

**PEER MENTORING:
A SUPPORT STRATEGY MOULDED BY STUDENTS FOR STUDENTS**

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Abstract

With the challenge of widening participation no longer being just for institutions to 'recruit their students from under-represented groups but also to 'ensure their success' (HEFCE quoted in Knox 2005), Universities are reviewing their strategies for student learning support for all students; amongst these is the use of peer mentoring.

This paper describes an initiative funded by the Widening Participation Group to harness the energy, enthusiasm and hindsight wisdom of second and third year students in supporting first year students as they adjust to the demands of life and learning in Higher Education (HE) through a peer mentoring scheme. A pilot scheme has been operating in the Departments of Computing and Dance Studies at the University of Surrey since September 2005. Whilst drawing on the experience of other institutions, the pilot has allowed students themselves to help shape its operation with the result that two different models have emerged. Some mentors have decided to work with mentees on a one-to-one basis, whilst others are engaged in small group work. Within the two basic models peer mentors have developed their own individual ways of working with some supporting mostly by email, and others being involved in regular face-to-face meetings.

Evaluation of the work so far has provided valuable information for future development and shows that there have been tangible benefits for both mentors and mentees. Experiences gained from the project support findings elsewhere that energy and organisation is needed to maintain the momentum of mentoring schemes. This paper suggests how peer mentoring might be sustained and expanded at Surrey.

Introduction and Background

The White paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (2003) highlighted the Government's determination to ensure that, as Universities gain the freedom from September 2006 to vary the level of tuition fees, access to HE is broadened, not narrowed. In recognition of the differing needs of an increasingly diverse student body and in the light of previous UniS research (Surrey Social and Market Research 2004 and subsequent report to the Student Care Services Committee, February 2005, Brooks 2003, Burden and Savage 2004 and Maloney 2003), a project was established in Library Services and funded by the Widening Participation group with the following aims:

- To investigate various models for the provision of learning support to all students.
- To co-ordinate a small scale scheme to provide support using post-graduate mentors.

The notion of adopting a mentoring scheme was thus part of the original terms of reference; discussions with UniS support services, staff and most importantly students however confirmed the experiences of other institutions who had been contacted or visited¹ that students who were closest in experience (rather than post graduates) would make the best mentors.

Peer mentoring is a concept that has been around a long time and has been used in a number of very different situations for example – hospitals, schools, prisons, offices, supermarkets, communities with high incidence of HIV/Aids. Hall (2002) comments that 'mentoring is not one thing: it is a range of possibilities'. There is therefore no hard and fast set of rules as to how to organise mentoring schemes although it is possible to identify what works and what does not. Hall uses evidence from the USA to do this and highlights as successful features such as monitoring of programme implementation, screening of mentors, on-going training and support for mentors whilst he includes amongst the conditions likely to result in unsuccessful mentoring, 'social distance and mismatch between the values of mentor and mentee', 'inexpert or untrained mentors' and 'conflict of roles'.

In the HE setting, peer mentoring can make a valuable contribution to the wider participation agenda, providing a bridge from where new students start at entry to the academic requirements of a degree level course. The 'lack of hierarchy facilitates communication, mutual support and the collaboration necessary for effective learning' (Woodd 1997). Peer mentors bring experience of their own feelings, problems and resolution and help new students put things in perspective rather than being overwhelmed. 'The greatest strength the peer mentors bring to the situation is that they have "been there and done that" and "survived"' (Carmichael 2003).

However, peer mentoring is not a cheap panacea for coping with increasing numbers of students, although it provides a useful adjunct and can offer students more interactive sessions with time for questions and answers, something which students at UniS and elsewhere prize (Alvarez-Cordoba 2003). Although there is little quantifiable evidence about the academic benefits of mentoring in terms of improving grades, a US study found 'improvements in the aspirations of economically disadvantaged students as a result of mentoring' (Lee and Crammond quoted in Hall 2002). Evaluating a scheme at London Guildhall University it was 'found that students who attended a peer support session obtained average grades that were higher than for those who did not' (NAO 2002). The mentoring process benefits all participants. In a study at the University of Western Sydney mentors noted gains in 'leadership, improved communication skills, improved job interview skills, stronger and more assertive, seeing how others study, refreshing the work, exchange of ideas' (Carmichael 2003). The evidence from the UniS pilot confirms that both mentors and mentees profited from the experience.

Constructing a Peer Mentoring Pilot for UniS

A framework for a peer mentoring scheme was constructed based on the experiences of other institutions and of UniS (particularly those of the student

¹ Kingston University(Anthony McNeill); Bournemouth University (Kathy Durkin); University of Western Sydney(Erst Carmichael); LCC (University of the Arts) (Daphne Hampton)

mentoring scheme in Educational Liaison and of the lapsed scheme in Physics), and a review of some of the pertinent literature and discussions with staff and students. The Departments of Dance Studies and of Computing were approached and agreed to trial the scheme. The choice of these 2 departments was based on three factors. First, number of students (the number of first year students being around 50 in each case and so manageable even if most students took up the offer of a mentor). Second, the difference in the perceived nature of the disciplines (one essentially creative and arts based and predominantly female, the other concerned with logic and analysis and predominantly male). Third, and most importantly, the enthusiasm of two of the members of the academic staff in each department.

The co-ordinator of the pilot also had an unexpected opportunity to participate in the training and evaluation of a buddy scheme being established by a student in the European Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (EIHMS). Feedback from this project helped to inform the peer mentoring pilots now running in Dance and Computing. The main lessons learnt centred on the need for better communication in setting up the scheme and in allowing buddied students some choice in whether or not they participated.

Recruitment

Second and third year students were recruited as mentors at the end of the Spring Semester 2005, mostly through departmental emails. Twelve students from Computing and five from Dance expressed an interest and were contacted and interviewed. They were asked to complete forms describing their interests and to give their consent for data protection purposes. A reference was also required from the academic tutors.

The scheme was publicised more widely, with technical help from Educational Liaison, at the beginning of the autumn semester through posters in the participating departments, the library, the Student's Union and in other support service areas. One of the newly recruited peer mentors wrote an article advertising the scheme in 'Barefacts', the Union newspaper.

Mentees were recruited to the scheme by departmental email, posters and by a short presentation at the beginning of selected lectures during induction. Although thirteen first year students signed up from Computing, only two had signed up in Dance after the first two to three weeks. The Dance mentors accordingly promoted themselves in lectures which brought an influx of fifteen more recruits. Recruitment activities for mentees also occurred at the beginning of the spring semester for Computing. Mentors again delivered a short presentation at the beginning of a selected lecture, but no further mentees were recruited at this stage. In total, about 30% of first year students from both Dance and Computing took up the option of having a mentor. Mentees were also asked to complete a form giving information about themselves and were given information about the scheme together with a set of guide lines relating to the mentor-mentee relationship.

Training for Mentors

Student mentors attended a series of initial training sessions in the autumn semester and received a supporting handbook. Previous experience of mentoring amongst the participants varied with some having helped younger

pupils at school and one third year student having been involved in a mentoring scheme at a University in Crete. The initial sessions drew on the expertise of colleagues from the Student Counselling Service, the Additional Learning Support Team and the Academic Liaison Librarian Team. They were designed to meet what were considered to be the mentors' immediate needs and related to the operation of the scheme with a particular emphasis on boundaries and to the sort of information that mentees might be seeking. Feedback from other schemes had suggested that participants could be uncertain about the limits of the mentor's role (Durkin and Main 2002). The UniS pilot emphasised that mentors were using their experience to guide others but were not acting as tutors. Further training opportunities were provided which focussed on cultural awareness (in collaboration with Educational Liaison) and group working. Focus groups were also held to share experiences and evaluate the project.

Creating a Team

The training sessions and focus groups provided opportunities for Dance and Computing mentors to get to know each other. Training was well attended with all students attending at least one session and more than a third attending all or all but one. There have been two group meetings between mentors and mentees; students suggested that the first should be held closer to the beginning of the scheme, this would not have been possible as initial recruitment was slow, but it is something that should be considered in the future.

A message board was set up for mentors to communicate with each other on ULearn. However, to date this has only been used by a few mentors, but the potential for the system is shown by the request for advice and shared experience that was posted by one of the mentors whose mentee repeatedly failed to turn up to sessions. She was disappointed not to get more peer support although staff were alerted and were able to offer suggestions. In this particular instance an underlying problem of non-attendance at formal lectures was also revealed. Developing 'a message board culture' could be a useful future direction to help foster team spirit.

Matching

Mentors and mentees were matched where possible to reflect courses, interests and personality. Although all mentors and Computing mentees were interviewed before matching, most of the Dance mentees were allocated to groups before being seen by the coordinator. This was not by design but because of the difficulty in arranging appointments with the semester then in full swing and the very busy schedule of Dance students. Feedback from Dance mentors at the first focus group pointed out that it would have been useful for groups to meet in the coordinator's office for the first time to get to know each other as other one-to-one mentors had done.

Meeting Format

The scheme had originally been designed to operate on a one-to-one basis. The increase in mentee numbers in Dance following the mentors' successful self-promotion therefore presented a problem. Mentors themselves suggested that they could work in small groups and provide individual support on a

pragmatic basis. This has proved to be a most effective solution and has underlined one of the basic principles of the scheme that it should be flexible and able to respond to different needs. Students at the feedback focus group meeting (30/11/05) considered that a mixture of one-to-one and group meetings was ideal. It was useful to meet individually initially and when specific problems arose, but meeting in a small group could offer a broader perspective. It was suggested that where mentors had particular interests or skills they could offer targeted group meetings. This could be particularly helpful if a mentee had been matched with a mentor who did not share all the same modules.

Mentors worked with mentees to establish those contact arrangements that would best be suited to them. Work is in progress to analyse the pattern of contacts. Information so far suggests that most relationships were established to reflect current needs with first meetings being longest and subsequent meetings dwindling in frequency; a similar pattern is shown in email contacts. There is a great deal of variation however with one very successful mentoring relationship involving regular weekly meetings. When interviewed, both the mentor and the mentee concerned attributed the informal and relaxed relationship they had been able to develop to the fact that they had met when things were going well and when they were not going so well so they were not always having to negotiate a crisis.

Payment

Mentors received payment for face-to-face contact time (£5 an hour for one-to-one work, £10 for running a group session). This was established after considering the experience of other schemes (Kingston, Bournemouth and the University of the Arts) although to date not all mentors have claimed and most make it clear that their main motivation for participating is self development, rather than financial. An upper limit of ten hours covering the period September to March was set. The cost of this has been minimal (so far £120). It is important however for participants' motivation that recognition is made of their efforts in a practical way, as well as through verbal commendation. A scheme in the University of Western Sydney rewarded mentors with book tokens at the end of their term (Carmichael 2003) whilst it has been suggested that in Zambia, where young people are being used to educate their peers about HIV/Aids, participants should be rewarded with bicycles (Svenson and Burke 2005).

Evaluation

Methods of evaluation have been various and on-going. The main channels for feedback have been through questionnaires, focus group meetings and individual interviews.

Training for Mentors

Mentors' comments on the training they had received showed that they felt well prepared and confident about their roles as mentors, and that they felt well supported. Examples included:

- 'I know where I can find the information',
- 'I appreciated getting together',
- 'Made me analyse my own questions through practical examples',

- ‘Gave me greater understanding of what to look for and tips on how to study effectively’,
- ‘Will help me in explaining to a mentee what plagiarism is’,
- ‘Gave me a good idea of what to expect’.

Most felt that the scheme was ‘well organised and prepared’ with one student commenting that ‘it was lovely to have a relaxed approach to such an important scheme’ and another advising that future developments should ‘keep an informal approach and have regular meetings and training sessions’.

Benefits to Mentors and Mentees

Questionnaires given to mentors and mentees in November 2005 on how the scheme had benefited them showed that mentors valued a gain in confidence, improvement in their ability to communicate ideas, and improved listening skills in themselves, whilst both mentors and mentees highlighted the gains for mentees in confidence, the ability to communicate ideas and an enhanced understanding of their subject (figure 1).

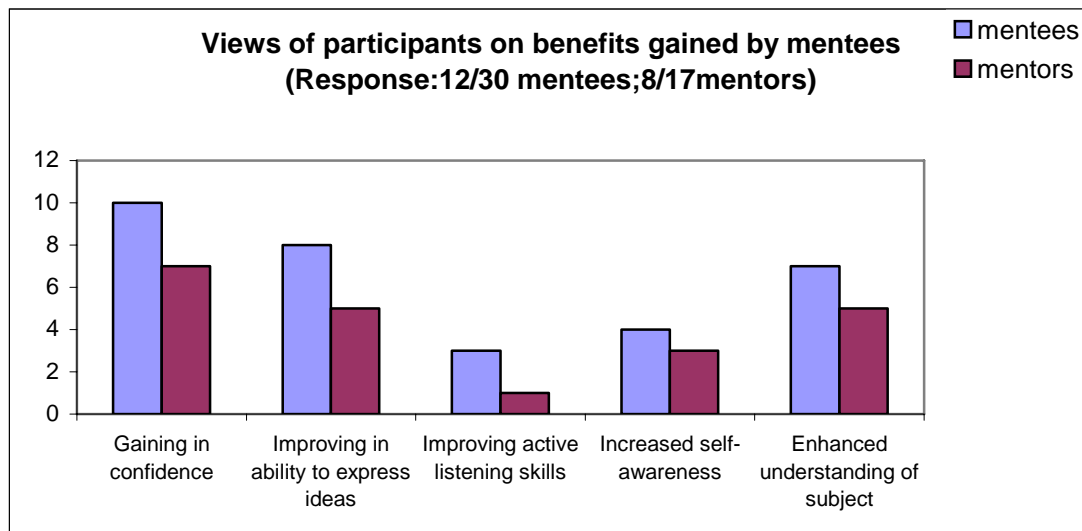


Figure 1

The agreement here indicates that mentors had developed a good understanding of their mentees. The seriousness with which they viewed their responsibilities was shown by the pin-pointing of ‘worrying over the quality of your advice’ when questioned as to the most difficult thing about being a mentor.

All participants who responded said that they would recommend the scheme to other students, and three-quarters of the mentees (nine) said that they would like to be mentors themselves next year. All mentors rated the experience as four or five on an enjoyability scale of one to five, with one indicating not at all enjoyable. Additional benefits identified by mentors attending the first focus group included:

- 'Learning through telling someone else',
- 'Helping someone else to develop good study strategies makes you question and improve your own practice',
- 'Practising how to explain and articulate ideas',
- 'Improvement in organisational skills'.

It has not been possible to determine whether being involved in the scheme has had an impact either on mentees' grades or on the employability of mentors. It would be very valuable to monitor both of these areas. Another useful measure would be gauging the impact of mentoring on participants' expectations. A brief case study suggested a rise in one mentee's expectations accompanied by growing enjoyment of his course and rising confidence, which empowered him to get more actively involved as a course representative.

How Did Mentoring Help Mentees?

Mentees were asked about the ways in which their mentors had helped them. From the twelve respondents, all listed 'talking a situation through' and nearly all, 'listening to your ideas' and 'giving you confidence'. Free flow comments added some useful information. Examples include:

- 'Being able to have a different view on how to approach an assignment, to make the focus clearer in my mind',
- 'My mentor helped me to gain an insight into the potential of my professional year and also gave me advice on my applications for next year and advice on my CV which I found was very useful. She also offered to listen if I needed anyone to talk to about any worries I might have during the current exam season which I found was comforting to know'.

The November 2005 focus group produced further information on the sort of support that mentors had been giving their mentees. Tips on presentation, referencing, making use of library resources, what to expect from coursework and accessing past papers were all mentioned. Most participants felt that mentors had been able to provide reassurance, one mentee felt more comfortable about asking his mentor for advice than a lecturer, which provided the opportunity to reiterate that where specific academic advice was needed beyond the immediate competence of the mentor, mentees needed to be encouraged to approach lecturers. It was agreed at the same time however, that practising asking a mentor was helpful in building up the necessary confidence and skill to put questions to lecturers.

The Future of Peer Mentoring at UniS

Evaluation of the pilot scheme would suggest that mentoring can provide a very useful adjunct to existing support services, particularly for first year students as they struggle to cope with new academic demands and is potentially an area of development that could make a substantial contribution to the 'student experience' at Surrey.

Whilst such a scheme is not expensive to operate (mentors do not necessarily need to be paid, although it is important to recognise their work in other ways) it requires a central driving force if it is to be sustained. Several departments have experience of running their own schemes; one of the points that this paper has been trying to make is that flexibility and moulding to individual

needs contribute to success, 'one size will not fit all'. Existing demands on academic staff however leave little time to spare for organising, training and supporting a departmental team of peer mentors.

It has been proposed therefore that a peer mentoring network is established (figure 2) directed from the new Academic Skills Unit in the library and with satellites in those departments (at present, Dance, Computing, Physics and Psychology) who wish to participate.

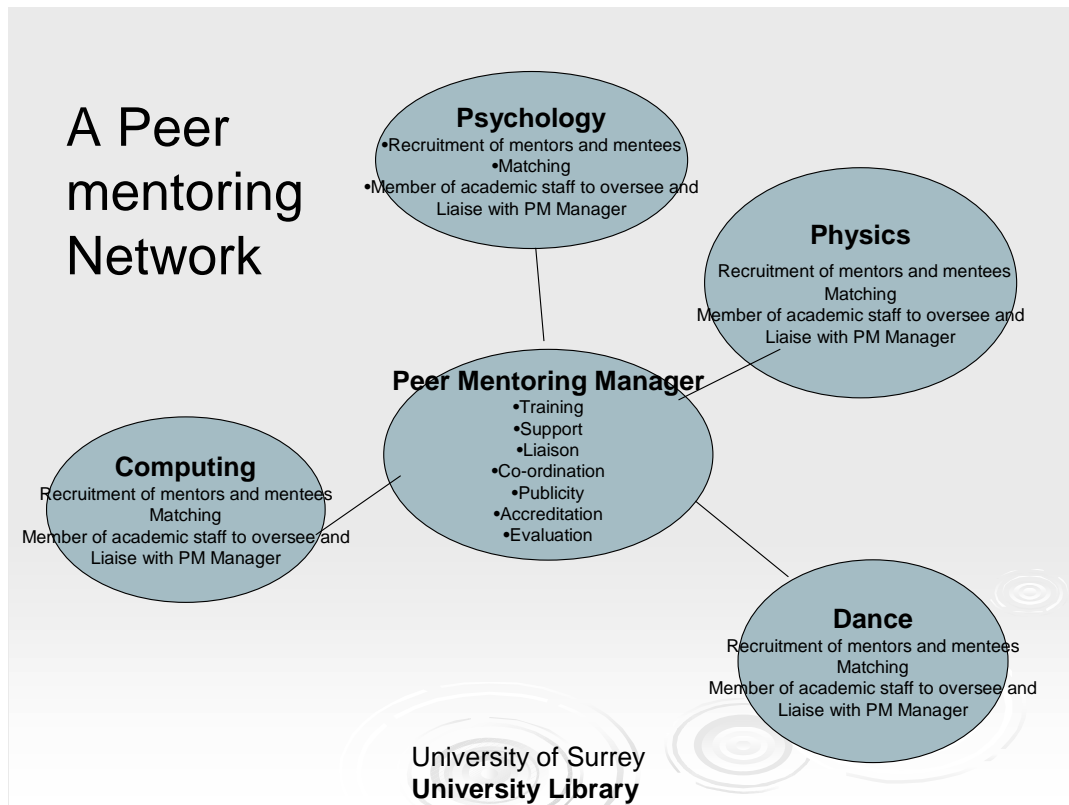


Figure 1

A similar structure is in place at Kingston University where the strategic oversight of peer learning and support is the responsibility of a named individual within the Academic Development Centre (McNeill 2004).

Hall (2002) has commented that 'the integration of mentoring into an organisational setting [...] may be as important for its success as the features of the mentoring scheme itself'. The pilot in Dance and Computing has shown that students themselves have the good will and commitment to help other students succeed and the energy, enthusiasm and good sense to make peer mentoring work in Surrey. It is hoped that UniS will now take the project forward and provide stability and sustainability, bearing in mind 'if the innovation is not embedded in the institution, then it will be open to changes in priorities in that institution and may disappear when those involved in introducing them move on or in time, leave the institution' (Ashwin, 2002).

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