

Case Study

Peer Relations: a supportive 'route' to student success

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Rationale for the case study

Two of the key strategic aims of the HEA Student Retention & Success (SRS) project at Ulster University was to develop supportive peer relations amongst and between staff and students throughout their student journey; and provide a safe, yet challenging learning environment that supports students to engage and learn with fellow students from diverse backgrounds and identities. Peer support and peer assisted learning is increasingly becoming an important study support feature in many higher education institutions across the UK and beyond. The benefits of peer-peer support are well established (Lindy *et al.* 2013, McKiggan-Fee *et al.* 2013) and evidence from the SRS *What Works* Phase 1 study demonstrates that peer mentoring is based on an ethos of mutual support, in that students help students to succeed (Clare & Andrews 2012). Studies by Falchikov (2001) found that student leaders provide "expert scaffolding" that steps students from one level of learning to the next within the discipline area.

This case study aimed to investigate and analyse the value of peer-support as an approach to (i) assist students in the transition to higher education (ii) build a supportive student community that responds to student diversity and (iii) contribute to the evidence base that demonstrates the impact of peer relations in the student learning experience. This case study provides evidence on how peer-peer relations when introduced from an early stage of the programme can be used to improve student engagement and belonging. This case study also provides a route map for the successful implementation of peer support more widely.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

Ulster University was one of 13 institutions involved in the Change Programme which aims to improve the strategic approach to engagement, belonging, retention and success of students. Seven disciplines have taken part in the HEA SRS Project with a range of interventions involving induction, active learning and co-curricular activities. The *What Works* Project has had a positive impact on the student experience and the sense of student belonging at Ulster. One of the key themes emerging from the SRS Phase 2 project at Ulster is the supportive environment created by students when there is a shared responsibility and identity within disciplines. This is shown to engender a strong sense of student belonging.

Many institutions across the UK have well established mentoring systems, where every new student is allocated to a mentor for the vital transition period or for a more long term programme of support (Clark & Andrews 2013, Gill 2013). Others may allocate students to study groups, or have specific modules where peer-mentoring is a feature. At Ulster University, peer support takes many forms. Pre-entry engagement has involved student mentors/ambassadors from an older year group, leading workshops at open days and insight nights, conducting tours, answering questions and addressing student expectations. Students

have also been involved in leading workshops at pre-entry Summer Schools. Peer interaction has involved social networking, and also phone-conversations once students have been made an offer to provide further information on the course, prior to entry.

At *induction* events in the SRS Project, peer mentors have had a key role in engaging students through group-work activities, ice-breaking events and study skills sessions. Student partners also played an important role in instigated the ideas for the welcome week and led these induction activities with support from academic partners.

Evidence from our Ulster SRS Project has demonstrated that students have an important role to play in engaging fellow students through academic and social dimensions. There was meaningful student involvement in a number of *curricular, co- and extra-curricular* activities including informal and formal study groups, weekly student-led workshops, field trips, Society-organised social events, and peer-assisted study sessions (PASS). Importantly there were a number of 'students as partners' projects. Student Ambassadors were not only involved in a peer mentoring/coaching role but were also involved in curriculum design and module delivery. Students were working in partnership with staff to transform education in their areas and were active participants in learning.

The '*students as partners*' approach is an institutional-wide change programme and this was very much evident in the SRS project. Students have played an important role in evidence gathering for the project. The student partners were involved in data collection on the identification of first-year issues (students led focus groups with staff and other students) and subsequently put forward ideas to staff for interventions to address these. These interventions were co-developed by the student and staff partners. In this process, students acted as organisers, teachers, advisors, researchers, evaluators, and decision-makers.

Evidence of impact

The impact of peer relations was evaluated using qualitative and quantitative evidence from across the seven disciplines involved in the HEA SRS project. Semi-structured interviews were held with students and also with staff and analysed using a six-stage approach to qualitative data analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

A number of different approaches to peer relations were implemented in the HEA SRS Project at Ulster University resulting in a number of positive effects on the student experience. In the peer mentoring process, it was evident that higher year students provide important support to lower year students through a range of activities and events. Peer mentoring can be focused on different parts of the programme, from the orientation and transition of students at pre-entry, induction, to placement and professional practice modules. Students were given opportunities to informally chat with older year groups in modules but interestingly, indicated that they would prefer a more formalised mentor process for programmes. In student focus groups carried out at the end of the academic year, students indicated that they wanted to work together and had in some cases, formed their own informal groups to help each other complete lecture tasks. Students recognised that they learn more by sharing and collaborating.

Evidence from the SRS project demonstrates that facilitating social integration within the academic sphere creates a sense of belonging and community. Social integration can be promoted within the academic sphere through induction, field trips, icebreaking events, group work, and society-organised events. This is particularly important as some students may not get the opportunity to integrate outside of the classroom setting such as those that commute to University or part-time students.

The qualitative feedback from students indicated that they appreciated receiving advice from older year groups. The students recalled how older year groups attended their induction and

modules, and provided encouraging advice and support. Students would prefer to have more formalised mentor support and can see the benefits of this:

"I definitely think you would feel more welcome and feel as if you are part of it. I know every time I see the guy (3rd year student) that was in our tutor group on the first day I always see him and I just know that was him. He doesn't know who I am but it's just a face. We do know a few people in second year through school" (First year student)

Feedback from students also indicated that they would prefer more peer support through group work at induction when it is their own course cohort, also if events outside of the classroom setting were focused on their discipline and were industry-focused.

Peer relations helps students to become more effective learners: There is an academic shift from studying at School or College level to studying at a higher level and students recognise that there is an academic cultural change:

"I think from going from school you get a lot of help from your teachers and you are not as independent and then whenever I came here, you are constantly checking blackboard and stuff and different things have been uploaded and your lecturers are emailing you. It is all kind of on your own, you have to have your own initiative and look up stuff yourself" (First year student)

As outlined in the SRS Project Phase 1, peer mentoring can help fellow students 'learn how to learn' at a higher level, and make expectations more explicit. Evidence from the qualitative data at Ulster indicated that students want to interact with older year groups as other students can provide guidance, support and clarity on topics covered in lectures. One student who was a part-time second year mature student spoke of how he/she helped re-engage a first year student who was overwhelmed by the jargon in a lecture:

"The first couple of weeks, I am doing Law with HR, and I remember the first week in HR I didn't like it. I remember I really didn't like it and I was going to go for straight law but I know X and came to him/her and he/she said just stick at it. To be honest I probably would have dropped out and went for straight law that week if I hadn't have talked to her/him" (Second year student)

Students welcome the opportunity to interact with peers in their own year group. Learning is more effective when working together in a collegiate environment:

"In my halls there's 4 or 5 of us in a flat and 4 of us are all in the same class so we would get together some nights and go through a tutorial paper together instead of individually";

"I think with the work getting a wee bit more complicated everyone is sort of banding together and saying have you done this or have you done that and then we have worked together. It does improve your belonging" (First year student)

Peer support was one of the interventions introduced in the SRS project at Ulster and it has been recognised as one of the effective processes which has helped students become more effective learners. Some courses involved in the SRS project have observed significant reductions in percentage attrition (e.g. 21.4% to 5.4%).

Peer support promotes student motivation: Peer support has an important role to play in motivating students to learn. Student mentors have an impact on fellow students:

"We just bumped into each other really. And then it made you work longer. You would want to give up if you were on your own"; "I think if everyone is going through the same thing. If you are in a band of people who are going through the same thing and they all talk with each other it's a lot easier than if you are on your own" (First year students)

In the design of peer learning activities using group work, particularly in activities taking place outside of the classroom setting, the needs of the student group should be considered.

“I think group work doesn’t really work with part time students. It’s just not feasible to meet up outside of class and it is more orientated towards full time students but you can see there is a point of doing it because of employability” (Part-time student)

Perhaps in these cases, a more formal approach to mentor support is necessary to give the activities a sense of purpose and meaning to students. Students can be motivated when there is a formal process linked to the curriculum, when this process is informal student engagement can be lacking:

“We did at the start at the year and they (student mentors) would give us advice on coursework but eventually those people just didn’t go and it kind of fizzled out” (First year student)

Peer support contributes to students’ confidence and sense of belonging: Supportive peer relations plays an important role in building a sense of belonging, cohort identity and community. The qualitative evidence from the SRS *What Works* Project at Ulster shows that encouraging students to learn together through different delivery methods with peer-peer interaction can motivate and improve student self-confidence.

“It was all based on groups so it was good they split us into groups. The groups that you have been placed in are the groups you do projects with and we would meet outside for study time and then Facebook”; *“It gives you more confidence as well I think”* (First year students)

The importance of interaction of other year groups at induction is valued by students:

“They (2nd and 3rd year students) were really well informed. They knew what they were talking about and they were very reassuring. They always said there is loads of help available you know” (First year student)

“One of the things that came out in the feedback was that it’s not just about the content they were actually using the mentors for transitional issues like maybe their accommodation or student life in general” (Staff comment)

Developing peer relations in the academic and non-academic spheres can build on a strong sense of cohort identity, a sense of community and self-confidence. Qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that students’ sense of belonging increased throughout the academic year. Students’ self-confidence was strengthened as a result of social interaction:

“I didn’t know anybody or wouldn’t make any friends and I know on talking to other people that’s how they felt. Even the Law Ball really helped with that even bridging a further gap but you do feel a bit more comfortable and you feel like you can come to class and answer out more” (First year student)

The importance of the learning landscape for peer learning: Ulster University is a four-campus based university that is committed to providing more flexible learning spaces at all University campuses. The concept of learning landscapes (Dugdale, 2009; Neary *et al.* 2010) captures the interrelatedness of learning in the many kinds of physical and virtual spaces in which it can take place. The goal of the Learning Landscape approach is to acknowledge this richness and maximize encounters among people, places and ideas.

It was interesting to explore whether the university environment has had an impact on incoming students and if it creates an environment for peer interaction. The importance of having access to learning spaces or student hubs for peer interaction was raised by students during the project and it appeared to have an impact on their level of engagement.

"Yeah I think sometimes you get bored between classes."; "We have a maths exam tomorrow and we met up in someone's house for that. It was someone's house not Uni" (First year students)

"It's hard at times as everyone lives in different places. Like people would be away home at the weekend or they are living in different parts of town and it's just hard to get everyone together all at once. It's different I think if you are living in halls you become a lot closer to people in halls rather than maybe someone you are just seeing in Uni obviously because you are living with them but it's difficult to see each other outside of Uni" (First year student).

The learning landscape continues to be a key focus for many institutions particularly as it is important in building the relationships that develops between the university and its students. At Ulster University, there are ongoing developments on each campus that offer opportunities for using a greater range of flexible learning environments, with more interactive, informal and social types of learning and spaces. Ulster is committed to fostering a collegiate environment and a campus community. The campus environment and its effects on the student population can be enhanced by peer interactions both within and outside of the classroom environment, developing students both academically and socially.

Peer support builds friendship, relationships and trust: This study has shown that peer relations build on friendships and social interactions, important for student belonging and engagement. These social interactions take place within the academic and non-academic spheres, within year groups, across year groups and prior to entry.

Peer support has been beneficial in aiding social integration and a sense of belonging. Friendships are reported as key in helping students stay at University. As a result of student's positive attitude to making new friends and forming relationships throughout semester 1 and 2, constructive relationships were formed where there was an openness to share ideas and help other students with their work (*students help students to succeed*):

"Sometimes you can figure out something but it doesn't relate to your theme but you know it relates to your friends and you are like I must say to her about it. If you are coming across artists in like a book that you have got that somebody else in your class could use so you are able to help each other which is good" (First year student).

"You can see it every day. If one person is falling behind, you will help them and vice versa" (First year student)

Peer mentoring and support builds trust between students. It creates an environment where student listen to each other, building those relationships so that the advantages of peer support may persist beyond first year and further strengthen retention in later years.

"Having a second year student meet with a group of us and say we are going to work with you for the first 2 months and help you kind of get yourselves organised to how you are going to approach your reading or working group so you could share the work a little bit. You wouldn't be floundering as much" (First year student)

Students found peer-support to be an important aspect of settling in at an early stage of their programme. Forming friendships with peers at an early stage is key in settling into a programme:

"Meeting new people was good. It helped fit a wee bit more" (First year student).

The Student Society established during the project is a good example of students working together within and outside of the academic sphere. Students in the Accountancy Student Society took part in delivery of the pre-entry open day. Society students also communicated through face-book successfully providing a forum for new and more senior students to interact.

Students are aware that their sense of engagement is deepened when they form strong friendships with peers both within university and beyond the course. It deepens a student's sense of engagement as they become a part of university life rather than solely being part of their course.

Skills acquisition and development by strengthening peer relations: Peer relations not only acts as a support in settling into HE life but acts as an opportunity to develop and strengthen students' core skills, necessary for their future career. Students develop a range of skills as a result of working together in terms of leadership, team work, professionalism, communication as well as acknowledgment of others strengths and weaknesses and the need to working towards each other strengths.

"I felt the communication between the 2 groups has been good and it has been a key aspect to some of the work" "It helps you team working skills as well"; It did make you practice those skills" (First year students)

In developing friendship and peer support, peer mentoring has become a valuable approach in aiding student transition, benefitting both mentees and mentors. Peer-peer roles of responsibility such as mentors and class representatives can empower students, improve self-confidence and sense of engagement with their own course. Peer tutors/mentors who provide support gain a range of skills from the integration of academic skills and literacy development to academic content.

Sustainability

Student belonging can be defined as a 'students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class' (Goodenow 1993b). Peer support is a process which occurs naturally in a day to day setting with students when they share experiences, knowledge and reflections. There are many forms of peer support across the University which are effective, some are informal others more guided where formal training is provided.

Peer support has developed a strong sense of belonging at Ulster and has provided the underpinning evidence to develop a road map of best practice to consider when embedding peer support activities:

- ✓ Peer relations must involve **meaningful interactions between students** that will help fellow students share learning and this may involve more formalised student-led study groups from year 1.
- ✓ Peer relation activities should develop **knowledge, confidence and identity** and could be nurtured through active Societies, and engagement pre-entry.
- ✓ Facilitating **social integration** within and outside of the academic sphere creates a sense of belonging and community and can be promoted through induction, field trips, student organised social events.
- ✓ Fostering a collegiate environment and a **campus community** through peer relations nurtures a sense of belonging and develops students both academically and socially.
- ✓ Peer relations should be 'discipline owned' and build on a HE experience which is **relevant to interests and future goals** within the academic sphere, through employer/industry focus and skills acquisition.

These areas of good practice will inform the development of Ulster University's new Student Experience Principles. This project has demonstrated that in times of transition, whether that is moving into higher education or during times of personal difficulties or during period of intensive assessment, peer-peer interaction and particularly study groups can provide the

support necessary for success. Students recognise the benefits of study groups within courses, particularly those students who have other personal commitments. Study groups help students to be more effective at managing their workload particularly if they are feeling overwhelmed. Informal study groups have sprouted where no formal process is in place. Students in some programmes are allocated to study groups in first year. In other disciplines, students have formed small informal study groups and communicate with each other through social media. More formalised study groups from year 1 which are student-led has been a key theme arising from the peer-relationships data.

Students are of the opinion that such peer support was invaluable to their engagement and achievement. They share the workload of class tasks, review each other's work and challenge each other's view.

"Well if I hadn't have fallen in with the wee group that I did I would have basically been on my own and we have worked on any assignment, any questions, any seminar work and we have had our own wee Facebook message"

In the more formalised peer mentoring schemes at Ulster University, training of mentors in the PASS programme is available for students. Training of other levels of student mentorship/tutoring could be provided. Ulster University has already a scheme in place which recognises additional achievement of students. This EDGE award at Ulster could be awarded to students involved in peer mentoring schemes.

By introducing peer mentoring/support into courses during the SRS project, teams have clearly demonstrated the value of having students as partners.

Lessons learnt

The success of a mentoring programme is dependent on a team effort and forward planning. Staff noted that it is important to correlate final year student's timetable and availability with first years students timetable and availability.

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>