

An aerial photograph of a vast sand dune landscape. The dunes are characterized by numerous parallel ridges and valleys, creating a rhythmic pattern across the terrain. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the sand. In the bottom right corner, a starfish is visible, partially buried in the sand. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of beige, tan, and light brown.

# **The STAR Project**

*(Student Transition and Retention)*

## **Centrally Organised Student Mentoring**

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## SUMMARY

The University of Sheffield has a centrally organised student-mentoring scheme for first year undergraduate students currently operating within 9 academic departments. The Department of Biomedical Science supports this scheme. Students in years 2 and 3 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 & 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 and 2.4.

- 2.1** Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.
- 2.4.1** 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 email, 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 2-4 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.
- 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 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 exam 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 offer by the university.

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 email 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 email 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 emails 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' to 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 email 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

<b>Institutional context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 23,000 students</li><li>• 5,500 staff (not all are academic staff)</li></ul>
<b>Departmental context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 430 Biomedical Science undergraduate students</li><li>• 37% male : 67% female</li><li>• 35 Academic staff</li><li>• 10% mature students</li></ul>

## REFERENCES

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