

The background of the cover is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows the dunes in a light, hazy atmosphere. The bottom half shows the dunes in a darker, more dramatic lighting, with a starfish visible in the lower right corner. The text is centered over the image.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

Peer Guiding

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SUMMARY

The University of Wales, Bangor has one of the largest Peer Guide 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 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 and 2.4.

- 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.

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.

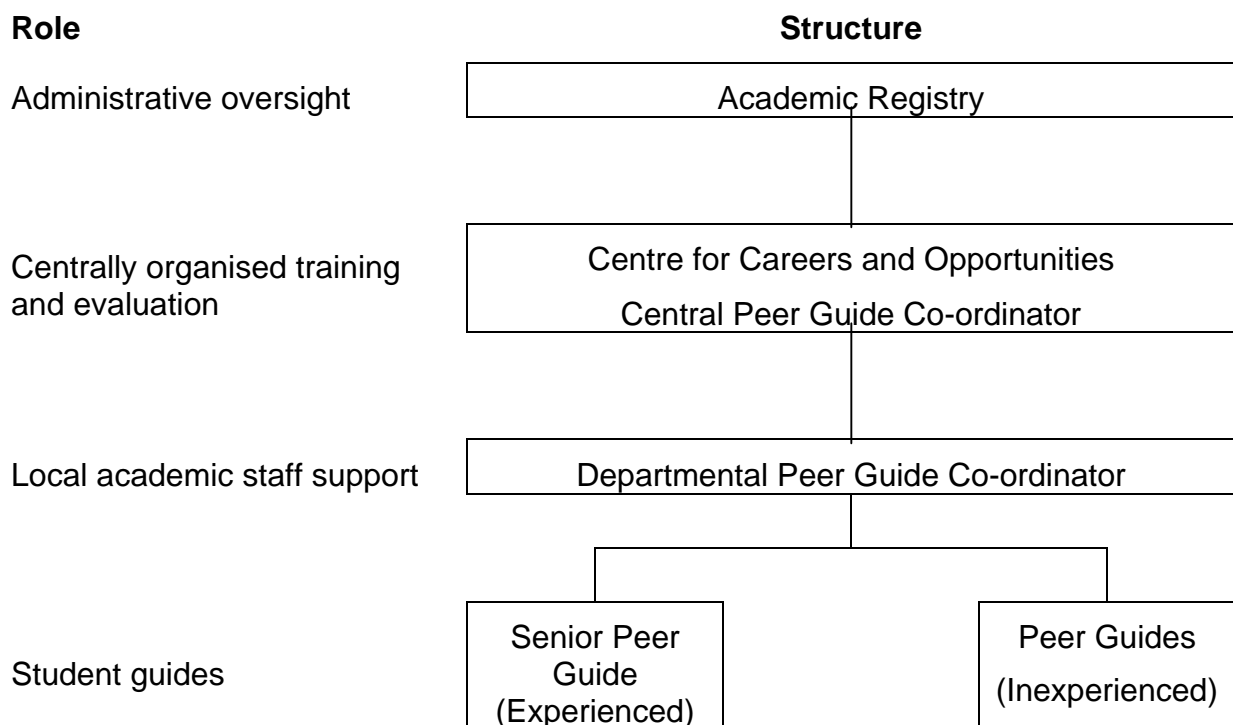


Figure 1. The Peer Guiding Structure

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 1 guide to every 4 or 5 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. Where serious problems occur the departmental and central co-ordinators are available to help and offer support.

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. 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, see 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 Peer Guides. As part of the screening process a system has also been set up whereby 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 (see 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 department co-ordinator plan the Welcome Week activities. In the School of Biological Sciences, just before exams 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 5 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 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 the 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 organise 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 organised for the students during the weekend when they begin to arrive on campus. In the School of Biological Sciences, they help organise events such as a trip to the beach and a cheese and wine 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 organises 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, for example, are involved 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 resource allocated but the practice is very much seen by the staff involved as a 'good thing' and part and parcel 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% 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% (3 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 21.0% 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 evaluative process 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
- 16% of Peer Guides were helping students considering withdrawing, all of whom did stay at UWB

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 helps 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 lecturer 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

Institutional Context	University of Wales, Bangor
Size	Established in 1884 9500 students on higher education courses
Campus	Single site, broad subject spectrum
Intake in 2002/3 (full time first degree students)	1600
% no longer in HE after first year	7% (against a benchmark of 9.8%)*

* HESA data

Appendix 1

Peer Guiding Calendar

December	Recruitment starts with a series of briefing sessions
January	Application forms to be completed and sent to co-ordinators
February & March	Compulsory training takes place. Training includes issues such as ensuring personal safety & 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
April & May	References are called in for all who complete compulsory training before they are considered Peer Guides. Disciplinary records are accessed.
May & June	Peer Guides help the Departmental Co-ordinator plan the Welcome Week activities
September	All Peer Guides receive a handbook containing useful information to help them cope with whatever they need to. They also receive a distinctive tee shirt so they are easily visible and recognisable. Wearing the tee shirt means they're on active duty
Welcome Week	Peer Guides at their busiest typically spend 15+ hours helping out in the department as well as attending social events.
Throughout year one	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 UWB generally.
January / February	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

Examples of slides used in Briefing Sessions

Why be a Peer Guide?

- To emulate someone who helped you when you were new
- Be kind – knowing you've helped others is good for you and...

What's in it for you?

- Personal development
- Professional development
- Tee shirt
- 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
- Seek help – departmental or central co-ordinator

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/email).
- 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 3 areas you should not advise on:
 - Academic matters (pass on to department or Student Services).
 - Financial matters (pass on to Student Services or SU Money Advisor).
 - Serious welfare issues (pass on to relevant section of Student Services or SU).
- 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!
- If they become too demanding you need to sort it – it means they need more formal / professional help – so pass them on.

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3. 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

5. 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 address and talked about the contact hour
- 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 Freshers week, but when I was finding it hard being at university and away from home he took the time to sure I was OK. Even now he doesn't ignore me after Freshers 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 Freshers 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 3am 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.