Mentor brings reality check

A university program taps into Australian leadership expertise for a Rwandan student, writes Helen Bennett

MENTORING program pairing prominent government and public sector professionals with aspiring political students is delivering real life knowledge to back up the theory at University of Sydney’s Graduate School of Government (GSG).

Alex Semarinyota is one of those aspirant’s whose dream is to rebuild Rwanda, help it recover from its violent upheaval and bring a quality of life to Rwandans that war has brutally torn from them.

Semarinyota, who holds a senior position with Rwanda’s Ministry of Local Government, Good Governance, Community Development and Social Affairs, is studying at the University of Sydney completing a Master of Public Administration on an AUSAID Developmental scholarship. (He is the only recipient from Rwanda).

Leanne Howie, executive officer at the Graduate School of Government, says the mentoring program brings a practical aspect to study, utilising the skills of experienced professionals rather than solely focusing on theory.

*‘Mentors act as a sounding board for students — it’s very handy for students to be able to discuss issues, where perhaps their strengths are weak, with experienced people. ‘The mentors don’t give answers but help the students find their own answers in such areas as management, strategic and leadership issues.*

It’s the mentor’s responsibility to set the tone of the relationship and make the mentee feel at ease, tailoring their approach to match the objectives of an individual student.

The mentor assists in broadening horizons and opportunities, gives support and encouragement, acts as a sounding board, presents challenges or provides insights into processes to which the student has had little or no exposure.

Directions to the mentor include providing a reflective opportunity for the student and not spend too much time talking. One strategy is to use Socratic questioning rather than providing answers, guiding the student to solve problems themselves.

Howie says mentoring offers many benefits. It can provide improved understanding of a student’s agency and the wider government framework within which they operate, insights into the culture and unwritten rules of various systems and profession.

‘It provides assistance in overcoming barriers to professional development, an awareness of strengths and weaknesses, a sounding board for ideas and/or initiatives, and enhanced personal and professional networks.’

The GSG mentoring program aims to provide three benefits to the person being mentored: academic advice, career development assistance and an opportunity to discuss work-related issues. The mentor is also encouraged to use the relationship to contribute to the enhancement of the overall skills base of the public sector in Australia and internationally.

Regardless of seniority, most people can benefit from a sounding board to provide expertise outside their experience. A mentor can provide honest feedback on specific issues, academic work or workplace behaviour.

Mentors selected for the program, Howie says, are keen to assist with the personal and professional development of future leaders in public administration.

They are high flyers at CEO or middle manager level with a combined public/private background.

They possess qualities that are considered essential to mentoring such as leadership, the ability to influence others and manage difficult people; they’re strategic thinkers able to give assistance in broadening the student’s perspectives and offer insights into the political and policy development processes.

They also share their expertise in managing stakeholder expectations, organisational change, balancing community and financial imperatives and provide career direction.

While the word mentor is often taken to mean a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher the process is not one-sided.

John Aquilina, House Leader in the NSW Government, has taken on the role of mentor to Semarinyota and says it’s satisfying to be able to share his knowledge and experience of 27 years in education and as a member of parliament.

‘It’s another dimension to the work I do as a parliamentary representative and legislator,’ he says.

‘I’ve always enjoyed mentoring, the opportunity to provide guidance. I don’t impose but make myself available to provide advice and practical experience whenever Alex asks.

‘Following the war in Rwanda there’s a major problem with the dislocation of the population and public administration is a nightmare. Alex can get perspective here and utilise that knowledge in the major reconstruction of the country — what he learns here he can adapt to his own country.’

Aquilina says that Semarinyota started with a lot of ideas — some unachievable — but has tempered his own thinking based on what he’s learning in Australia.

‘He now has a better understanding of what resources he has, and what limitations.’

From the other side of the arrangement, Semarinyota says Aquilina thinks “outside the box”, asks intriguing questions and challenges him time and again.

‘It’s been a dramatic three months. What I’m learning I can take back to Rwanda, with answers to such questions as what’s preventing the system from performing better, the economy and budgetary processes, what causes poverty and how can it be solved?”