

Development and evaluation of student transition writing mentoring

James Elander¹, Rebecca Westrup², Teresa Caldwell², Angela Foxcroft², Lin Norton², Sarah Crooks¹ and Karen Wardley¹

1. University of Derby, UK
2. Liverpool Hope University, UK

Correspondence: James Elander, j.elander@derby.ac.uk

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Abstract

Flying Start, an inter-institutional NTFS project, developed and evaluated programmes in which university students mentored A-level and other pre-university students in academic writing. Feedback showed that the pre-university mentees found the mentors easy to talk to and believed the programme would help them write better at university. Focus groups revealed that mentees would have liked better preparation for the programmes; that interpersonal mentor-mentee interactions affected both sets of students' experiences; and that mentees valued working with mentors on the aspects of writing that were programme targets. Before-and-after measures showed limited changes in approaches to learning, no changes in understanding of the core criteria for university writing, but small improvements in quality of writing. The evaluation provides the basis for recommendations about wider use of pre-university interventions in academic writing, and about ways the approach could be adapted for different settings.

Key words: student mentoring, transition, academic writing, approaches to learning.

Introduction

The transition to university is difficult for many students. It involves many non-academic life changes (e.g., Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000; Scanlon et al., 2007), but quality of learning is a key factor in successful academic transitions (Elander et al., 2010). Students' approaches to learning can play important roles in learning and achievement at university. Students with a 'deep' approach to learning "have a personal interest in learning and set out with the intention of understanding the material", and those with a 'strategic' approach are "concerned with both the academic content and the requirements of the assessment system, and they use whatever strategy will maximise their chances of success", whereas those with a 'surface' approach "focus on memorising facts in an unrelated manner" (Byrne et al., 2004a, p. 450). Both deep and strategic approaches are associated with better academic achievement at university (Byrne et al., 2004b; Hughes & Peiris, 2006). Students with a deeper and/or more strategic pre-university approach to learning would therefore be expected to make a more successful transition to learning at university.

Academic writing is also a critical element in the transition to university learning, because the first assessment hurdles usually involve written assignments and because academic writing is such an integral part of higher education. The core criteria for academic writing at university include answering the question, showing understanding, using evidence, critical evaluation, structure, developing argument, and use of academic language (Elander et al., 2004). Demonstrating those qualities requires complex skills (Elander et al., 2006), and workshops with a special focus on those core criteria have helped university students understand what is required in academic writing (Harrington et al., 2006; Norton et al., 2005). However, similar workshops produced only limited improvements in pre-university students' understanding and beliefs about academic writing (Jessen & Elander, 2009).

Student peer mentoring is an alternative approach to instruction by academic staff, and has been shown to increase student satisfaction with university, leading to improved student retention (Hixenbaugh et al., 2005), as well as benefits for student mentors in terms of increased confidence, opportunities to refine important academic skills, and enhanced employment potential (Hill & Reddy, 2007). Recently developed models of student 'writing mentoring' have shown that mentoring can also be a valuable tool for improving students' academic writing skills (Bakhshi et al., 2008, 2009; Harrington et al., 2007; O'Neill et al., 2009).

Could pre-university students also benefit from 'writing mentoring' by university students in ways that would help prepare them to make a more successful transition to higher education? To address this question, we developed and evaluated a series of student transition mentoring programmes in which university students acted as writing mentors to pre-university students. These ran over two years in two settings, Liverpool and Buxton, with a total of 202 pre-university and 33 university students.

Pre-university mentees

In Liverpool, the pre-university mentees were 173 students (47 in year 1, 126 in year 2) in schools and colleges. In year 1 there were 40 A-level (AS) students and seven International Baccalaureate (IB) students, with 26 females and 21 males, aged from 16 to 19 years (mean age 17 years). In year 2 there were 77 A-level students and 49 BTEC students, with 87 females and 39 males, aged from 16 to 19 years (mean age 17 years).

In Buxton, the pre-university mentees were 29 students (25 in year 1 and four in year 2) studying level 2 and 3 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at a further education college that is part of the University of Derby. In year 1, there were 20 students studying NVQ Beauty and Spa Therapies, and five studying NVQ Hairdressing, with 24 females and one male, aged from 17 to 55 years (mean age 20 years). In year 2, there were four students studying NVQ Beauty and Spa, all females, aged from 17 to 25 years.

University mentors

In Liverpool in year 1, the mentors were four 2nd and 3rd year Liverpool Hope University undergraduate students. There were two males and two females, aged from 19 to 23 years (mean age 20 years). In year 2 there were 13 mentors, with six females and seven males, aged from 19 to 29 years (mean age 21 years). Two of the year 2 mentors had also been mentors in year 1; the remainder were 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates, plus one PhD student. The

subjects they were studying included Education, History, Music, Social Work, Human Biology and Religious Studies.

In Buxton in year 1, the mentors were 16 female 2nd and 3rd year University of Derby students taking BSc International Spa Management, aged from 19 to 27 years (mean age 20.5 years). In year 2, the mentors were two who had been mentors in year 1, plus two who had been mentees in year 1. All four were female, aged from 20 to 25 years.

In Liverpool, mentors attended two half-day generic mentor training sessions and a half-day academic writing mentoring training session. In Buxton, the mentors attended a half-day generic mentor training session and a half-day academic writing mentor training session. The mentors were paid a standard hourly rate for the training and mentoring programme sessions.

Mentoring models

The Liverpool programmes involved mentors working with mentees in structured activities focused on academic writing, facilitated by a more experienced academic. The programmes all involved four two-hour or half-day sessions over four weeks during 2009 and 2010, and were offered as optional programmes that mentees were invited but not required to attend. Three models were employed:

- The one-to-one mentoring model was a four-session programme in which the first session, on 'what is academic writing?' took place at the University, led by a University 'writing specialist' tutor. This was followed by three sessions in local schools in which mentors and mentees worked one-to-one in structured exercises on: 1) answering the question and structuring the answer; 2) evaluating, evidencing and referencing; 3) re-writing, editing and reviewing. A handbook of information about academic writing was used in conjunction with the mentees' own written work, and at the end of the programme the mentees were invited back to the university to take part in an 'academic writing masterclass' programme.
- The academic writing masterclass model was a four-session programme at the University, led by the writing specialist tutor. Mentors and mentees worked together in small groups in a series of structured exercises on: 1) what is expected of me at university?; 2) evaluating, evidencing and referencing; 3) making the most of feedback; 4) the importance of a critical friend in writing. Specimen essays and other materials were provided.
- The mentor-led masterclass model was a similar four-session programme in which mentors took the lead in developing exercises and materials for group activities. The four sessions focused on: 1) what is academic writing?; 2) answering the question and structuring the answer; 3) evaluating, evidencing and referencing; 4) re-writing and reviewing. Specimen essays and other materials were provided. This programme took place at the mentees' schools and colleges.

The Buxton programmes also took place during 2009 and 2010, and resembled the Liverpool student-led masterclass model very closely, except that in Buxton the programmes were scheduled in mentees' teaching timetables and students were expected to attend (participation in the evaluation was voluntary). In year 1, there were four sessions over four weeks led by a University tutor, in which mentors and mentees worked together in small groups in structured exercises:

1. A session of orientation to academic writing, with activities designed for mentors and mentees to work together to obtain examples of different types of writing from the University library.

2. A session on answering the question and structuring answers, with exercises involving key terms from coursework titles and examination questions, plans for essays with titles related to topics from the NVQ curriculum, and discussion of the relative merits of opening paragraphs to essays.
3. A session on evidence and referencing, with exercises using the University library to identify evidence relevant to the essay titles used in session 2, discussion of the academic merits of each item of evidence and how it could be used, and preparation of citations.
4. A review and reflection over the three previous sessions, including a quiz-style game designed by the student mentors called 'Who wants to be an academaire?'

In year 2, the same model was followed except that the mentors played a much larger role in the preparation of materials and the leading of sessions.

Evaluation methods

The programmes were evaluated using quantitative and qualitative methods. Direct evaluative feedback was obtained with a brief questionnaire at the end of the programmes, with scales for students to rate their degree of agreement with statements about the programmes.

To explore students' experiences of acting as mentees and mentors, both groups took part in separate focus groups at the end of the programmes. In year 1, focus groups were held at Buxton and in year 2 they were held at both Liverpool and Buxton, and the data were combined across settings for analysis. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, and a content analysis was used to identify different aspects of students' experiences of the programmes.

To assess changes in approaches to learning, mentees in year 1 completed part B of the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST; Tait et al., 1998). This comprises 52 statements with 5-point response scales ranging from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). Scores are computed for 13 subscales and three scales measuring deep, strategic and surface approaches to learning. The deep approach scale is comprised of four subscales: seeking meaning, relating ideas, use of evidence, and interest in ideas. The strategic approach scale is comprised of five subscales: organised studying, time management, alertness to assessment demands, achieving, and monitoring effectiveness. The surface approach scale is comprised of four subscales: lack of purpose, unrelated memorising, syllabus-boundness, and fear of failure.

To assess changes in mentees' understandings of what is required in academic writing at university, mentees in the year 2 programme at Liverpool were asked before and after the programme to write a few sentences in their own words about their understandings of core assessment criteria, in response to these questions:

"What is your understanding of ...

... how to 'develop an argument' in an essay?

... how to 'critically evaluate' in an essay?

... how to 'use evidence' in an essay?

... what is meant by 'demonstrating understanding' in an essay?"

Each answer was rated on a 6-point (0-5) scale, where 0 = no understanding at all, or no answer provided; 1 = only a vague reference to the meaning of the criterion; 2 = reference to basically accurate aspect of meaning; 3 = reference to deeper or more accurate aspect of meaning; 4 = reference to relational aspect of meaning; 5 = sophisticated understanding as expected of university students. More detailed coding frames were used for each question, to provide specific criteria for levels of understanding of how to develop an argument, critically evaluate,

use evidence and demonstrate understanding. All the responses were independently coded by two members of the project team (TC and AF), who discussed discrepancies to arrive at agreed codings.

To assess changes in mentees' academic writing, mentees undertook brief essay writing exercises before and after the year 2 programmes at Liverpool. To make them as naturalistic as possible, the writing exercises were specifically related to students' current studies. The samples of writing were analysed using a coding system based loosely on Patchwork Text assessment, which was developed for students of vocational subjects to write short 'patches' reflecting on their professional roles and practice (Winter, 2003; Crow et al., 2005). The Patchwork method was adapted to correspond with the advice mentees received about academic writing during the mentoring programme. Each paragraph of each essay was scored 0 or 1 on each of the following criteria:

- 1) Paragraph makes a point with evidence and explanation;
- 2) Content appropriately paragraphed;
- 3) Information signposted;
- 4) Relevant evidence used to support the point;
- 5) Critical/evaluative point made;
- 6) Appropriate citation/reference.

For each of those criteria, the number of points assigned across paragraphs was divided by the number of paragraphs to give a score between 0 and 1 for each criterion. Essays as a whole were also assigned one point each for three factors: 1) having an introduction, 2) having a main body, and 3) having a conclusion, and the number of points awarded was divided by 3 to give a score between 0 and 1. The seven 0-1 scores were then added together, divided by seven, and multiplied by 100 to give a score out of 100 for each student's essay.

The protocol for the evaluation was approved by the University of Derby Psychology Research Ethics Committee, and the Liverpool Hope University Education Research Ethics Committee. Student mentors and mentees who took part in the questionnaire and focus group parts of the evaluation at Buxton received a £10 shopping voucher as a gesture of appreciation for the time and effort involved. Numbers of data points vary in the results presented below because different numbers of students took part in each part of the evaluation.

Direct evaluative feedback

The numbers of mentees agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements in the feedback questionnaire are given in Table 1. Over three-quarters of responding mentees agreed that the mentors were easy to talk to and that the programme would help them write better at university. However, less than half agreed the programme gave them more confidence in their own ability, made them want to go to university, or would recommend it to friends. Levels of agreement were higher in Liverpool for five items: the programme being enjoyable, finding mentors easy to talk to, believing that the programme will help them write better at university, helping them to understand what university is like, and wanting to go to university. Agreement was higher in Buxton for three items: increased confidence in writing, increased confidence in ability, and recommend to friends. However, these differences are difficult to interpret given the numbers of factors that could potentially differ between settings.

Table 1. Proportions of mentees agreeing or strongly agreeing

	Number (percent) agreeing		
	Buxton (N=16)	Liverpool (N=37)	Total (N=53)
The workshops were enjoyable and fun.	6 (38%)	24 (65%)	30 (57%)
I found the mentors easy to talk to.	13 (81%)	33 (89%)	46 (87%)
The workshops will help me write better at University.	11 (69%)	30 (81%)	41 (77%)
The workshops helped me to feel more confident about writing.	11 (69%)	22 (60%)	33 (62%)
The workshops gave me more confidence in my own ability.	8 (50%)	17 (46%)	25 (47%)
The workshops helped me understand what university is like.	9 (56%)	22 (60%)	31 (59%)
The workshops made me want to go to university.	5 (31%)	20 (54%)	25 (47%)
I would recommend the workshops to my friends.	8 (50%)	14 (38%)	22 (42%)

Focus groups with mentees

Table 2 shows the main aspects of mentees' experiences that were identified in the analysis of focus group data following the year 1 Buxton programme. Aspects identified by mentees as helpful included many of the aims and objectives of the programme. Mentees also appreciated being able to talk and work with more than one mentor, rather than being paired with a single person. However, many mentees also described negative experiences, including anxiety, confusion or fear, especially at the beginning of the programme. There were also issues related to the different subjects mentees were studying, with a tendency for the Beauty and Spa Therapies students and the Hairdressing students to form separate groups within the sessions.

Specific concerns and issues that mentees raised included not being given enough information about the programme at the beginning or beforehand, so they did not have a clear idea what to expect. Some had either expected or would have preferred information about university courses, as their main concern was to decide about which course to take rather than prepare for learning at university. Relationships between mentors and mentees were a key aspect of mentees' experiences, and some mentees described negative perceptions of mentors, including finding some mentors rude or aloof.

Table 2. Categories of mentee experiences of the year 1 Buxton programme

Helpful aspects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions • Reading questions better • Structuring • Referencing • Writing style • Multiple mentors 	Concerns/issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient info at start • Wanted more info on degree course content • Would not help decide on a course • Hairdressers' learning styles
Feeling/experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not as expected • Fearful/confused/daunted • Beauticians vs. hairdressers 	Relations with mentors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some mentors 'rude'/'aloof' • Communication problems • Mentors had useful information to pass on

Table 3 shows the main aspects of mentees' experiences identified in the analysis of focus group data following the year 2 Liverpool and Buxton programmes. The things mentees reported having learnt corresponded broadly to the aims of the mentoring sessions and exercises. However, mentees' descriptions of how the programme affected their expectations about university included both positive and negative factors.

Mentees' descriptions of their experiences of mentors indicated some negative impressions in the early stages of the programme, but this was tempered with a recognition and appreciation of the mentors' experience and knowledge, which many mentees recognised as superior in some ways to that of staff tutors. The mentees also made suggestions for ways the programme could be improved in the future, including having separate groups for students studying Beauty and Spa Therapy versus Hairdressing, and for there to be more frequent mentoring sessions starting earlier in the academic year.

Table 3. Categories of mentee experiences of the year 2 Liverpool and Buxton programmes

What was learnt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding questions • Structuring essays/reports • Sourcing information • Referencing/bibliographies 	Expectations of university <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More/harder work • Scary/challenge • Feel ready/prepared • Do more for myself
About student mentors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimidating at first/helpful/easy to get on with • Mentors' knowledge more recent than tutors • Mentors 'have done it' • Learn more with students 	Suggested improvements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate groups for separate subjects • Need earlier in year • More, and more frequent, sessions

Focus groups with mentors

Table 4 shows the main aspects of mentors' experiences identified in the analysis of focus group data following the year 2 Liverpool and Buxton programmes. Mentors' experiences were positive overall, and mentors reported finding transition mentoring interesting and motivating, but also challenging and demanding, and they recognised the need to plan and prepare for the sessions. Mentors also reported ways they perceived the experience contributed to their own development, including increased confidence and communication skills. Some of the mentors reported that the work had improved their own knowledge and understanding, including some aspects of academic writing and referencing.

When mentors described their perceptions of the programme, they suggested it could be improved with more interactive and hands-on activities. Some also queried whether the programme would actually achieve its objective of preparing mentees for studying at university. The mentors reported mixed perceptions of mentees and how they had got on together. Many mentors perceived the mentees as anxious or fearful, or negative in attitude, especially at the beginning of the programmes. However, there were also some very positive impressions of mentees, and descriptions of developing positive, constructive relationships.

Table 4. Categories of mentor experiences of the year 2 Liverpool and Buxton programmes

Mentors' experiences	Perceptions of programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging, interesting, motivating • Demanding, need time to plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved, more tasks, more interactive, more hands-on • But does it work?
Mentors' development	Perceptions of mentees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience, confidence and communication • 'Things click' • Writing and referencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fears, scared, negative to start with • Independent, constructive, 'things clicked' • Trust, bond, close relationship (with mentors)

Changes in approaches to learning

Table 5 shows mentees' mean before and after ASSIST scores for the year 1 programme. There were increases in both deep and strategic approaches to learning at Buxton, but the changes were not statistically significant. We also examined changes in ASSIST subscale scores, which were significant for just two out of 13 subscales. 'Seeking meaning', a sub-scale of a deep approach to learning, increased significantly among mentees at Buxton and overall, but not those at Liverpool. 'Fear', a subscale of a surface approach to learning, reduced significantly among mentees at Buxton, but not at Liverpool or for mentees overall.

Table 5. Mean (SD) before and after ASSIST scores among year 1 mentees

	Buxton (N=15)		Liverpool (N=31)		Total (N=46)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Deep approach to learning	52.1 (14.8)	58.0 (12.5)	55.8 (8.3)	55.4 (6.9)	54.6 (10.8)	56.2 (9.1)
Seeking meaning subscale	11.7 (4.1)	14.0 (3.4)*	13.1 (3.1)	13.6 (2.2)	12.6 (3.5)	13.7 (2.6)*
Strategic approach to learning	71.8 (17.9)	75.5 (17.7)	69.1 (11.4)	71.2 (11.3)	70.0 (13.5)	72.6 (13.7)
Surface approach to learning	46.7 (6.9)	45.9 (9.5)	52.4 (8.2)	54.3 (11.4)	50.5 (8.2)	51.5 (11.5)
Fear subscale	14.1 (4.0)	12.7 (4.2)*	13.7 (3.2)	14.6 (8.3)	13.8 (3.4)	14.0 (7.2)

* $p < 0.05$ by repeated measures t-test

Note: only subscales where changes in scores were significant are shown

Changes in mentees' understandings of assessment criteria

Table 6 shows mean scores from coding the year 2 Liverpool mentees' descriptions of their understandings of the meanings of core assessment criteria for student writing. Understanding scores were generally low, especially for 'critically evaluate' and 'demonstrate understanding', and there were no statistically significant changes in scores.

Table 6. Mean before and after scores for year 2 Liverpool mentees' understandings of assessment criteria

	One to one model (N=11)		Masterclass model (N=31)		Student-led model (N=13)		Total (N=55)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Develop argument	1.4	1.4	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.2	1.6	1.4
Critically evaluate	0.6	0.5	0.7	1.0	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.7
Use evidence	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.0	0.9	1.3	1.3
Demonstrate understanding	1.0	1.1	0.9	1.2	0.4	0.5	0.8	1.0
Total score	4.6	4.6	4.8	5.0	3.8	2.8	4.3	4.4

Changes in mentees' academic writing

Thirteen Liverpool mentees completed essays before and after taking part in the academic writing masterclass programme. The mean score assigned from the content analysis of essays written before the programme was 34%, and that for essays written after the programme was 41%, giving an improvement (non-significant) of 7.2%.

Discussion

The feedback and focus group data showed that many aspects of the programmes were positively perceived by mentees, with referencing skills being perhaps the most valued. It was encouraging that the things mentees reported finding helpful and learning from the programmes related to aspects of academic writing that the mentoring sessions had aimed to improve. The focus groups also showed, however, that it is important to inform and prepare mentees so their expectations are consistent with programme content, and to differentiate clearly for mentees between information and advice about selecting and applying for university courses, and

preparing for academic writing at university. The focus group data also showed that it is important to tailor mentoring content for specific subjects, and that the interactions and relationships between mentors and mentees are important for the experiences of both groups.

The focus groups also revealed both positive and negative ways the programme affected mentees' expectations about university. A previous study of pre-university students had shown that many overstated their understanding of what is required in academic writing at university (Jessen & Elander, 2009), so it is possible that mentees' descriptions of negative expectations about university following mentoring are part of an adjustment towards more realistic expectations of what learning at university will be like. The programmes were developed and adapted from year 1 to year 2, but the focus groups did not reveal much change in mentees' experiences from year to year. Perhaps the clearest positive evidence from the focus groups concerned the experiences of the mentors, who described their own increasing confidence and learning about academic writing.

The quantitative parts of the evaluation were rather less encouraging. The before and after questionnaires revealed only very limited evidence of improvements in approaches to learning, with significant changes only for certain subscales, which were mainly restricted to the Buxton programmes. However, the significant changes were in a positive direction, with increases in seeking meaning, a component of a deep approach to learning, and decreases in fear, a component of a surface approach to learning. One possibility is that changes in approaches to learning take longer than the relatively short timescale between the beginning and end of the programmes.

There was also no evidence of changes in students' understandings of the criteria applied to university written assignments, which was disappointing but perhaps not so surprising considering the research showing how difficult it is for university students to understand assessment criteria (e.g. Bloxham & West, 2007; Norton, 2004; O'Donovan, Price & Rust, 2004). The analysis of the students' actual writing showed a trend towards an improvement, but this was not statistically significant.

The programme evaluation had a number of limitations. The numbers of students involved in some parts of the evaluation were small, and there were not uniform data for all students in all parts of the evaluation, which makes it problematic to identify integrative patterns across the evaluation as a whole. The measures used in the evaluation may also leave scope for improvement, and it is possible that measures of other aspects of students' learning and writing would be more sensitive to changes resulting from the programme, or would be better indicators of successful transitions to university study. Most importantly, there was no systematic follow-up, so we do not know much about the impact on mentees' actual experiences and achievement at university. However, we did contact four of the year 1 Buxton mentees who had entered higher education the following year, to ask their views about the mentoring programme having now experienced university study. They reported that they still found referencing 'difficult to get to grips with', and described difficulties with the increase in number of written assignments at university, and with understanding the difference between essays and other types of report. Asked what they now thought a transition writing mentoring programme should cover, responses varied, but included referencing, how to organise reports, how to cope with the amount of work involved, how to put an essay together, and how important it is for mentors to be from the same disciplines as mentees.

The programmes could potentially be adapted for other settings and groups of students. This might include focusing on specific subjects that mentees are studying or intend to study, so

programmes could take into account subject-specific writing conventions and requirements. Programmes should also prepare students carefully for participation, and when students are expected or required to attend it is important to consider students who really do not intend to progress to university, who may not find the programmes helpful or of interest. Longer mentoring programmes might also allow stronger and more positive mentor-mentee relationships to develop, but as Jessen and Elander (2009) have argued, all pre-university preparatory programmes must strike a careful balance between maximising the benefits of early orientation to university and minimising any impact on mentees' current learning.

In conclusion, developing and delivering transition mentoring is challenging, and programmes must be carefully prepared for specific groups of students. Programmes where pre-university students are followed-up at university will be needed to assess the impact on actual transitions, but student 'transition writing mentoring' could potentially make a useful contribution to improving students' learning and writing at university.

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