

STUDENT MENTORING: AN EXPLORATION OF THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT MENTORS FOR YEAR 1 STUDENTS ON AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMME

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Abstract

In 2015 I introduced the idea of student mentors for year 1 students on the BA Applied Social Work at the University of Derby. This was a small and low key idea. I recruited 5 students from the 2nd and 3rd years to run a short session during induction week and to be contactable so that the new year 1s could raise questions and queries which they preferred not to raise with tutors. Discussions with all involved indicated that year 1 students wanted to have a significantly developed student mentoring scheme. So this year 19 further mentors have been recruited from current year 1 in order to develop the scheme. For 2017-18 the mentors have taken responsibility for 2 full days of student induction. They are taking responsibility for setting up and managing a Facebook group for the new year 1 students.

This group will allow information to be given to new students as well as providing an opportunity for them to raise questions. Student mentors will also be involved in providing assignment guidance to year 1 students for subjects in which those mentors have been very successful.

A key finding thus far has been the enthusiasm with which those invited to take on the student mentor role have responded.

Keywords: Student mentors, support, student experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

I am a Senior Lecturer at The University of Derby on the BA Applied Social Work Programme. One of my responsibilities is Year 1 tutor. As part of this role I design and facilitate the Year 1 Induction Programme as well as overseeing the progress of Year 1 students and trouble-shooting any issues arising during the students' first year of study. Having taken up my post at the university in 2012 and taken on the Year 1 Tutor role in 2013 I was keen to develop the support available to year 1 students.

2 METHODOLOGY (THE PROJECT)

In early 2016 I started to talk to my colleagues about the possibility of providing student mentors to year 1 students. It was agreed that I would approach some students on the programme with a view to them taking on a mentoring role with incoming year 1 students. I approached 5 students from year 2 and year 3 to ask if they were interested in taking on such a role. At this stage the idea was very much in its infancy. It was envisaged that the mentors would each be allocated to a tutor group of 12 students and that they would be available to those students by email and available also by attending tutor group sessions. The incoming year 1 students would have the opportunity to contact their mentor if there was an issue that they preferred to raise with a fellow student rather than an academic member of staff.

It is worthy of note that the 5 students approached all enthusiastically said yes when offered the chance to become mentors. This enthusiasm has been replicated when other students have subsequently been approached to expand the project. It is also appropriate to say that those students who were approached to become mentors were chosen on the basis of having demonstrated a high level of commitment to the programme. I took the view that this would be an essential component for an effective mentor.

Once the academic year started in September 2016 the year 1 student group quickly took a decision to create their own Facebook group in order to provide academic and personal support to each other. It was decided that the 5 mentors should become part of the Facebook group and this proved to be the most effective part of the Mentoring Programme at this stage. Year 1 students can raise queries

on Facebook regarding any issue about the Social Work programme and the input of the mentors has been reported as very helpful. It should be noted that academic staff are not part of the Facebook group. I take the view that this has been a helpful decision as students see the Facebook group as a safe place where they can raise issues without feeling conscious of staff interference or judgement.

In January 2017 I met the mentors to review the project. The consensus was that the Facebook group had been the most successful element thus far. I suggested to them that the project could be expanded so that there would be a larger number of mentors and that the mentors might take a significant role in the Induction of Year 1 students. The normal pattern of Induction had previously been 4 days of talks and activities for the new entrants. Within these 4 days was a 1 hour slot run by students from year 2 entitled "Things I Wish I Had Known on Day One". This had always proved a popular part of the Induction programme. At the review we concluded that mentors could in future run 2 of the 4 days of Induction with various talks and activities designed to give new students a much more complete overview of the Social Work Programme from the point of view of existing students. We also concluded at the review that it would make sense for mentors to take responsibility for helping the students run an election to elect 2 student representatives to advocate for fellow year 1 students to the academic staff and to the university as a whole.

So in April 2017 I approached 16 year 1 students to ask if they might be interested in taking on a mentor role for the students due to commence year 1 in September 2017. Once again every student who I approached agreed enthusiastically to take on the role. In fact nearly all of these students said that they felt honoured to have been asked to take on such a role. This year the 16 students who were approached were chosen because of their commitment to the Social Work Programme. They included some very strong academic achievers as well as others who were not as academically able but who had demonstrated significant engagement in their studies. I convened a meeting with these and the existing mentors where we agreed the following:

- Creation of a Facebook group over the summer to include all new Year 1 students and all of the mentors
- Mentors to arrange 2 full days of Year 1 Induction with topics covering a range of academic and support issues
- Mentors to be allocated to specific year 1 students so that the new students would have a 'named buddy' with whom they could raise queries relating to the Social Work Programme
- Mentors to organise the election of student reps from the incoming Year 1 group.

It was agreed at this meeting that those students who had been approached to become mentors would be sensitive to those who had not and would recognise that any sense of elitism needed to be avoided.

Alongside the development of the Mentoring Programme I took a decision to invite a number of students to assist me with some of my teaching for the 2017-18 academic year. I invited a number of students who had achieved particularly high grades with specific module assignments to help with assignment guidance for these modules. I also decided to ask some students who had demonstrated particular skills or knowledge regarding some subjects to assist in providing teaching input for these subjects. Once again all students who have been asked to help in this way have enthusiastically said yes, often mentioning a sense of feeling honoured to be asked.

3 RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS (FINDINGS)

The student led induction which took place in September 2017 was very well received by the freshers group. The overwhelming view was that the input of the mentors was the most useful part of the 4 day induction programme. Comments indicate that the new students appreciate the input and support of students from years 2 and 3. Comments also indicate that the new students find it easier to raise questions and concerns with students than raising such queries with members of staff. Feedback from the mentors also indicates that they have really enjoyed being involved in this project. Again an overwhelming response has been a sense of honour in being asked to be a part of the project. Other feedback has included a sense of being trusted, by being allowed the freedom to write their own content for the induction sessions. Furthermore they have reported on developing their confidence in public speaking. There have also been a number of comments about developing relationships with students across the programme so that they have a sense of identity across the whole Social Work cohort rather than their own year group.

The project has also led to a surprising development. The student mentors created one induction presentation on “How the social work degree can change your relationships with partners, family and friends”. It was clear that they felt that this was a particularly important issue to discuss with the new students. As a consequence of this the academic staff team has discussed the idea of undertaking a small research project on “The impact of undertaking a Social Work degree on close relationships”.

Another development has been that the University Student Wellbeing Team has expressed an interest on the mentors producing a video on “Getting the most out of university”.

I will continue to work alongside students in reviewing and developing this project. The project has grown organically. Working together to continually review and develop the project appears to have been its greatest strength. I see it now as very much a co-produced piece of work. I am looking forward to seeing how the project develops.

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