

Implementing best practice principles in the delivery of a Learner Driver Mentor Program in rural Queensland: a case study report

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Abstract

Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs) assist disadvantaged learner drivers to gain supervised on-road driving experience by providing access to vehicles and volunteer mentors. In the absence of existing research investigating the implementation of Best Practice principles in LDMPs, this case study examines successful program operation in the context of a rural town setting. The study is based on an existing Best Practice model for LDMPs, and triangulation of data from a mentor focus group (n = 7), interviews with program stakeholders (n = 9), and an in-depth interview with the site-based program development officer. The data presented is based upon selected findings of the broader evaluation study. Preliminary findings regarding driving session management, support of mentors and mentees, and building and maintaining relationships with program stakeholders, are discussed. Key findings relate to the importance of relationships in engagement with the program and collaborating across sectors to achieve a range of positive outcomes for learners. The findings highlight the need for the program to be relevant and responsive to the requirements of the population and the context in which it is operating.

Introduction

Young novice drivers have a higher crash risk compared with older and more experienced drivers (Ferguson, Teoh, & McCartt, 2007). The higher risk has been attributed to underdeveloped risk perception, driving inexperience (Keating, 2007), and propensity to engage in risky driving behaviour and underestimate their crash risk (Ferguson, 2003; Mayhew, 2003). Young drivers aged 15-24 years are overrepresented in road crashes worldwide (BITRE, 2013). Despite recent improvements in crash fatality rates in Australia for this age group, road crash fatalities remain around 30% higher than older age groups (BITRE, 2013).

Greater supervised driving practice during the learner period has been associated with reduced crash involvement during unsupervised driving (Gregersen, Berg, Engström, Nolén, Nyberg, & Rimmö, 2000). This knowledge underpins the learner licence component of Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) programs, which is a countermeasure designed to reduce exposure to known risk factors while providing an opportunity to obtain appropriate driving skills and experience over time and under supervision. Queensland currently enforces a GDL scheme. The associated Queensland Learner Licence requirements and Learner Driver restrictions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Queensland Learner Licence requirements and Learner Driver restrictions

Learner licence requirements	Learner driver restrictions
Minimum age 16 years	Must display L plates on front and back of vehicle
Pass a written road rules test	Must not use mobile phones
Must be held for 12 months minimum before attempting probationary licence test	Must carry licence at all times
Practical driving assessment	Zero alcohol and illicit drugs limit
	Drivers under 25 years must complete 100 hours of supervised driving experience, including 10 hours of night driving, and hours must be verified by the supervising driver in a logbook. Penalties apply for falsifying log books.
	Must drive under the supervision of an open licence driver, who has held their open licence for a minimum of 1 year
	No passenger can use mobile phone on loudspeaker function
	Maximum 4 demerit points
	BAC restrictions for supervising driver

Of note is that all learner drivers under the age of 25 years must obtain 100 hours of supervised on-road driving experience, of which 10 hours must be night-time driving, and all hours must be certified in a log book. Research indicates that licensing system requirements for supervised practice being recorded in a log book can result in a greater amount of supervised driving hours actually being completed by learners (Bates, Watson, & King, 2010). While there are potential safety benefits associated with increasing the amount of supervised driving that learners undertake during the learner phase, there are also potential barriers, particularly for socially disadvantaged groups, in meeting the licensing requirements. Barriers often include access to financial resources (limited ability to pay for professional lessons, or expenses such as fuel costs), access to a suitable vehicle and driving supervisor, and low literacy (Environmental Land Heritage, 2011).

Learner Driver Mentor Programs and the ‘Braking the Cycle’ program

In recognition of the difficulty of some groups in meeting the licensing requirements, Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs) have been designed to assist learners to obtain supervised driving hours. The “Braking the Cycle” (BTC) intervention is an LDMP that is designed to provide disadvantaged youth with the opportunity to complete the driving time requirements through coordinated access to program-provided vehicles and volunteer mentor/supervisors. BTC operates from urban and rural PCYC locations with the support of Queensland Police Service. It is a multi-stakeholder intervention and is funded by short-term grants from various stakeholders. BTC has the following objectives:

1. Assist young persons to accomplish the 100 mandatory log book driving hours to achieve their licence
2. Source driving mentors through community organisations that will provide positive role models to young people and immigrant populations
3. Increase equity of opportunity for all young persons to obtain core life and employment skills

4. Provide assistance, education and networks for L Plate drivers to support transition into P plates

The program site and learner participants

The case study focusses on the delivery of the BTC program in a single rural Queensland town location. To preserve the anonymity of research participants, the town in which the research was conducted cannot be identified. At this site, the program is coordinated by a minority group community member, with a pool of 20 mentors available to support the program, which includes one minority group mentor (female) who had completed the BTC program as a learner. At the time of data collection, the program site operated two program vehicles, and delivered on average 63 hours of supervised driving, and 1.7 licences, per month.

The program site is based within the Western Downs region which according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data has a population of approximately 31,590 (ABS, 2011) and an economy that is largely based upon mining (the largest contributor to Gross Regional Product in 2012/13, at 21.5%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (13.6%), and construction (11.2%) (WDRC, 2014). As the fifth fastest growing region in Australia, the economy has benefited from resource-driven economic growth; however, a recent slowing of the local economy due to ‘a premature end to the mining boom’ reportedly (according to local media and perceptions of stakeholders interviewed) has negatively impacted upon local employment, housing markets and business sustainability (‘Town and Out, 2015).

At the time of the last population census, the town in which the program is situated had a population of 11,016 persons, with approximately 14% aged 15-24 years, falling within the young driver category (ABS, 2011). Approximately 6% of the town population, and approximately 7.5% of the 15-24 age group, is reported as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2011). The region is characterised by a somewhat transient population (WDRC, 2014). The number of Learner to Provisional licence upgrades for the region in 2011 was 607, however it should be noted that population transiency may impact upon this figure (TMR Data Analysis Unit, 2011).

Preliminary qualitative data from program staff indicates that, consistent with existing literature (Environmental Land Heritage, 2011), barriers for the program participants at the site in meeting the licensing requirements include lack of finances and social support, and access to an appropriate vehicle and/or supervisor. There is limited public transport, provided via buses and taxis services, available in the community.

Research aim

To date, there is little research to evaluate the effectiveness of LDMPs in Australia (Soole et al. 2014). In the absence of existing research investigating the implementation of Best Practice principles in LDMPs (Soole et al. 2014), this case study examines successful program operation, as conducted in a rural town setting. The data presented is based upon selected findings of the broader evaluation study. The comprehensive Best Practice Guidelines identify eight essential requirements for LDMPs in the operations phase. Upon review of the data obtained from staff and stakeholder interviews, it was found that the topics raised by the program coordinator, mentors, and stakeholders pertained to three of the Best Practice principles for program operation, outlined below:

1. *Ensure the driving sessions are well-managed*: This principle centres on the management of the vehicle, including storage, access, and appropriate use, driving session booking

management, and the relationship between program staff, mentors and mentees regarding driving sessions.

2. *Provide ongoing support for mentors and mentees*: This principle relates to providing mentors with appropriate training, and providing mentees with life skills and assistance to help with any social issues that they are experiencing.
3. *Maintain communication with key stakeholders*: This principle refers to ongoing communication between the program site coordinator and stakeholders, including regular program progress meetings and the use of a program advisory group.

The present paper will discuss the application of three of these requirements, related to driving session management, support to mentors and mentees, and communication with key stakeholders, in order to examine the program characteristics that are essential to successful operations. Some aspects of the principles (e.g., the policies that stipulate vehicle management, the use of a program advisory group) are managed at the statewide program coordination level and through the policy guidelines that are consistent across each program site. The review of statewide program policies is part of the broader evaluation study and is excluded from the present paper.

Method

The study results are based on triangulation of qualitative data from a driver mentor focus group, interviews with external program stakeholders, and an in-depth interview with the program site development officer (PDO), all of which were conducted as part of a broader program evaluation study. The driver mentor focus group participants ($n = 7$; 4 males, 3 females) had an average age of 47 years, and were predominately of Caucasian background, with one mentor being of a minority group. Four mentors were employed on a full-time basis, while three were unemployed at the time of the survey. The majority (4) of the mentor sample had achieved a senior high school certificate, trade qualification or bachelor degree, while two mentors had achieved a junior high school certificate. The majority of participants reported having prior experience with driver training/supervision or working with young people in general, and in such cases this was due to being a teacher, being a professional driver, and/or being parents themselves. The mentors had been involved with the BTC program for an average of 8.7 months, ranging from 6-15 months.

The external program stakeholders ($n = 9$; 8 females, one male) consisted of contacts from a range of sectors, including employment agencies, driver training organisations, community groups related to special needs sectors (youth housing, young women, youth justice and Indigenous youth), charity organisations, mining industry, and local Council and Chamber of Commerce members. No further demographic information was recorded.

An in-depth, focused interview was conducted with the site-based program development officer. The aim of the interview was to explore the main issues related to the strengths, weaknesses, strengths and opportunities of the program related to its current operations and context. An interview protocol was established to obtain information on these aspects for all interviews. Example questions included “What do you think is working well in the program?”, “What aspects of the program could be improved?”, and “What benefits do you see the program delivering to the community?”. Interviewees were also given the opportunity to comment on any other issue that had not been covered in the interview questions. Interviews took approximately one hour and all interviews were conducted face-to-face. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Two researchers independently performed a thematic analysis of the transcripts, and consensus regarding themes was achieved. Direct quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the themes reported in the following sections.

Results

Results related to selected essential requirements for Best Practice for LDMP program operation are discussed in the following sections.

Best Practice Essential Requirement: Ensure the driving sessions are well-managed

There was a strong consensus across all mentors and stakeholders interviewed that the provision of a manual transmission vehicle by the program is important so as to allow delivery of manual vehicle driving skills and licences. This was due to driving a manual vehicle being often required for employment, particularly in the rural setting where farm vehicles are typically manual rather than automatic. However, it was also highlighted that for safe operation in a learning situation, manual vehicles should be equipped with dual pedal controls and mentors should be appropriately trained in their operation. It was also recognised that the maintenance of manual vehicles can incur additional program expenses.

“I mean out here just about everything that you’re going to do work-wise, you’re going to need a manual licence, so the availability of the manual vehicle is really important.”
(Program mentor, male)

“Manual cars are often used on farms and things, so there is a need for a manual licence for employment, like there are a lot of cleaning jobs at mining camps but they need to have a manual licence, so the agency struggles to fill these jobs. If they have an automatic licence, the agency can pay for specific driving lessons for a manual.” (Employment agency stakeholder)

“Manual cars are needed, but to avoid crash situations, these need to be equipped with dual controls, as well as an operator who is trained in using them. The expense of dual controls may be a barrier, as well as training the mentors to operate dual controls.”
(Driver trainer external stakeholder)

A related finding concerned the matching of mentors and mentees. The Best Practice guidelines endorse matching mentors and mentees on various characteristics (such as common availability, gender, shared interests, personality and temperament, cultural/ethnic background, religion and language), and that learners perform the majority of their driving sessions with the same mentor, with some sessions performed with different mentors as the learner nears their practical driving test. Consistent with this, mentor and learner matching at the program site occurred, with the PDO undertaking each learner’s first driving session with the program, in order to understand the learner’s level of driving skill, experience and background, which would then be the basis of matching with an appropriate mentor. However it was found that it was not always practical and achievable, due to limited numbers of available mentors, and thus priority was given to matching for special groups such as Indigenous learners.

“Another thing too which is probably is a downfall for our mentors is that in a small town you find that we have all these groups and committees and you go to this committee, it’s the same people at each committee. In a small town, each meeting I go to, I see the same people so it is to a point where you burn them out.” (PDO)

Matching was noted by both program staff and stakeholders as being particularly important for recruiting and engaging Indigenous learners, and having Indigenous program staff and mentors available at the site supported this.

“Who is running the program and who the mentor is, that will make or break the program. It doesn’t matter how committed you are and want to do it, if you don’t have the right people there, with the right communication, and you don’t match the right skills, you’re wasting your time.” (Indigenous/youth justice external stakeholder)

“We had an Indigenous learner who wasn’t very confident in talking with people and so the PDO matched them with our Indigenous mentor; they [the learner] were very shy, didn’t want to go with anyone, but they really wanted their licence, so the Indigenous mentor did a few sessions with them and the learner started to get more confident, and was right to drive with other people then.” (Program mentor, male)

While matching mentors and learners was seen as important, providing the learners with the opportunity to drive with mentors with whom they were less familiar was also seen to be beneficial in preparing the learners for their practical driving test.

“Because when you go for your actual driving test, you’re sitting with someone you’ve never driven with...so it’s good to get that exposure to different people, like different styles of working together.” (Program mentor, female)

Mentors viewed that providing learners with an opportunity to practice various skills, such as overtaking, driving at night, and driving vehicles of various sizes, is important for developing hazard perception skills related to judging distance and speed. The practical challenges of providing night time driving sessions to learners were highlighted, with learners often having difficulty obtaining this requirement outside the program, while staffing the program at night can be problematic.

“Put them behind the wheel at night time and for some reason, it’s very different, and I’ve found a lot, they’ll get their 80, 90 hours and have two or three hours night driving, for probably one or two of them Mum or Dad has taken them and sort of had their screaming match and ‘nope, never taking me out at night again’, then they get to 10 hours to go, and they’ve got eight hours of night drive to try and pull together.” (Program mentor, male)

Best Practice Essential Requirement: Provide ongoing support for mentors and mentees

It was evident from the focus group interview that program driver mentors are not purely instrumental, but contribute their own skills and experience, attitudes and beliefs, and personality. Several mentors were parents themselves, and reported drawing upon the experience of teaching their own children how to drive when operating in the program. Mentors reported that the atmosphere in the program was relaxed and comfortable, and it was evident that mentors sought available advice and assistance when needed, which was also facilitated by the PDO.

“I make sure my mentors go on that Keys2Drive (government-funded professional driving lesson), for mentor training as well as the learners... That one hour and they just sit back and observe the actual driving instructor, how they come across... because you’re not in the car with [the mentor] every lesson so you don’t know how they interact with the learner. I think updating mentors too with the road rules and communicating with the Department of Transport is very insightful too, cause we don’t know when the rules are changed so we as PDOs try and get that first hand and inform our mentors as much as possible. That way we’re not telling them the wrong thing.” (PDO)

Building a positive relationship with a local driver trainer who is willing to be available to the program for ongoing training and as a source of information for program mentors was viewed as very important to developing mentor knowledge and capabilities suited to their role.

“I have asked one of the driving school instructors that we have out [here] and he has had a one-on-one with the mentors, so that was very informative ...one mentor was teaching or guiding the learner driver to use the mirrors for parallel parking, and that’s a big no-no, it’s not what they do in the test, so even having that one-on-one...that was fantastic so the mentor was very happy.” (PDO)

Within the program, the effort and commitment of mentors is acknowledged as crucial to the program’s success and sustainability. As well as personal recognition and appreciation from the site PDO for mentors’ time and efforts, mentors are also nominated for relevant volunteering and related community awards. Nominations and awards are communicated to program stakeholders, and are featured in the program newsletter. This was seen as contributing to the mentors’ reported positive and rewarding program experience.

“I’ll apologise [to a mentor] because a learner hasn’t turned up so I’ve wasted their hour, and that’s what happened to me today, I couldn’t fit anyone in with him, but also too just having that one-on-one with the mentor and making them feel special, and that what they’re doing is a fantastic job.” (PDO)

Similarly, the success and commitment of learner drivers engaged in the program is recognised in a number of ways. Photos of each licence achieved in the program are taken and posted on a ‘Wall of Fame’ in the program office. Success stories of learners, either completed or currently engaged in the program, are also featured regularly in the program promotional newsletter. These strategies were seen as a potentially effective in not only promoting the outcomes of the program and the success of its learners to the community, but also provided a way of demonstrating positive role modelling to potential learners.

Best Practice Essential Requirement: Maintain communication with key stakeholders

Regular contact with program stakeholders and promotion and activity within the community at large is undertaken by the PDO. This was facilitated by the PDO attending existing community interagency meetings, providing program updates including regular newsletters, holding education workshops, and being part of organised community events, as evidenced in the following quotes.

“[The external stakeholder organisation] have been very supportive...I invite them all along to whatever I’m holding, any functions and events and vice versa, so we keep communicating.” (PDO)

All stakeholders interviewed agreed that this aspect of the program operations was critical to their ongoing support and relationship with the program. In addition, for those stakeholders who referred their clients to engage in the program as a learner, there was a strong need for the program to provide feedback about their client’s attendance, engagement and progress in the program. In the absence of such feedback, stakeholders may potentially assume that things are going well for their client, when in fact this may not be the case. Regular communication in this regard was considered to be crucial, and also provided a means for the program and relevant stakeholders to collaboratively problem solve any issues (e.g., client attendance) that arose.

“We get a monthly report, and we’ve just started a lot more engagement with [the PDO], so we had a meeting last week to discuss the program, so that we knew the nuts and bolts of becoming a mentor, what requirements it has, that sort of thing so that when we are

talking with our community we might come across someone who might wish to be mentor or might come across a group or organisation that need the services of the Braking the Cycle program, so we work quite closely together, we correspond very frequently.” (Local industry stakeholder)

“It’s kind of like unless you hear from [the PDO], you assume it’s alright”. (Youth housing stakeholder)

It was also noted that there is some diversity in program activities between sites due to each site having different stakeholders who each seek varying outcomes from their relationship with the program. This particularly related to the level of program activity and outcome promotion that the PDO was expected to undertake. It was perceived that this was not unreasonable and could indeed benefit the program as well as the stakeholder, in that it promoted awareness of the program not only among potential learners, but also potential future mentors and stakeholders.

“Even though the structure is still the same, my requirement is different from Beenleigh, from Crestmead...” (PDO)

Also important was the ability of the program to link with existing community groups to build relationships and program awareness within the community, and generate ideas for cross-engagement.

“In a small community we tend to see how we can all work together...we’re helping each other out...it’s that mutually beneficial relationship and being connected with other people.” (Community centre stakeholder)

Discussion

The present findings help to illuminate the characteristics of LDMP program operations that are perceived, according to internal program staff and external stakeholders, as essential to success. A consistent theme across program staff and stakeholders is the importance of the program building positive and mutually beneficial relationships within the program and the external community. The existing connectedness of the community in which the program operates can also be harnessed, and is influential in program outreach, delivery and sustainability.

Matching learners with mentors is a Best Practice guideline requirement, but was found to be unrealistic in practice in a smaller community due to a somewhat limited number of available mentors. Nonetheless, it was found that matching for particular groups such as Indigenous community members is especially advantageous for their engagement in the program. While the guidelines also recommend matching learners with the same mentor for the duration of learner involvement, it was considered by program staff that in practice, exposure to different mentors, as well as different driving scenarios and vehicle types, was beneficial for building learners’ driving skill and preparation for the practical driving test.

Providing ongoing support and training to mentors was also important to program staff, and this was facilitated by the PDO in building a positive relationship with a local professional driving instructor and providing information sharing opportunities. The program coordinator makes a concerted effort to treat mentors with respect and provide recognition for their efforts, which contributes to mentors having a positive and rewarding experience with the program. Similarly, providing recognition for learner achievements helped to create a positive environment for learners as well as facilitated promotion of program outcome delivery. Stakeholders agreed that regular communication and program updates are essential to stakeholder-program relationships. This also provides an avenue for further program promotion and problem solving.

It is evident that characteristics of the program location have a considerable influence on its operations. A number of factors related to Best Practice must be tailored according to the setting in which the program is operating. A strong point raised by program staff and stakeholders, while not explicitly stated as a Best Practice principle in the operations phase, was that the provision of manual vehicle driving skills (and thus manual vehicle availability) within the program is considered to be almost essential to employability in the rural community.

Limitations and conclusion

The data presented is preliminary and based upon selected findings of a broader case study. Several limitations to the information obtained must be considered. The study was aimed at providing in-depth information related to successful program operation, and one program site was suitable for selection, however this also represents a limitation in that the findings may not be entirely generalizable to other communities. In conducting the stakeholder interviews it was aimed to achieve broad representation across sectors, however it is possible that some relevant sectors may not be represented. While the number of participants in the driver mentor focus group was sufficient, the findings are based on information obtained from only one focus group, and not all available mentors were able to attend on the day. By nature of operating in a relatively small community, some sectors could only be represented by one person. As such, it is possible that the interview and focus group data do not fully represent the diversity of opinion. Further, self-report data is potentially vulnerable to limitations related to the accuracy of recall of situations and events. Finally, interviews of the mentees were not conducted as part of the current case study, however learner participant focus groups and surveys have been undertaken as part of the broader evaluation study. Broader evaluative research is recommended to address these limitations and strengthen existing understanding of the factors related to the success of LDMP operations within different settings. In conclusion, alignment with Best Practice guidelines is important for program implementation, however the study findings highlight the need for LDMP programs to be relevant and responsive to the requirements of the population and the context in which it is operating.

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