Peer e-mentoring in the School of Psychology

Teaching Innovation Award Final

Report 2008-2009

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Contents   Page

Summary

September 2008 saw the launch of a new Peer e-mentoring Scheme in the School of Psychology. The aim is to provide every first year Psychology student with informal support and advice from a more experienced second year Psychology student. 23 peer e-mentors were successfully recruited and trained in 2008. During the academic year 2008-2009, they mentored approximately ten first year students each. For 2009-2010, 22 students have been recruited to act as mentors. With the support of a Teaching Innovations award from the Faculty of Natural Sciences the scheme was evaluated in its first year. Feedback from first year students and the mentors themselves was generally positive with overwhelming agreement that the scheme should continue. For those who had contacted their mentor, 89% rated the advice/support they had received has helpful or very helpful. The mentors felt equipped to deal with the issues and valued the training and support they had received. Perceived benefits to mentors included a sense of satisfaction from helping others and the opportunity to learn new things. Take-up of the scheme by the first year students could be better. The key proposed change for 2009-2010 is to allocate mentors to seminar groups, with the opportunity for students to meet their mentor on at least one occasion. It is hoped that this will serve to promote the scheme to students and enable students to get to know their mentor face-to-face. Mentors also need to be encouraged to email their students on a regular basis and more could be done to promote the mentoring, particularly to members of staff who could encourage students to make better use of the scheme. It is hoped that our work in Psychology will encourage those in other Schools to set up similar initiatives.

Introduction

The Peer e-Mentoring Scheme in the School of Psychology was launched in September 2008 but development work began one year earlier. Peer mentoring is a process by which a more experienced person provides advice, support and encouragement to a less experienced person and it is thought to have benefits to both parties. The scheme arose out of the University Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007-2010 under goal two of easing the transition to university – 'establish a peer e-mentoring scheme'.

The scheme was initially promoted to all first year students in December 2007 with interested students asked to complete an application form by March 2008. All those students who applied were interviewed in April 2008 with the training taking place in May 2008. In 2008-2009 we recruited 21 peer e-mentors and each mentor was allocated approximately 10 students each. Two other students completed the training but were on study abroad in semester one. These students were able to take on new students on their return in semester two; one of these students took over a group of first year students from another mentor who took a leave of absence and the other student took on two students who transferred into Psychology at the beginning of semester two. For the academic year 2009-2010 we have recruited and trained 22 students with one of these students on study abroad in semester one. The scheme was evaluated in its first year, supported by an award from the Faculty of Natural Sciences Teaching Innovation Scheme, and this report includes details of the scheme and the findings of the evaluation.

Our scheme is based on a model of peer e-mentoring developed by the School of Psychology at the University of Westminster (Dewart, Hixenbaugh, Drees, & Thor, 2006). Reasons listed for using e-mentoring include: it is relevant to the student environment, there is 24 hour access, it enables a high frequency of communication with fast and easy responses, and it uses a non-intimidating communication style (Dewart et al, 2006). An evaluation of the scheme at the University of Westminster found that the mentored intake of students showed better adjustment to university life and better social integration into university life, compared to the non-mentored intake (Hixenbaugh et al, 2005).

Aims / Objectives of the scheme

The main objective of the scheme is to provide all first year students with informal support and advice from a more experienced second year student. Hopefully, this will help with the transition to university life, with benefits in terms of improved student retention. It gives first year students *someone else* to turn to for advice and support; it may be that students find it easier to raise concerns and / or seek help from a fellow student, rather than a member of staff. It also provides students with training on and experience of mentoring. They can use their university experience to benefit others, promoting a sense of 'giving something back'. The mentoring does not take up too much of their time, but is a useful addition to their CVs. The mentors are awarded with a certificate of participation at the end of the year. Additional benefits for mentors include: the development of key transferable skills and opportunities to meet other like minded students.

Responsibility for the scheme

Two members of academic staff are responsible for overseeing the work of the peer e-mentors and are the first point of contact for mentors who have concerns about their role or any of their mentees. In 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 the co-ordinators were Gaby Jacobs and Claire Fox. Sally Sargeant took over from Gaby Jacobs in February 2009 (when she left Keele University to take up a new post) and will continue in this role during 2010-2011.

Application / Interview process

First year students who are interested in becoming a peer mentor complete an application form in March, following promotion in the January. The form asks students to outline their reasons for wanting to become a peer e-mentor and to give details of what they can bring to the role. All of these students are interviewed by one of the co-ordinators in April, with the interview focusing on reasons for wanting to become a peer e-mentor, their understanding of the role, what sorts of problems they think first year students at Keele face, and their skills and experience relevant to the role. We recruit all of those who express an interest and who go through the

application and interview process. We decided that it if it becomes clear during training that a particular student is unsuitable, then appropriate action would be taken (through discussions with the mentor concerned). In 2008-2009 all of the students were deemed capable of fulfilling the role. In 2009-2010 some of the mentors will need to be paired up because mentors will be allocated to first year seminar groups (there are more mentors than seminar groups). This means that we could, if necessary, pair up a student who we have concerns about with a more experienced mentor.

Training

We run two 2-hour training sessions in May with approximately 10 students in each session. We stipulate that all mentors must attend the training session if they wish to become a peer e-mentor. Students are provided with a pack containing power point slides from the presentations, a set of guidelines, an agreement for mentors to sign, a table for recording mentor-mentee contacts, an academic article about e-mentoring, and a handout with tips on using webmail. The first part of the session focuses on what peer e-mentoring involves, what is expected of the mentors in their role, common problems students face, support services at Keele and information sources. Guidelines are covered that included safety issues, the type of support that should and should not be given, and confidentiality and record keeping.

The second part of the training is a more engaging session whereby students are asked to consider different types of questions to expect and ways of responding to queries. Prior to the session students are asked to respond to an email sent to them from a fictitious student who discloses a family problem and concern about falling behind with work. Some of the responses are presented to the students to discuss in groups (care is taken to select responses from students taking part in the *other* training session). Students are also asked to consider a number of difficult situations such as disclosure of harassment involving a member of staff, and a mentee who expresses feeling down and having suicidal thoughts.

A further 'booster' training session takes place at the start of the next academic year. During this session, mentors have the opportunity to set up an email list and send out

a first message to their mentees. It is also expected that mentors will be involved in induction activities around this time, e.g. helping with the first year drinks reception in week one.

Checking for criminal records

We decided that it would be unnecessary to obtain CRB clearance for the mentors, since they will not be working with children or vulnerable adults. Also, it was felt that this was yet another hurdle that we would be asking the students to jump over and we were concerned that this would affect the up-take of the scheme. However, we did recognise that some of the students that they will be mentoring could be described as 'vulnerable'. All students who take part in the training are asked to read the guidelines and sign to indicate that they agree to abide by the guidelines, recognising that they will be asked to step down if they do not. They are also asked to sign in response to the following statement:

'I confirm that I have not been convicted of any crimes that would prevent me from taking on the role of peer e-mentor (e.g. sexual assault). I do not know of any other reasons why I should not be considered suitable for the role'.

All of the students have signed this form and given their permission to let us check their UCAS form (held by the UG office) which has a question about criminal convictions. Checks are also conducted on the students' main Psychology files (with their consent) as a final check that there is nothing recorded that would prevent them from becoming a peer e-mentor.

Roles and responsibilities

The main contact between mentors and mentees is via email, with the option of mentors and mentees meeting face to face if both parties are happy with this arrangement (and with appropriate safeguards in place, e.g. meeting in a public place). Mentors are expected to maintain regular email contact with the students that have been allocated to them. The co-ordinators remind mentors on a regular basis to send out a general email to their students. Mentors must respond within 48 hours to

any messages sent from their mentees. Mentors are expected to maintain a record of any correspondence with students, using a form provided (but with no names attached).

Mentors must maintain regular contact with the co-ordinators by email and by attending group supervision meetings (a few meetings each semester). Mentors must contact the co-ordinators if they have any concerns, e.g. about particular students or about their own well-being and capacity to do what is expected of them. Issues can be discussed face to face with one of the co-ordinators and / or consultation with a member of the university counselling service could also be arranged.

A WebCT space is available for mentors where they can locate material they need for their role, e.g. a table to record contacts. We also encourage the mentors to use the discussion board, posting any queries/concerns they might have about particular students (at all times striving to protect the identity of their mentees), able to get advice and support from their peers and from the co-ordinators. However, in 2008-2009 the discussion function was not used.

Nature of and limits on the support given

We expected that most of the email queries would be from students needing very practical advice, e.g. about where a particular building is, how they register at the Health Centre, how they hand in their coursework. Mentors should be able to deal with most of these queries, using knowledge acquired through their own university experience. Other queries are likely to be more complex, e.g. of university systems and procedures. Some information can be located on the Keele University web-site, which mentors are encouraged to use and refer their mentees to. Mentors and mentees will also have access to an up-to-date School of Psychology undergraduate handbook via Web CT, which is also a useful source. If, at any time, a mentor is unsure about the advice they are giving, then they must contact one of the peer e-mentoring co-ordinators who should be able to provide the information needed. Mentors must agree to offer advice to the best of their ability and within their own capabilities.

Other queries may be more personal in nature, e.g. a student feeling homesick, or worried about studying Psychology. Again, using their own university experience, mentors should be able to provide some words of support here. If the mentor is happy with this arrangement, he/she could suggest meeting up with the student face-to-face. Alternatively, the mentor could suggest that the student contact one of the support services within or outside of the university and/or contact a member of staff within the School of Psychology.

Mentors must understand that the scheme does not involve educational mentoring. Although mentors may feel comfortable giving advice in relation to small queries (e.g. about referencing, useful books) mentors should be careful about offering advice in relation to more teaching and learning related matters. For example, mentors must not offer to look at essays or tutor a student who needs help with statistics. While such support could be seen to be entirely appropriate and useful, the current scheme is not geared towards offering this sort of support, which would require a different type of training for, and supervision of mentors. It would also require a further investment of time from the mentors. There is a concern that mentors could, unwittingly, pass on their own misconceptions to other students. Mentors are advised to recommend that the student try to seek support from one of the Teaching Fellows or their lab / seminar tutor.

Confidentiality

Mentors must not disclose the names of any mentees that contact them to anyone else (however, see exceptions below). In one-to-one and group supervision meetings, it is acceptable for mentors to discuss information disclosed to them by mentees, but with no names attached. This is an important part of the reflective process and it enables mentors to seek advice and reassurance from the rest of the mentoring team. We take any breaches of confidentiality very seriously; this could result in a mentor being asked to step down from the role.

There are certain exceptions to the right of confidentiality. If a mentor is concerned that one of their mentees is at risk of harming themselves or someone else, or a mentee is involved in any illegal activity or is in breach of university regulations, then

action does need to be taken. The mentor must contact one of the peer e-mentoring co-ordinators immediately. In the absence of both of the co-ordinators, then the mentor must contact the Head of School. The relevant members of staff will then decide on the next course of action.

Promotion of the scheme

The scheme is promoted to first year students via posters, email, Web CT, Keele Psychology facebook, and at the first 1st year lecture. In 2009-2010, mentors will be allocated to first year seminar groups which, it is hoped, will help to promote the scheme.

Matching of students to mentors

In 2008-2009 we allocated all of the mature students to mature student mentors based on evidence that mature students appreciate having a fellow mature student to turn to for advice and support (Roz Phillips, University of Stirling, 2007, personal communication). Informal feedback we received this year from some of the mature first year students supports our decision to match students in this way. Although the plan is to allocate mentors to seminar groups in 2009-2010 we hope to treat the mature first year students as a separate group and allocate them to our two new 'mature' mentors as they have been allocated this academic year. The onus will be on these mentors to arrange a group meeting with the students that have been allocated to them early on in the first semester.

Evaluation of the scheme

Feedback was collected from mentors and first year students at the end of the academic year 2008-2009 using surveys (a mixture of closed and open questions) and focus groups.

The survey questionnaire for mentees was completed by 60 first year students (14 male and 44 female, 2 'missing') at the beginning of a lecture. 100% were aware of the peer e-mentoring scheme but only 71% knew who their mentor was and even

fewer (29%) knew what their mentor looks like. This is despite mentors being prompted to email their mentees on a regular basis and group lists and photographs being available on the notice boards and via Web CT. 90% knew how to contact their mentor if need be and 76% knew what sort of issues they can contact their mentor about.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicated that most students had a good basic understanding of what the scheme involved. However, some students thought that they could <u>not</u> ask about academic issues. This misunderstanding may have arisen from our attempt to explain to the first year students that the mentors cannot offer 'educational' support, i.e. help with essays and statistics. Our experience of the scheme in its first year is that many of the queries are academic in nature, i.e. about the Psychology course, but they have been small queries that the mentors have been able to help with, e.g. with referencing, which books to buy, exam preparation, etc. Clearly, we need to think more carefully about how we promote the scheme to the first year students. Perhaps it is more important that the mentors themselves understand what the limits are and that mentees are simply told that mentors can help with academic and non-academic queries. If a mentor feels that a query crosses a boundary into an area they cannot help with then they can at least direct them to someone who can.

Students were also asked how many times they had been contacted by their mentor. 65% has been contacted on two or three occasions but only 16% had been contacted four or more times which is the minimum we would expect (the mentors had been asked to contact their students on at least four occasions). Somewhat disappointing was that three students (5%) said that they had never been contacted and 14% only once. It is of course possible that some emails were not received, e.g. because of an inbox being full. Nevertheless, this is something that needs to be addressed in the second year of the scheme. The need for regular contact will be emphasised to the mentors and the first year students will be told: a) what to expect from their mentor and b) who they need to contact if they would like to change their mentor.

64% of the students reported that they had never contacted their mentor. 21% had made contact on one occasion, 12% two-three times and only 2 (3%) had been in contact four or more times. This is to be expected as many students will have no need to contact their mentor. We would hope that for these students it is still reassuring to have an allocated peer e-mentor – someone they can contact should any issues arise.

Interestingly there were no differences in the level of contact based on having/not having Psychology A-level or age. However, male students were found to be more likely to have contacted their mentor (86%) compared to females (56%). The chi-square value was approaching significance (χ^2 = 3.16, df = 1, p < .08). Perhaps male students prefer the particular mode of communication, i.e. the lack of face-to-face contact which might enable them to seek help when they need it.

Those who had made contact with their mentor rated how satisfied they were with the advice/support received (n = 18). 89% rated it as helpful. None of them rated it as 'very unhelpful' or 'unhelpful'. Those who had not made contact gave the reasons as: no issues to approach mentor with, prefer to speak to friends or a member of staff.

Only five of the students responded to the open-ended question about the benefits of the scheme. The responses were as follows:

"You know that you have someone there if you are in trouble or need"

"Gives comfort knowing someone is there to talk to who has been through what we are doing"

"It was just good for a general 'pick-me-up' chat"

"You feel there is someone out there who understands the fears, pressures etc that you're contending with"

"Knowing there is someone you can ask for help if needed"

When asked about the problems with the scheme and suggestions for improvement this highlighted a number of areas for improvement:

1) *Not feeling able to contact someone you don't know*. Students would perhaps feel more able to approach their mentor if they have met them face-to-face on at least one occasion. In 2009-2010 mentors will be linked to first year seminar groups and, it is hoped, will be able to attend at least the first seminar session of the academic year. This will give mentors the opportunity to introduce themselves and explain what they can help with, inviting queries no matter how big or small.

2) *The need for regular contact*. Mentors need to be encouraged to email the students they are responsible for on a regular basis throughout the year (every 3-4 weeks, particularly before important deadlines), reminding them of who they are and what they can help with. In 2009-2010 it may also be possible for mentors to turn up at the beginning of seminar sessions at regular intervals throughout the year.

3) *Not knowing enough about the scheme*. In 2009-2010 we need to focus our efforts on better promotion of the scheme, encouraging students to contact their mentor should they have any queries. Students need to know who they can contact, and how and what they can contact them about. Sending regular emails and linking mentors to seminar groups should help in this respect. We will continue to promote the scheme using postings on notice boards and via Web CT. We will also do more to promote the scheme to members of staff in Psychology who can encourage their students to make better use of their mentors.

94% of the students who responded to the survey said that the scheme should continue. Unfortunately take-up for the focus groups we had planned was low despite the incentive of a £10 HMV voucher for every participant. We held only one group discussion with only three first year students and so the findings must be treated with caution. The group discussion highlighted the same issues that came out from the survey. There was general agreement that the scheme was a good idea because the

use of email enabled fast and easy communication and because students sometimes feel unable to approach their lecturers, particularly for minor queries.

The survey questionnaire for the mentors was completed by 16 students in total. The main problem that the survey highlighted was that many of the mentors had very little or no contact from their mentees. For these students, who have gone through the application and interview process and taken part in the training, it was disappointing for them not to use/develop the knowledge and skills they had acquired.

The common issues that they had been contacted about fell into the following categories:

- What books to buy/read
- Referencing in Psychology
- Exam preparation
- Use of electronic databases
- Essay structure
- Research Participation Time
- Statistics
- Time management/organisation of work
- How to use Web CT
- How to change courses
- Who to go to for what
- Finding places, e.g. lecture rooms
- Problems with Webmail
- Homesickness
- Freshers' Flu

NB: Although the data collected from the mentors' records of contacts still needs to be analysed, the issues above do seem to reflect the issues that have been recorded more formally by the mentors in their tables of contacts.

The mentors stated that they felt equipped to deal with the issues and valued the training and ongoing support they had received. This was echoed in the focus group

discussion that took place with five of the mentors. Similar issues to those that came out in the survey were raised in the group discussion. Despite many of the mentors in the group feeling slightly disappointed at the lack of contact they were in agreement that the scheme should continue. There was optimism that with time the scheme would become better integrated into the School of Psychology, which would lead to better take-up by the students. They felt equipped to deal with most of the issues that were presented to them and that support was there for them if they needed it. Many of the issues were ones that they had encountered in their first year. They thought that the best approach to giving advice was to mention the things they had found useful and, if appropriate, refer them to someone else they could contact about the issue.

When asked about the benefits to them from being involved in the scheme they discussed the sense of satisfaction you get from helping someone and learning new things, e.g.

"It was nice to know that you could help people with experiences you have already had"

"The personal thing of you, you know, somewhere along the line, even if it is just one person, one email that you sent, that you know you have helped someone"

"Found out all sorts of things I had no idea about"

"I'd say I have no idea, I'll find out for you and I found out and I'm like I never knew that before!"

Summary and conclusions

The findings from the evaluation suggest that the scheme is benefiting many students and there is overwhelming support for the scheme to continue. There are some lessons to be learnt from the operation of the scheme in its first year. Clearly we need to do more to encourage students to seek support from the mentors when they need it. It is hoped that by linking mentors to first year seminar groups this will

help to promote the scheme and enable students to get to know their mentors. We will endeavour to collect feedback from the mentors and first year students in 2009-2010 to assess whether the changes we implement do lead to better uptake of the scheme. It is hoped that our work will stimulate those in other Schools within the university to set up similar initiatives.

<u>References</u>

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