

Building belonging: The vital role of peer support in enhancing student retention and transitions to university

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Setting the Scene

- The ***Student Mentor Scheme*** is an award-winning peer support programme which was established in 2012
- Aim of the scheme is to support first-year students with their ***transition into university life*** and cultivate a ***strong sense of belonging***
- Student mentors help first-year students settle in by offering ***impartial, informed and up-to-date advice***
- Over ***40,000 first-year students*** have been supported by over 5,000 student mentors who have provided 1,000 mentoring sessions

Student-led Support

- Every first-year undergraduate student can **access** a student mentor from their school
- Student mentors contact their group of first-year students **before they arrive** via email
- First meeting takes place during **induction week** followed by regular meetings
- Advice provided based on **shared experience** and students can be **signposted** to appropriate services



Peer to Peer Relationships

- Each student mentor is responsible for a group of first-year students, to encourage **social connections** to be developed at **course level**
- *“The mentor scheme is good because sometimes advice from another student is more reassuring; I also **gained friends** on my course through the mentor scheme”*
- **85%** of students ($n = 342$) felt comfortable talking to their mentor about their university experiences
- **69%** of students ($n = 280$) said that the scheme helped them to develop positive student-to-student relationships

Sense of Belonging

- Developing connections with ***students and staff*** create a strong sense of belonging (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010)
- **73%** of students ($n = 293$) said that having a student mentor helped them settle into and feel part of Cardiff University
- *“It’s really helped me **settle into university life**. The new way of living/studying was overwhelming at first and the mentoring scheme has made it a lot easier. It has definitely enabled my work to be as good as possible”*
- **78%** highest reported in 2016-17 ($n = 293$) and an average of 65% during Covid

Retention

- Student mentors support with *academic and social integration* (Tinto, 1993)
- **28%** ($n = 111$) of students considered withdrawing from university
- **44%** ($n = 58$) of students reported that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay
- 711 first-year students considered withdrawing but **69%** ($n = 491$) of those stated that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay (2016-23)

Retention

“Starting university for me and I'm sure for many other students was quite daunting but having that extra guidance from a student mentor was helpful. I would love to have the opportunity to help out other future students and give them plenty of useful advice to help them settle in and feel more at ease here, having a ***positive impact on their student experience***”

(First-year student, 2023)

Summary

- Peer support is powerful and contributes to a positive *transition into university*
- *Student feedback* enables us to provide a student-focused programme of support
- Have a *flexible* approach to suit the needs of the students
- Provide a *personalised experience*, every first-year student has their own story

