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, Drew 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 the use of 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 as one approach in a diverse range of student support initiatives. This is required in order to 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 in the literature around being taught within a mentoring programme within higher education. Indeed, Jacobi presents four main themes that mentoring could align with: involvement in learning; academic and social integration; social 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 academic year 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. 4). 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 30% wish to become a Mentor in the following year, which has been seen as a real positive because they often cite their Mentee experience as the reason for wanting to become an S4S Mentor.

Introduction

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.

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. For many years of feedback Mentors highlight a real sense of belonging to the University as well as having periods of self-reflection alongside other students engaging 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 of taking part in the scheme (Gannon, Maher 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.

How Does it Work?

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. 3) with details listed below.

1. Mentor Recruitment
2. Mentor Training
3. Mentor Feedback
4. Mentor Recognition/STAR Awards

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

Throughout the Year

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.

Overall, in S4S, Mentors are eligible to apply for a Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award, which recognises the co-curricular activities and achievements of specific roles within the University. STAR Awards aim to enhance student learning experiences and to enhance employability, so any student taking on the role of S4S Mentor is able to demonstrate many skills and graduate attributes and have them formally recognised through STAR.

S4S has several layered tiers to its structure that allow a degree of flexibility dependent on the discipline areas within the University (see Fig. 2). 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.

Reference:


