

Mentoring students of different cultural backgrounds

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Abstract:

In this paper I shall analyse mentoring programs at two different Australian universities, La Trobe University and Monash University, foregrounding the ways in which mentors and mentees are trained and the mentoring programs conducted. I argue that by minimising cultural and religious differences, both programs construct and represent mentees as all the same. It is up to the mentors to signify these differences and construct their own sub-programs to reflect the individual needs of the mentees.

The mentees range from domestic students who have lived in Australia for many generations to international students who are newly arrived in Australia. The background knowledge of careers in Victoria as well as the personal needs of the students is vastly different. I shall point out some problems associated with treating them all as a homogenous group and the possible consequences of these representations within the mentors' psyche and the program more generally.

At Monash University, the opportunity to be a mentor is offered by Alumni Programs within the Advancement Office whereas La Trobe University offers the student career mentoring experience through its Student Enrichment program, embedded in the LTU Careers Office. There are many similarities between the two, and yet each has its own uniqueness about it.

I have had tremendous fun being involved in these two programs. I count mentoring students at these universities as two of my four volunteer jobs. I learn from the differences in the mentees' cultural backgrounds, and feel enriched by sharing their experiences. Each mentee brings a unique experience and a set of different values and expectations to their program. Some I keep in touch with, on Facebook or by email; others I have never heard from again after their time with me ended. Besides the mentees, my network of mentor friends is growing, and we lend support to one another, with our mentees, sharing skills according to our strengths. LinkedIn provides us with endless opportunities to network and share experiences or ask for support.

The ISANA audience for this presentation may find themselves inspired to take on mentoring themselves. There could be others in the audience, who, in organising their own mentor programs, take on some of the suggestions presented here.