

# Learner Driver Mentor Programs: Stakeholder perspectives on an ideal program

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## Abstract

This study investigated the development and operation of Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs). LDMPs are used throughout Australia to assist young learner drivers to gain supervised on-road driving experience through coordinated access to vehicles and supervisors. There is a significant lack of research regarding these programs. In this study, 41 stakeholders including representatives from existing or ceased LDMPs as well as representatives of other groups completed a questionnaire in either survey or interview format. The questionnaire sought information about the objectives of LDMPs, any social problems that were targeted as well as the characteristics of an ideal program and what could be done to improve them. Stakeholders indicated that LDMPs were targeted at local communities and, therefore, there should be a clear local need for the program as well as community ownership and involvement in the program. Additionally, the program needed to be accessible and provide clear positive outcomes for mentees. The most common suggestion to improve LDMPs related to the provision of greater funding and sponsorship, particularly in relation to the vehicles used within the programs. LDMPs appear to have an important role in facilitating young learner drivers to acquire the appropriate number of supervised hours of driving practice. However, while a number of factors appear related to a successful program, the program must remain flexible and suitable for its local community. There is a clear need to complete evaluations of existing programs to ensure that future LDMPs and modifications to existing programs are evidence-based.

## Introduction

Young drivers have a disproportionately high rate of involvement in road crashes (Bates, Davey, Watson, King, & Armstrong, 2014; McCartt, Shabanova, & Leaf, 2003). Driving behaviours such as carrying peer passengers (Lam, Norton, Woodward, Connor, & Ameratunga, 2003; Preusser, Ferguson, & Williams, 1998), using their mobile phones (Gauld, Lewis, & White, 2014; McCartt, Hellinga, & Braitman, 2006), being under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Bates, Davey, et al., 2014) and driving at night (Fell, Todd, & Voas, 2011) increase crash risk for this group. As well as their behaviours, young drivers crash risk is increased because their ability to perceive hazards and assess various driving situations is still developing (Bates, Davey, et al., 2014), and they are distracted more easily (Buckley, Chapman, & Sheehan, 2014).

One countermeasure that is effective in reducing crash rates for young drivers is graduated driver licensing (Bates, Allen, et al., 2014). Graduated driver licensing schemes frequently have three phases: learner, provisional and open (Bates, Allen, et al., 2014). The learner phase enables new drivers to obtain driving practice while under the supervision of a more experienced driver (Bates, Watson, & King, 2014). The crash rates for drivers in the learner phase are low (Williams, 2003). The provisional phase enables newly licensed individuals to drive a car by themselves. However, they generally need to adhere to restrictions placed on them. These restrictions vary from

jurisdiction to jurisdiction but include a minimum age they can obtain their licence, limits on the number of peer passengers able to be in the vehicle with the driver and night time driving restrictions (Bates, Darvell, & Watson, in press). Crash rates for novice drivers are highest in the first few months of driving on a provisional licence before they begin to decline (Williams, 2003). An open licence enables a person to drive on a full, unrestricted, licence (Masten, Chapman, Atkinson, & Browning, 2014).

Within Australia, a frequent requirement of the learner phase is that drivers complete an extensive amount of practice. The exact amounts vary amongst the states with 100 hours required in Queensland, 120 hours in New South Wales and Victoria (Senserrick, 2009) and 50 hours in Western Australia (Department of Transport, 2015). Compared to other places, such as the United States of America, these practice requirements are high. In the United States of America, the hours of practice requirement varies with some states not requiring any, and up to 70 hours are required in Maine (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2015).

Supervised driving practice is important because research suggests that it may help to reduce crashes after the person starts driving by themselves on a provisional licence. However, the exact number of hours required to reduce driving risk is inconclusive (Steadman, Bush, Thygeson, & Barnes, 2014). In one study, learner drivers who made use of a longer learner period experienced about a 40 per cent reduction in crash risk compared with learner drivers who did not. The longer learner period resulted in learners obtaining more supervised practice. Learners who did make use of the longer permit period accumulated on average, 118 hours of supervised practice. Learners who did not make use of the longer permit period accrued, on average, 41 or 47 hours of practice (Gregersen et al., 2000).

Parents play an important role within graduated driver licensing systems (Brookland, Begg, Langley, & Ameratunga, 2014; Williams, Leaf, Simons-Morton, & Hartos, 2006). It appears that parents are the primary providers of supervised hours of practice, although additional people such as siblings or other family also provide supervised practice to learner drivers (Bates, Watson, et al., 2014; Jacobsohn, Garcia-Espana, Durbin, Erkoboni, & Winston, 2012). Mothers appear to provide a greater number of hours of supervised practice than fathers (Bates, Watson, & King, 2013). However, sometimes it is difficult for a learner to access a parent to be their supervisor for reasons such as no longer living at home (Scott-Parker, 2015). Given this situation, individuals without access to a private supervisor such as a parent are placed at an inherent disadvantage in obtaining the required amount of supervised driving practice.

Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs) are one intervention that can be used to address this inequity. LDMPs can increase the equity of admission to the licensing system by providing access to appropriate supervisors and/or vehicles and thus assisting in achieving the necessary supervised driving hours. LDMPs are initiatives that provide learner drivers who face significant difficulties in obtaining the required on-road supervised driving experience the opportunity to access a suitable vehicle and supervisor. These supervisors, referred to as mentors, are typically volunteers, while the vehicle used is typically a dedicated program vehicle obtained through funding or sponsorship, although some LDMPs may utilise the mentor's own vehicle.

LDMPs are not designed to provide formal instruction, but rather provide learners the opportunity to practice driving in a suitable vehicle in order to assist them in meeting the required number of hours of supervision in the requisite types of conditions. LDMPs vary in terms of their objectives, structure and the number of driving hours that are provided. LDMPs are often nested within community-based programs, which may have a broader range of objectives such as improving employment and/or education opportunities, social engagement and young driver road safety. There has been little formal research undertaken regarding LDMPs. Stakeholders provide an important

assessment of operations by providing ‘on the ground’ understanding of the way in which an LDMP can be and has been implemented.

## Method

This study involved consultations with different types of stakeholders including individuals involved with both existing LDMPs and those that were attached to LDMPs that no longer operate, government organisations with a vested interest in youth safety and/or road safety, insurance companies and workplace training corporations. Participants came from Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. Additionally, some participants represented national stakeholders. No socio-demographic data regarding age, gender, was collected. Different versions of the questionnaire were developed for each group of stakeholders.

The questionnaires sought information about a range of topics including:

- Particulars regarding the program including name, location, the year it commenced
- Program objectives
- Staffing
- Stakeholders involved with the program (including roles and existence of a steering committee or advisory group)
- Mentors and mentees including information about recruiting, training and induction
- Funding including the sources and adequacy
- Barriers and difficulties faced and how these were managed
- Evaluations including planned evaluations
- Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program
- Perceived characteristics of an ideal LDMP

Participants were provided with the opportunity to complete the questionnaire in writing (sent via email) or via telephone. Stakeholders who were based in south-east Queensland, close to the research team based at the Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland at the Queensland University of Technology, had the option of completing the questionnaire in a face-to-face meeting. Interviews that were conducted face-to-face or over the phone ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 90 minutes. The various options available for completing the questionnaire did not appear to affect the participation rates. All consultations were confidential and undertaken individually. When a stakeholder provided written consent to do so, face-to-face and telephone consultations were audio-recorded to enable transcription. Most stakeholders took the option of completing the questionnaire in writing and returning it via email as it gave them more freedom regarding when they could respond.

A manual content analysis of the responses from the stakeholder consultation phase of the project was conducted by a member of the research team to ensure consistency of analysis. The analysis identified major themes related to each of the key topic areas investigated as part of the questionnaire. Emerging themes falling outside these intended topics were also analysed where relevant.

## Results and discussion

Within this study, 41 stakeholder consultations occurred with 33 of these with individuals who were directly involved with existing or ceased LDMPs. Of the remaining eight stakeholder consultations, five were conducted with government organisations, two with insurance companies and one with a corporation focused on workplace training.

Many of the programs best known to participants (e.g. the one's that they had worked on) sought to address social inequity issues associated with the compulsory requirement to acquire a specific number of driving hours on a learner licence and to help mentees overcome social and economic disadvantages associated with not having a driving licence as well as improving road safety outcomes and social connectedness.

Stakeholders were asked about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, as well as the perceived characteristics of an ideal LDMP. Stakeholders discussed several elements that they associated with a successful program LDMP.

### ***Local focus***

Stakeholders directly associated with LDMPs highlighted the importance of a program that addresses a local need, their advice for developing or newly implementing a program would be to best understand the community need. This research suggested that the most appropriate way to do so was to undertake extensive community consultation prior to the program's implementation. Given that LDMPs typically represent community development programs, it was argued that programs should establish cooperative and supportive relationships with the community.

*We're reliant on local people being committed and contributing in ways that they can...  
....it's the collective of people having a shared goal to try and help young people who are disadvantaged get a licence....(stakeholder directly associated with an LDMP)*

In addition, the common requirement to raise additional funds through sponsorship and donation was argued to encourage a sense of community ownership of the program, particularly in more remote communities. It was also suggested that programs should be readily accessible, including ensuring adequate public awareness of the program and making the process of participating in the program as straightforward as possible with some participants noting a number of bureaucratic requirements were restrictive.

One stakeholder did suggest that for some programs targeted at remote communities, community ownership and involvement in the program is critical for its success. In these type of cases, the stakeholder suggested that the role of the government should be restricted to educating stakeholders and the public about the rationale behind the program and the requirement for policies and legislation. Examples provided included education about the graduated driver licensing system, helping to identify and implement ways to recruit and reward mentors and facilitating process to ensure community organisations are unimpeded from becoming involved with LDMPs.

### ***Flexibility***

Further reflective of understanding community need, stakeholders directly associated with LDMPs noted that flexibility was crucial to allow the program to be responsive to the specific needs of each community. They noted a general structure on which their program was based recognised that communities and individual mentors, students and each relationship had different needs. That is, program coordinators were often perceived as having considerable autonomy in the way that they performed their role, even though the program content itself might be quite structured. This was argued to be particularly important in relation to programs delivered on a state-wide basis.

Flexibility was also highlighted as important by other stakeholders involved in the consultation. They indicated that while it was important to have a basic, systemic structure regarding how the fundamental characteristics of the program are operated (e.g., vehicle booking systems, consistent

mentor training), it was also argued that there needs to be enough flexibility for the program to adapt to the specific needs of each community (e.g., how mentors are trained, recruitment strategies). As part of the basic, systematic structure of the program, stakeholders suggested that consistent policies and procedures should be developed and documented in relation to various aspects of the program, including recruitment of learner drivers and mentors, mentor training, risk management and vehicle booking systems. To more effectively cater for culturally diverse mentees, stakeholders also indicated that it was important to establish a network of culturally diverse volunteers who are appropriately trained (e.g., cultural sensitivity). It is also important to have an induction process which clearly outlines codes of conduct and important policies and procedures.

### ***Funding and costs***

A number of stakeholders involved with LDMPs spoke from experience as they reported the importance of careful and realistic considerations during the development of any LDMP. Specifically, a common factor argued to be important was having a realistic understanding of the costs associated with the program, and developing a budget accordingly. It was argued that program developers should engage in discussions with other programs to ensure they consider all budgetary concerns and avoid being conservative in estimations of costs. Following on from this factor, it was also argued that program developers need to have a realistic understanding of program capacity to ensure it is not exceeded (i.e., take on more learners than the program can accommodate). Indeed, a number of stakeholders suggested that program efficiency and effectiveness should not be jeopardised in the name of increasing program capacity. In addition, it was suggested that program developers must have an adequate understanding of the legislative issues associated with program operation, including insurance, and take the appropriate steps to reduce liability and manage risks. Some participants believed that it was the role of corporate partners to provide assistance with this.

Increased base, or recurring, funding was by far the most commonly suggested way to improve the operation of a program. Indeed, increased base funding was argued to be crucial, not only to improving program efficiency and effectiveness through the provision of more resources, but also in regards to allowing for program expansion for the purposes of meeting increasing demand. It was typically argued that adequate funding allowed programs to maximise their capacity and reduce the pressure on program staff to acquire additional funds and sponsorship. Stakeholders suggested that the focus should be on securing ongoing and sustainable funding, as opposed to the relatively short funding periods programs are typically currently subjected to.

*...driving programs like this fall between the [funding] cracks because we don't seem to be anybody's [responsibility].* (stakeholder directly associated an LDMP)

*...in the end you need to have sustainable funding...it's important to have it [the program] delivered at a community level because they're the people who have access to the mentors and connected with the clients.* (industry/government stakeholder)

In addition, it was suggested that there was an increased need for greater assistance in the acquisition of additional funding, sponsorship and in-kind support from the government, community and local industry. It is possible that the inclusion of research evidence regarding the effectiveness of LDMPs could be used to support requests for further funding.

A number of stakeholders who were not directly associated with LDMPs noted the importance of having a well-developed business plan that focussed on sustainability of funding. Specifically, it was argued that programs should establish strong corporate partnerships for sourcing vehicles and other resources, as well as sponsorships and donations from local businesses. In addition,

stakeholders highlighted the need for effective marketing strategies as a method for enticing local businesses and funding bodies to become involved in the program.

### ***Staffing***

Almost universally, having a dedicated and enthusiastic program coordinator responsible for the day-to-day operation of the LDMP was argued to be critical to program efficiency and success. It was suggested that the individual performing this role must be given ample time and money to perform their duties, as well as considerable autonomy in the manner in which they operate the program. Having other dedicated program staff with strong administration and people management skills, where necessary, was also perceived as being important for program efficiency.

### ***Mentors***

The recruitment of quality mentors (e.g., committed, supportive, safety conscious) who meet minimum standards was also reported as being fundamental to the sustainability and effectiveness of a program. While the actual process of recruitment will vary between organisations, it could include consulting with groups and organisations within the community that have a vested interest in youth safety, advertising through the media, conducting presentations at relevant community events, promoting the program through key partners and relevant stakeholders as well as advertising on the program vehicles. The requirement to recruit a greater number of female mentors was perceived as being particularly important. This was because many girls do not feel comfortable or, in some cases, that it is culturally appropriate for them to have a male mentor. Additionally, stakeholders believe that it is significant to have mentors that suit the ethnic diversity of mentees involved in the program. Moreover, a number of stakeholders argued that programs need to ensure they have flexible training options for mentors (e.g., online training) that reduce the lag time between mentor recruitment and mentor involvement in the program. Additional professional development opportunities for mentors (e.g., conference attendance, guest speakers, short courses) were also argued to be important for ensuring mentors are efficient in their role and that they benefit from their experience in the program as well. Mechanisms to monitor mentors could include conducting regular group debrief sessions with the mentors and mentees to provide an opportunity to provide feedback and ask questions as well as being proactive in approaching mentors and mentees for brief discussions.

Given the perceived importance of mentors, it was argued that they must be provided with a high level of support from program staff and should receive greater recognition and reward for their hard work and dedication to the program (e.g., recognition events, milestone gifts). It was suggested that this would increase their perception of being appreciated, which would subsequently enhance retention rates. In addition, it was strongly suggested that the role of volunteer mentors should be publicly recognised on a regular basis, through such avenues as media recognition and award ceremonies. It was argued that this recognition would ensure mentor satisfaction and enhance retention rates. However, stakeholders acknowledged that in some cases it was difficult to reward mentors.

*..because they are voluntary, it can be difficult to reward them...just under different legislation about what volunteers roles are....you can't be paying for instruction so to speak. (industry/government stakeholder)*

### ***Manuals***

The development of operations manuals that clearly define program policies and procedures was argued as critical in ensuring program efficiency and the achievement of program objectives. The manuals could include, but not limited to, information such as the rights and responsibilities of the

learner drivers and the mentors, policies regarding the use of the program vehicle, matching procedures, mentor training and grievance and complaints policies.

It was argued that programs must have positive outcomes for the target audience. At a minimum, it was suggested that programs should assist learner drivers who have difficulties in complying with requirements of the GDL legislation (e.g., minimum hours) with the opportunity to obtain their licence by providing access to a suitable vehicle and supervisor. In addition, it was argued that programs should strive to provide driving practice, road safety knowledge and attitudes, social equality and access to other programs and services, community and family connectedness, while also providing a positive role model, opportunities for personal growth and the acquisition of fundamental life skills. However, it is possible that a LDMP that emphasizes too many goals may lose focus.

### ***Networks***

To facilitate evidence-based program development and efficient program operation, many stakeholders reported that it is crucial to establish strong networks with other similar programs and encourage the sharing of information, experiences and resources. Cooperative and supportive relationships between key stakeholders involved with LDMPs were perceived by many as crucial to enhancing program efficiency, reducing the likelihood of avoidable mistakes, fostering improvement in operations and program expansion.

*Obviously a lot of us [co-ordinators] support each other. I pick their brains and they pick my brains....* (stakeholder directly associated with an LDMP)

At a broader level, the sharing of knowledge and experience regarding program management, as well as the sharing of program resources, with other similar programs, having a supportive steering committee or advisory group, and adopting a cooperative, whole of government approach to further encourage the sharing of resources, experience and knowledge, were all perceived to improve the effectiveness of a program.

### ***Centralisation***

Among stakeholders who operated programs at the state-wide level, there were consistent calls for a centralised approach to promotion and advertising. Suggestions included a centralised website that could be used as a hub to direct interested parties to their local program, as well as a centralised advertising campaign for newspapers, radio and television.

*....every program was working in isolation effectively. There was no centralised promotion....we were all having to run our own show.* (stakeholder directly associated with an LDMP)

Stakeholders who were not associated with a current LDMP, typically perceived centralised management as being an important characteristic of an effective and efficient LDMP. Specifically, they argued that one organisation should generally be responsible for the broad management of the program, while community organisations or local councils should manage the delivery and operation of the program. It was argued that following this formula would facilitate community ownership and involvement in the program. It was suggested that, ideally, the community organisation responsible for program delivery would work closely with other youth organisations in the community, and that key influential organisations (e.g., local service clubs, Police, transport authority) would also be involved in the governance structure of the program, such as through the development of a steering committee or advisory group. Following on from this recommendation to have a local service provider with strong links within the community, a number of stakeholders

highlighted the importance of conducting extensive community consultation prior to program implementation. It was argued that such a process would demonstrate a local need for the program, ensure the program reflects the interests of the entire community and would subsequently facilitate a sense of community ownership of the program.

### ***Government and industry***

Stakeholders who were associated with LDMPs were specifically asked how they believed government and industry could assist in the improvement of LDMPs, including their development, implementation and management. Overall, the most common suggestion was in relation to the provision of greater program funding and sponsorship, particularly in relation to program vehicles. More specifically, while there is government support available to some LDMPs, these stakeholders believed that they could provide greater support including more funding and sponsorship, assist in the brokering of partnerships with industry partners, provide information sessions for learner drivers and potential volunteers, assist with in-kind support such as the use of fleet vehicles or staff volunteering schemes, develop mentor training packages and assist in the promotion of state-wide LDMPs.

Stakeholders associated with LDMPs suggested that industry could provide additional funding, particularly for vehicles as well as sponsorship or in-kind assistance in the form of vehicles, maintenance and professional driving lessons and corporate volunteering schemes to assist with mentor recruitment.

*...the corporate sector could make the donation of a car or money. That would be an enormous help....corporate volunteering would be a help.* (stakeholder directly associated with an LDMP)

The stakeholders suggested that it may be best to approach relevant organisations that stand to benefit from the positive outcomes of LDMPs such as employment agencies, car dealerships, mechanics, driving schools and other community-based organisations. The stakeholders suggested that research institutions could assist with program evaluations and the development of best practice guidelines while insurance companies could assist with discounts on insurance policies.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this qualitative study further develops our understanding of existing LDMPs and provides some suggestions for further improvements of these programs. Ensuring that programs maintain a local focus was a key theme emerging from the research. While the stakeholders highlighted some services that may be beneficial if centralised or shared such as promotion and advertising, a key idea was the ability to maintain the flexibility to allow programs to be focussed on the local area and issues. Funding was also highlighted as an area that could be improved. Many programs exist on non-recurring sources of funding. By developing a source of funding that was more secure, participants felt that the LDMPs could be improved. Participants also believed it was important to have a dedicated co-ordinator for the LDMP and high quality mentors.

One of the outcomes of this research was the development guidelines, including a checklist, for LDMPs (Soole, Reveruzzi, Bates, & Watson, 2014). These guidelines list 36 essential requirements of LDMPs in the areas of pre-development (e.g. identify the target audience and their unique needs), development (e.g. develop a comprehensive and realistic budget), operation (e.g. maintain a vehicle maintenance schedule) and evaluation (e.g. conduct a program evaluation). The use of these guidelines by groups and organisations that are interested in creating or amending a LDMP is recommended.



There are limitations relating to this research. As it is likely that LDMPs differ greatly in both the context in which they are located and the way that they are delivered, it is not possible to generalise the findings of this study to all LDMPs in operation throughout Australia. While this study has been useful in exploring how LDMPs operate, further research is essential to develop our understanding of the successful elements within LDMPs that support the development, operation and sustainability of the programs that evidence effectiveness in implementation. The research should include process and outcome evaluations of specific LDMPs in order to identify their effectiveness in reaching their goals. Additionally, they should identify the elements which support the development, operation and sustainability of the programs. Such research should consider whether particular disadvantaged groups differ in their experience of program models and consider effectiveness evaluations according to the target audience of the program. For example, if the target audience is diverse then all perspectives should be considered. Similarly, research is needed to evaluate whether LDMPs are more or less effective when they are combined with complementary education components. Given the efficacy of driving practice on safety, including through the learner phase, there is considerable research needed to best understand how to effectively and efficiently provide support to young people who do not have someone in their lives to provide supervised practice.

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