Supporting the 1st Year Undergraduate Experience with Mentoring

Dr John Barrow
University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

Introduction

Students 4 Students (S4S) was born out of the retention and progression agenda at the University of Aberdeen. This agenda pressed for change and the inception of novel mechanisms by which we could support and nurture students throughout their studies. From evidence gathered across the UK university sector (Harvey, Dowe et al 2006) and internationally (James, Krause et al 2010) as well as our own institutional retention data, first year students have higher non-continuation rates compared to all other years of undergraduate study. One possible approach to alleviating this issue of non-continuation is through peer mentoring schemes, with many excellent reviews being published on the subject in recent years (Christie 2014; Collings, Swanston et al 2014). The literature is frequently neutral when it comes to recommending peer mentoring as a transformational approach to student retention, but it is often mentioned alongside a diverse mix of other policies and initiatives that can give students a successful outcome and a smooth transition through their chosen degree programme.

From the first reviews in the undergraduate mentoring literature (Jacobi 1991) there has been large discussion on how to establish a well constituted mentoring programme within higher education. Indeed, Jacobi presents four main themes that mentoring could align with: involvement in learning; academic and social integration; support; and developmental support. With these four themes in mind our mentoring scheme was created as another mechanism to enhance an already strong range of student support. The first iteration of the peer mentoring programme was introduced as a trial within one section of our institution in 2011-12 and has since progressed to an institution-wide programme for all new undergraduates (see Fig.1).

The main objective of the S4S scheme is to offer an extra layer of support to incoming students in parallel to that delivered by academic staff through support from a fellow student. Thus, S4S has one simple aim: to smooth the transition into higher education as much as possible in order for students to successfully build a foundation on which they can construct a successful degree outcome.

A summary of some key data collected from recent feedback questionnaires is presented here (see Fig. 2). From the pilot stages of the mentoring scheme to S4S as it is today, student responses have been consistently positive from both Mentors and Mentees. For the sake of brevity results from Mentees have not been shown, but largely mirror those of the Mentors, with satisfaction levels being high (70% say they were happy with the advice provided by Mentors) and 35% wish to become a Mentor in the following year, which has been seen as a real positive because they often cite Mentee experience as the reason for wanting to become an S4S Mentor.

How does it work?

S4S has several layered tiers to its structure that allow a degree of flexibility dependent on the discipline areas within the University (see Fig. 3). There is an overall S4S Coordinator who oversees the institutional management and administration of the scheme; an S4S Admin Team from the central University administration responsible for day to day activities and responding to student queries; S4S School Coordinators within each section of the University who act as the ‘go to’ person for any issues raised by Mentors; S4S Mentors who are recruited annually from within the subject disciplines; and finally Mentees who are assigned a Mentor prior to arrival at the University.

The key yearly milestones in the scheme are Mentor recruitment, Mentor training, initial meetings during Fresher’s Week, term-time management and feedback, plus Mentor recognition through STAR Awards (see Fig. 4) with details listed below.

1. Mentor Recruitment

Students complete a short application form which asks for their personal information, a brief justification of their reasons for wanting to be a Mentor and two references who may be contacted if required.

2. Mentor Training

Mentors are fully trained through access to online training materials delivered through the University virtual learning environment (MyAberdeen) which uses the Blackboard platform. Training sessions covering University Student Support Services, University Counselling Service and Role Play Scenarios are presented as tests, so this allows very simple tracking of student progress as well as providing the S4S Admin Team with an ability to check completion of each training component.

3. Term-time Meetings

Each section of the University has an organised event at which new students and Mentors can come together and meet one another. These large scale events also promote the scheme widely within the student population by making S4S highly visible during this initial transition period into higher education.

4. Term-time Feedback

During each term the Mentors and Mentees are largely left to contact each other freely with little to no intervention from S4S School Coordinators or the central S4S Admin Team. We request feedback for each term during the year.

5. S4S Mentors and STAR Awards

S4S Mentors are eligible to apply for a Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award, which recognises the curricular and extracurricular activities and achievements of specific roles within the University. STAR Awards aim to enhance student leadership and engagement. We hope to see more students taking on the role of Mentor in future years as this will increase our numbers of Mentors on year on year, have more large scale events at an institutional level and subject-specific level, as well as investing in stronger promotion and publicity of the scheme across the institution.

Integration of S4S as part of the University of Aberdeen’s first year experience adds the transition into the University, thereby providing an opportunity for all students to make a confident transition into university and ultimately achieve a positive outcome at graduation.

Summary

Overall the S4S initiative at the University of Aberdeen has had a positive influence on any student who has fully engaged with the scheme either as a Mentor or Mentee. Based on many years of feedback Mentors highlight a real sense of belonging to the University as well as having periods of self-reflection alongside them, which can be applied to others. The initial aim of S4S was to offer support at an early stage to all students, thereby identifying and possibly helping some individuals overcome problems quickly so they persisted with their university education. Our view of S4S aligns with other published studies in the mentoring literature that state schemes often work best when Mentees are fully engaged and aware of the benefits so taking part in the scheme (Gannon, Mahar 2012). S4S has definite benefits for Mentors in terms of building a strong CV, taking part in co-curricular activities and generally being an active part of the student experience in Aberdeen. S4S is not without its issues, with one major issue being Mentee engagement. There is a real dichotomy between positive student responses on the benefits of peer mentoring when students are asked, compared with actual student levels of engagement. Moving forward we hope to see more students taking on the role of S4S Mentor and be able to demonstrate many skills and graduate attributes and have them formally recognised through STAR.

References