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Title: Mentoring for Educational Change: An East African Case Study

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Extended Abstract

As part of this paper is submitted to a scientific journal for publication (Khamis and Chapman, 2014) an extended abstract is provided for the conference proceedings.

Summary

In 2012, a partnership was begun between Aga Khan University (AKU) and Academics Without Borders Canada (AWBC). In the initial project, three mentors from AWBC worked with nursing faculty on three East African campuses of AKU with a focus on developing more interactive teaching skills and scholarship. Following this four-month project, two of the mentors continued to work with nursing faculty to develop capacity. The relationship between AKU and AWBC has been formally extended with the initiation of several new projects, all centred on strengthening the student learning experience.

Introduction & Background

Aga Khan University (AKU) is an international university with campuses on three continents and in eight countries. Excellence in teaching and learning is a strategic priority as it aims to develop graduates who are leaders and critical thinkers able to serve the developing world. Academics Without Borders Canada (AWBC) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization whose aim is to share knowledge and expertise across borders to enhance faculty capacity. Since 2006, AWBC (formerly AHED - Academics for Higher Education Development) has mobilized 44 volunteer academics to support 14 higher education institutions in 11 countries on 27 projects. It has 157 volunteers on its database, largely, though not confined to, North American academics. The project described in this presentation was a joint venture between AKU and AWBC (Khamis and Chapman, 2014). The original initiative (others have evolved since) focused on strengthening the capacity of nursing faculty teaching in both the Enrolled Nurse-to-Registered Nurse and Registered Nurse-to-BScN programmes on all three AKU campuses in East Africa (Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam, and Kampala) through a mentoring programme with AWBC volunteers.

In late 2011, a quality assurance audit at the Aga Khan University campuses in East Africa demonstrated a need to expand nursing faculty members' expertise in utilizing student focused teaching strategies. Three AWBC mentors from North America were recruited to assist AKU faculty members. AKU identified the outcomes envisioned for the project and the skill sets required in the mentors. The ultimate aim was to strengthen the learning experience and learning outcomes for nursing students in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and, in so doing,

better prepare graduates to promote health amongst the East African population (Khamis and Chapman, 2014).

The formal objectives of the partnership between AKU and AWBC were:

- To develop a faculty development continuing education plan that met the needs already identified through quality assurance baseline reviews of AKU's Advanced Nursing Studies programmes in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.
- To build capacity of nursing faculty on student centred pedagogies, clinical teaching, effective feedback and assessment for learning to engender student engagement.
- To share lessons learnt and mentoring strategies for faculty development across AKU and to other higher education institutions in East Africa. (Contract between AKU and AWBC, 2012.)

In addition, it was anticipated that faculty scholarship could be supported and enhanced through dialogue with the mentors and through action research projects surrounding the development of interactive, student centred pedagogies.

Method

An action research approach was utilized for the original study and the results have informed further development of a relationship between AKU and AWBC. The key questions for the research were identified as:

1. What are the challenges to implementing a cross-cultural mentoring process?
2. What are the facilitating factors that contribute to the success of a partnership between an East African university and the non-profit organization Academics Without Borders Canada?
3. What can be learnt from this experience of partnering for mentoring that would inform future endeavours?

The researchers/presenters reviewed their own personal journals as well as other relevant documents. The authors have shared the themes from those journals and other documents as well as the themes from the journal of one other AWBC mentor in an article (Khamis and Chapman, 2014). In addition, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis was chosen as the evaluation approach as it was familiar to most faculty members, allowed for the participant voice, could be accomplished as a group activity and allowed for ease of analysis. Through the SWOT nursing faculty, from each site, as well as administrators, were asked to identify strengths, facilitating factors, inhibiting factors and challenges associated with the project.

Findings

The AWBC volunteer mentors worked with nursing faculty members from AKU in slightly different ways on each campus, dependent upon the needs of the faculty as well as the personality and style of the mentors. Strategies that were employed to develop teaching capacity included classroom visits with mentor feedback, co-teaching, visits to clinical areas, participation in an action research project using critical incident questionnaires in the classroom, and a faculty retreat workshop of all East African nursing faculty for academic exchange and dialogue (Khamis and Chapman, 2014).

The mentoring partnership was not without challenges. Key challenges identified were:

relationship building across cultures; competing responsibilities of mentors and mentees; “transformation takes time”; and “Challenging the status quo is...challenging!” (Khamis and Chapman, 2014)

The SWOT revealed several enabling and inhibiting factors through the reflective process. This included the need for management support; ownership over the partnership from the mentees; creating an enabling environment, including the need for team work amongst the faculty; and support and role modelling by the mentor. Faculty members identified that one strength of the project was the nature of the mentors chosen, which indicates that the selection process was effective.

There were several positive outcomes from the project including: the engagement of faculty, many for the first time, in an action research project on student engagement and the subsequent journal article reflecting on change and innovation in teaching strategies employed; an increase in faculty engagement in academic dialogue and teaching scholarship; sharing of resources through a virtual learning environment (Moodle) (Khamis and Chapman, 2014); and development of an inter-professional curriculum with much better cohesion apparent between the medical and nursing aspects of the programme centering on health issues of East Africa.

Discussion

Mutually agreed-upon goals are important to the success of a mentoring project (Hnatuik, 2009). The perception of faculty members at AKU’s Advanced Nursing Studies programme that the mentoring project was mandated by the administration clearly influenced relationship development between faculty members and mentors. Despite actions on the part of Advanced Nursing Studies administrators to engage faculty in the design of the project, there seemed to be a resistance, initially, to working with the mentors. Partly, this seemed related to differing agendas with faculty members often wanting to have assistance in writing and scholarship, while the project outcomes identified enhancing student-focused pedagogies. The mentors struggled with the resulting philosophical tension this created, as each came with a community development orientation (Freire, 1992; Naidoo & Wills, 2009; Khamis and Chapman, 2014).

Mentoring is a complex process and both an art and a science (Metcalf, 2010). It is even more complex when occurring cross culturally. Expectations surrounding the role of the mentor/teacher vary between cultures (Wroten and Waite, 2009). The AWBC mentors experienced challenges in trying to understand the dynamics of the faculty teams and developing an understanding of how best to mentor in this context. Their writings suggest that it took time to develop relationships and try different approaches (Khamis and Chapman, 2014). Wroten and Waite (2009) suggest that gender, race/ethnicity and culture are factors that influence the nature of the mentoring relationship and are noted in some of the reflections and journal entries in this study (Khamis and Chapman, 2014). The mentors’ non-threatening approach and their presence on campus over time were identified in the SWOT analysis as facilitating the mentoring process. The art of mentoring is illustrated in this delicate dance between pushing faculty members but not pushing so hard that relationships are destroyed (Khamis and Chapman, 2014).

Practical implications

There are several lessons to be shared with ICED delegates who plan to embark on mentoring partnerships both across geographic frontiers as well as to enhance educational development of their faculty. The first amongst these is to include the mentee faculty members in determining the outcomes of the mentoring partnership. It is also imperative to provide adequate time for relationship building between the mentors and faculty members. Mentoring programs should consider learning style diversity as well as development of cultural awareness and cultural competence (Allan, 2010).

As AKU has expanded beyond this initial pilot partnership of three mentors to a further six academic exchanges between the two institutions, interaction with mentors and mentees prior to actual site visits through Skype and other means, longer on-site visits and shorter return visits have helped in ensuring outcomes are met effectively. And finally, there must be targeted mentoring expectations that are clear and that are doable in the time allocated. It is very helpful to have a champion in the institution to facilitate the exchange and ensure no logistical distractions from the core mentoring activity. The number of repeat visits by mentors to AKU is an indicator that the sharing of time and knowledge benefits both the mentee and the mentor.

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