Griffith Industry Mentoring Program

**Background:** In the early 1990s, Griffith University faced a number of critical challenges. It was still relatively new, and facing stringent competition from well-established rivals, one of which was positioning itself with students and employers as ‘real world’. Furthermore, graduating students often appeared unclear about career options, lacking understanding of work roles and workplaces within their profession and unsure how to make a confident transition to graduate employment. Clearly, there was a need to explore strategies that would connect Griffith and its students directly with industry.

The University chose mentoring as a vehicle for developing these connections, establishing a pilot Program in 1994 with a small number of mentors and students. Enlisting the support of accomplished alumni as ‘industry mentors’, the Program aimed to provide students with real-world experience, facilitating exploration of the critical interface between academic knowledge and professional practice. In linking Griffith University and its students directly with industry, the Program supported work readiness and career transition, while at the same time the University was enriched by the re-engagement of its alumni, and connections with industry generally. The expanding reputation of the Program, however, mainly from the endorsement of early participants, soon meant that applications exceeded places. "The best thing I did at University was to join the Mentoring Program.” (Student)

**Evolution:** Toward the end of ’98, Griffith Industry Mentoring Program underwent substantial changes to accommodate growing demand. The Program was moved from the Alumni office to Student Services, a full-time coordinator appointed and resources significantly increased to cope with the rapidly expanding numbers. Challenges included: recruiting increased numbers of suitable mentors; facilitating appropriate matches; setting up a workable Program structure; ensuring coherence of mentor/mentee expectations; maintaining student and mentor motivation and monitoring mentoring partnerships.

Program objectives were articulated as: assisting students to develop a better understanding of potential employing organizations, roles, and workplaces in areas relevant to their degrees; expanding the potential employer base for Griffith graduates by providing an avenue of involvement for people with no previous association with the University; providing opportunities for mentors to develop networks within the University and with other professionals and facilitating the continuing involvement of Griffith alumni in a way that offers benefits for them, current students and the University. From the start, mentoring staff were committed to a process of continuous improvement. New initiatives were tried, and where they did not contribute to the efficacy of the Program, discarded. As new technology became available, staff sought to take advantage of the efficiencies this afforded. Over the past 12 years, formal and informal feedback has provided the impetus for far-reaching changes.

- Mentors were identified and recruited for their expertise and corporate affiliations.
- Mentees and mentors received more comprehensive training in establishing and developing mentoring relationships.
- On-line and hard copy brochures were produced to publicise the Program.
- A database/web interface was developed to facilitate program administration and matching of mentors and mentees.
- Resources were written (Mentoring Handbook, Mentoring Logbook and compulsory reporting proformas).
- Mentors and mentees agreed and signed-off on written goals for their mentoring relationships.
- Functions were strengthened – each Program commenced and concluded with high-profile networking events at inner-city hotels (Brisbane and Gold Coast).
- Medium and long-term mentors were recognized with awards from the University.
- Mentors’ supervisors / managers / directors / business owners were advised annually about the valued contributions of their staff (by means of a letter from the Vice Chancellor).
- Students were awarded certificates on completion of the Program, and
- Program processes were constantly re-visited in the light of annual evaluations.

"From a mentor's perspective, although the organization has always been good, there has been significant ‘fine tuning’ in response to feedback; and this has resulted in an efficient well-run system underpinning the process. I believe that the Griffith Industry Mentoring Program can now be regarded as an example of best practice in its field. “ (General Manager, Community partnerships, Dept. of Environment and Resource Management)
The Program currently operates across second semester (late July to the end of October), involves 400 participants annually (200 students; 200 mentors) and is conducted concurrently in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast. Participating students represent a wide range of disciplines and are drawn from all five campuses of Griffith. More than 2000 students and the same number of mentors have taken part over the last 11 years. With 535 students applying for just 200 available places in 2009, clearly applicants are keen to take advantage of this important learning experience.

Mentoring staff demonstrate their commitment to diversity by ensuring that the ratio of international students to domestic students closely approximates that across the University (approximately 25%). Students with disabilities and indigenous students are encouraged to apply for the Program and provided with extra support as needed (for example, a sign-language interpreter was employed to accompany a hearing-impaired mentee to workplace meetings and mentoring functions).

**Outcomes:** Student evaluations attest to the benefits they derive: “From my involvement, I gained a better understanding of myself, what I want to do in life and a greater passion for the field I chose to study at university.” (Student) “Joining the Program was the best move I could have possibly made for my transition from university to the corporate world.” (Student)

The statements below represent the average of five years’ of evaluations: 2004-2009; N=1000 students

- 83% - better understanding of opportunities in my professional field
- 76% - greater clarity in career direction
- 74% - increased confidence as a beginning professional
- 78% - enhanced understanding of potential duties and workplace demands.

Although the Program focuses on the overall career development of students, 13% reported obtaining a graduate job, 13.8% had gained short-term paid work with their mentor’s organization and 72% had extended their networks beyond their mentor. 90% indicated they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their mentoring experience.

Mentors also consistently express their enthusiasm for the Program. “I have mentored a number of students over the past nine years, and found this Program to be both personally and professionally rewarding.” (Team Leader, Australian Federal Police)

“I have had the pleasure of mentoring five fantastic students. I appreciate the students’ fresh look at business and life, and value their honesty and ambitions. In many ways they keep me young.” (Operations Manager, Boeing Australia Ltd)

Program sustainability is evidenced by the long-term commitment of mentors. 9 mentors have served for over 10 years and 61 have mentored students for 5 or more years, while 20 former mentees have now returned to the Program as mentors after establishing themselves in their professions.

Critical to the Program’s success has been the recognition and support from senior officers of the University, evidenced by their regular attendance at Program events. Following the significant impact of the Program on the University community, Griffith has holistically embraced mentoring by promoting the development of ‘University-wide and department-specific mentoring programs’ as a commitment in its Academic Plan. Learning outcomes from the Program are moreover recognized and confirmed by senior Griffith academics, many of whom have been strongly supportive over many years. “The (Industry Mentoring) Program helps students (as ‘professionals-in-training’) to learn through observing how other professionals conduct themselves. This opportunity provides much more powerful and rewarding teaching than a textbook could ever achieve.” (Professor Michelle Barker, Department of Management, Griffith).

Griffith Industry Mentoring Program has been recognized by other Australian universities as ‘best practice’, with a number of other programs in higher education institutions and several commercial organizations basing themselves on the Griffith model. In 2008, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council acknowledged the quality of the Program and its outcomes by the award of a national citation for ‘a program sustained over thirteen years and widely recognized for its contribution to students learning, career development and University-industry partnership’.

The high value mentors place on the Program is illustrated by a comment from a long-standing mentor: “That such a wide diversity of successful professional people have committed to the Program has reinforced for me the positioning that Griffith has carved out for itself as a university very much in touch with industry and the community generally.” (A/Deputy Director-General, Science and Technology, Department of Tourism, Regional Development and Industry)

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