

Peer mentoring in higher education: a reciprocal route to student success

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Keywords

- peer mentoring;
- peer support;
- reciprocity;
- student experience.

Nature of intervention

This paper provides an introduction to the findings of a large HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn-sponsored project, which aimed to investigate and analyse the value of peer mentoring in facilitating a successful transition into higher education.

Focus of intervention

Peer mentoring may be academic, social or professional in nature; or indeed, a mixture of these. It is generally aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Description of intervention

In considering ways to support students at transition, universities are not awash with money, consequently innovation is critical. By exploring the use of an institution's key asset, its own students, there is an opportunity for the creation of a true 'win-win-win' situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition. Peer mentoring can provide such a 'win-win-win' situation. It offers an approach whereby students help students discover the new world of university life through the formation of safe and supportive peer relationships. The research upon which this brief paper is based provides evidence that peer mentoring works by offering universities a way forward in supporting their students at transition (Andrews and Clark, 2011). The study findings made clear that the introduction of a peer mentoring programme

needs to be well thought through and supported with student training and a level of ongoing care and maintenance. For a small investment, the benefits realised in relation to student success at transition are considerable. The institutions involved in this study believe that peer mentoring is a key component of the challenge to encourage student success at transition. The approach to peer mentoring briefly discussed here provides a useful tool that higher education institutions may adapt and adopt for their own purposes.

Figure 1 below shows the main components of the ‘Transition +’ approach to peer mentoring. This approach was developed out of the ‘What Works?’ peer mentoring project.

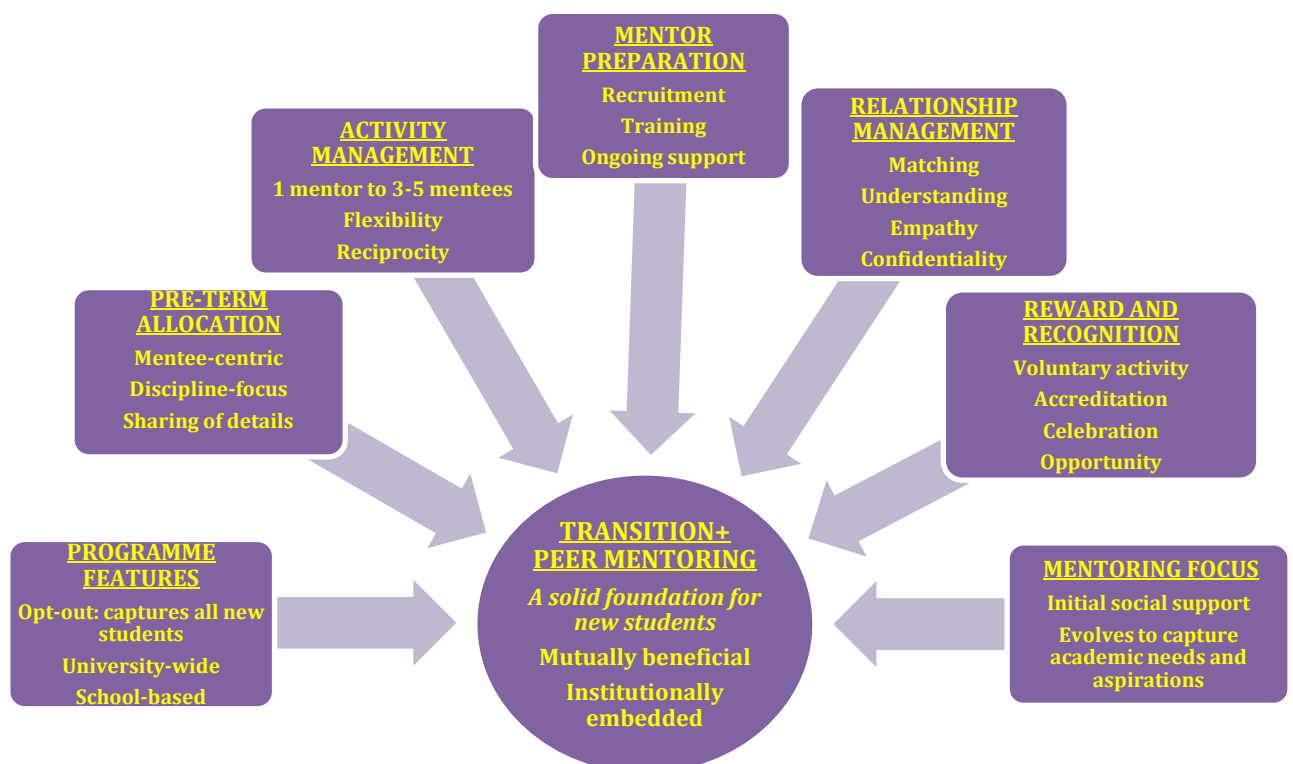


Figure 1: ‘Transition+’ peer mentoring: the features of an ‘ideal’ mentoring programme

How the intervention engages students

Peer mentoring works by engaging students in four different ways: (1) at transition; (2) by providing academic support; (3) by providing an efficient and effective way of providing ongoing support; (4) additionally, the unique benefits of peer mentoring for mentors means that it provides a unique method of engaging second- and final-year students.

Each of these is now discussed in turn:

1. **Peer mentoring at transition:** The first few days at University are vital in shaping students' university experience. University-wide transitional peer mentoring helps students make those vital first steps into higher education. It provides a 'safety net' that helps them make the transition from their previous life into university. By providing a 'catch-all' approach, this transitional peer mentoring is not viewed as a 'deficit model' of student support – instead it is embedded in institutional practice and as such represents a major strength where it is offered.
2. **Academic support and peer mentoring:** While transitional and longer-term pastoral peer mentoring are not about providing academic support, the study showed that peer mentoring relationships can provide the ideal forum whereby more experienced students can offer first-years generic academic support and guidance. Furthermore, in institutions where peer mentoring is offered on a school or faculty basis, peer mentoring can provide new students access to the tacit knowledge necessary to succeed at university.
3. **The role of peer mentoring in providing ongoing support:** Belonging and relationships are pivotal to success at university. In addition to providing new students with the means by which they quickly gain a sense of belonging, transitional peer mentoring can provide ongoing support to new students. Such support often lasts into the first term and beyond. Longer-term *opt-in* pastoral mentoring provides the ideal means by which students are able to build meaningful, supportive and reciprocal relationships. With regard to this type of peer mentoring, it is the concept of dual voluntarism that makes pastoral peer mentoring programmes a success.
4. **The unique benefits of peer mentoring for peer mentors:** While most of the benefits of peer mentoring are experienced by peer mentees and mentors alike, some benefits are experienced by peer mentors alone including enhanced employability skills and personal benefits. Participation in peer mentoring offers student peer mentors with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in a responsible position. In doing so they gain valuable and transferable 'employability skills'.

[Link to the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings](#)

In addressing both academic and social issues, peer mentoring fits with the 'What Works?' conceptual model and findings. The study provided evidence that the value of peer mentoring in higher education is not just reflective of the support given to new students in the first few days and weeks of university. Instead it is indicative of the longer-term reciprocal relationships made between peers in which both benefit and both succeed.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

The study upon which this paper is based commenced with the hypothesis that “peer support impacts positively on students’ experiences by engendering a greater sense of belonging both socially and academically”.

The research approach involved a multiple case-study design in which pastoral peer mentoring and writing peer mentoring activities in six different HEIs were analysed utilising a mixed methodological approach. Primary research was conducted in three separate stages:

1. a pilot survey administered across all partner HEIs in 2009-10. This resulted in a response rate of 302 completed questionnaires (just under 10% of the sample);
2. a follow-on survey administered in 2010-11 at three of the partner institutions focusing on pastoral peer mentoring. This resulted in 374 completed questionnaires (just over 19% of the sample);
3. concurrently, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted at all institutions with a total of 97 student peer mentors and peer mentees. Of these 61 were involved in pastoral or transitional mentoring programmes (29 peer mentees and 36 peer mentors), and 36 were involved in writing peer mentoring (16 writing peer mentors and 20 peer mentees).

The quantitative data were coded and analysed using SPSS. The qualitative data were analysed following a grounded theory approach, in which the main themes and sub-themes were coded then analysed in some depth.

The full report, and other evidence, outlining the evidence of the value of peer mentoring can be found at: <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/current-projects/>.

Impact: recommendations for HEIs

One of the key aspects of the project discussed in this paper is that the recommendations made prioritise the student perspective. By *listening* to the student perspective, the two researchers were able to develop recommendations for higher education institutions, policy makers, students and for colleagues wishing to pursue further research in this area. It may be argued that of these, the recommendations for HEIs are most important. Thus they are summarised below:

1. Consider embedding peer mentoring as part of the institutional retention strategy.
2. Decide on the form of mentoring programme to be introduced.
3. Design a robust and well-managed programme.
4. Appoint a dedicated person, or persons, to manage the programme.
5. Ensure effective marketing of the programme.
6. Introduce a rigorous mentor selection and training process.

7. Take care in pairing mentees and mentors to ensure a good match.
8. Make clear the availability of ongoing support (if needed).
9. Evaluate the programme at an appropriate point or points in the year.
10. Consider academic credit/recognition for mentors.

References

Andrews, J. and Clark, R. (2011) *Peer Mentoring Works! How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in Higher Education*. Birmingham: Aston University.

Website

<http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/>

Resources

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