# The STAR Project

Student Transition and Retention

## Students Supporting Students: Student Mentoring

### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preface</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Student to Student Mentoring in Induction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Katrina A. Macintosh</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Guiding</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sinead McCormick, Anthony Cook, Bill Norton, Kim Davies and Susan Assinder</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrally Organised Student Mentoring</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Suzanne McLaughlin, Gillian Bartlett and Alistair Warren</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

The purpose of this booklet is to describe practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students’ transition into Higher Education and to help to improve retention. This is important because student retention has become a significant issue both for students and for institutions. Students waste valuable time and resources if they drop out from a university course in which they have invested their hopes and aspirations and institutions waste money and staff effort. Early withdrawal of students frustrates the purposes of all. It is, however, just the measurable component of a more general malaise. For every student who takes the decision to leave a course there must be many more who are just able to pass, who are just able to cope with the stresses of Higher Education and who are failing to reach their full potential. Equally, there will be students at university who should never have joined or who should have joined a different course. They might be too immature, too deficient in the basic skills required or their talents might lie in different directions.

Every institution that has highlighted student retention as a significant component of its strategies has investigated the causes of early leaving and most will have drawn similar conclusions. The STAR consortium was formed at a time when the generality of these causes was becoming apparent but the responses to them were less clear. The first action of the consortium was to list a set of outcomes that, if achieved, would contribute to the alleviation of problems associated with student transition. These we published as the *Guidelines for the management of student transition* (Cook et al., 2005). The consortium then identified practices that were likely to assist the achievement of the outcomes in the *Guidelines* booklet and researched them.

The STAR booklets, of which this is one, are small compendiums of practices that have worked in some institutions to ease the stresses of students’ transition into Higher Education. Many have been shown to improve retention. Many are the practical expression of institutional policies. All are descriptions of the dedicated work of teaching and support staff in the Higher Education sector who have introduced, maintained or developed practices for the benefit of students. The practices are derived from three sources. First, some were identified through survey. These were researched by STAR staff and written in collaboration with practitioners. Second, some staff volunteered to write about their practices independently. Third, some new practices were introduced and some existing ones evaluated using funding provided by the STAR project. Most practices have been described by staff and then validated by students through questionnaires or focus groups. All the reports contained in these booklets have been refereed independently and then approved by the STAR Steering Group.

This booklet describes the practices in enough detail to allow others to adopt or advocate that practice in their own institutions. The practices, however, should not be considered as definitive. They work in the institutions in which they were implemented by the staff who implemented them and with the students who participated. They are unlikely to remain the same. They will almost certainly evolve further even in the institutions in which they have
been described and, when adopted elsewhere, will need to be adapted to suit local conditions. They are, therefore, offered as foundations on which to build appropriate practices to suit the staff, the students and learning environments involved.

REFERENCE
The Role of Student to Student Mentoring in Induction

Katrina A. Macintosh, The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA

Embarking on semester one in a Higher Education institution can be a trying time in any student’s life. For most, it is their first experience of the independence associated with living away from the parental home. This demands an increased level of responsibility by the student, not only for their future academic success but also for their personal wellbeing. Many students are ill prepared for the experience of Higher Education and while most cope
well, some do not (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Many institutions have implemented measures, therefore, to alleviate some of the anxiety associated with this transfer procedure and to facilitate the ‘settling-in’ period.

Induction activities, co-ordinated by institutions seek to familiarise students with the campus, highlight their academic obligations, develop independent study techniques and indicate available student support networks. The effective academic and social integration of students into Higher Education is critical to successful retention (Tinto, 1993)

One method that has been developed in order to assist with these academic and social adjustments and which forms the focus of this booklet is the use of student mentoring or peer guiding schemes. In the context of Higher Education, mentoring is an activity in which current students can offer new students advice on all aspects of university life, be it academic or social.

In essence, the aim of a mentoring scheme is the provision of an informal student support network that can provide initial contact and guidance in the weeks prior to and the weeks beginning the first semester. Mentor support extends throughout the entire first year but, in general, all problems tend to be alleviated during the initial period. One of the main benefits of student mentoring lies in the fact that second and third year students can directly identify with first year experiences. Past students who have been part of the first year process can offer tailor-made advice and support on a friendly, personal and informal level.

Many institutions have developed, almost as a tradition, the supportive relationship between existing and new students. In that sense mentoring is not new. Several institutions, however, have taken responsibility for the promotion of such schemes and the formal training of student mentors. This distinguished them from the traditional academic uncles and aunts roles that are widespread across the UK Higher Educational system.

Implementation of a student mentoring programme yields a variety of benefits for the mentee, mentor and the institution. Retention rates are improved as new students feel accepted and valued (Moxley et al., 2001).

Benefits to the mentee include:
Facilitated transition into Higher Education;
Enhanced relationships and student networking;
Increased motivation due to a sense of belonging;
Friendly support and encouragement;
Academic study advice;
Social integration; and
Improved self-confidence.
Benefits to the mentor include:

- Development of leadership, management and support skills;
- CV enhancement;
- Increased employability;
- Personal satisfaction;
- Input into the university;
- Learning experience; and
- Dissemination of personal knowledge and skills.

(Taken from: http://www.brookes.networks.co.uk)

Contained within this booklet are two examples of student mentoring: one from the University of Sheffield and the other from the University of Wales, Bangor.

At the University of Sheffield, student mentoring is centrally organised for all first year undergraduate students. The aim of the programme is to provide academic and personal support to new students on arrival. Mentors are expected to contact mentees prior to Induction Week to provide the reassurance of a friendly-face on arrival. Once initial contact is made arrangements for future meetings and contact details can be confirmed.

Mentoring at Sheffield is a voluntary activity open to both second and third year students. Within the School of Biomedical Science prospective mentors are asked to apply via an online application form. Once the selection process has been completed, the successful candidates receive appropriate training and guidance on their responsibilities as a mentor.

First year participation in the mentoring scheme is also voluntary. Enrolment onto the programme is through completion of the application form supplied alongside literature issued by the University when an offer is made. Applying students are also free to make requests as to the nature of their mentor, specifying criteria such as age, country of origin or religion.

One of the largest peer guiding schemes operating within the UK is at the University of Wales, Bangor. In operation since 1994, the programme trains between 350 and 400 peer guides per annum in good practice pertaining to the support of first year students entering Higher Education. As in Sheffield, the aim of this peer guiding scheme is to provide a welcoming face and informal support in addition to that provided by central services such as accommodation and counselling.

Mentor recruitment at Bangor begins in December with a series of briefing sessions detailing what is expected. Application forms are completed, training received and referees’ reports sought prior to appointment in May. In September, two weeks before Welcome
Week, mentors contact their allocated students to provide assistance and arrange an initial meeting. Peer guides are available as long as is thought necessary by the first year student, however most transitional problems are resolved during the first few weeks of semester one.

In acknowledgement of the hard work and dedication provided by peer guides at the University of Wales, a ‘Peer Guide Ceremony’ is held in January or February of each year. All guides receive a certificate and the prize of ‘Peer Guide of the Year’ is awarded.

In conclusion, student mentoring in Higher Education has a positive impact upon all parties involved. Mentees, from the beginning, have an amicable point of contact to alleviate pre-arrival stress and someone to turn to when dealing with post-entry problems. Mentors benefit through increased employability, improved social skills and elevated confidence, as a consequence of the expertise gained during the scheme. Finally, there are institutional benefits related to improved retention rates by reducing the potential for student withdrawal.

REFERENCES


Peer Guiding

Sinead McCormick, Anthony Cook, The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 ISA

Bill Norton, Learning and Teaching Development Centre, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool, L16 9JD

Kim Davies, Centre for Careers and Opportunities, University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2DG and

Susan Assinder, School of Biological Sciences, University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2DG

SUMMARY
The University of Wales, Bangor has one of the largest peer guiding schemes in the UK. Running since 1994, each year between 350 and 400 peer guides are trained on how to best support new students when they arrive at the University. The scheme is co-ordinated centrally by the University but each department runs the scheme slightly differently to suit its particular needs. The scheme aims to supplement the other sources of support available from the personal tutor system and student services such as counselling, accommodation advice and advice for international students.

Keywords: transition, induction, peer guides.

INTRODUCTION
The transfer from Secondary or Further Education institutions into university can be a difficult time for students since many students enter university with little appreciation of what university life and work will be like. Naturally most of these transition problems are experienced in the first few weeks of the new students’ experience and involve adjusting to new social, domestic and academic experiences in a relatively short period of time. A peer guiding scheme can help new students through this transition. The new students have access to a current student who can advise them about where they can find information and support appropriate to everything from where to go for a night out to helping find lecture rooms.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES
At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:
2.1 Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.

2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.

*Cook et al. (2005)*

**THE PRACTICE**

The peer guiding scheme aims to provide each new student with a welcoming face from the outset and to supplement other more formal support such as counselling, accommodation advice and advice for international students. The scheme is co-ordinated centrally by the University’s Centre for Careers and Opportunities but, in addition, each academic department uses its peer guides slightly differently to suit its needs. The peer guide structure is shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative oversight</td>
<td>Academic Registry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central training and evaluation</td>
<td>Centre for Careers and Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central Peer Guide Co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local academic staff support</td>
<td>Departmental Peer Guide Co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student guides</td>
<td>Senior Peer Guides (Experienced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Guides (Inexperienced)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: The peer guiding structure at the University of Wales, Bangor.*

Each year between 350 and 400 peer guides are centrally trained on how to best support new students when they arrive at university. This represents one guide to every four or five new entrants. These are second or third year students who have already adapted into university life and have volunteered to help new students settle in. The scheme is tiered; first time peer guides are supported by senior peer guides who participated in the previous year and can offer the experience of having done it before. For serious problems the Departmental and Central Co-ordinators are available.

**Recruitment and Training**

The recruitment and training of the peer guides is co-ordinated centrally from the Centre for Careers and Opportunities with help from the Departmental Co-ordinators, for example The
School of Biological Sciences Co-ordinator encourages students to apply who she thinks will do a good job. This means that all peer guides are trained to the same, centrally determined standard.

A timetable for the peer guiding scheme has evolved and is outlined in Appendix 1.

The recruitment process starts in the December of the preceding academic year. It involves a series of briefing sessions where students are informed of the structure of the scheme and how it is co-ordinated, the benefit of the scheme to new students and themselves, the role of the peer guide and how to apply and some aspects of the training they would receive. Examples of the PowerPoint slides used are in Appendix 2.

In January, application forms, which are distributed at the briefing sessions, are completed and sent to the Departmental Co-ordinators. Compulsory training takes place in February and March and discusses such issues as ensuring personal safety and stresses where the peer guide responsibilities begin and end (Appendix 3). The training session is an intensive two-hour interactive session. Attendees are asked to review material prior to the session.

References are requested in April and May for all those who attended the compulsory training before they are considered for the peer guiding scheme. As part of the screening process a system has also been set up by which the students’ disciplinary records are accessed.

In 2002, a handbook was developed which included ideas from existing peer guides. This handbook contains a comprehensive range of information and advice from emergency contact numbers to the role of a peer guide to peer guiding dos and don’ts (Appendix 4). This handbook, and indeed the whole programme, is constantly reviewed; peer guides, co-ordinators and students are contacted to give feedback on the programme and constructive criticism is welcomed to ensure the scheme improves year on year.

The Role of the Peer Guide

The work of the peer guide begins in May and June (Appendix 1) when they help their Departmental Peer Guide Co-ordinator plan the Welcome Week activities. In the School of Biological Sciences, just before examinations in May, the Co-ordinator arranges peer guides into groups, each with a group leader and briefs them on their role, making sure she has their contact details for the summer. Two weeks before Welcome Week, each peer guide will contact their five students to offer help and assistance. The Co-ordinator meets the peer guides again at the start of Welcome Week when she hands out ‘corporate’ sweatshirts/tee shirts and further information. The peer guides will then be on site to welcome the new students as they arrive. As Welcome Week in September is part of the term proper, students are expected to attend and this is when the peer guides are busiest making sure their students get to the right place at the right time and complete all the registration paper work. They are asked to be available for at least 15 hours helping out in their respective departments – giving tours, talking to students and attending planned social events. The peer guides are available to students after this initial induction period for as
long as is necessary, typically they have an hour a week available. However, experience shows that the majority of students settle quickly and so the demands on a peer guide’s time are not too demanding.

The role of the peer guide will be to listen to and reassure students about the worries they have such as feeling homesick or concerns about meeting new people. They will try to answer questions the students may have and refer those questions that need more specialist advice on to the appropriate source.

The peer guides organize social events to encourage students to mix. Students are allocated to peer guides prior to them arriving at the University and often they have events organized for the students during the weekend when they begin to arrive on campus. In the School of Biological Sciences, they help organize events such as a trip to the beach and a wine and cheese party as part of induction as well as informal events for their group of students.

Peer guides are also asked to attend some recruitment events, such as open days, throughout the year to speak to prospective students and/or their parents.

To acknowledge their hard work and to thank the peer guides, a ceremony is held in the January or February to present them with certificates and to give the award for Peer Guide of the Year. Nominations are invited from all first year students and some of the comments about one of the Peer Guides of the Year included:

“[He was] a constant source of support.”

“ Took me out so that I met others and made new friends.”

“Without my PG I would be sitting in my room feeling sorry for myself or would have left!”

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

There is a Central Peer Guide Co-ordinator (0.5 FTE) who deals with the administration of the scheme. This includes dealing with over 300 peer guide application forms; additionally references have to be collected for each potential peer guide. The Central Co-ordinator also organizes the 20-30 two-hour training sessions, the presentation ceremony and ensures the whole scheme is quality assured.

Each department assigns a co-ordinator, a member of the academic staff, who administers the scheme at local level. They are involved, for example, in helping recruit volunteers. This individual also allocates new students to the peer guides and works with the peer guides to organise events in the department. In the School of Biological Sciences, administrative staff are also involved as needed to a limited extent. It is difficult to quantify the resources allocated but the practice is very much seen by the staff involved as a ‘good thing’ and a component of the normal support given to students.
Evaluation

Evaluation for the academic year 2002-03 consisted of two surveys. First year students were surveyed to investigate the effect the peer guiding scheme had on their experiences while settling into Bangor. Peer guides were also surveyed to investigate their experience of the scheme.

Eleven percent of first years responded to the survey: of these 78.5% stated they wanted to see peer guiding continue; 40.8% of students were aware of the scheme prior to entry and of these 7% deemed it was an important factor in their choice of university; 13.7% of the respondents stated they had considered leaving the University and 3.0% of these students discussed the issue with their peer guide. Furthermore, 1.6% (three people) of those who had considered leaving, would have left without the support of their peer guide. Extrapolation of these responses indicates that, college wide about 20 people could have been retained directly as a result of the peer guiding scheme.

Twenty-one percent of peer guides responded to their survey and 21% of these reported to be guiding first years thinking of leaving; 69% of the respondents spoke to students and parents at open days and indicated that the majority of these were interested in the scheme. On a personal level, 80% of the peer guides felt that they had gained or improved their employability skills and over a third had discussed their participation in the scheme during recruitment interviews.

The evaluation procedure has been altered slightly over the past two years but the results from subsequent surveys have been similar. The most recent was undertaken in December 2005. At this point:

- 75% of first years rated the peer guides’ hard work in Welcome Week as good or very good;
- 14% of peer guides were helping students with serious welfare issues; and
- 16% of peer guides were helping students considering withdrawing, all of whom did stay at University of Wales, Bangor.

Staff and Student Opinions

On the purpose of the scheme the Central Co-ordinator said:

“It’s important that these Freshers are greeted with a friendly face. A lot of students feel alone when they arrive. The peer guiding scheme means someone will be there encouraging them to take part in social activities and to answer any questions they might have.”

Comments from first year students reinforced this:

“I was worried about coming to university. My peer guide was really useful and helped me settle into life at Bangor.”
“The peer guides make sure you are joining in during Welcome Week so you don’t have time to sit in your room and be homesick.”

“When I got here I met loads of people on the very first night when we got taken out by the peer guides.”

On the peer guides, a lecturer commented:

“The peer guides take it very seriously. I’ve had students come back to me either directly or via the staff, saying I’ve got a student in my group and I’m worried about her and I don’t want to do anything wrong.”

Regarding recruitment and training, which help set boundaries for the peer guides, a lecturer said:

“It gives us a group of students who we know are committed to doing it and we can use them for other things; they come and do open days. They tend to be self-selected as being the more outgoing responsible group.”

On the value of the scheme a lecture commented:

“Some of the peer guides said they had first years coming to them to discuss issues connected to withdrawal and have actually managed to talk to them or refer them on for help so that they didn’t leave. Sometimes it’s much easier to talk to someone who’s been through it.”

Why do students want to become peer guides?

“I decided to become a peer guide because my own peer guide was so good. I come from Finland and I was really nervous about coming to Wales and worried that my English wasn’t good enough. My peer guide contacted me by letter before I got to Bangor and it was really good to know that someone would be there waiting to help me settle in. It’s comforting to know that someone is always there and that’s what I want to be able to offer new students this summer.”

“Being a peer guide helped improve my self-confidence.”

“I want to become a teacher, being a peer guide has given me some experiences of helping students.”

Appendix 5 contains accounts from previous students which testify to the utility of the scheme at a personal level.

**CONCLUSION**

There is both statistical and anecdotal evidence that the peer guiding scheme is effective in helping the transition from school or college into the University of Wales, Bangor. Every new student needs some degree of help when they first arrive at university. Most, once they have been to some of the Welcome Week activities, both academic and social, have the
confidence to meet new people and take on the new challenges. However, there will always be some new students who struggle that little bit more to settle in and these students will continue to benefit from the peer guiding scheme which is available to them for as long as they need the support.

CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University of Wales, Bangor</th>
<th>Bangor is a university city with a population of around 20,000, of whom about a third are students of the University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>9,500 students on Higher Education courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus</td>
<td>Single site, broad subject spectrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake in 2002-03 (full time first degree students)</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage no longer in HE after first year</td>
<td>7% (against a benchmark of 9.8%) (HESA data)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCE

**APPENDIX 1. Peer Guiding Calendar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Recruitment starts with a series of briefing sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Application forms to be completed and sent to co-ordinators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February and March</td>
<td>Compulsory training takes place. Training includes issues such as ensuring personal safety and stressing where their responsibilities end. They are not expected to be able to solve every problem but they are expected to know to whom first years should be referred for more formal and/or professional advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April and May</td>
<td>References are called in for all who complete compulsory training before they are considered peer guides. Disciplinary records are accessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May and June</td>
<td>Peer guides help the Departmental Co-ordinator plan the Welcome Week activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>All peer guides receive a handbook containing useful information to help them cope with whatever they need to. They also receive a distinctive sweatshirt/tee shirt so they are easily visible and recognisable. Wearing the sweatshirt/tee shirt means they’re on active duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Week</td>
<td>Peer guides at their busiest; typically spend 15+ hours helping out in the department as well as attending social events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throughout year one</td>
<td>After Welcome Week peer guides continue to offer support for as long as new students allocated to them feel they need it. This slows down quickly and is not generally too demanding. On specific days during the year peer guides help out at recruitment events and open days, both within the department and in University of Wales, Bangor generally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January/February</td>
<td>Peer guide ceremony (including Peer Guide of the Year Award) to thank the peer guides for their hard work and to award them their certificates for their professional portfolios.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2. Examples of Slides used in Briefing Sessions

Why be a Peer Guide?
To emulate someone who helped you when you were new; and
Be kind – knowing you’ve helped another is good for you and…

What’s in it for you?
Personal Development;
Professional Development;
Sweatshirt/Tee shirt; and
Certificate.

How will you cope?
Training – basic compulsory sessions;
Post-training optional workshops;
Handbook;
Website – will soon include a Peer Guide chat room;
Refer on when appropriate; and
Seek help – Departmental or Central Co-ordinator.

APPENDIX 3. Guidelines for Peer Guides

A few reminders of what we discussed in training:
Go and greet your first years rather than chatting with other peer guides;
Use Welcome Week activities to get to know your first years;
Arrange further ‘contact sessions’ (e.g. meet for a coffee), just to chat;
Be reliable: if you arrange a meeting make sure that you are there on time;
Arrange how you can be contacted if needed. Do not give your phone number to
someone you do not know. Organise other ways of contacting your first years
(e.g. pigeon holes/notice boards/e-mail);
Never give first years the impression that you are too busy to talk to them. If it’s an impossible time, arrange to see them later;

Respect the views, opinions and beliefs of others and maintain confidentiality where appropriate;

Give accurate and neutral advice, and a balanced view of student life. Of course you should be yourself, but take care to offer your views in a wider context. If you accidentally give wrong information correct it as soon as possible;

Know your limitations; remember the three areas you should not advise on:

- Academic matters (pass on to department or Student Services);
- Financial matters (pass on to Student Services or Students’ Union Money Advisor); and
- Serious welfare issues (pass on to relevant section of Student Services or Students’ Union).

Your first years should decide for how long they need you. If they settle in well, and do not need you for long, please don’t be disappointed – it means that you have done a good job; and

If they become too demanding you need to sort it – it means they need more formal/professional help – so pass them on.

Page 1
Contents
Page 2
Introduction
Page 3
The Role of a Peer Guide
Page 4
Your Responsibilities
Page 5
Peer Guide Checklist
Page 6-7
Safety
Page 8
Peer Guiding Do’s and Don’ts
Page 9
Departmental Peer Guide Co-ordinators
Page 10
New Registration Information
Page 11
Semester/Holiday Dates
Page 12-13
Welcome Week
Page 14-15
Emergency Contact Details
Page 16
Students’ Union Information
Page 17
Disability Information
Page 18-19
Accommodation Advice
Page 20-21
Library Services
Page 22-23
Information Technology Information
Page 24
Mature Students
Page 25-26
Peer Guiding … what’s in it for you?
Page 27
The Centre for Careers and Opportunities

The Role of a Peer Guide

Tactful
Helpful
Enthusiastic

Reassuring
On hand
Listening
Encouraging

Open-minded
Friendly
Approachable

Privacy (respect for)
Equal
Efficient
Resourceful

Guiding
Understanding
Informative
Down to earth
Energetic

Peer Guide Checklist

Have you spoken to your first year(s) about:

- Whether they have any questions/concerns about their course;
- Whether they have any questions/concerns about their accommodation;
- What they have to do at registration;
- How they go about signing up with clubs and societies;
- Whether they have any problems about the layout of the University – i.e. do they know where all their lectures are being held and how to get to them?

Whether anything is worrying them;

- Not being afraid to come to you if they have any concerns/problems;
- Your future contact with them – are you all clear about how this will work? – i.e. have you swapped e-mail addresses and talked about the contact hour; and

Whether they have any other questions you can help with.
APPENDIX 5. Comments from First Year Students

“My peer guide was very helpful and did her best to make settling into Bangor easier for me. She came to my halls and knocked on the doors of people who were also 1st year so that I could meet some of them. She also put me in touch with other peer guides for events she couldn’t attend. She met up with me for lunch when I felt down and kept in touch with me. She made my 1st few weeks easier and I am very grateful.”

“My peer guide helped me a lot when I first joined the university and as we live in the same hall he has always been available to answer my numerous questions about our department or simply life at university. He also wrote to me before I joined university and particularly looked out for me in Freshers week.”

“I believe he was an exceptional peer guide. Not only did he make me and others feel at home in Fresher’s week, but when I was finding it hard being at university and away from home he took the time to make sure I was OK. Even now he doesn’t ignore me after Fresher’s week and makes an effort to see if I’m OK.”

“My peer guide has been very helpful to me and my peers, especially during Freshers week. She was very well organised and was more than happy to help with any problems. She constantly put us before herself to make sure we had a great time during Freshers week, and since has helped with any queries I have had.”

“Within minutes of my arrival my peer guide came to see me. I had a few initial questions and she was able to help. What she didn’t know she went and found out and got back to me within an hour. She took us all on a tour of Bangor’s nightlife. Throughout Fresher’s week she popped up everyday to see if I was OK and answer any questions. Then she was a constant source of support for the rest of the semester, always there to answer questions. She even walked us all the way home at three am when we didn’t know our way back. She was so friendly and approachable, not once did I feel silly asking her questions. She even sent me a message on Christmas day wishing me a merry Christmas.”
Centrally Organised Student Mentoring

Suzanne McLaughlin, The STAR Project, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 ISA

Gillian Bartlett, Student Services Department, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN and

Alistair Warren, Department of Biomedical Science, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN
SUMMARY
The University of Sheffield has a centrally organised student mentoring scheme for first year undergraduate students currently operating within nine academic departments. The Department of Biomedical Science supports this scheme. Students in years two and three are trained as mentors and assigned a small group of undergraduate students as mentees from the same department and, wherever possible, the same programme of study. Mentees then have peer support from someone that they can contact or talk to if they are experiencing difficulties in their academic or social student life and to help them ‘settle in’.

Keywords: retention, induction, student mentoring.

INTRODUCTION
The management of students moving into Higher Education needs to take into account that the diversity of the students entering university has increased considerably over the last number of years. Integration of students into institutions is a key aspect of successful student retention and when students fail to make the necessary academic and social adjustments to university life they may drop out or under-achieve as a consequence (Lowe and Cook, 2003). The use of student mentors is one way in which students can get to know other students and have an experienced student that they can rely on as a source of information and guidance.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES
At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:

2.1 Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.

2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.

Cook et al. (2005)

THE PRACTICE
The mentoring scheme is organised centrally by the University and the level of involvement can vary from department to department. The main aim of the scheme is that the mentors provide initial support for the first years when they arrive at university. It is a chance for the first years to make contact with the second and third years and to establish a relationship with them. The mentors have been through the first year experience themselves and can
therefore give relevant advice and support to first year students to help them settle in.

**The Mentors**

Mentoring is a voluntary activity. Second and third year students are asked, via e-mail, if they want to become mentors early in the calendar year. They complete an online application and are asked why they want to be mentors to ensure suitability. There are normally 12-15 mentors in Biomedical Science each year, with a ratio of two to four mentees each. In May, the volunteer mentors have a half-day of training where they are given information on their responsibility and carry out role-play scenarios. The mentors are also warned about safety issues and not divulging sensitive information about themselves.

The training is carried out centrally and involves such aspects as:

- What a mentor is (and is not);
- Outlining issues relating to personal safety;
- How and where to meet;
- Information on the University and support services available; and
- What to do if getting ‘out of your depth’.

The training stresses the importance of making contact prior to the Introduction Week in order to answer questions and to reassure mentees that there will be a ‘friendly face’ here for them, thus reducing pre-arrival anxiety. The training also emphasises the need for mentors to consider what they can do to help their mentees to settle in as soon as possible, for example by providing help in understanding timetables, the module choice process, finding their way around campus and so on. Mentors are trained to consider their mentees background, with specific exercises on cultural awareness and considering the needs of mature and commuter students.

Within Biomedical Science there is both a central and a departmental contact in support of the mentors. The departmental contact can help with departmental or course specific queries or problems. Departmental contacts are expected to communicate regularly with mentors, for example providing prompts to contact mentees (such as at examination times) and ideas for things and activities they could do to help their mentees to settle in (for example a tour of the departmental facilities).

**The Mentees**

The scheme is also voluntary for first year students. Potential mentees receive written information about the scheme and an application form in their pack when they are made an
Students wishing to have a mentor can also make special requests, such as asking for a mentor who is a mature student or from the same home country/religion; such requests are accommodated wherever possible.

Mentoring

Currently mentors first meet the students during Introduction Week, under the auspices of the central support staff, although this approach is being re-considered in favour of giving mentors responsibility for arranging initial meetings with mentees at a mutually convenient time. The mentors and mentees then agree on arrangements for future meetings and means of contacting each other. The mentors often give out their mobile phone numbers and e-mail contact details to the mentees so that if they need help or guidance outside of the meetings they can get in contact quickly and easily. It must be noted that the mentors are trained only with basic mentoring skills and are therefore not qualified for every problem they encounter. Mentors are primed to know when and to whom to refer students with problems so that they can be addressed by an appropriate academic tutor or university counsellor depending on the nature of the problem.

The departmental academic tutor is available to support mentors throughout the year. Initially this involves helping to advertise the scheme and attend the introductory event during Introduction Week. Later on, the tutor receives and responds to e-mail queries from mentors and is available for individual meetings. Often queries are simply about updates and revisions to the degree programme, but occasionally more detailed advice is sought about a specific issue. The tutor is available should the mentor feel the mentee needs to be referred on for further support. The tutor e-mails all mentors periodically to remind them of his or her availability, should it be needed.

At the moment, the department is not aware of any students with a declared disability being a mentor. Students with a disability, however, are welcome to be involved in the mentoring scheme either as mentors or mentees.

The main overall aim of the mentor is to provide peer support, either academic or social, and also to be able to detect students with problems and to refer them for help or to guide them in the right direction for them to seek help.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The mentoring scheme is run centrally by the University, therefore there are no major costs to the department. There are staff mentors as points of contact for the students (both mentors and mentees) and so there is a time commitment for some staff.

EFFECTIVENESS
Mentoring is one limb of student support on offer to the students. Some students take up the scheme with enthusiasm while others choose not to become involved. The scheme is voluntary and take-up tends to be variable; its effectiveness must be viewed within these boundaries. It is undoubtedly a useful scheme. If it helped a single student during their transition from school to university then we feel it would be worthwhile, however the evidence is that it forms a useful back up to more formal support systems. The involvement of undergraduate students gives it a different ‘feel’ from staff-led support.

The scheme also has benefits for the mentors who take their responsibility very seriously. They learn about revisions to the curriculum, actively explore issues raised by their mentees, and meet a different group of students from their own circle of friends. Mentor training includes a session from the Careers Service on how mentoring can improve employability. This involves thinking about the skills they need to develop personally and professionally (conducting a skills audit) and how they can articulate/demonstrate to future employers that they have acquired key transferable skills such as record keeping (as part of a work experience portfolio). Being run centrally means that the workload on departmental staff involved in the scheme is kept to a minimum. The central organiser is available for tutor support and provides updates and reminders about the process throughout the year.

Student Opinion of the Mentoring Scheme

The main opinion of the students interviewed was that the mentoring system was a useful thing. Many were mentors and had been mentees so obviously thought the scheme was good.

The students commented that they were sent profiles of the mentees, which included details such as a photograph, a telephone number and an address. They received this information approximately one week before Fresher’s (Introduction) Week so that they could contact the mentees. It seemed to be common practice that the mentors would contact the mentees before they actually came to the University.

“I just contacted mine straight away so that they had a week where they could ask questions.”

A mentor

The students seemed to think that the most important role of the mentor was to be a contact in the weeks prior to starting university.

“They [the mentors] are useful when you are about to come to university and you feel more secure that there is someone there if you do have any problems.”

“Before you come to university it is good to get hold of the people [the mentees] coming by phone or e-mail to reassure them and obviously when they come to university they know that there is someone there; but I think it is more of a back up.”
“I think it is just that initial period before they go to university that they need some support.”

The students that had been mentees echoed the thought that the mentor was more of a pre-entry support. They considered that by the time they were at university and met their mentors, they already had most of their questions answered and knew where everything was.

“But I think that once you are here it’s not much point and it’s more a waste of time that you have to meet them really.”

“The first meeting [with mentor] was on the Thursday of the first week but by Monday I kind of knew where everything was as you had the meeting for the BMS [Biomedical Science] registration and all that.”

The mentoring scheme seems to be popular among the students, however the main role they see the scheme playing is as a contact before the mentee actually comes to university. They can then get any of the questions that they are worried about answered before they arrive.

Their conclusion from their own experiences of being mentees is that once students come to university and go through induction, they quickly get to know their way around and have the opportunity to get any questions answered. Knowing that if they have a problem, that there is someone they can contact seems to be enough support for them.

CONCLUSION

Student mentoring serves a range of purposes. Firstly, it is part of the development of the mentor and provides useful experience in a range of skills. Secondly, it provides contact between the incoming student and a sympathetic individual within the institution prior to the student joining the institution. Many new students have irrational fears about coming to university and some have unrealistic expectations. These can be allayed by empathetic contact prior to entry. Finally, and perhaps least usefully, student mentors can provide points of contact and support in the first year at university.
CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The University of Sheffield</th>
<th>23,000 students and 5,500 staff (not all are academic staff)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Departmental of Biomedical Science</td>
<td>430 biomedical science undergraduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37% male: 67% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35 academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10% mature students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


Acknowledgements

This booklet is the result of the activities of the STAR consortium. The STAR Project was funded through the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (Phase Four) by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland. The ideas and impetus of the project have derived from the enthusiasm of a core group of academic staff:

   Tony Cook (University of Ulster)
   Mark Davies (University of Sunderland)
   Bill Norton (University of Liverpool Hope)
   Helen Richardson (University of Manchester)
   Brian S. Rushton (University of Ulster)
   Steve Waite (University of Brighton)

This group has been ably assisted by STAR development officers Katrina Macintosh, Sinead McCormick and Suzanne McLaughlin and placement students Leslie-Anne Buchanan, Gina Smith and Dave Southall.

The project’s external evaluator, Mantz Yorke (University of Lancaster), has also made critical contributions.

The printing of this booklet has been with the sympathetic cooperation of Stanley McCahon of the Reprographics Department, University of Ulster.