A NATIONAL AUDIT REVIEW OF MENTORING PROJECTS FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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[POWERPOINT #1]

Today I’d like to present some preliminary findings of a study we were commissioned to undertake on mentoring projects for young offenders and young people identified as at risk of offending for the Crime Prevention Branch of the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department. The project will be completed in October.

[POWERPOINT #2]

In my paper I will be discussing 8 key issues:

■ aims of the project

■ methodology

■ location of mentoring projects

■ organisational context of mentoring programs

■ initiating and developing mentoring relationships

■ recruiting young people

■ evaluation

■ is mentoring an effective crime prevention strategy?
1.1 AIMS OF THE PROJECT

Firstly, in terms of the aims of the project, we were asked to conduct a national audit and review of mentoring programs around Australia in order to:

[POWERPOINT #3]

- provide a national profile of mentoring programs for young offenders
- identify models and good practice
- identify key crime prevention outcomes from youth mentoring
- make recommendations for Stage 2 of the project.

At this point it is not known what exactly Stage 2 will involve, but key activities might include, for instance, the development and production of resource materials for a range of audiences, or the trial of a mentoring program with a specified target group.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

[POWERPOINT #4]

One of the most challenging aspects of the project was deciding how precisely to define mentoring projects for the purpose of the study. Projects were included in the study only where the following five criteria were satisfied:

(a) mentoring is a significant or primary component of the project, and this has been defined and documented by the project itself (eg in their aims and objectives)

(b) a significant or primary target group of the project is young people who have either (i) previously committed criminal offences or (ii) have been identified as being at risk of committing criminal offences
(c) the target group is young people, including (but not necessarily exclusively) young people aged 18 years or below

(d) the mentors used are community persons rather than people acting in a professional capacity such as youth workers

(e) the program is currently operational.

Quite a few projects were excluded from the study because they did not meet this definition eg a number were aimed at young people at risk generally, rather than having been specifically identified as at risk of offending.

[POWERPOINT #5]

The project has involved the following key components:

(1) Literature review - this included a review of Australian and (selectively) overseas material

(2) Initial scoping consultations to identify mentoring projects - according to the definition I’ve just described. 23 projects were identified nationally.¹

(3) Postal survey - of the 23 mentoring projects identified. Responses from 21 projects were received.

(4) Fieldwork - consultations with seven projects nationally, in almost all cases by a face-to-face visit. These consultations were conducted with field staff, key external stakeholders who could comment on the project, and in some cases mentors and young people.

(5) Telephone interviews - these were with other key informants.

¹ This included one NSW project operating in two different locations which was treated as two separate projects for the purpose of analysis due to differences between the two locations.
1.3 LOCATION OF MENTORING PROJECTS

Turning to some of the key findings, in relation to the location of projects, the number of mentoring projects in each State or Territory varied considerably. Over a third of the projects were located in Victoria alone. South Australia also had numerous projects. On the other hand, no mentoring projects within the definition were identified in Queensland or Tasmania.

1.4 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT OF MENTORING PROGRAMS

1.4.1 Auspicing Agency

The majority of mentoring projects are run by community organisations (62%).

Government agencies are the primary funding source for most mentoring projects (67%).

48% reported that their project was a pilot or trial program, 29% stated that their project was running for a fixed time (some projects responded positively to both these options) and 43% said their project was an ongoing one.

Funding concerns are a major issue for the programs, with over half citing insufficient funding or a lack of resources as a significant weakness in their program, and a serious challenge to the program’s operation.

The literature does not discuss the implications of different auspicing organisations and funding sources. However from our research it is clear that - perhaps unsurprisingly - the
programs which have been in operation the longest time had had ongoing government funding.

Funding insecurity has clearly had some impact on the development of mentoring programs in Australia. For instance, there is a tendency for mentoring programs to be established and then vanish, to concentrate on their most immediate program goals, and to place little emphasis on evaluation. It also appears that mentoring programs can take a comparatively long time to effectively establish, which may mean that newly-established programs can be in danger of not getting fully ‘off the ground’ before their funding sources cease.

From the field visits it was also apparent that, regardless of whether the funding source is government or otherwise, it is preferable for a mentoring program to at least have the feel of being a community-based organisation and be perceived as such by young people and others. More successful mentoring projects seem to be viewed by young people and others as being ‘separate’ from the ‘standard’ agencies which might be working with young people such as juvenile justice and welfare. This makes the project more welcoming to young people, and differentiates it from the ‘standard’ agencies which might be working with them - and of course, the young people we are talking about have often had contact with multiple workers from multiple agencies.

1.4.2 Aims of the Program

One program element recommended from the literature that the majority of Australian mentoring programs appear to have implemented is the need for clear and realistic objectives and operating principles. The literature suggests that ideally these should be developed in consultation with potential participants and stakeholders, be realistic and attainable, and maintain a degree of flexibility as the program develops. A number of the
Australian mentoring projects we looked at had changed their aims or approach in some way over the life of the project, as they identified aspects which did and did not work.

### 1.4.3 Stand-alone Versus Integrated Projects

The mentoring projects we examined varied as to whether they were stand-alone projects or integrated into a range of services offered by the auspicing organisation. There was general agreement amongst the stakeholders consulted that integrated mentoring projects are more likely to be effective. This is particularly critical given that many mentoring programs appear to take a while to establish, and typically only have one or a small number of staff. The view was that it is more cost-effective, quicker and easier to establish a mentoring program if the existing infrastructure, administrative support, and networks with other key agencies and potential clients are already established.

### 1.4.4 Coordination of the Program

[POWERPOINT #8]

Another critical issue concerning the organisational context of mentoring programs is the need for a strong structure and coordination of the program overall. While mentors provide the most obvious ‘labour’ undertaken for mentoring programs, the role of the Coordinator of the program is critical and requires effective organisational and people skills in selecting appropriate mentors, providing ongoing monitoring of mentoring relationships once established, and monitoring effective networks.

### 1.5 INITIATING AND DEVELOPING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

#### 1.5.1 Recruitment of Mentors

[POWERPOINT #9]
In terms of recruitment of mentors, the literature states that there is no ‘good practice’ as such - the mode of recruiting will depend largely on the type of people required (eg based on ethnicity, interests, age and so on), although generally personality is considered to be more important than physical or racial demographics. The literature states that the most important characteristics of mentors to look for are:

- the ability to listen
- a non-judgemental attitude
- flexibility
- respect for young people
- reliability.

These features were also nominated by the people consulted on our fieldwork as the characteristics of successful mentors.

As with the experience overseas, some mentoring projects just use general community members as mentors, while others such as Whitelion in Victoria place emphasis on recruiting specific types of mentors who might be particularly appealing to young people - for instance, sporting personalities, and people involved in artistic pursuits.

Although there is variation in how demanding the process is, most Australian mentoring projects require the completion of an application form, some references, at least one interview, and at least some training.

Screening for criminal records is another issue to be considered. The overseas literature recommends that screening should be conducted. Consistent with this, over 90% of the projects we surveyed ask mentoring applicants to declare any criminal history, and conduct either State or Federal police checks. However both the literature and the projects
we looked at agree that a criminal record should not automatically preclude someone from being a mentor – except where it involves more serious offences, particularly involving sex or violence. Indeed there is recognition that some people with criminal records can in fact make excellent role models, so long as the record is a while ago and the person has turned their life around.

1.5.2 The Matching Process

Another key issue for mentoring programs is the process of matching mentors and young people. The literature states that the process should be based on a clear and consistent policy, and that while gender and ethnicity may be considerations, the primary factors in matching should be the interests, needs and goals of the young person. Matching therefore needs to be considered as a process tailored to the individual young people and mentors involved. This is the standard approach adopted by Australian mentoring projects.

Some Australian mentoring projects are specifically for young people from a particular racial background, that is, Indigenous young people. Examples include the Aboriginal Family Supervision Program in Western Australia. There is a view that mentoring may be a particularly appropriate form of intervention with Indigenous young people.

One issue is whether Indigenous young people should be matched with an Indigenous mentor. While the conventional wisdom might be that this should always be the case, those we consulted stressed that while this may be appropriate and valuable for some (or even many) Indigenous young people, it may not necessarily be so for others. For instance, some Indigenous young offenders may be quite alienated from their communities and not feel motivated to work with someone from their own background. So as with other aspects of the matching process, it is important to assess each young person on an individual basis.
1.5.3 Training and Supervision of Mentors

The literature and our data also clearly demonstrates the importance of providing both appropriate training and strong supervision, feedback and support for mentors that is consistent, timely and regular - although not too burdensome. Support can be in the form of group meetings, telephone contact or face-to-face interviews. This monitoring is important for a number of obvious reasons - for instance, often the mentors may be dealing with quite difficult or challenging behaviour by the young person and need to debrief and obtain guidance on the best way to deal with it. The organisation will also need to satisfy accountability requirements to their clients - who are often very vulnerable young people with multiple difficulties.

1.5.4 The Use of Paid versus Voluntary Mentors

[POWERPOINT # 10]

There is considerable discussion in the literature about whether it is appropriate to use paid versus volunteer mentors, and there is no evidence to support a good practice principle one way or the other. However it is regarded as good practice to reimburse mentors for agreed costs and out-of-pocket expenses relating to the mentoring relationship, such as fares, mileage etc.

Amongst the Australian mentoring projects, there was clear disagreement as to whether it is better to have volunteer or paid mentors. Around half use volunteer mentors and around half pay mentors a modest stipend or hourly rate - which is an average of just over $16. The arguments used by those projects which favour volunteer mentors are that the young person typically has enough paid workers in their life and it is important for them to know that the mentor is working with them because they have chosen to do so. On the other hand, other projects felt that payment for mentors makes them feel valued, promotes a
sense of responsibility to the project, ensures the agency can require accountability, makes it easier to recruit mentors, and won’t exclude people on lower incomes who cannot afford to work on a volunteer basis.

1.6 RECRUITING YOUNG PEOPLE

[POWERPOINT #11]

In terms of recruitment of young people, there is agreement in the literature and amongst the projects we examined that it is preferable to only accept young people voluntarily into mentoring projects. It was also stressed in consultations that projects may need to make specific active efforts to ‘sell’ mentoring to young people as part of the recruitment process. Agencies who have had pre-existing contact with the young person or who have a ‘hook’ of offering mentors who might be regarded as particularly appealing to young people such as sporting personalities may have some advantages here.

There was also some recognition in the consultations we conducted that mentoring may be more suitable for some types of young people than others - for example, those with at least some motivation to address their problems (or who can at least be brought to that point), and a degree of stability in their lives to make establishment of an ongoing relationship feasible.

1.7 EVALUATION

[POWERPOINT #12]

Both the literature and the informants consulted for this project agreed that monitoring and evaluation is essential for any mentoring program. However, there have been few formal evaluations conducted of mentoring programs in Australia, and even fewer that are external evaluations and publicly available.
The most important reasons for this appear to be funding constraints and the short-term, pilot nature of many mentoring projects. Organisations providing funding to mentoring programs should therefore consider allocating specific funds to enable an external evaluation to be conducted, and commit to prompt release of the resulting report.

1.8 IS MENTORING AN EFFECTIVE CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGY?

One question that many want to know - in particular, funding agencies - is does mentoring work as a crime prevention strategy or in improving the long-term outcomes for young people who have offended or are at risk of offending?

In terms of the overseas literature, there is some conflict regarding the effectiveness of mentoring as an intervention to reduce juvenile offending. For instance, New Zealand researcher McLaren’s 2000 review of a broad range of literature concluded that at best, mentoring can be described as a ‘promising’ strategy, with drug use being the area where most impact can be made. Some overseas studies have demonstrated that mentoring programs have had positive benefits such as reduced offending, reduction in drug use, improved school attendance and self-esteem and so on – at least over the relative short periods used for the evaluation.

The small amount of Australian evaluation material available on mentoring means that we cannot confidently draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of mentoring in Australia at this current time. Certainly the small number of evaluations done here have overall produced mixed results, while indicating that some positive benefits can be experienced by at least some young people (again at least in the shorter term period covered by the evaluations). No conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the Australian material about whether mentoring reduces recidivism.
Nonetheless, at a qualitative level there was certainly an overall view amongst the project staff, mentors, young people and external stakeholders interviewed that mentoring can make a real difference to some young people in all sorts of ways, and a number of specific instances were described to me of young people for whom this had been the case. These differences included reduced offending and drug use, improved self-esteem, and a general increase in social functioning and capacity to form and maintain relationships with others.

1.9 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are currently a relatively small number of mentoring programs operating around Australia for young offenders and young people identified as at risk of offending. While there are variations in the type of mentors used, the target groups of these programs and the approaches adopted, there are a number of similarities across the programs in terms of their operation. These include an emphasis on rigorous processes for recruiting mentors, the general qualities of the people sought as mentors, the perceived benefits of mentoring for clients, and the difficulties experienced in establishing or maintaining mentoring projects. In terms of the effectiveness of mentoring, there are some positive indications both here and overseas that mentoring can be one of a range of effective strategies for intervening with young people. However, overall mentoring remains a ‘promising’ approach rather than one which has been conclusively demonstrated to be effective as a crime prevention strategy, particularly in the longer term.