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How peer mentoring can support students during the pandemic

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How peer mentoring can develop communities of practice to help support students during the pandemic.

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As the new academic year is about to begin, many universities are planning to use an online or blended learning model in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In light of this time should be spent considering how best to facilitate students to form study communities outside the physical space of the university campus.

The development of such study communities (or communities of practice) is highly desirable because they provide additional support to students and a safe place for them to explore issues which they lack the confidence to discuss in a wider forum. This would reflect a traditional university experience where study communities are developed by sharing experiences in physical spaces.

Replicating face-to-face environments where students can form study communities can be achieved in the online environment through the use of a variety of approaches, for example, putting students into online breakout rooms (virtual learning spaces similar to placing students in small groups around a table) or peer group work that is completed online outside of the formal learning environment.

One additional approach that we have found to be successful in helping students to develop study communities within the Open University Law School (OULS) is online peer mentoring. In 2020 (Feb-Sept presentation) we conducted a pilot peer mentoring scheme on W101 An Introduction to Law, a large first year module on the Law degree. Many of our students on this module are returning to education with little or no previous formal qualifications; they are often combining their studies with other commitments such as family and work; and are geographically scattered across the UK and beyond. All of these factors lead to a student body who report low levels of confidence and problems of isolation.

Our initial pilot peer mentoring scheme which ran in 2020 was based in two regions of the UK. These regions were selected because their geographical areas included both large conurbations and rural areas and we were keen to be as representative and inclusive of our diverse student body as possible. We

also recognised the importance of having a designated person to oversee the day-to-day management of the scheme and we were fortunate to receive internal SCiLab funding to appoint an experienced tutor to do this.

Mentors were appointed from a body of students who had already successfully completed W101 and had expressed an interest in being involved in the scheme. Ten mentors were appointed and invited to a one-day face-to-face training and co-creation session at the OU campus in Milton Keynes, funded by OULS. During the training we covered a variety of topics including the role of a mentor and safeguarding issues. Thereafter, the majority of the day was given to mentors to allow them to share their thoughts on the types of problems experienced by students at level one and to co-create the mentoring scheme to address these issues.

We adopted a co-creation model for the mentoring scheme because we felt that the students were best placed to devise a programme to help their peers. This also gave mentors a sense of ownership because they had played an integral role in the scheme's development. A key concern raised during the approval process for the project was that mentors were not there to provide academic advice and that they should avoid discussions that touched upon assessment. During training, mentors were provided with strategies to deal with this should it arise.

All students joining W101 in the selected regions were emailed about the possibility of being assigned a mentor and were asked to express an interest if they wanted to be involved. This resulted in 42 students being selected as mentees for the pilot.

Each mentor looked after 4-5 students and were provided with an online forum where they could post relevant information, answer questions, and encourage students to develop their own study support groups. In addition, each mentor hosted three virtual meetings (one at module start, one before the first module assessment, and one after feedback for the first assessment had been returned). Each meeting involved the mentor responding to students' questions and encouraging discussion around wider topics of interest to the students. Mentors were clearly advised to avoid conversations in these sessions that touched upon assessment.

We evaluated the scheme from both the mentor and mentee perspective. Mentors were asked to participate in a focus group and individual interviews

and mentees were asked to attend a focus group. These sessions were recorded and the data subsequently transcribed. The mentoring team is currently working with this data and we have used this to inform the development of the next iteration of the scheme that will run in in the W101 presentation starting in October 2020.

A key message from the feedback was that the mentoring was of value, particularly in terms of helping our students to develop study communities. For some of our mentees this also gave them an avenue through which to further develop their study communities through continued contacts beyond the duration of the scheme. For our mentors we found that they too developed their own communities of practice because working closely with their fellow mentors had allowed them to develop the bonds that paved the way for them to provide one another with the study and wider support that proved helpful during lockdown.

While the feedback received made it clear that both mentors and mentees gained a lot from being involved in the mentoring process, one issue that was flagged up was a concern that the mentoring groups were too small. As a result of that feedback, we are currently arranging to conduct a second larger pilot across the whole of the W101 module, which will involve around 2000 students and 16 mentors across the UK. This will ensure that every W101 student who wants to access the scheme can do so and this should help address the issues of scale identified in the feedback to the first pilot. We have also recently finished training with mentors for the new pilot, which was delivered entirely online this time around due to Covid-19 restrictions.

The take home message from our experience so far is that there are some real benefits to be had from online peer mentoring for students who are starting at or returning to universities where some or all of the learning will be delivered online. We would encourage universities who are intending to use online provision during the pandemic to give serious consideration to the use of mentoring to help students develop the communities of practice that will help them to live and learn well during these Covid-19 times.