

Building on Success: Linking the University of Otago's International Mentor Programme with the Student Exchange Programme.

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The provision of buddy or mentor support to new international students is now a common service provided by International Offices. In providing these services there is an implicit acknowledgement that students settling into a new campus and city require support delivered in a range of ways. The provision of a buddy or mentor support allows the new student to engage with a senior student, already experienced within the institution, and in a way which is very different to the more traditional techniques of delivering support.

The success of these services is largely the result of the use of peer support to not only assist in the transition to the new campus and city, but as a complementary source of information and support for the incoming student. A buddy or mentor is in a unique position to field a range of questions, many of which would possibly not be directed to International and Admission staff. The key to the success of a mentor or buddy support programme is those senior students who volunteer to undertake the task. Demand for a buddy or mentor by new international students can run into the hundreds in many universities, and as such the successful recruitment and retention of willing and able students is critical to the success and longevity of such programmes.

The alignment of the International Mentor Programme and the Otago Global Student Exchange Programme at the University of Otago has proven successful in not only providing suitable mentors (in terms of quality and quantity), but also has in turn benefited in a range of ways those mentors who are part of the Exchange Programme. In fostering the synergies between the two programmes, a mutually supportive relationship between new inbound international students and outbound domestic exchange students has developed. In general the very qualities that encourage a student to go on exchange are the same qualities that make an ideal mentor.

In recent years there has been a significant shift in the make-up of the mentor cohort; primarily towards the majority of volunteers either about to go on exchange, or having just returned from their exchange experience. Traditionally the recruitment of mentors was a little more sporadic, normally highly reliant on the friendship network, and connections of the Mentor Coordinator. But the strengthening of linkages between the Otago Global Student Exchange Programme and the International Mentor Programme has resulted in the University successfully tapping into this ideal group of students for these important roles.

In mentoring a new student, those preparing to go on exchange develop a new insight into some of the issues they may face as part of their own study abroad experience. By supporting and interacting with a new international student, the mentor experiences firsthand the process of transitioning into a new culture and the hurdles that sometimes are experienced. This experience further develops their own skill set for interacting within an unfamiliar host community, when they themselves go on exchange.

For those students who have returned from exchange the mentor programme provides them with an opportunity to 'continue' in a small way their international experience. In doing so they can use their practical experiences from studying abroad to assist their mentee through issues of culture shock and adaptation to a new campus and city. Again, this is enriching and rewarding for both parties.

The process of recruiting potential mentors from those cohorts, both pre and post exchange, is a relatively seamless exercise, and normally has resulted in an excellent response rate. The benefits of involvement in the programme as a mentor are obvious, as is the attractiveness of the service component of the role.

The link between the International Mentor Programme and the Otago Global Student Exchange Programme has proven critical in ensuring sufficient recruitment of suitable mentor candidates. As demand for a mentor continues to grow, the key will be to ensure that the supply of those from the Otago Global Student Exchange Programme continues to expand as well.