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Taking an ecological view of student (peer) mentoring

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Practice insight working paper

The language and practice of student support for one another: Diverse options for diverse purposes

Towards a Student (peer) Mentoring Framework

One of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) expectations for quality is that 'from admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education' (QAA, 2018a, p3). They advise to evaluate provision by asking 'What peer support mechanisms do you have in place to encourage your students to develop their independent study habits?' (QAA, 2018b, p9). This paper reflects on one aspect of The Open University's response to this (The OU), through its review and forward planning around student (peer) mentoring. This coincides with a time when online support between peers has been under the spotlight as educational settings internationally have needed to move study online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student mentoring and related peer support mechanisms are well known to increase a sense of belonging and to make new/inexperienced/under-confident students feel welcome and part of a community. Further, this sense of community and belonging can contribute to student success (Thomas, 2013; Thomas et al, 2017). To explore how peer support was working and could work in its distance learning context, student mentoring was included in The OU's Access and Participation Plan 2019/2020.

A Student Mentoring Framework for articulating and guiding such provision was envisaged and a student-staff task and finish group set up. Students acting as 'student experts' have been integral to developing several of The OU student mentoring initiatives, mirroring other University's approaches nationally eg. University of Huddersfield (Reeves et al, 2019), Sheffield Hallam (<https://www.shu.ac.uk/goglobal/going-global-on-campus/culture-connect>) and internationally (Sieu et al, 2017). In the mapping activity of current provision, 20 separate initiatives were identified, each born from local drivers, such as:

- offering moral support and study tips,
- a welcome into a broader student community,
- support for personal development planning,
- reduction of student isolation and
- increasing likelihood of student retention

alongside opportunities for mentors to develop and capture employability skills (Ragavan, 2012), stay connected with peers and become more involved in the life of the University.

Student roles and structures to support other students had already been developed by various teams across the University. As found in education more broadly (Whiteside, 2020), these reflected different ways of envisioning the course of support (whether as buddying, coaching or mentoring or as 1:1, 1:few or 1:many approaches).

Peer support: does it matter what it is called?

‘Coaching’, ‘Buddying’, ‘Mentoring’, ‘Peer Support’: What an initiative chose to call itself appeared linked to its purpose and how students were expected to engage. It was clear there was no ‘standard way’. Whilst sometimes the terms might appear interchangeable and subject to interpretation, they may also be applied with specific meanings in mind. With the benefits of co-creation in mind (Edwards et al, 2021), the naming could be reviewed to check it resonated well with students involved. Part of the training and co-creation day for new mentors in two Faculties involved discussing the appropriate name for the initiative. Considerations were being able to communicate their involvement to those involved and to external audiences, such as employers. Table 1 summarises how names mapped against OU initiatives.

Table 1: Possible naming conventions according to initiative features.

	Coach	Mentor	Buddy	Peer supporter
Vertical relationship (where an experienced student supports a less experienced student).	✓	✓		
Horizontal relationship (where students of a similar experience support each other).			✓	✓
1:1 (where one mentor supports one mentee).	✓	✓	✓	
1:Many (where one mentor supports many mentees).	✓	✓	✓	
Many:Many (where a group of mentors support a group of mentees).				✓
Formal scheme (i.e. involving a mentoring role with specific tasks and expected outcomes (e.g. increased retention)).	✓	✓		
Informal scheme (i.e. involving a mentoring role supporting general introductory or community building activities).			✓	

Peer support: does it matter how it is offered?

At The OU, most mentoring initiatives are offered by faculties in relation to academic study, rather than being generic, emotional support sought by students independent of specific courses or qualifications. Being study and course/qualification-focused means peer mentors can share their own experiences and tips. Whilst support is needed for safeguarding

purposes and advice on where to go for help should they receive interactions beyond the scope of their role, peer mentors do not require advanced training in areas such as mental health support or vetting, nor the mentor emotional support that this would entail. Having decided upon the **purpose** of the mentoring, the next decision is to identify at which point in a student's academic career mentoring is best offered and how long it will continue, balancing the needs of the mentees with those of the mentors. The options for consideration are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Stages of study for possible initiatives and anticipated purpose

Stage of study	Anticipated purpose/benefits
Before a student enrolls	To focus on study readiness and encouragement for those who are unsure of their capabilities
On registration	To encourage a sense of belonging and orientation
Once a module starts	To reinforce confidence and share study tips
Throughout first year	Instilling sense of belonging and study skills by pointing to wider University support mechanisms
Throughout study in a Faculty	Helping establish sense of belonging and good study practices
At any point needed throughout study at the University	Needs to be coordinated across University to join up initiatives, helping establish sense of belonging to the University and maximising use of support available

Twenty different initiatives were identified as operating at The OU, as summarised in Figure 1 below, with different schemes often operating within the same faculty, serving different purposes such as support for students with particular characteristics (e.g., care givers) or a particular support focus (e.g. personal development planning). All have different entry and exit points.

Figure 1: OU student mentoring schemes by study stage and faculty

Stages	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17 and 19	18	20
Pre-registration												STEM							
Registration – pre module start	WELS			WELS					FASS	FASS	FASS		STEM			FBL			
Study – Student Support		WELS	WELS			WELS	WELS					STEM		FBL			OU WALES	OU WALES	CES
Study – Learning and teaching					WELS										FBL				
Study – general interest						WELS	WELS	FASS		FASS		STEM					OU WALES	OU WALES	CES
Alumni																			

NB. The abbreviations in Figure 1 refer to Faculties: WELS - Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies; FASS- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics; FBL – Faculty of Business and Law; OU WALES – the OU in Wales; CES – Careers and Employability Services.

Because The OU is a distance learning institution and mentoring is always offered remotely, each option raises questions about which technical solutions to use. The dimensions to be considered are:

- Whether the mentoring is linked to a course/qualification or stand alone?
- Whether mentoring is limited to students with certain attributes or open?
- The numbers of students involved – there can be 1000s of students on courses
- Which platform to use? Internal or external?
- How can security and confidentiality be ensured?
- How will students be notified about the service?
- How will they access the service?
- Students’ preferred ways of communicating eg. via mobile devices, social media platform preferences

The technological solution is often shaped by compromises. For example, in course-specific mentoring, course forums and online rooms are unavailable to students until they have been allocated a tutor. Mentoring therefore cannot begin until close to course start when students might already be feeling overwhelmed. Workarounds are possible and initiatives have been using welcome forums on course and Qualification sites which are available before and/or across course study and available as soon as students register. However, this still leaves pre-registration support difficult to offer. Similarly, whilst wishing to be student-led, using students' preferred modes of communication might not be advisable once University data protection and Safeguarding responsibilities are factored in.

An inclusive rather than prescriptive Framework

Whilst The OU Framework has ended up being called Student Mentoring, it quickly demonstrates a respect to the way teams think carefully about their initiative's name, and outlines different conceptualisations (eg. buddying, Motzo, 2016; coaching, Whiteside, 2020; mentoring, Munro et al, 2020, KIC, 2021) and ways of constructing names. To illustrate these different ways of framing initiatives, the Framework needed to become part of a larger resource illustrating the rationale for and practical implementation of these as alternatives. However, this diversity also presents challenges. Similar sounding schemes in the same Faculty might appear to offer too many choices, confusion about what is on offer and what students might be able to engage with. Clarity of communications is proving important.

The process of developing our Student Mentoring Framework has been one of coming together to learn from students and staff - not only involved in the initiatives but also those who have offered relevant insights into broader issues and next steps, such as the Safeguarding team and the Student Association. We are aware of evidence to suggest that students who feel that they 'belong' are more likely to be retained. Evaluations of peer support initiatives in various Universities have reported students' feeling welcomed and developing a sense of belonging (eg. Andreanoff, 2010; Andrews and Clark, 2011), particularly for international students (Nguyen and Clothier, 2019) and those from other potentially more marginalised or minority groups (Ryder et al, 2017; Foley, forthcoming). The Framework has embraced evidence that students can support one another and that this support might be offered in different ways, to support different transitions within a student journey, from pre-registration through to becoming an alumnus/alumna. With the diversity of backgrounds of students, for example as represented by the OU student body, these transitions are known to be demanding and represent a change process. The associated individual shifts in identity and agency would benefit from support (Ecclestone et al, 2009).

Peer mentoring support offers a resource whereby students can draw on one another for this support, however we name our schemes and organise them.

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