, Skinner & Zakus, 2014; Zappalà, 2000). Engelberg et al. (2014) suggested three levels of motivation — the core level, the primary level and the secondary level. The core level of motivation is driven by altruistic tendencies and the desire to help people and society without expecting anything in return (Ritchie & Short, 2016). Shure (1991) stated that altruism is the single motivator for voluntary action; however, the reliability of altruism in driving voluntary actions in contemporary times has been questioned in relation to the sustainability of volunteerism.

At the second level of motivation for volunteerism, the primary level (Engelberg et al., 2014), volunteerism is driven by self-interest and personal needs, which showcases the egoistic attributes of the volunteer. Thus, people will volunteer when it serves their personal interests or provides them with satisfaction (Bussell & Forbes, 2002). Closely related to the primary level of motivation is the secondary level, also driven by social and personal development considerations. At the secondary stage, people look for opportunities to develop their personal and social skills through volunteerism — this explains recent developments in educational and industry placement practices and skills volunteerism (Engelberg et al., 2014). Overall, it is important to recognise that there are various motives for volunteerism, and these motives are dynamic across social contexts. To sustain volunteerism, there is a need to harness the different levels of motivation (Engelberg et al., 2014). Thus, the extent to which altruistic, egoistic and personal developmentconsiderations are embedded in any volunteering process can contribute to the sustainability of that process.

Consideration of a good blend of altruistic, egoistic and personal development in sustaining volunteerism initiatives is critical within the context of social exchange theory. The theory rests on the assumption that human interaction is sustained by the level of exchange of social and material resources (Cook, Cheshire, Rice & Nakagawa, 2013; Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2016). Khalid and Ali (2017) asserted that social exchange theory is dependent on the exchange of cost and rewards. In this instance, therefore, consideration of cost (the altruistic consideration) and reward (what one stands to benefit) are critical to maximise commitment to and outcomes of volunteering. Hunter and Ross (2013) referred to such an approach as stipend-paid volunteering or a motivated volunteer scheme, which draws synergy between cost and reward systems.

Over the years, educational peer-mentoring models have largely operated as unpaid volunteerism, based on altruistic considerations (Casey, 2013; Reynolds, 2003). In addition, there are discussions about the effectiveness of peer mentoring in schools for improved educational outcomes in the form of better grades and better completion rates. For example, Casey (2013) found that students buddied with mentors in their first year learned more about resources available to them and had better experiences than students without peer mentors. Reynolds (2003) also argued that students who mentor peers perform well academically (see also Topping, 1996). However, discussion on how a paid mentoring programme translates into opportunities and educational outcomes, for both the mentor and the mentee, have not been adequately explored in the literature — a gap this paper seeks to fill, using the Top-Up Programme as a reference.

3. The Top-Up Programme

The Top-Up Programme was established in 2015. The peer-mentoring programme supports DAUS at ECU in Western Australia. Various studies have identified the challenges DAUS face in higher education in many parts of Australia (Gately, Ellis, Britton & Fleming, 2017; Samani & Lozeva, 2016). For instance, on average, 20% of African students withdraw from undergraduate programmes (ECU, 2015). A recent study by Gately et al. (2017) found that the failure rate of Sudanese students in all units they enrolled in between 2010 and 2014 at ECU was almost 50%. The authors identified socio-political factors as key barriers (see also Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Turner & Fodzar, 2009, 2010). Unfortunately, to the authors' knowledge, there have been no targeted programmes to reverse this trend. The Top-Up Programme sought to (1) improve the English language and conceptual learning skills of DAUS, (2) build the capacity of DAUS to manage their academic work, family life and work/employment commitments, (3) develop clear career pathways and iv) adjust to the Australian academic life. The programme is funded under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme.

There are two pathways of recruitment into the programme — referral from academic staff and studentself-selection. Academic staff identifies DAUSwho require additional academic support in their respective units/courses,and make referrals to the programme team, who conduct a needs assessment to determine the appropriate learning strategy to assist the student. In addition, based on testimonies of beneficiary participants and flyer adverts, some DAUS with academic difficulties self-select for assessment. The self-selected DAUS are taken through a similar assessment process as those referred by academic staff (Adusei-Asante et al., 2016; Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016). A third recruitment pathway has been added this year, for DAUS who do not wish to be part of the regular support process, but have specific and immediate needs. These are referred to as walk-in participants. The walk-in participants also self-select, but are not taken through any assessment — they already know exactly what they want, and are only willing to invest a short time period in achieving it. The support provided to walk-in participants differs slightly from the mainline support systems for DAUS in the full Top-Up Programme; this is detailedbelow in the section on components of the programme.

The Top-Up Programme comprises three main activities — peer-mentoring sessions, plenary sessions and the walk-in support sessions. In the peer-mentoring session, each participating DAUS is assigned to an experienced mentor, who are mostly African PhD candidates at the ECU or other postgraduate students with substantial industry experience and academic support skills. Each mentor is expected to dedicate two–four hours to each mentee per week. Meetings take various forms,but face-to-faceisrecommended. In certain circumstances, online video systems (such as Skype and Facebook Live) or telephones are used. Mentors and mentees use the meetingsat the beginning of the semester to plan for the academic journey and set milestones or targets. The meetings and discussions focus on developing assignment outlines, reviewing assignments and lecture notes, individual skills-development sessions, accessing other resources and support systems, and preparations for examinations. Mentors also encourage students to discuss personal and family issues that may be affecting their academic performance, and provide support if they are competentto do so or refer them appropriate support services within and outside the university.

By design, meetings between mentors and mentees are expected to be held on ECU campuses. However, there are occasions when meetings have been held in convenient locations such as public libraries and cafes. To achieve the best outcomes in each meeting, mentors are encouraged to obtain copies of mentees' unit plans for all units they have enrolled in for the semester and discuss these with mentees. The agenda for each meeting is driven

by the mentees' needs and priorities for the semester, although mentors also influence issues discussed.

The second component is the plenary session. The Top-Up plenary session is a compulsory one-hour weekly skills-development and integration session for all mentees in the programme. The sessions are used to build generic academic, personal and social skills. Some sessions focus on English language and study skills, academic writing, referencing and plagiarism, and using EndNote. Other sessions focus on public speaking, preparing and delivering a presentation, job seeking and resume writing, and understanding the Australianemployment context (Adusei-Asante et al., 2016). Towards the end of the semester, students are taught ways to approach examination questions. The plenary sessions are designed to be hands-on; as a result, each session involves a practice component and an opportunity for ideas sharing. Mentors and other invited facilitators from within and outside ECU facilitate the plenary sessions.The plenary session is also used as a socialisation or academic-bonding session, so mentees, mentors and invited facilitators share snacks.

The third component, a new addition, is the walk-in session with DAUS who have specific short-term needs but are not part of the regular mentoring session. The DAUS who use this service are independent students, and seek support only when dealing with crucial assignment deadlines or in need of educational and/or pastoral assistance. They can 'walkin'and find designated mentors available for one-off assistance. This component is very flexible and allowsself-supporting DAUS to access help when they need it.

There is an embedded outcome assessment in the Top-Up Programme to monitorthe progress of each mentee, because it is anticipated that after a period of time, usually three semesters, mentees will graduate or become independent and self-sustaining if they are still studying. This allows for the continuous enrolment of other first-year DAUS requiring similar support. When a mentee has not shown sufficient progress, that mentee is retained for a longer period. Mentors provide a report of up to one page on each of their mentees, highlighting their respective achievements and areas that need improvement, at the end of each semester. The programme manager reviews the reports, after which a decision is made on whether a mentee should continue in the programme or be encouraged to become a self-supporting student, or even, potentially, a mentor. So far, three of the ten students who participated in the programme in 2015 have moved on as independent students, and discussions are far advanced to employ some as mentors in the programme.

4. Our Approach: Paid Volunteerism

The enormous commitment required of mentors and associated demands on their time in the Top-Up Programme meant that we designed it as a paid volunteer initiative. Mentors participating in the Top-Up Programme are therefore paid casual rates, covering over 85% of the actual time they invest in the programme. The intention of this approach was to induce altruistic motives in peer mentors, and to induce ownership of the mentoring process, while providing minimal incentives. Aside from monetary reimbursement, mentors are recognised as university staff and given access to subsidised parking fees and other ancillary benefits. Additionally, mentors who facilitate the weekly plenaries are paid at 100% of the lecture rate, and enjoy a free lunch. Provision is also made for the professional development of the volunteer mentors. They also have opportunities to contribute to publications on the programme, which enhances the resumes of those interested in academia.

Mentors in the programme have a minimum of (or are enrolled in) a master's degree; currently, almost 90% are ECU PhD candidates of African descent. They apply to work on the programme through an expression of interest to the programme manager, subject to availability of students and funds. Mentors accepted into the

programme are taken through a briefing session and assigned to students based on their competencies. On average, each mentor is assigned between two and five students. As of publication of this paper, there were eight mentors, supporting 30 students.

5. Findings

Top-Up has been successful largely because mentors working in the programme are paid and enjoy many benefits. As a result, all eight mentors are very enthusiastic and have demonstrated an enormous commitment to the programme. Some mentors have gained university teaching experience through the programme, while others have learned skills they can transfer to other endeavours. The Top-Up Programme has positioned the mentors for other casual academic jobs, such as research assistantships, and many have taken advantage of these opportunities. Some mentors have completed their PhDs and moved to permanent jobs, citing our programme as a reference and/or track record. We have recently received several expressions of interest from master's and PhD students from Western Australian universities wishing to be employed as mentors in the programme, a clear indication that motivated volunteerism works.

Over 90% of the students who participated in the programme in 2015 were retained. We also observed that:

> Except for one student, whose personal circumstances did not permit him to be present all the time, most of the participants attended the plenary sessions regularly. Attendance averaging seventy per cent was recorded. The sense of community created in the sessions played a role in the sustained patronage of the plenary discussions. The atmosphere enhanced sharing of ideas, sense of belonging and networking among the students. Through the project, the students have formed study partnerships, which are improving their academic skills (Adusei-Asante et al., 2016, p. 4).

Some 20 of the 22 students who participated in the 2016 programme were retained. Generally, there was significant improvement in academic outcomes for most of the mentees. Most students participating in the programme have expressed their satisfaction with their mentors and the programme in general, writing 'thank you'messages to their mentors such as:

> Excellent news I have for you, I ended up achieving a Distinction in Social Policy!

> Thank you so much, God bless you for all the academic support throughout this semester!

> I got HD, two Distinctions and a Credit … So delighted and making progress.

The level of commitment of mentors and mentees to the mentoring process in 2016 was commendable. However, academic writing skills remained a key area requiring attention for most mentees. As a result, most sessions of the 2017 plenary sessions have focused on supporting the mentees to improve their academic writing competence.

6. Conclusion

This paper discussed one of the key factors underpinning the success of the Top-Up Programme, a peer-mentoring initiative seeking to retain and improve educational outcomes for DAUSat ECU, Western Australia. The results obtained so far showa direct association between motivated volunteerism and positive outcomes for the students who have participated in the initiative. For example, we have learned that the programme provided opportunities for mentors to (1) support students needing academic support, (2) earn an

income and (3) build on their teaching abilities. Aside from obtaining personal fulfilment for positively influencing academic outcomes for the students they supported, some of the mentors have used the experiences obtained from the Top-Up Programme as a track record to secure permanent jobs, while others have attained on-going casual positions in the university. Based on our experiences, we would recommend paid volunteerism for settings where volunteer morale is low or where volunteers are to work on results-based initiatives.

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