Working with Students as Partners: Developing Peer Mentoring to Enhance the Undergraduate Student Experience

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Abstract
Capturing the power of student peers to enhance the student experience and higher education (HE) learning environment, as well as provide skills development opportunities, has a centuries long history (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). However, recent changes in the HE sector (including changes to financing students resulting in growing financial pressures, and the teaching excellence framework emphasising metrics measuring students' satisfaction with a course and their outcomes) means 'peer mentoring' and 'peer assisted learning' schemes have grown as the holistic context of higher education becomes increasingly understood as fundamentally significant to students' learning experience (Lindley, McCall and Abu-Arab, 2013; Mavrinac, 2005). Recent work has pointed to the contemporary imperative for universities to work with students to re-imagine and re-develop all aspects of the student learning experience in a spirit of collaboration, co-operation and partnership (Bryson, 2014; HEA, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Thomas et al., 2017). In this chapter we focus on how such an approach was applied to the development of a peer mentor scheme for new undergraduate students studying within the social sciences. Such mentoring programmes have been linked to higher achievement outcomes as well as retention and student inclusivity within diverse populations (Binder, Schreir, Kühnen, and Kedzior, 2013; Chester, Burton, Xenos and Elgar, 2013).

The scheme, though initiated by staff and institutional-wide strategy, was developed in collaboration with the students who volunteered to take part, and who took on the role of 'student expert'. This collaborative development was intended to ensure that the scheme would achieve the aims of enhancing the student learning experience, support an inclusive and collaborative learning culture, provide empowerment opportunities, support gaining employability skills, and develop a sustainable peer mentoring culture. The first year of the initiative was also qualitatively evaluated by the mentors and mentees, with this research project being co-designed and researched with the peer mentors. Through this process peer mentors developed tools to aid the establishment, implementation and maintenance of collaborative peer mentoring schemes which can be incorporated into a model to support the development of such future schemes.

Introduction
In this chapter we explore the implementation and development of a peer mentor scheme for year 1 students across a range of social sciences undergraduate degree programmes at the University of Huddersfield, UK. In doing so, we start by focussing on the particular way in which this scheme was underpinned by a collaborative ethos in which staff engaged with students as expert partners in a joint endeavor to better support new students entering Higher Education (HE). This way of working was also extended to the research project which explored this process: The PEER (Peer Enhanced Experience and Reflection) project, within which students were engaged in the design, conduct, analysis and dissemination phases of the research – including as co-authors in this chapter.

We follow this background by exploring key themes resulting from the authors' reflections and data from the PEER project, to consider the impacts of this way of working for both students and staff, and how it can feed into the development of sustainable and successful peer mentoring schemes. We focus on the insights gained from such an approach, particularly in terms of changing roles and relationships for all those involved in the project. The chapter draws on the subjective experiences and reflections of the authors: Robin Kiteley and Carla Reeves, who were the staff lead coordinators for the peer mentoring scheme and the PEER project, and Kirsty Spall and Louise Flint, who were two of the peer mentors and co-researchers in the PEER project. In addition, data is drawn from year 1 of the PEER project. This is an ongoing endeavour which aims to explore the impacts of peer mentoring for mentors and mentees, and seeks to identify ways to sustainably develop the scheme effectively. The chapter draws upon 7 semi-structured interviews that have been conducted at the end of year 1 with both staff co-ordinators, 3 peer mentors (in second and third year of their undergraduate studies) and 2 peer mentees (in their first year). For all phases of the research peer mentors co-designed the data collection techniques and research instruments, and took part in data collection.

The chapter starts by exploring the local and national drivers that led to the implementation of our peer mentoring scheme and considers this within the light of academic and practice literature and knowledge on peer mentoring and working with students in partnership collaboration. This then provides the background to explore the experience of working in this way and the impacts of implementing a peer mentor scheme from both staff and student perspectives.

Institutional Background and Context

Within the University of Huddersfield (UoH) peer mentoring schemes to support undergraduate students are a central element of the institutions' teaching and learning strategy 2013-2018. Peer mentoring is particularly highlighted as a means of contributing towards the creation of "a safe, secure and challenging environment" (UoH, 2013) in order to inspire students and support them to achieve their personal and academic potential. At the time of writing, this emphasis on peer mentoring is considered highly likely to be retained in the next teaching and learning strategy, with a particular view to extending this across all levels of study as, to date, focus has been primarily on year 1 undergraduate students.

In tandem with this, the teaching and learning strategy also emphasizes the clear aspiration that staff work in partnership with undergraduate students as researchers. To extend this, undergraduate students are increasingly being offered opportunities to engage in research with staff either alongside, or as part of, their studies (including as a form of work placement, for example). In this peer mentoring scheme students were provided with opportunities to engage not only as volunteer partners in designing, developing and delivering the peer mentoring scheme, but also as volunteer co-researchers throughout the research project, including as authors in dissemination. Such approaches seek to encourage students to perceive of themselves as "co-producers of knowledge" which challenges the notion of student as passive consumer (Hagyard & Watling, 2014, p.68). Furthermore, accounts in the literature on student engagement point to the validation that students experience through

the processes of staff-student co-production which enables them to voice their own perspectives and understandings and more visibly contribute towards scholarly development and academic discourse (Lund, 2014, p.92).

These foci of the university teaching and learning strategy echo the HEA (2014) framework for engaging with students in partnership within teaching and learning, as well as the current Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF: DfE, 2017). In particular the HEA (2014) encourages partnership in alignment with Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) model, which describes 4 overlapping domains of partnership, wherein partnership working is defined as characterizing the teaching and learning relationship between students as well as between students and staff. The 4 domains are in: learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; teaching and learning scholarship; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, p.8-9). Significantly the aims of such an approach in teaching and learning aligned well with the aims of the peer mentoring scheme we wanted to develop in social sciences, thus supporting this as an appropriate approach. Particularly emphasized are: inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, community and responsibility within a context of authenticity, honesty, trust and challenge. Consequently, such partnership working is purported to support successful "engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement" (HEA, 2014, p.2), enhancing not only individual students' (and staff members') teaching and learning experience and outcomes, but also the broader learning environment and community. Additionally, the aims and intentions of the peer mentor scheme aligned with the recommendations arising from the *What Works? Student Retention and Success* report (Thomas et al., 2017). In brief this includes embedding interventions within the main academic provision, enabling students to be engaged and proactive, ensuring interventions are timely and relevant to students' needs, providing opportunities for collaboration and monitoring the level of student engagement.

This focus on student engagement and learning environment is picked up by the TEF framework (DfE, 2017) which seeks to assess quality in the broad domains of the learning environment as well as teaching quality, and student outcomes and learning gain. This learning environment includes:

> "opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and extra-curricular activities in supporting students' learning and the development of independent study and research skills. The emphasis is on a personalised academic experience which maximises retention, progression and attainment." (DfE, 2017, p. 23)

Moreover, student outcomes and learning gain emphasise student acquisition of appropriate professional attitudes and experiences that support future graduate employability. Research indicates that these can be supported through both peer mentoring (Andrews and Clark, 2011; Johnson, Murphy and Parnham, 2014, p.155-156) and research opportunities (Hagyard and Watling, 2014, p.79).

At a local level, staff delivering courses within social sciences at UoH have traditionally struggled to engage students in extra-curricular activities around their learning. This has been for a number of reasons, including some relating to the composition of the student cohort. Over the last decade the number of undergraduate students entering courses in this subject

area has nearly doubled, coupled with an increase in UCAS entry points whilst simultaneously broadening out the range of admissions entry mechanisms to support students from non-traditional backgrounds accessing university. This includes the use of APL and APEL (accreditation of prior (experiential) learning), relaxing of what constitutes appropriate evidence of numeracy and literacy skills, and use of a summer school. Consequently, the student cohort is now characterized by a greater diversity of students than ever before, as well as more of them, with an average of 50% of students across all relevant courses in 2016/17 entering with vocational qualifications (such as BTECs), 18% from POLAR quintile 1 (just over 50% on average from quintiles 1 and 2; the most disadvantaged groups), and 56% commuting to university. Thus, a significant proportion live at home, have dependents, and paid and voluntary work commitments outside of university, which impedes their capacity to engage in university life beyond the necessary timetabled classes. This has the result that a significant number of students appear to struggle to become embedded fully in university life and culture, whilst at the same time requiring the support that such engagement would provide them. Further, it requires strategies to support students to work alongside these commitments and within these constraints, but also to be able to provide more individualized and tailored support to students in the ways that they can easily access, when they need to.

Designing the peer mentoring scheme in partnership with students

One of the realities of staff-student partnership working is that it is usually initiated by the institution, whether in the form of a broad organizational strategy or a discrete project established by a particular individual. Thus, these activities will often proceed from the default position of the institutional representative(s) having 'control' and seeking to invite ownership through a gradual process of devolution. As this scheme was born out of staff concern to enhance the learning environment and better engage students, within an institutional context of developing peer mentoring across the university, it similarly suffered from this origin. However, the staff co-ordinators were keen to ensure the scheme developed in a way that made it both sustainable and successful for students, and to provide a framework mechanism to better engage students in the learning environment of the course and foster a sense of belonging on campus. Ensuring that the scheme was developed by students was considered key to this endeavor because it simultaneously empowers students and repositions lecturers as co-inquirers. Partnership working has the potential to "acknowledge the dual role of staff and students as both scholars and colleagues engaged in a process of learning and inquiry" (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014, p.8). Furthermore, commentators such as Neary and Morris (2012, p.9) argue that processes that enable students to enter into an authentic and constructive dialogue with lecturers, around their learning experience, helps to mitigate against the contemporary construction of students as passive 'consumers' of an educational product.

In setting up the scheme the staff co-ordinators first of all sought guidance from similar schemes across the university, considering models such as PAL (peer assisted learning wherein students are trained and paid as classroom assistance and teaching support) and traditional pastoral support 'buddy' models (where students could opt-in and opt-out of having a mentor). There are, of course, strengths and weaknesses to all of these, and although the co-ordinators wished to develop the scheme as required by mentors and mentees, an initial plan was to establish a limited programme for year 1 students where all new year 1 starters on the course were assigned a peer mentor automatically. This assignment was based

on the concern that the most "needy" of students are often the ones that feel the least able to approach peer mentors pro-actively, or ask for a peer mentor, perhaps believing to do so would be tantamount to admitting a weakness or failure on their part.

We advertised over the summer period for student volunteers to be peer mentors in the following academic year and would be in their second or third year of relevant social sciences courses. Around 10% of the student population expressed an initial interest, but only half of these attended the compulsory training day. This was enough to assign one peer mentor per personal tutor group. The training day was designed to be very interactive and fun, exploring the role of the peer mentor, the skills needed and how they could be developed and what they as peer mentors could take from this role, as well as what support they had from the staff co-ordinators and the university, before exploring likely common (and not so common) scenarios they may come across. We also established at this meeting how peer mentors would communicate with the peer mentees, their role with staff co-ordinators (who acted as their support and facilitators – more on this in our discussions below) and that we would meet 4-6 weekly as a support group.

Initially peer mentors held an optional drop-in session in induction week for new students, which was well-attended and was felt to be moderately successful in introducing new students to the mentors. Mentors then communicated via university email to peer mentees to raise their availability to them, what they could do to support them, and to advertise any student campus events they thought interesting and appropriate. Very quickly in support groups peer mentors were reporting very little response from mentees, which disheartened them. As a result, posters and leaflets were designed by the mentors and placed around campus and via email. They also went into some group personal tutorial sessions as mentors believed that mentees perhaps did not respond to them because they did not know them and had no relationship with them. Some of these issues were to be the basis of the analysis of the scheme and so are explored below and in the future development of the scheme briefly outlined at the end of this chapter.

Reflections on implementing peer mentoring in partnership

In this second part of the chapter we explore key themes drawn from our personal reflections, and data from the PEER project on the impacts of working in partnership from both staff and student perspectives, before considering how this can feed into the future developments of the peer mentoring scheme. The themes identified stem from a grounded analysis approach to our reflections and research, wherein themes emerged without reference to a pre-existing analysis template or coding frame and were, therefore, rooted in the experiences of those people involved in peer mentoring through a partnership approach. The key areas highlighted focus on the implementation of the peer mentor scheme, mentor-mentee relationships, staff-student mentor relationships and the tensions involved in sustaining staff-student collaboration.

Implementing the peer mentor scheme

Initially the peer mentor scheme was implemented as a 'buddy' system to personal tutor groups and operated outside of formal learning sessions. The intention being that mentors would act in a solely pastoral capacity and act as a bridge between new students and the formal support structures of the institution and staff:

> "Uh, I'm guessing they [new students] would have been told in the introductory lectures [about wellbeing and similar services], but I feel like we [peer mentors] were just there if they forgot or, like, they'd misheard, or like, just weren't quite sure if they would really be able to help with what they wanted - so I feel like they were building that gap." (peer mentor 2, interview)

Thus, the knowledge and experiences of peer mentors were regarded as valuable resources; their experience of being a university entrant and student, finding their own strategies to support and enable this - which may have diverged from some of the recommended, and arguably 'idealised', guidance and advice imparted through the formal curriculum – and their ability to impart this wealth of experience to support others. This is important as peer mentors themselves highlighted that there was a significant gap between what tutors perceive they are offering in terms of guidance and support and students' willingness to take up those modes of support. In particular they confirmed the view that many students' hold the belief that if they identify themselves as needing support they are, in effect, raising question marks around their suitability to be at university:

> PMs [peer mentors] expressed concern that the lack of contact did not just mean all the mentees were Ok. But that "the ones really in need didn't want to ask" perhaps because "like when we were in the training session [for PM] we said we didn't want to ask for help as that's like admitting you need help or [are] a failure". (support group 1)

However, as the first iteration of the peer mentoring scheme was mainly predicated on email contact between mentors and mentees it was anticipated that this mediated means of communication might alleviate some of the mentees concerns around being marked out as needing guidance or support. Moreover, Hixenbaugh et al. (2006) advocated e-mentoring approaches as a cost-effective way of offering peer mentoring to first year students, indicating a positive impact on social integration. Whilst their work did not enable them to ascertain the effect that e-mentoring had on attrition it was postulated that the scheme may have provided the kind of buffer against some of the difficulties students experience in their transition year. Additionally, they relate that a high proportion of their institution's students were commuter students, similar to our cohort, and that this makes establishing a sense of social and academic community problematic. Therefore the use of online communication was seen as offering an appropriate medium for providing "the opportunity to form relationships with other students and staff and with the university" (Hixenbaugh et al., 2006, p.13).

However, our peer mentor initiated email contact received minimal mentee response, leading mentors to feel unappreciated, particularly as they recalled feeling that such peer support would have been useful in their own first year:

> PMs discussed how demoralising it was that no-one replied to the emails, if even to say thanks but we're OK. [….] This lack of interest and contact left them feeling "sad" and "not needed", wondering if it was "pointless"

> and “useless”. They would appreciate something back if only courtesy emails to acknowledge and thank them even if not taking up the PM offer. (Support group 1)

This kind of ambivalent response from peer mentees has also been acknowledged elsewhere in the literature, even in instances where peer mentor schemes are broadly acknowledged as having been successful (Furlonger, Johnson & Parker, 2014). Nonetheless, the lack of response was considered significant in the early attrition of some of the peer mentors in terms of their ongoing engagement with the peer mentor scheme:

> “I’m sure they [mentees] are all wanting to ask something, but don’t want to. […] That is definitely what has made us [mentors] less enthusiastic – people not using us. […] So I think really, yeah, it does knock your confidence a bit. Makes you feel not wanted, really. You want to feel wanted, and you’re not feeling wanted.” (peer mentor 1, interview)

Peer mentors speculated that scaffolding a relationship with the mentees may combat this disappointing response, and, as a result, strategies were adopted as already outlined; ranging from mentor-produced posters, regular email updates, VLE announcements and attending group personal tutor sessions in term one. Although emails continued to be regarded as the main communication method (in keeping with general university policy and norms), they were also thought to be “[…] too impersonal to be the only way or main way – Need to be more personal and ‘entice’ them [mentees] into peer mentoring” (support group 1). Nonetheless, some mentors found that “email seemed to be the preferred way that mentees actually asked for help, maybe because it is more anonymous and therefore ‘safer’, or because it is quicker” (support group 3). However, methods involving direct face-to-face contact were seen as offering most potential in helping to build initial relationships:

> Those that had gone into personal tutorials to talk to students said this was better, especially if you could be at their level by sitting with them and talking to them that way, maybe helping with the group tasks […] (support group 1).

Those mentors that did this reported that it was valuable in breaking down barriers and misconceptions about peer mentoring and its value to students:

> “I just, I think going along to the personal tutorials really helped, because again it is more personal. There is only a few of them in a class, so it’s a lot easier than being in a big group. It made it a lot easier to interact with them. Get to know them again on that little personal level, you know […]. Um, and seeing what they’d like to get from the course and stuff, and me just stating that I’m here for anything, whether it was to help find a book or show them where to look for the JobShop on campus, and show where the books are […] even things not related to university, about where to shop for cheaper […] you know, little stuff like that really.” (peer mentor 1, interview)

The benefit of such an approach was echoed by peer mentees:

> "…[it]would be helpful if we got to meet and talk to them you know and sort of, it's quite difficult to go to someone and say to them, you know look I'm having a problem with this, err, can you help me with it, when you've not met them, you've not spoke to them and you've no rapport or relationship with them, in any way, 'cause you kind of, it's difficult to ask for that help off of somebody you don't know." (peer mentee 1, interview)

As a result of this it was considered important that future iterations of the peer mentoring scheme develop this method of building relationships between mentors and mentees. It was agreed that the peer mentor's role in these sessions was to assist their mentees in developing their understanding of the requirements of academic work at university level, and to reinforce their awareness of the kinds of resources that are available to support them (e.g. online resources and activities, academic skills development tutors, wellbeing services, personal tutor support). This emphasised the mentor role as being a bridge between students and formal support structures, but it also started to change the position the student mentors had in relation to their student mentees and staff.

Positioning of peer mentors to peer mentees

Commentators such as Jackson and Livesey (2014, p.227) have noted that staff perceptions of student engagement, and the ways in which that may best be facilitated and supported, can be influenced by "anecdotal evidence", "beliefs based on cultural or professional background" and "personal experiences". Thus, there may be significantly different perspectives on what constitutes effective student engagement between staff and students and it was felt that this was a key area in which student peer mentors could shed some light, based on their very recent knowledge and insight into the first year student experience. Encouragingly, peer mentors noted that as the peer mentor scheme developed they increasingly took on the role of 'experienced student'; they were experienced in being a student on the courses relevant to the peer mentees and had successfully navigated the transition into university and through year one:

> "I understood my role as a peer mentor to be a student who had some experience and knowledge of the university and to use that experience to support first year students settle in to university life. I was expecting students to use me as another form of support." (peer mentor reflections 1)

> "[I] see myself as some sort of role model. Offering support and advice from my own experiences with my time at the university." (peer mentor reflections 2)

However, while peer mentors identified themselves in relation to their mentees in terms of this 'supporting' capacity, they were uncomfortable with positioning themselves in relation to an 'expert' role:

> “I did not see myself as the expert at all. In fact I found it more difficult to be a mentor as I did not feel like I had expertise at all. The only thing I had was the experiences of doing a degree at the university. Which for some was useful, some not. […] I was still learning the ropes myself and then I was almost dictating to others on what to do etc. (peer mentor reflections 2)

This construction of the ‘expert student’ role was also noted to be a double-edged sword in respect to developing rapport with the peer mentees, with some of our mentors noting an unhelpful mentee perception in which mentors appeared to be conceived of as proxy-lecturers:

> “I think some of the students believed me to be an extension of their lecturers. This can be viewed both positively and negatively, on the negative aspect I do feel this was one of the reasons that the first-year mentees did not engage with me.” (peer mentor reflections 1)

This understanding is further corroborated within the mentee accounts where some of them indicated that they would like mentors to assist with academic support, particularly in relation to “help with understanding some of the, err, requirements of the [assignment] questions, you know” (peer mentee 1, interview). This suggests not only a misalignment between mentor and mentee expectations of the nature of the mentorship relationship but perhaps signals mentees greater willingness to express the vulnerability of ‘not knowing’ to their peers as opposed to their lecturers.

However, mentors may also be considered to have occupied positions of power over mentees resulting from their understanding of, and relative confidence and familiarity with, the peer mentor scheme and role. On occasion, peer mentees lack of personal familiarity with mentors, or understanding of the scheme, contributed to, and exacerbated, this questioning of mentors as ‘peers’:

> “…my perception of the peer mentor scheme changed completely the minute one of them said she was from [same college]. […] like oh she is normal whatever. […] Yes, I mean instead of the perceptions being these are the top best students because they are going to have picked the best ones, […] that makes you more human - if you have used the services that we might be using as well.” (peer mentee 2, interview)

This question of positioning with respect to status, power and responsibility was something that peer mentors were often aware of and took measures to mitigate or even subvert, believing it hindered rapport and the likelihood of mentees accessing them for support and guidance. For example, one peer mentor explained this in terms of the physical positioning and embodied relationships between mentors and mentee, describing how she focused on being “at their level by sitting with them and talking to them that way, […] not by just standing at the front because this maintained a power relationship that meant they may not come to the PM [peer mentor]” (Support group 1).

Positioning of peer mentors to staff

Peer mentors' position and role in relation to staff also evolved through the implementation of the scheme. The staff co-ordinators were committed to the view that:

> "Positioning students as peers who have valuable perspectives in learning is key to supporting equitable partnerships between educators and students with the goal of improving practice". (Elkington, 2014, p. 178)

Staff, therefore, particularly valued peer mentors' experience as students who had undergone their own processes of university acculturation and so could assist by translating those experiences into informal pastoral support of new students. One of the staff co-ordinators conceptualised this in terms of an informal positioning that gave rise to an intermediating space that was felt to hold productive potential:

> "We're often being asked to make positive changes to the course to benefit the student experience, but we don't know what the students want, and for me, the peer mentorship scheme in-particular seemed like a good way of trying to improve that communication between us and the students, and whilst I don't want to put it in terms of us and them, it's sometimes what it feels like and so, I was interested to know whether the peer mentor scheme could be like a middle ground between academics and students." (staff co-ordinator 2, interview).

Yet staff were keen to ensure that it was clear that peer mentors were not a replacement or extension of existing academic or formal pastoral support mechanisms and this discussion of role boundaries was a central element of the initial training day. When asked to propose the parameters of the mentor-mentee relationship the trainee mentors offered the following:

> Be careful that they could be manipulative in trying to get you to do things for them. Make sure they understand the uni regs. Signpost them but do not give them work or ideas. Don't be their tutor. Recognise they may work very differently to you. (notes from trainee mentors, initial training)

Interestingly, but understandably, this tends to focus on the constraints and limitations of the mentor role. In contrast staff often emphasised the peer mentor scheme as offering something of unique value to students in a way that they themselves, and wider university structures, could not provide:

> This is actually about the students supporting each other and it's, you know, something that we as staff couldn't do, because we can't support students *as* students, can we? We can't give people that support and that, that advice, that guidance because, well we're not students. (staff co-ordinator 1, interview, emphasis added)

So, it may be the case that the ambiguity around the mentor role, and mentor positioning in respect of staff co-ordinators and mentees, offers potential in suggesting new opportunities

for engaging and supporting students, and for establishing the trust, dialogue and mutuality that would characterise partnership working. However, it does this at the same time as opening up a space for confusion and possible misalignment in terms of understandings and expectations, for all parties involved. Whilst it might be tempting to suggest ways in which such a seemingly ill-defined and unstable identity could be ratified and resolved, it may in fact be that the significance and value of the mentoring role lies precisely within this form of productive uncertainty.

Cullingford (2006) considers that this inherent ambiguity within the mentor role has been evident throughout the historical evolution of mentoring, often making it difficult to define both within structural hierarchies of power and within interpersonal transactions. For example, he notes that mentors act “as the agent of ‘induction’” (2006, p.2), concerned with facilitating mentee conformity in line with the organisation’s dominant cultural practices. Yet at the same time the process of mentoring is connected with the notion of supporting and sustaining the “autonomous individual”, and with “the light touch of advice rather than the heavy hand of induction” (2006, p.2). This results in an ambiguity for mentors themselves, which can sometimes polarise around the issue of whether they perceive themselves to be acting in the interests of the organisation, the individual, or more likely an ongoing tension between the two. At the heart of this dilemma is a concern around power. Mentors are typically recognised as those who have ‘expertise’ and/or ‘valuable experience’, as in our scheme, and yet it is questionable whether they are perceived to carry the same level of authority, and/or cultural or academic capital as lecturers. Indeed, peer mentors themselves question not only their expertise, as above, but also the level of respect they received from mentees:

> The PMs felt that how mentees felt about the PM process really depended on how they approached and thought about learning. If they were really bothered about their studies. There was […] talk about if mentees respect PMs. Ideas of age important – if mentees see younger PMs as having nothing to contribute or tell them “what can you do to help me”, especially if the mentee is older. But also if the PM is older perhaps younger mentees think: what can your experience tell me – we’re not the same. (support group 1)

Thus, to some extent our peer mentors surmised that the level of respect that they would most likely be offered would be affected by differences in traditional markers of authority and status, including relative age and experience, as well as more subjective markers such as the mentees’ perceived commitment to their studies. Nonetheless, acting in a dual capacity as both friendly advisors and agents of institutional induction may compromise the mentor’s sense of allegiance to either individual mentees or the institution. In turn this may give rise to feelings of uncertainty, doubt or even suspicion amongst mentees who may experience such feelings precisely because the power dynamic and associated boundaries of the ‘mentor-mentee’ relationship are insufficiently clear.

This ambiguity around the definition and role of the mentor can be considered more broadly within the context of the work that mentors perform within institutions. For instance, Cullingford (2006) thinks of the role of “mentor” as being a metaphor for the increasing

managerialism that has crept into the teaching profession. He argues that parts of the profession that teachers "used to cherish" (2006, p.1) are increasingly undertaken by ancillary staff. In this context mentoring may be understood as a restorative mechanism intended to provide learners with forms of "personal nurturing", "pastoral relationships" and responsiveness "to individual needs" (2006, p.1) that were formerly associated with the core activity of teaching. Undoubtedly the same trend has been replicated within the contemporary context of Higher Education, where 'massification' has led to increased student numbers and, in many cases, a corresponding reduction of opportunities for personal contact between students and academic staff. Cullingford alerts us to the reality that mentors might function not only to shore up "the deficiencies of mechanistic models" associated with contemporary neoliberal education, but may in fact ensure that "the same models function more smoothly" (2006, p.4).

Relationship between staff and peer mentors: working in partnership

The peer mentoring scheme was initiated with the view of developing it in collaboration with peer mentors with the aim of ensuring it is designed to best suit the needs of new students and be sustainable in terms of the amount of time and commitment peer mentors could devote to the work. Thus, to start with the monthly support sessions with peer mentors were designed not only to support them in their role (addressing any concerns or questions) but also to discuss how best to develop and potentially extend the peer mentoring scheme within the academic year and beyond. But, staff co-ordinators were keen to ensure that suggestions and ideas came from peer mentors giving rise to a situation whereby "…it really feels like we're working together to a common goal" (staff co-ordinator 1, interview).

This way of working, whereby control was relinquished by staff to students, and trust was placed in them to generate ideas and help establish them, was risky in terms of not only the success of the scheme for mentees, but in terms of the level of ongoing commitment from mentors. As a result, although staff co-ordinators "didn't want it to be us, as lecturers, just controlling how the scheme happened and what shape it took." (staff co-ordinator 2, interview), the relationship between peer mentors and staff was one in which leadership status remained effectively unchallenged. This was a pragmatic, comfortable compromise for both parties as staff felt the need to ensure the scheme worked, whilst peer mentors expressed a lack of confidence and concerns about the time commitment involved in taking greater ownership. This kind of tension in staff-student partnership working, around differential investments and contrasting motivations for staff and students, is clearly acknowledged in the literature (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014, p.9). Therefore, in many ways it felt as if we were seeking to establish a compromise position, on the one hand cultivating the parameters within which students felt confident enough to assert ownership of the process, and on the other hand providing a safety-net to ensure that the scheme was supported and sustained. This tension is exemplified below:

> "It's part of our jobs at the end of the day to be, you know, involved in things like this, it's hard not to grab hold of the reigns again and say, 'right. I'm going to step in and try and push things forward a little bit.' Because on one hand you want to stand back don't you? You want to let people come up with stuff, and I can give you an example actually of where

> somebody did. So one of the peer mentors totally spontaneously produced a peer mentorship leaflet very early on, which she designed to give to her mentees to tell them about what the scheme was about, and as soon as she sent that to me, I said, ooh, can I send this to the other peer mentors and… I mean maybe that's again me taking control of the situation but, um, so it was good that, you know, there are examples where students have used their own initiative, totally unprompted by us, to come up with stuff which has which has been good." (staff co-ordinator 2, interview)

One of the more subjective outcomes that arose from what we are describing as the 'productive ambiguity' around the mentor role was in terms of how staff and student mentors related to each other. This was clearly identified by one of the staff co-ordinators who spoke of glimpsing a "different relationship with students to that which we have in the classroom" (staff co-ordinator 2, interview). Furthermore, the space to work on a joint challenge in partnership with students gave staff an opportunity to recognise and appreciate the skills, competencies, commitment and pro-social attitudes of students beyond the prescribed confines of the academic curriculum and associated activities:

> "We have a tendency to focus too much on […] students that are seen as – have problems, or difficult, or are challenging in some way, because […] they're the ones you have to think about the most, worry about the most, and put a lot more effort into or time into. And yes, we still have that with the peer mentor scheme, but actually it really emphasises just how wonderful and amazing some of the students are." (staff co-ordinator 1, interview)

Mirroring this, some peer mentors report being able to relate to academic staff in a renewed capacity whereby they viewed the supportive activities of staff co-ordinators as a form of 'extended' mentorship – i.e. mentoring the mentors:

> "I think them being that extended mentor to us, going to them if we felt like we couldn't, like, cope [with aspects of peer mentoring]. It helped to know weren't on our own, if you know what I mean. Um, we could go to them." (Peer mentor 2, interview)

What this appears to address, in terms of student need, is precisely the kind of individualised, authentic and meaningful engagement that is so often squeezed out of the system in this era of anonymised, intensive, educational delivery. In fact, one student mentor expressed this sentiment very clearly in terms of being able to establish more informal, empathic relationships with the staff co-ordinators, which cut across the barriers so often implied through conventional academic status and protocol:

> "I found working with the lecturers [….] very interesting. […[talking to them over tea and coffee and knowing their struggles of life and studying to get to where they are today, being very inspirational. It also made me think they are real people, they aren't just these robotic machines that

> know everything about anything and that's why they are teaching. It allowed me to think actually they have worked so hard to be here and they are normal people with normal lives. They are in fact just like the rest of us. Because I feel, and am sure many do, that the professors and the Drs of the university lectures are so important and highly educated that they feel very unapproachable and faultless almost. The relationship between myself [and the staff co-ordinators] grew very strong throughout the peer mentor [scheme] and remains strong." (peer mentor 2, reflections).

This would appear to support Elkington's (2014) assertion that effective structures for learning are not enough, in themselves, for establishing and maintaining the kinds of interpersonal relationships that best encourage student engagement. However, as already indicated, it was not possible to erase the structural positions of staff and students entirely, but this did not undermine the value of the partnership approach. Indeed, one peer mentor described this in terms of having the facility to adopt a new positionality in relation to academic staff, resulting in an additional, informal perspective which she was able to 'hold' in parallel to her awareness and understanding of institutional hierarchy:

> It felt as though we as mentors and students had more control over the role, obviously the co-coordinators guided us and stepped in when technical or protocol issues had to be addressed. Their knowledge and academic experience was invaluable at times. I think we had to be given the opportunity to view the teaching staff in a different way, the dynamics of the group seemed to change. However, I also feel that professional boundaries remained in place and hierarchal position of the staff was still visible. Although that was not by staff having to re-enforce it, it was just a mutual understanding. I think as students this was a fantastic opportunity to work with staff in a more casual way and in retrospective terms my view is that it made them appear more approachable. (peer mentor 1, reflections)

Thus, this partnership approach has the potential to break down barriers between students and staff through developing a more personal understanding and knowledge of each other. This knowledge and understanding also has the potential to be the basis of establishing a sounder basis for student respect for staff, and belief in the legitimacy of staff authority. Simultaneously, for staff this relationship also has the potential to foster a better appreciation of student concerns, aspirations and fears, culture, and learning context. For those who engage, at least, also prompting a greater respect and appreciation of the abilities and capacities of the students beyond the purely academic.

Furthermore, peer mentor comments on the beneficial impact on mentoring on their transferable skills (confidence, communication, presentation, interpersonal relationships, for example), as well as from the wider literature around student engagement, supports the claim that students who act as peer mentors benefit in a number of ways including an increased sense of confidence in their studies and a greater sense of belonging in relation to the learning community (Furlonger, Johnson and Parker, 2014; Johnson, Murphy & Parnham,

2014 p.156; Sambell and Graham, 2014). This may partly be accounted for through peer mentors developing greater insight into both the implicit and explicit cultural practices which frame their educational experience in order to better support new students who are transitioning into this environment. To some extent this insight comes about through the training and support provided to peer mentors which seeks to make university systems and protocols more ‘transparent’ to the student peer mentors. As Elkington (2014) notes “When tutors engage in dialogue with students about learning, expectations and rationales are clarified” and that “such pedagogical transparency can lead to greater student responsibility and aligning of expectations in a learning encounter” (2014, p.178). Thus, in this sense it can be seen that increased levels of confidence come through an enhanced awareness of the functions and processes of this system, and a reconfigured relationship to the academic staff that enact and sustain the system. Peer mentors are permitted a degree of access to a community of practice of educators and, therefore, come to share some of the challenges and opportunities that this role entails. Furthermore, their confidence can be developed through the act of assisting the mentees process of educational transition and acculturation. In doing so they are more likely to recognise how their own learner identity has developed through the journey that they have undertaken and through relating this to the challenges of transition faced by their mentees.

Although working with students as partners presents specific challenges in terms of identities, roles, responsibilities and the uncertainty evoked by a significant change in traditional staff-student dynamics, recent work emphasises that a partnership ethos is “fundamental to the success of any interventions that are put in place to facilitate student engagement” (Jackson and Livesey, 2014, p.218). Furthermore, although the work that the peer mentors have been carrying out was intended, and anticipated, to have a beneficial impact on some of the key drivers and metrics comprising the contemporary higher education landscape it is important to acknowledge that the holistic value of partnership working may exceed these narrow criteria and in some cases may even be antagonistic towards them. As Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p.10) note, partnership working may induce cognitive dissonance in the sense that it values a “creative process that may result in unexpected outcomes”, reinforcing an element of risk that governmental and institutional priorities and policies often actively attempt to minimise.

Conclusions: building collaborative peer mentoring

In this chapter we have discussed some of the opportunities and challenges involved in engaging students in order to develop a peer mentorship scheme adopting a partnership approach. Whilst we feel we have achieved some partial successes in establishing practices of consultation, collaboration and shared responsibility we recognise that creating the conditions for authentic and meaningful student engagement is a complex process. In particular we recognise that seeking to engage students and encourage them to take ownership of teaching and learning innovations involves renegotiation of power, responsibility and identity. Clearly, for the most part, these issues arise from the implication that students have a valuable role to play in the planning and development of their own learning processes, which goes well beyond institutional imperatives to merely canvass and quantify student opinion (e.g. course or module evaluations). Equally, for students, it can be illuminating to recognise that university lecturers can also be ‘co-learners’ within a shared enterprise, which seems to subvert the usual power dynamic embodied within the metaphor

of ‘the sage on the stage’. However, the structural differential, and economic inequality, embedded within a model based on salaried university staff working alongside volunteer university students, presents practical and ethical dilemmas around the extent to which staff should ‘step-in’ to direct, influence and sustain the process, as well as the question of what can reasonably be expected of students working in a voluntary capacity.

A slightly unexpected finding from this project is that our student peer mentors seemed to face many of the same challenges around engaging their student peers as academic staff often anecdotally report. These include establishing contact with students, especially outside of formal teaching activities, maintaining relationships in the absence of regular timetabled contact, and directing guidance and support to students who may most benefit from receiving it. One side effect of this is that our student peer mentors come to genuinely share a sense of ownership of the challenges that course teams often face in engaging students, and likewise staff come to better understand the complex and multiple factors that frame contemporary students’ experience of undergraduate study.

Whilst our PEER research project is evolving and ongoing our initial findings suggest that student peer mentors are often very motivated to carry out the role of mentor, and are disappointed when they feel that are not fully utilised in this capacity. Furthermore, initial interview and survey responses indicate that new students appreciate the existence of a peer mentor scheme even if they do not always avail themselves of it. In moving forwards we have adapted the scheme so that mentor-mentee contact is embedded within our term 1 teaching activities, specifically within a context whereby mentors can offer advice to new students around the development of an academic presentation. The intention is that this will better support the seeding of mentor-mentee relationships so that relationships of trust and confidence can flourish.

Our learning about the necessary ingredients of successful partnership working, within the specific context of developing an undergraduate peer mentor scheme, has enabled us to generate some guidelines that we feel are also potentially applicable to broader, staff-student partnership initiatives. These include the importance of:

- co-establishing shared goals, norms and values from the start of the project (informed by the needs of all parties);
- co-negotiating space to come together and support each other and share experiences and challenges - reinforcing the shared goals, norms and values;
- allowing space to communicate as equals - including 'giving of one's self' in terms of disclosing context-appropriate details about one’s wider life, background and challenges;
- facilitating student peer mentors to work out their own strategies for most effectively working with mentees, as well as staff co-ordinators;
- facilitating student peer mentors understanding and negotiation of relevant institutional structures and systems to enable them to take ownership and leadership of (aspects) of the project;
- allowing flexibility to develop and change ways of working or communicating;

- accepting (and supporting peer mentors to accept) the productiveness of role ambiguity as part of changing conventional, staff-student and peer-to-peer working relationships;
- sharing in successes and commiserating over disappointments, and reminding peer mentors that the success of the scheme may be signalled by a minority of mentees who most need it, as opposed to mass take-up of mentor support.

Therefore, encouraging students to take ownership of this type of initiative can be initiated by ensuring that leadership decisions are taken based on generative discussion of the ideas and experiences of the peer mentors, including the devolvement of roles and responsibilities, which utilises their input as the very foundation of the decisions made. The early experiences in this scheme indicate that this (although structurally limited) breaking down of traditional hierarchical roles engenders greater mutual respect and understanding between staff and students. This in turn supports students to gain confidence and to challenge themselves to work in new and unfamiliar ways and settings.

We continue to seek ways in which we can extend our partnership working in conversation with our student-partners and this includes within the planning and execution of our research activities. As this chapter has highlighted we have not yet established a 'perfect' model of staff-student partnership working, and as some of the issues raised above testify to, this may not be possible given the evident constraints on promoting risk-taking and creativity within an increasingly risk-averse higher education landscape. However, as we have suggested earlier, we (staff and students) are finding that there can be something vital and productive about working from these positions of tension and ambiguity, both in terms of how they encourage reflection on the existing status quo, but equally in how they generate the discovery of stimulating new paths and positionalities.

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