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# Peer Mentoring Works!

**How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in  
Higher Education**

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Aston University  
Birmingham

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## **What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme**

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## Foreword

Making the decision to attend university to embark on a course of study is a significant step in a person's life, whatever their background. The conflicting emotions of apprehension and excitement that accompany this decision indicate that for many, the transition into university life is far from easy. As we enter a new era in UK higher education, the demands on institutions to support student success are likely to increase. Much is at stake for all of the parties involved. As such, mechanisms that can aid student transition and promote student success are going to become ever more important in the higher education landscape. Having said this, it is important that the interventions are underpinned by evidence that they are going to impact the student experience at transition in a positive way and are not simply a passing fad or 'knee jerk reaction' to a perceived problem.

In considering ways to support students at transition, universities are not awash with money, consequently innovation is critical. By exploring the use of an institution's key asset, its own students, there is an opportunity for the creation of a true 'win-win-win' situation in which new students belong, existing students develop new skills and institutions experience minimal student attrition. Peer mentoring offers an approach whereby students help students discover the new world of university life through the formation of safe and supportive peer relationships. This report and its associated outputs provide evidence that peer mentoring works; offering universities a way forward in supporting their students at transition. The study makes clear that the introduction of a peer mentoring programme needs to be well thought through and supported with student training and a level of on-going care and maintenance. For a modest investment, the benefits realised in terms of student success at transition are considerable. The institutions involved in this study believe that peer mentoring is key in addressing the challenge of encouraging student success at transition. The evidence presented here confirms this belief.

*Robin Clark* (Dr Robin Clark, Project Manager, Peer Mentoring Works!)

## Abstract

This report draws on the findings of a three year study into peer mentoring conducted at 6 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), 5 of which were in the UK, 1 of which was in Norway.

Following a multiple case-study design, quantitative and qualitative research was conducted in collaboration with the project partners. The research findings provide empirical evidence that peer mentoring works! In particular the report provides:

- ❖ An Executive Summary outlining the main project findings
- ❖ A synopsis of the relevant literature – and a link to a much larger literature review undertaken at the beginning of the study
- ❖ A working conceptual framework and set of research questions
- ❖ An overview and rationale of the methodological approach and tools
- ❖ Evidence of the value of peer mentoring in promoting a ‘smooth’ transition into university
- ❖ Evidence that peer mentoring works by providing the means by which new students can access peer support in both social and academic spheres throughout their first year
- ❖ Identification of the main challenges of peer mentoring
- ❖ Evidence of the manner in which writing peer mentoring works by providing bespoke help for individual students
- ❖ A discussion section in which a new approach to peer mentoring, Transition+, is proposed.

The report concludes with recommendations for: Higher Education Institutions: Students: Policy Makers: and, Individuals within HEIs wishing to establish peer mentoring.

## Executive Summary

This report provides a detailed and in-depth analysis of the value of peer mentoring in promoting student success in higher education. Commencing with a brief overview of the relevant literature, attention is paid to the role that public policy has played in shaping higher education over the previous three decades. It is argued that the face of higher education has been irrevocably changed by policies resulting in unprecedented increases in the number of students. On the positive side, such change has resulted in the opening up of the opportunities afforded by higher education to people from a wide-range of social and demographic backgrounds. Conversely, whilst such policies have done much to promote equity with regards to access to higher education, contemporary policies leading to the forthcoming increase in student fees, mean that more Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] than ever are facing a challenging and uncertain future.

It is within this environment of uncertainty that issues of retention and attrition arise. Indeed, pedagogical concerns about the growth in the numbers of students within the classroom are contextualised by issues of transition and retention. Thus the need for HEIs to put into place mechanisms to both support students and to address issues of retention has never been more important. Peer mentoring represents one such mechanism. It provides the means by which students can make friends, acclimatise to university life, and come to terms with their new student identity.

In seeking to identify students' perceptions of the value of peer mentoring, this study provides evidence that, in today's ever-changing and increasingly challenging academic environment, students represent an institution's most valuable asset.

*[Executive Summary i: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

## Methodological Approach

Commencing with the hypothesis that 'peer support impacts positively on students' experiences by engendering a greater sense of belonging both socially and academically', the study set out to analyse pastoral peer mentoring and writing peer mentoring activities in 6 different HEIs.

The research approach involved a multiple case-study design, in which a mixed methodological approach was adopted. The research was conducted in four separate stages. The first stage took the form of a pilot survey administered across all partner HEIs in 2009-2010. This resulted in a response rate of 302 completed questionnaires (just under 10% of the sample). This was followed by a follow-on survey that was administered in 2010-2011 at three of the partner institutions focusing on pastoral peer mentoring. This resulted in 374 completed questionnaires (just over 19% of the sample).

The third part of the study comprised in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups which were conducted at all institutions with a total of 97 student peer mentors and peer mentees. Of these 61 were involved in pastoral or transitional mentoring programmes (29 peer mentees and 32 peer mentors), and 36 were involved in writing peer mentoring (16 writing peer mentors and 20 peer mentees). The quantitative data was coded and analysed using SPSS. The qualitative data was analysed following a grounded theory approach, in which the main themes and sub-themes were coded then analysed in some depth.

The final part of the project involved non-participant, overt observations of peer mentoring activity undertaken during 'welcome' weekend in September 2010. Data was recorded and analysed using an observational framework specifically developed for the project out of the emergent findings of the quantitative and qualitative research.

*[Executive Summary ii: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

## The Study Findings: Pastoral Mentoring

### - The Transition Period

The first few days and weeks at university are widely acknowledged as being crucial to student success. In looking closely at 'transitional peer mentoring' this project identifies and analyses how reciprocal peer support can provide new students with a solid foundation to their university careers.

By looking at *what* students concerns are, and by showing *how* peer mentoring helps new students address such concerns, this study highlights the value of peer mentoring both during the transition period and also into the first year of their studies. Furthermore, by analysing the data collected, this report highlights the value of peer mentoring both during the transition period and also into the first year.

A significant majority of the students surveyed were particularly concerned about making friends once they started university. Indeed, it is the 'social' aspects of university life that concern students the most – particularly in relation to settling in and adjusting to university life. Conversely, despite such worries before starting university, most of the students were confident that they had the ability to succeed academically, as such they were committed to completing their university studies. The study shows that transitional peer mentoring works by providing the means by which new students quickly gain a sense of 'belonging'. Indeed, it is in the key transition phase that peer mentoring first begins to make a difference to new students' lives. University-wide 'opt-out' programmes in which peer mentoring is offered to all new students, are particularly successful because in capturing the whole population of new starters peer mentoring is not viewed by students as a '*deficit model of provision*' but is instead seen and accepted as part of the university culture.

*[Executive Summary iii: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

Another type of peer mentoring, longer-term pastoral mentoring is successful because it offers on-going, long-term support to those students who need it. Both transitional and pastoral peer mentoring provide a valuable 'safety-net' for students making those first few tenuous steps into university life. Transitional peer mentoring works best when the relationship does not simply end after a few weeks, but instead continues into the first term. Such relationships are built on the success of the first few days and evolve to become mutually beneficial.

- **Following Transition – Term 1 and Beyond**

In offering continual support in Term 1 and beyond, the study revealed that peer mentoring works by helping students make the most of the academic opportunities available at university. It affords new students the means by which they can make good use of the social support available at university by allowing them to build a one-to-one relationship within a semi-formal and supported environment. By meeting individual needs and assisting students in the development of positive learning relationships, peer mentoring engenders a reciprocal relationship in which students, both peer mentors and peer mentees, are able to grow as individuals and succeed at university.

- **Academic Support – Belonging & Peer Mentoring**

Having made the initial transition into university from a social perspective, despite their previous confidence about their academic ability, many students find the 'academic transition' difficult. Indeed, the findings revealed that for many the 'academic shift' from studying at school or college level to studying at a higher level can be very challenging. One of the most valuable roles undertaken by peer mentors is that they can help fellow students 'learn how to learn' at a higher level. Indeed, the use of more experienced students to guide and advise newer students does much to promote independent learning; enriching the overall student experience by nurturing a sense of belonging through offering on-going support and friendship.

*[Executive Summary iv: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

### - **Benefits for Mentors**

The study revealed that participation in peer mentoring results in some benefits that are experienced by peer mentors alone. In particular, student peer mentors are able to develop valuable transferable employability skills such as self-management, leadership and communication skills. Additional personal and social benefits experienced by individual peer mentors include personal satisfaction and the opportunity to 'give something back'.

### - **The Challenges of Peer Mentoring**

In focusing primarily on the student experience, one of the weaknesses of the study is that it did not capture in-depth, the challenges of peer mentoring from an institutional perspective. From the students' perspectives the challenges generally focused on institutional issues and communication problems. Some additional difficulties were identified with some approaches to training.

### - **Turning the Challenges Around**

One unexpected finding of the study was raised by a few mentors who had experienced a negative time as a mentee. Determined to do things differently, such individuals identified the need to make things better for new students as a strong motivating factor.

### - **Transition+ Approach to Peer Mentoring**

Based upon the study findings a new approach to peer mentoring has been developed and is recommended for use in the HE Sector. This approach, **Transition+** Peer Mentoring, provides social support during the initial transition period and then evolves and develops to encompass academic and longer-term support needs.

*[Executive Summary v: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

## **The Study Findings: Writing Peer Mentoring**

### **- Practicalities & Pastoral Support**

The findings show that by providing advice and support in all aspects of writing, writing peer mentors provide a distinctive service that helps students improve their overall academic portfolio. Whilst the focus of writing peer mentoring is by necessity practical in nature, it also provides a 'safe' environment in which students can find someone to listen to their problems and help them work through university life. Writing peer mentors, the majority of whom are undergraduates, provide bespoke support and advice for students irrespective of year of study or subject studied (indeed many of the mentees were postgraduates).

### **- The Challenges of Writing Peer Mentoring**

The study found that most of the challenges experienced by writing peer mentors and mentees centred around balancing the often differing expectations of both parties. Mentees would often expect mentors to proofread or comment on the content of their work – neither of which they are in a position to do. Furthermore, many of the writing peer mentors reported that students would often seek advice on a 'last minute' basis. For writing peer mentoring to work, mentees need to be counselled to seek advice about their writing in plenty of time.

## **The Study Findings: Recommendations**

One of the key aspects of the project is that the recommendations made prioritise the student perspective. In listening to higher education students, the report writers have developed recommendations for Higher Education Institutions, policy makers, students and for colleagues wishing to pursue further research in this area. The most pertinent of which, for HEIs, are summarised overleaf.

*Executive Summary vi: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

## - Recommendations for HEIs

1. Consider embedding peer mentoring as part of an institutional retention strategy
2. Decide on the form of mentoring programme to be introduced
3. Design a robust and well structured programme
4. Appoint a dedicated person, or persons, to manage the programme
5. Ensure effective marketing of the programme
6. Introduce a rigorous mentor selection and training process
7. Take care in pairing mentees and mentors to ensure a good match
8. Make clear the availability of on-going support (if needed)
9. Evaluate the programme at an appropriate point or points in the year
10. Consider academic credit / recognition for mentors.

## Concluding Remarks

This report begins by reaffirming the belief that making the decision to attend university to embark on a course of study is a significant and often difficult step in a person's life, irrespective of social background or level of previous study. This study represents the most in-depth investigation of peer mentoring in higher education conducted within the UK to date. Over the course of three years the study has captured and recorded the perceptions and experiences of close to 800 students. For the majority of students who participated in this project the most difficult aspect of making the transition to university reflects fears about whether they will settle in and make friends. This study has shown that peer mentoring works by addressing such fears and by providing the means by which new students quickly feel as if they belong. In addressing both academic and social issues, this project provides evidence that the value of peer mentoring in higher education is not just reflective of the support given to new students in the first few days and weeks of university. Instead it is indicative of the longer-term reciprocal relationships made between peers in which both benefit and both succeed.

*[Executive Summary vii: Peer Mentoring Works!]*

# Section 1: Background and Literature Review

## 1.1 Background

The massification of Higher Education (HE) has resulted in increased pressure for Universities to provide a service that is seen to offer 'value for money' (Capstick & Fleming, 2002; Fox & Stevenson, 2006). In the UK, such pressure has originated both from the students and from the government (Johnston, 2001). Two of the most obvious changes over the past few decades reflect an increase in student numbers and alterations to the demographic makeup of the student body (in terms of age, culture, ethnicity and social standing). A more contentious and recent issue, which looks set to radically alter how higher education is managed and perceived relates to how universities are funded – with student fees due to increase to a maximum of £9,000 per year from 2012 (Cable, 2010) and government funding being drastically reduced. In addition to increased financial pressure, government demands that universities wishing to charge over £6,000 should put into place tangible measures to widen participation in higher education are causing considerable consternation across the Sector (for further discussion see Vasagar, 2011).

Previous studies have suggested that the growth in the numbers of *non-traditional* students over the past few decades means universities are now faced with large numbers of students, many of whom may need additional help to cope with university life (Fox & Stevenson, 2006). One of the most notable outcomes of this can be seen in the university classroom with a '*reversion to traditional lectures*' and less small group and tutorial teaching (Reid et al, 1997, 3). "Traditional" lectures tend to be in large lecture theatres, with class sizes often comprising well over 100 students. In addition to difficulties associated with large classrooms, many universities are struggling to deal with high numbers of students 'dropping out' in the first year of study (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). Indeed, the quality of support provided by universities during the transition period from school to higher education (HE) has been identified as

critical to student retention (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001) and as such is an issue that needs urgently addressing.

## 1.2 Peer Mentoring, Peer Learning and Peer Tutoring

One of the main difficulties in defining mentoring and peer mentoring is that across the literature various terminologies are used to describe mentoring activities. Such terminologies include: Guiding: Tutoring: Assisted Learning: Coaching and Sponsorship. One of the main difficulties with such wide-ranging terms is reflected in the fact that they are frequently mixed-up or used interchangeably (for further discussion regarding this area see Woodd, 1997; Gray, 1988; Keele et al, 1987; Yoder, 1995; Chao, 1988). Moreover, whilst the array of different terminologies used may reflect the complexities of the role, the resultant lack of clarity causes confusion and disagreement (D'Abate et al, 2003). Indeed, when considering 'traditional' mentoring it is important to note that mentors tend to be higher up the hierarchical ladder than the mentee (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998). This perspective is discussed by Clutterbuck (1991) who argues that traditionally a mentor is perceived to be an older, more experienced individual passing down knowledge of how a task is done to a younger less experienced colleague. The hierarchical nature of mentoring is also discussed by Joyce et al (1997, p 2) who argue that mentoring represents '*an intense interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protégé) in which the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development*' (for further literature in this area see Dalton et al, 1977; Hall, 1976; Levinson et al, 1978; Kram, 1983).

An alternative perspective is offered by Megginson (1994) who in discussing the 'helping' nature of the mentoring relationship defines a mentor as a '*person who helps another individual to address the major transitions or thresholds that the individual is facing and to deal with them in a developmental way*' (p 165). Likewise, Burlew (1991) acknowledges the value of the support given to the mentee... '*A mentor is anyone who provides guidance, support, knowledge and*

*opportunities for whatever period the mentor and protégé deem this help to be necessary*' (p 214). Burlew's perspective builds on previous work by Pedler (1983) who, in coining the term 'critical friend' summarises what may arguably be the 'core' of the mentoring relationship.

Literature focusing on peer mentoring specifically is scarce. However, one definitive conceptualisation of peer mentoring is given by Topping (2005) who argues that... '*Peer mentoring is typically conducted between people of equal status*' (p 321). This definition moves away from the traditional view of mentoring in that it suggests peer mentoring involves a relationship between equals, rather than between a senior, more experienced person and a less experienced, often younger individual. The importance of 'equality' within the peer mentoring relationship is also discussed by Blackwell & Mc Clean (1996) who argue that ... '*the more interactive and collaborative the approach of the mentor, and to a lesser extent the mentee, the more likely the pairs are to view themselves as peers*' (p 36). Conversely, an alternative perspective is offered by Kennedy (1980) who suggests that peer mentoring involves a 'delayed' reciprocal relationship whereby the peer mentor shares interests and knowledge with the mentee on the understanding that it will be reciprocated at a later time. This viewpoint appears contradictory in nature, describing what may arguably be a more traditional mentoring relationship.

In addition to the above, a useful typology of peer mentoring was proposed by Shapiro et al (1978) who identifies a continuum of activity: *Peer Pals*, people at the same level who share information and mutual support: *Guides*, who explain the system but are not in a position to champion a protégé: *Sponsors*, less powerful than Patrons in promoting the career of a protégé: *Patrons*, influential people who use their power to shape the career of a protégé: *Mentors*, develop a paternalistic relationship with their protégés in which they adopt the role of teacher and advocate (pp 51-58). This continuum may prove particularly useful when considering the role of peer mentors in higher education – although from this perspective peer mentoring at University encapsulates the first two activities only (peer Pals and Guides).

A more functional approach comes from Kram and Isabella (1985) who identify three types of peer relationships: Information Peers, for information sharing; Collegial Peers, for career support; and Special Peers, for confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback and friendship (pp 110-132). When considering the function of peer mentoring in higher education it may be argued that both Information Peers and Special Peers are relevant.

Additionally, work by Vygotsky (1978) is useful in encapsulating and defining the pedagogical value of peer learning. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' in which student learning is prompted and enhanced by interaction with peers arguing that ... *'an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the [student] is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalised, they become part of the [student's] independent developmental achievement . . . developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development* (1978, p 90).

Whilst Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the 'zone of proximal development' suggests that an individual can enhance the cognitive level they are able to achieve on their own by learning with a more capable peer, it is evident that difficulties continue in conceptualising exactly what is meant by the term 'peer tutoring' (for further discussion see for example, Anderson & Boud, 1996; Topping, 1996; Reid et al, 1997; Topping & Ehly, 2001). One formal definition of peer tutoring is proposed by Topping who argues that peer tutoring is *'the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions. It involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing'* (Topping, 2005, p 631). Whilst the emphasis given to 'equality' and 'mutual-help' by Topping (2005) effectively capture the nuances of peer tutoring, another insightful perspective comes from Anderson and Boud

(1996) who highlight the importance of flexibility and the need for mutual emotional support within peer tutoring.

### 1.3 Peer Mentoring and Peer Tutoring in Higher Education

Within higher education, peer mentoring relationships are built upon equality in terms of 'power' (Cropper, 2000). At its widest, peer mentoring provides a wide range of support and consciousness-raising. By using reflection, mentors are able to challenge mentees perspectives and deal with difficulties and challenges as they arise. Thus, through consciousness-raising student mentors enable mentees to develop the *structural context* of academia (Cropper, 2000, p. 603).

In discussing the value of peer mentoring in higher education Jacobi (1991) adopts a functional approach arguing that relationships within mentoring serve three main functions: *(a) emotional and psychological support (b) direct assistance with career and professional development (c) role modeling* (p 510). In the UK, it is the first and the third of these three categories that are particularly relevant to peer mentoring in the transition period and first academic year of higher level study.

An alternative perspective comes from Anderson & Boud (1996) who in discussing the reciprocal value of peer learning, as opposed to peer mentoring, argue *'It is this type of mutual, complementary or reciprocal learning which, if properly managed, holds much potential for extending the range of learning activities. It offers a means of dealing with educational issues difficult to handle in other ways and of restoring and enhancing some of the social dimensions of learning frequently lost in universities of today'* (Anderson & Boud, 1996, p15). Anderson & Boud (1996) continue to argue that the main advantage of peer learning is the opportunity for students to learn from each other in a manner that is qualitatively different from formal university lecturing.

Whilst the above perspectives provide some insight into the value of peer mentoring and peer tutoring in higher education what is evident is that the two are not the same thing, neither are they mutually exclusive. In order to gain a fuller picture about the benefits of each, it is necessary to consider why university students ask for a mentor. The literature provides a detailed analysis of students' reasons for requesting a mentor which may be summarised thus: the opportunity to make friends before starting university; assistance with acclimatising to university life; help coming to terms with the new identity of 'university student'; help dealing with personal problems; the opportunity to discuss difficulties or concerns over academic work; assistance with understanding vocational or professional demands; help with non-study related matters including personal problems and difficulties with culture or language) (for further details see Cropper, 2000; Peyton, 2001; Fox & Stevenson 2006).

Whilst it is argued that peer mentoring is useful in that it provides social or pastoral support for new students, peer tutoring provides an equally valuable function by providing academic support. Indeed, the role of peer tutoring in promoting academic success within higher education has long been recognised in the literature (see for example Astin, 1977, 1984; Topping, 1996, 2005; Topping & Ehly, 2001). Work by Topping (1996) draws attention to the pedagogic value of peer tutoring noting that it is particular useful for students who gain from being given the opportunity to participate in active learning within an interactive environment. peer tutoring provides the means by which students are able to receive immediate feedback in a manner that lowers anxiety and promotes independent learning. Moreover, many students believe peer tutors are better than staff tutors at understanding their problems as they are easier to relate to and are more interested in their personal lives (Topping, 1996)

Conversely, one of the main challenges associated with both peer mentoring and peer tutoring in academia reflects unsuitable pairings. This is particularly the case in peer tutoring in cases where weak students are paired with other weak students as this can result in little or negative pedagogical impact (Topping, 1996). Another difficulty associated with the nature of the mentoring / tutoring relationship and the academic 'strength' of mentoring partners is

highlighted by Fox & Stephenson (2006) who draws attention to issues around trust and confidence – pointing out that difficulties arise when students lack confidence in the quality of their partners work within a peer tutoring setting (Fox & Stephenson, 2006, p 3)

Across all higher education mentoring programmes one of the main challenges reflects the academic, social and personal boundaries between mentor and mentee. In discussing this, Anderson & Shore (2008) argue that despite the fact that the boundaries may be indistinguishable at times, it is the mentors responsibility to maintain clear academic and personal boundaries between themselves and the mentee (for further details see Bowman et al., 1995; Plaut, 1993).

This literature review has provided a brief synopsis of the extant literature in this area. A much wider literature review about reciprocal peer learning and support has been undertaken as part of this project and can be found at <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/>

## Section 2: Project Framework: Typology, Conceptual Framework & Research Questions

### 2.1 Typology of Peer Mentoring

Having analysed the literature, and undertaken a ‘mapping’ of peer mentoring activities across the UK, a Typology of Peer Mentoring was developed prior to the fieldwork commencing, in which the various types of peer mentoring were classified according to ‘form’ and ‘constituents’. This is given below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Typology of Peer Mentoring**

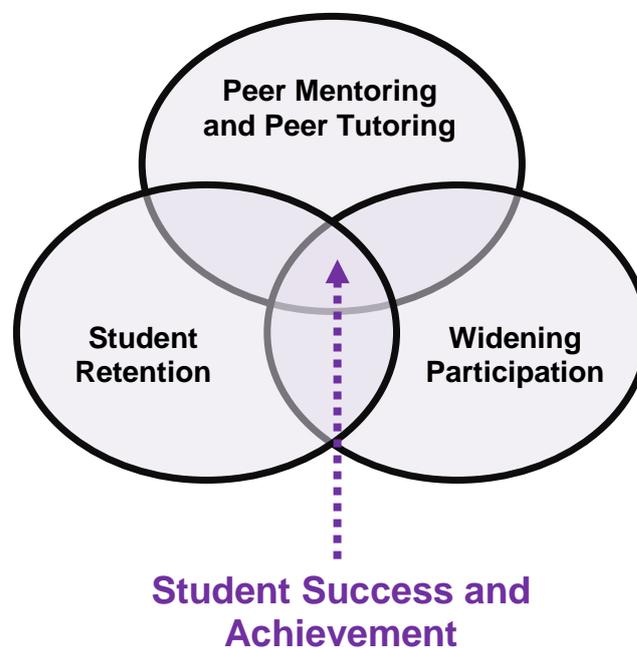
<b>Type of Peer Mentoring</b>	<b>Form of Mentoring</b>	<b>Constituents</b>
<b>Pre-entry peer mentoring</b>	Generally offered via social network sites or e-mail. Existing students mentor future students.	- Targeted or generic [all first years]
<b>One-to-one Peer Mentoring at transition</b>	Generally offered to particular individuals or groups depending on individual and institutional needs and norms. More experienced students mentor new arrivals.	- Resource intensive in terms of organisation and administration - Requires careful ‘matching’ in terms of cultural and, if appropriate, academic requirements.
<b>One-to-group Peer Mentoring at transition</b>	Often known as ‘Peer Guiding’ this form of Peer Mentoring has the advantage of providing a ‘friendly face’ upon arrival making transition positive for students (and in many cases their parents) More experienced students mentor new arrivals	- Often offered on an ‘opt-out’ basis - Institutional, School or Departmental - Can be ‘targeted’ depending on institutional needs - Some matching may be possible - Generally one mentor to four or five mentees (in some cases this is higher)
<b>One-to-one longer term Peer Mentoring</b>	Pastoral in nature this form of peer mentoring tends to be carefully managed. It can involve an element of informal peer counselling. More experienced students mentor their less experienced peers - or mentoring peers at same level.	- Resource intensive, usually offered on an opt-in basis. Mentoring pairs carefully matched. - Needs close supervision of student pairings - Student peer mentors may additional support - Can be cross-university or school focused - Relationships often last throughout the mentees university career and beyond.
<b>One-to-group longer term Peer Mentoring</b>	Pastoral in nature this form of peer mentoring tends to be less formal than one-to-one longer term mentoring. Often school focused. Mentoring partners can be at same or different levels of study	- Less resource intensive than one-to-one peer mentoring - Mentors may need support with group dynamics - Usually put in place within [across] a year group
<b>‘Partnership-led’ Peer Mentoring</b>	Two nominated ‘peer mentors’ lead a small group of between four and ten (possibly more). Can be long or short term. Mentors at same or higher level in their studies than mentees.	- Can be offered on an inter or intra year basis - Offered on a long or short term basis - Particular useful at transition into university
<b>Group Peer Mentoring</b>	A group of students specifically placed together with the purpose of mutual support. This form of mentoring relies on group cohesion and reciprocity. Usually mentors and mentees from same year.	- Can be resource intensive as management of peer support groups may be problematic - Generally School or subject focused. - Usually offered on a short term basis [one term or less]

The above Typology was used both in framing the methodology in terms of selecting the sample and classifying the various mentoring programmes offered by the partner institutions.

## 2.2 The Conceptual Framework

Whilst some challenges to peer mentoring and peer tutoring exist, they are clearly outweighed by the benefits. The literature suggests that peer mentoring programmes help students make the transition into university by providing social support. Peer tutoring on the other hand promotes success by offering individual academic support. Having undertaken a brief analysis of the literature it is evident that government policies pertaining to widening participation and issues of retention and attrition are interconnected. The conceptual framework given below depicts this connection in a diagrammatic format.

**Figure 2: Working Conceptual Model: The Value of Peer Mentoring and Peer Tutoring in Promoting Student Success**



## **2.3 Research Questions**

Taking into account the issues raised in the literature the primary research question was articulated thus:

***From the Students' Perspectives How do Peer Mentoring Programmes Work in Promoting Student Success?***

Four sub-research questions were also developed:

***... From the students' perspectives...***

- 1. What are the main issues impacting student transition into higher education?***
- 2. How can peer mentoring promote a smooth transition into higher education?***
- 3. How do peer mentoring programmes support students within higher education?***
- 4. How does writing peer mentoring support students within higher education?***

## Section 3: The Peer Mentoring Study: Methodology

### 3.1 Defining Peer Mentoring: What is Peer Mentoring in Higher Education?

Having critiqued the literature the following definition of peer mentoring was articulated for use within the project:

*Within the UK Higher Education context, peer mentoring relates to the concept of reciprocal peer support and learning whereby a peer mentor helps to enhance and promote the overall university experience of either an individual student, or group of fellow students. Peer mentors are generally (but not always) slightly more advanced in their studies than peer mentees. By using their own experiences and insights, peer mentors help newer students settle into, and succeed at, university; building relationships that often last through the first year – and in many cases beyond.*

Depending upon the individual HEI, peer mentors may be known by a range of titles including: peer guides: peer coaches: peer supporters: peer leaders: and student guides or student leaders.

### 3.2 The Project Partners

Commencing with the hypothesis that ‘peer support impacts positively on students’ experiences by engendering a greater sense of belonging both socially and academically’, the project set out to clearly identify and critically analyse the key determinants of two different types of peer support: pastoral peer mentoring, and, writing peer mentoring in six different Higher Education Institutions<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The six HEI's comprised: Aston University, Bangor University, Liverpool Hope University, London Metropolitan University, Sheffield University, Oslo HIU

The decision to conduct the research in a number of institutions rather than just one reflected the research need to gain the widest possible picture of students' experiences of peer mentoring. The five UK universities were purposively selected to reflect the sector as a whole. The Norwegian University was included as at the beginning of the project it was in the very early stages of setting up a small mentoring programme in one of its schools<sup>2</sup>:

### 3.3 Approaches to Peer Mentoring Included in the Project

In total, at the beginning of the study five different *approaches* to peer mentoring were identified within the six HEI's in the study. All of these fell within one or more of three categories:

- 1. Transitional university-wide opt-out peer mentoring:** This initially involves peer mentoring during 'welcome' or 'freshers' week. Second and final year students act as peer mentors to first years. Pairing of mentoring couples can be discipline-specific, or based on other demographic characteristics (age, gender, religion, language). Training is compulsory and comprises a single session. Support is given by a centrally appointed person and backed-up by individuals within each School or Faculty. In many cases the mentoring relationships continue into the first term and beyond. Peer mentors are unpaid.
- 2. Longer term university-wide opt-in pastoral peer mentoring:** Peer mentors and mentees are paired in the first few weeks of term. The aim of the programme is to offer on-going support throughout the first year. Pairing of mentoring couples is carefully done to optimise the chances of success. Training is compulsory and comprises two or three two hour-long sessions. Support is given by a centrally appointed team or individual . Peer mentors are unpaid.
- 3. Writing peer mentoring:** Peer mentors are recruited and employed by the university. Writing peer mentors receive in-depth initial and then on-going support. Writing mentoring can be offered on a university-wide or on a more

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<sup>2</sup> Greater detail about each institution included in this study is included in Appendix 1.

local, school-wide basis. The focus of the relationship is writing. Peer mentors are paid.

Figure 3 below shows the approaches to peer mentoring in each of the HEIs identified at the beginning of the study for inclusion within the study.

**Figure 3: Approaches to peer mentoring identified at the beginning of the study.**

Transitional Peer Mentoring	Longer-term Pastoral Peer Mentoring	Writing Peer Mentoring	
	Aston	Aston Liverpool Hope	Opt-in University wide
Bangor Sheffield	<p>-----&gt; The mentoring programmes offered by Bangor &amp; Sheffield both encapsulated many elements of longer-term pastoral peer mentoring.</p> <p>-----&gt;</p>		Opt-out University wide
	Oslo	London Met	Opt-in Discipline-specific

It should be noted that within the HEIs included in the study an additional 8 other programmes to peer mentoring and peer tutoring were offered to the students. However, in order to assure the comparability of the data, and to maintain the internal validity of the sample (the need to compare like-with-like) it was decided to focus the study in the areas identified above.

### 3.4 The Research Approach

The complexity of the different programmes, combined with the varied nature and history of the HEI's included within the study meant that it was somewhat difficult to identify a suitable philosophical and theoretical framework with which to conduct the research. After some discussion, it was decided that a multiple-cases study design involving mixed-methodological approach would be the most appropriate (Yin, 2003). This decision reflected arguments that case studies are particularly useful as a research approach ... *when the*

*phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context...* [and there] exists a complex interaction between a phenomenon and its [ ] context (Yin, 2003, p 4). Furthermore, the fact that each of the HEI's in the study was set within its own ... *temporal, geographical, organisational, institutional and other contexts'* meant that boundaries could be drawn around each case which could then be conceptualised *with reference to characteristics defined by individuals and groups involved; and they can be defined by participants' roles and functions...* (Cohen et al, 2007, p 253).

Taking into account Yin's (2003) description of the necessary criteria needed for multiple case-study research to be undertaken successfully the following commonalities were identified across all of the HEI's involved in the study:

- Common Exemplar Phenomena (In all of the institutions the concept of *students helping students succeed* was central. For the purposes of the study it was decided to concentrate on pastoral peer mentoring and writing peer mentoring).
- Comparable organisational / institutional characteristics and features: All of the organisations in the study are Higher Education Institutions – with a shared emphasis on student support and success).
- Similar regulatory frameworks / constraints: The five UK HEI's share similar regulatory frameworks; additionally all six HEI's are governed by the Bologna Treaty.
- Shared objectives (KPIs / Outputs / Outcomes): All of the HEI's award Bachelors, Master's and PhD level Degrees. Additionally, as the study progressed the UK Institutions introduced Foundation Degrees.
- Shared Interests (policy / practice / purpose): All of the partners share an interest in student success. All of the HEI's in the study are expected to meet externally driven targets and all are committed to enhancing student learning.
- Theoretical linkages: higher education theory links all HEI's in the study.

Prior to the fieldwork commencing, detailed 'Case-Study Plans' were drawn up for each Institution in the study. These were developed in collaboration with

partners at the Institution's concerned to make sure that the methodological tools were suitable for each mentoring environment.

The study began with a pilot survey. A survey tool was developed aimed at capturing the value of mentoring from the perspectives of the student peer mentors and mentees. Following a period of consultation amongst the partners it was decided not to differentiate between the different types of mentoring programmes offered by the institutions but instead to concentrate on the commonalities across each of the programmes. The pilot survey covered both academic and social issues and encapsulated four distinctive areas of university life: thoughts and anxieties before starting university: the social impact of participation in the mentoring programme: the academic impacts of participation in the mentoring programme: relationships and peer mentoring. It was conducted at all of the UK institutions participating in the Project and resulted in a total of 302 completed questionnaires – a response rate of just under 10%.

Following administration of the survey, the data was coded and exported to SPSS for analysis. All results were generated using SPSS and the percentages were rounded to one decimal point. Following the descriptive analysis, the statistical significance of the results was established using ANOVA (showing variance) and t-tests (showing statistical difference). The results of the pilot study are not given in this report but can be found at <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/>

Building on the findings of the pilot study, the next stage of the study involved a follow-on survey of the students involved in pastoral peer mentoring activities within the UK. The Norwegian partner was not included in this second survey due to financial restrictions. As in the pilot survey, it was decided to ask peer mentors and peer mentees similar questions. A total of 374 responses were received at the three Institutions where the survey was administered, a response rate of just over 19%. Following administration of the survey the data was downloaded into SPSS, coded and analysed. Statistical significance tests were used to verify the validity of the data.

The largest part of the project involved undertaking qualitative interviews and focus groups at all of the universities included in the study. Including writing peer mentors a total of 97 one-to-one and focus group interviews were conducted over a 9 month period. The interviews were recorded contemporaneously and then transcribed.

Undertaken during the same time period as interviews and focus groups, the fourth part of the project involved undertaking qualitative non-participant, overt observations of peer mentors activities during welcome week. An observational framework was developed and observations made at two of the partner institutions.

Following a grounded theory approach, the qualitative findings were analysed utilising simple and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory provides a useful set of research strategies with which to undertake social investigation into education (Cummings, 1985). It proved particularly useful in this project as it allowed for the qualitative data analysis to commence once the first few interviews and process groups had been completed. Thus the analytical process involved a critical, comparison of the data that continued through to the end of the analysis.

The analysis was undertaken by the project leaders, who, initially working independently, undertook a micro-analysis of the data in which they each identified the main concepts and sub-concepts. Following this, and in order to assure internal validity and reliability of the findings, the two researchers analysed the data again working together as a team.

Using theoretical sampling techniques, supported by a process of open and then axial coding, the researchers set about identifying key themes and sub-themes. Following this they then identified the relationships between and across the themes and sub-themes. Although the research team undertook the analysis following a grounded theory methodology, they did not use the analysis to build new theory, but instead chose to adapt the process for the purpose of

using the data to develop knowledge about students' experiences. In critiquing the relationships between themes, and subthemes, the researchers were able to identify similarities and differences between the dimensions and properties of the students' perceptions. Having reached a mutual agreement in respect of the key emergent themes and sub-themes, selective coding was used to again re-analyse all the data by the researchers working in collaboration. This final stage of the analysis process involved an interpretation of the relationships and linkages between the concepts and sub-concepts.

By undertaking a constant comparative analysis of the data, the analysis process afforded the opportunity for the researchers to develop knowledge, grounded in data, about how peer mentoring impacts the student experience.

### 3.5 Research Schedule

**Figure 4: Activities and Schedule**

	Exploratory phase	Main fieldwork	Analysis	Final write-up
Literature review and content analysis	Commenced October 2008	Throughout the project	Analysis of literature: January 2009 – throughout	July – September 2011
Survey	Pilot: Nov 2008 – March 2009	Main Survey: October 2009 – March 2010	Analysis of pilot: March 2009 – Aug 2009  Initial analysis of main survey: April – June 2010 In-depth analysis: December 2010 – March 2011	Pilot survey findings written up and disseminated throughout 2009 – 2011  July – August 2011
Interviews and Focus Groups		May 2009 – April 2011	On-going analysis from June 2009	August – September 2011
Observations		September 2009	November 2009	August – September 2011

### 3.6 Ethical Issues

The main ethical issues focused on consent and confidentiality. Prior to the research commencing permission to conduct the fieldwork was gained from the appropriate research committees in each partner of the partner HEI's. On an individual basis, 'informed consent' was gained from the survey respondents as

a matter of course in the process of filling out the questionnaire. All of the students who participated in the interviews were given written details about the project and all signed consent forms. The quantitative data was anonymised whilst confidentiality was guaranteed for the participants in the interviews. The data is being securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. The ethical issues around the observations focused on consent. Thus, for this part of the study, only the peer mentors were included within the sampling frame and consent acquired prior to the observations taking place.

## Section 4: The Study Findings: Evidence from the Surveys

### 4.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of a comparative quantitative analysis of data obtained through surveys conducted by Aston, Bangor and Sheffield Universities. It comprises a descriptive analysis of the survey findings. Accompanying each question is a bar chart that depicts the combined responses in percentages from all three universities. On each graph, the Y axis represents the percentage of responses and the X axis represents the response itself, such as strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion etc. Where there were significant anomalies between each university, one graph for each institution's responses has been displayed to demonstrate the differences between them.

### 4.2 Demographic Details

**Figure 5: Response Rate (Mentors and Mentees)**

	Aston	Bangor	Sheffield	Total
<b>Response</b>	50	248	76	<b>374</b>
<b>Number in Sample</b>	350	1,100	500	<b>1,950</b>
<b>Response Rate</b>	14.29%	22.6%	15.2%	<b>19.2%</b>

Out of the three universities, Bangor garnered the highest response rate (22.6%), followed by Sheffield (15.2%) and then Aston (14.29%). The mentee to mentor ratio was roughly half and half across the three universities, although Aston had slightly more peer Mentors (61.5%) and Bangor and Sheffield had slightly less (46.7% and 42.1%). The ratio of female-male peer Mentors was similar across all three Institutions with noticeably more female students peer

mentoring for the role than their male counterparts (around 75% of the peer Mentors were female, 25% male). This is somewhat different to the gender distribution noted in recent wider studies of student peer mentoring in the UK which found that amongst student peer mentors, the gender division is relatively small with just under 56% of student peer mentors being female and just over 44% being male (Holdsworth, 2010).

#### - **Ethnicity**

Across all three universities, the majority of respondents (80%) define their ethnicity as being white. Aston University was by far the most diverse of the three institutions with 55% of the respondents being from British Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (the vast majority of these classified themselves as British Asians). At Sheffield 20% of students classified themselves as being from a BME background, with the largest group being of Chinese origin (7%). Conversely, almost all of Bangor University's respondents defined themselves as White (93%), with Chinese students again making up the next largest ethnic group.

#### - **Other Relevant Demographic Characteristics**

At all three universities, less than 8% of participants described themselves as having a disability. This compares to 14% [1 in 7] of the working age population in the UK (DWP, 2011). The overwhelming majority of respondents at each institution were full-time home / EU students. The majority of respondents at Bangor and Sheffield were living in university residences whereas 63.2% of respondents at Aston lived off campus in private / rented accommodation or with their families.

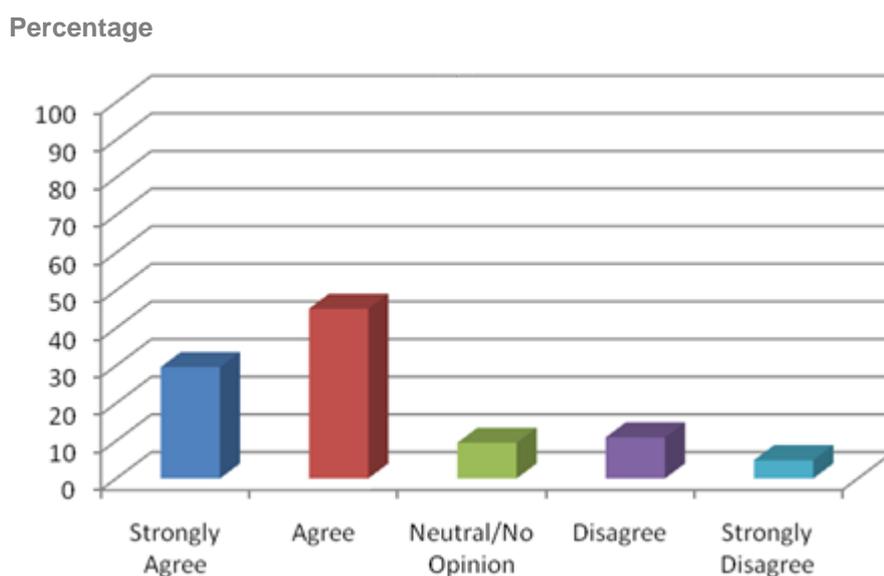
### 4.3 How Information About Peer Mentoring is Communicated: Student Perspectives

There were similarities between Aston and Sheffield in how respondents found out about the peer mentoring / guiding programmes. At both universities, e-mail was the most successful method of promotion for the programme. This was followed by the Virtual Learning Environment at Aston and websites at Sheffield. In stark contrast to these two institutions, at Bangor the most effective methods of promotion were at fresher's week, on open days, and in prospectuses.

### 4.4 The 'Transition Period'

At all three universities, the majority of students (just under 75%) agreed that they were anxious about making new friends before starting university. Figure 6 shows students responses to the statement '*Before coming to university I was concerned about making friends...*'

**Figure 6: Students' Concerns about Making Friends**

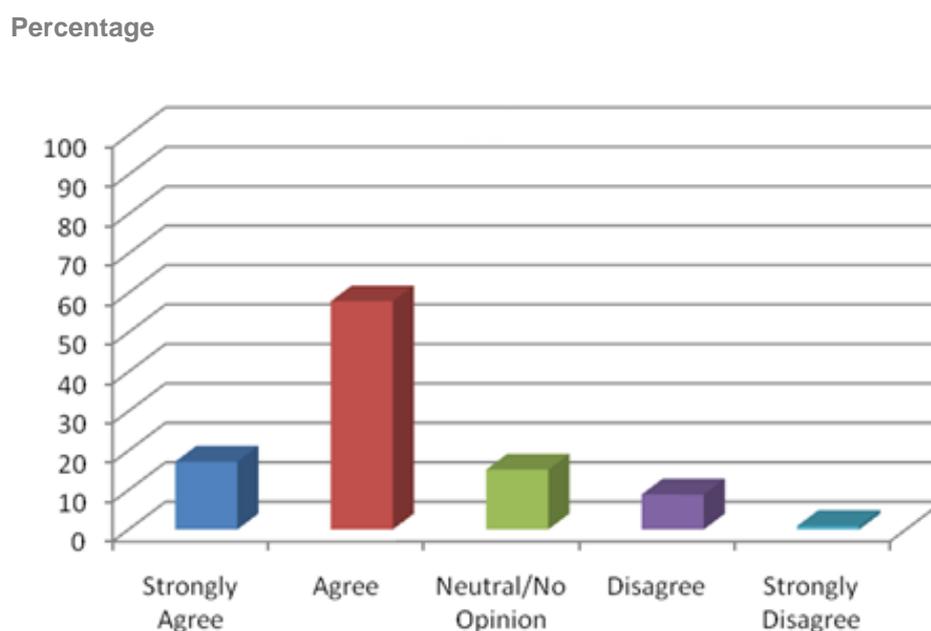


The importance of the transition in shaping the student experience is discussed in the literature (see for example, Cropper, 2000; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001;

Sanchez et al., 2006) which identifies the first few days and weeks as being crucial in determining both student retention and student success. The majority of respondents indicated that in starting university they were mostly concerned about whether they would adjust to the social aspects of university life (in particular the majority were worried about 'fitting in' and 'adjusting').

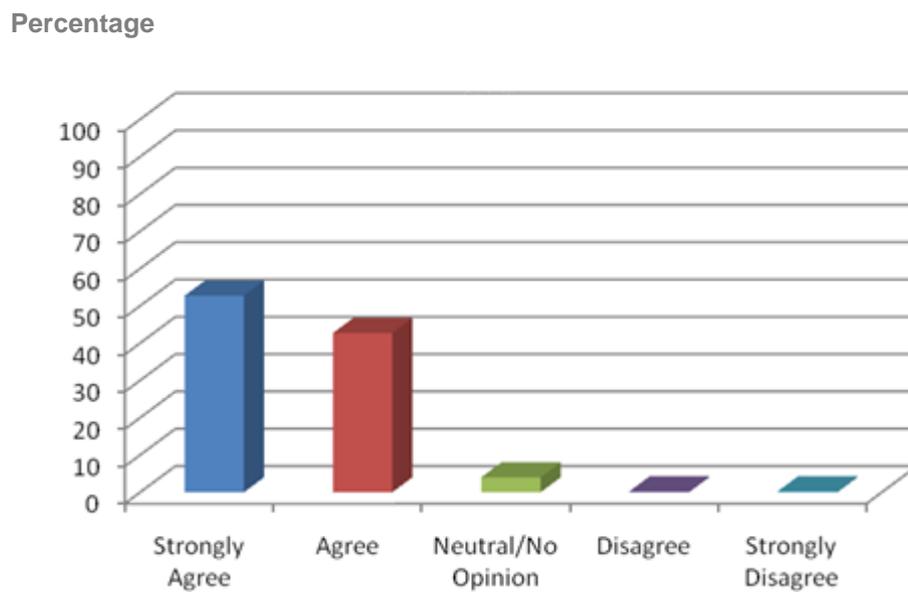
Conversely, whilst the majority of students were worried about the non-academic aspects of university life, 70% were confident they had the ability to succeed in their chosen area of study. Figure 7 provides a graphical representation of student responses to the statement '*I am confident that I have the ability to succeed in my chosen area of academic study*'.

**Figure 7: Students' confidence in their ability to succeed academically**



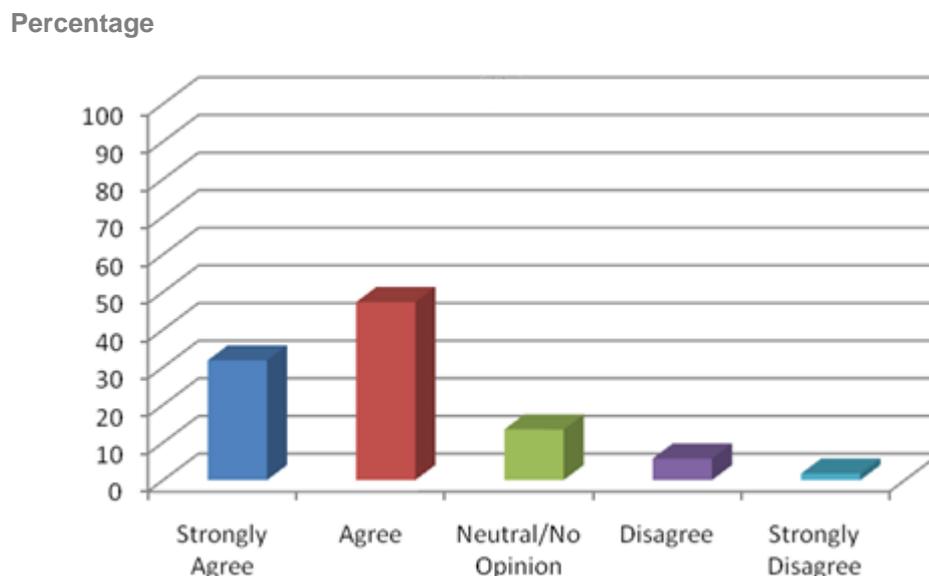
In addition to having confidence in their abilities to succeed academically, there was a considerable level of strong agreement when participants were surveyed about whether they were committed to completing their studies at university. This is shown below in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Students Commitment to Completing their Studies**



Taking the above research findings together, it is evident that the majority of new students are not concerned about the academic side of university at transition, but are in fact worried about whether they will settle in and make friends. One of the strengths of peer mentoring is that it engenders a sense of belonging right from the onset. Indeed, just under 75% of the students surveyed agreed that becoming involved in peer mentoring had helped them feel part of the university. This is depicted below in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Participation in peer mentoring Helped Me Feel Part of the University**



The study findings support previous work (see for example Jacobi, 1991; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Fox and Stephenson, 2006) and show how important a sense of belonging is in making students feel part of the university.

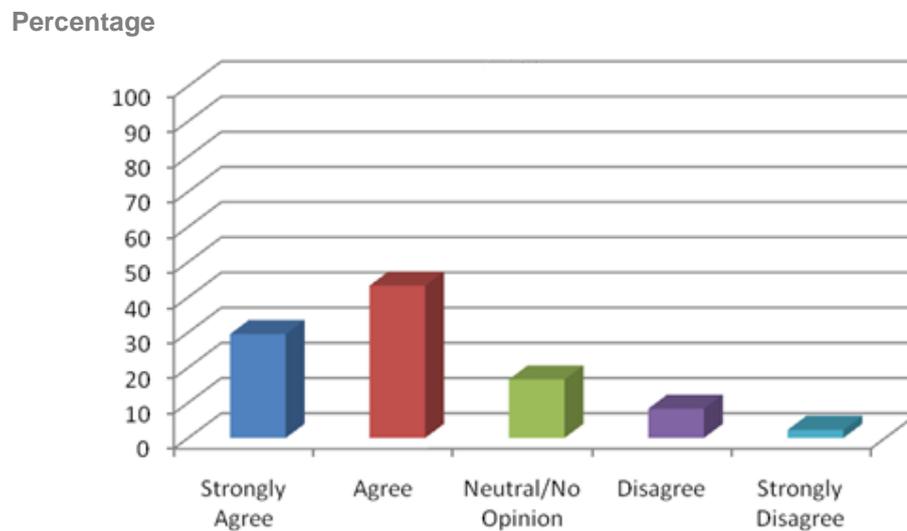
In addition to providing the ideal mechanism by which new students are able to make friends and settle in, participation in peer mentoring enables new students to gain a good insight into what studying at university level will require. Such insights helps students' better prepare for the demands of their course and reinforces individual's commitment to completing their studies.

#### **4.5 Following Transition – Term 1 and Beyond**

Across the three universities, peer mentoring relationships continued well after fresher's week and into the first term. At Aston this is indicative of the way in which the programme is managed – peer mentoring partnerships are established in the first few weeks of term and students are encouraged to develop a reciprocal relationship throughout the year. At Bangor and Sheffield although the emphasis is on the 'transition period' the vast majority of participants indicated that having made a 'connection' the peer mentoring relationship continued throughout the first term – often into the second term and beyond.

The longitudinal nature of peer mentoring was evident in the responses given to questions that focused on how participation in the programme had helped students succeed at university. The first area covered by the survey looked at how peer mentoring helps both mentors and mentees make better use of the breadth of opportunities available at university. Figure 10 shows that around 70% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that participation in peer mentoring helped them to make the most of the academic opportunities available to them.

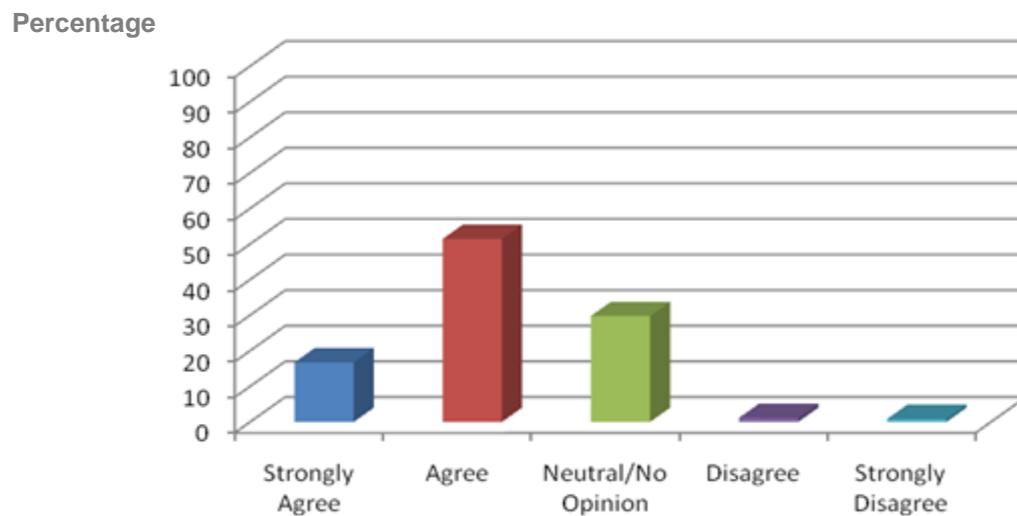
**Figure 10: Participation in Peer Mentoring Helped Me Make Better Use of the Academic Opportunities Available at University**



Further qualitative investigation (see section 4) suggests that peer mentoring supports students in making the most of academic opportunities by providing the ideal forum in which they can learn from each other's experiences with regards to all aspects of their university experience.

In addition to providing the means by which students can make the most of academic opportunities, the survey revealed that participation in peer mentoring encourages new students to make the most of the support offered by student services. This is shown below in Figure 11.

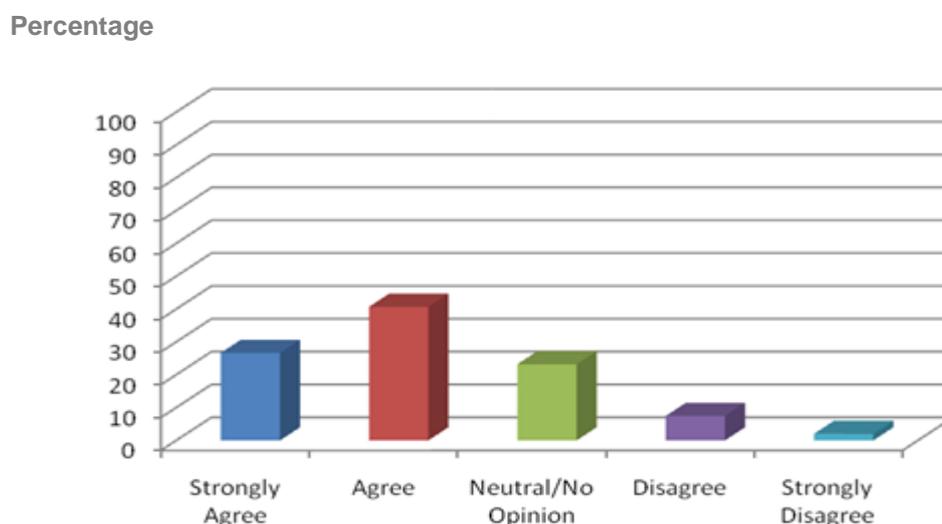
**Figure 11: Participation in Peer Mentoring Helped Me Make the Most of the Support Offered By Student Services**



Irrespective of area of study or social-demographic background it is widely acknowledged that communication skills are crucial to student success.

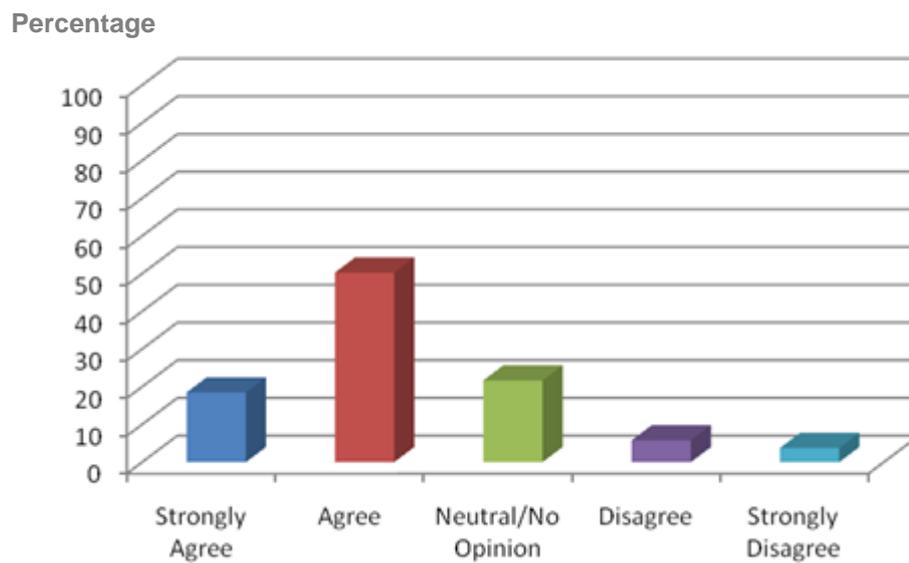
The nature of peer mentoring means that it is built upon reciprocal communication between the mentee and mentor. Indeed the majority of both mentees and mentors agreed that peer mentoring helped them improve and develop their communication skills as is shown overleaf in Figure 12.

**Figure 12: Participation in Peer Mentoring Helped me Develop my Communication Skills**



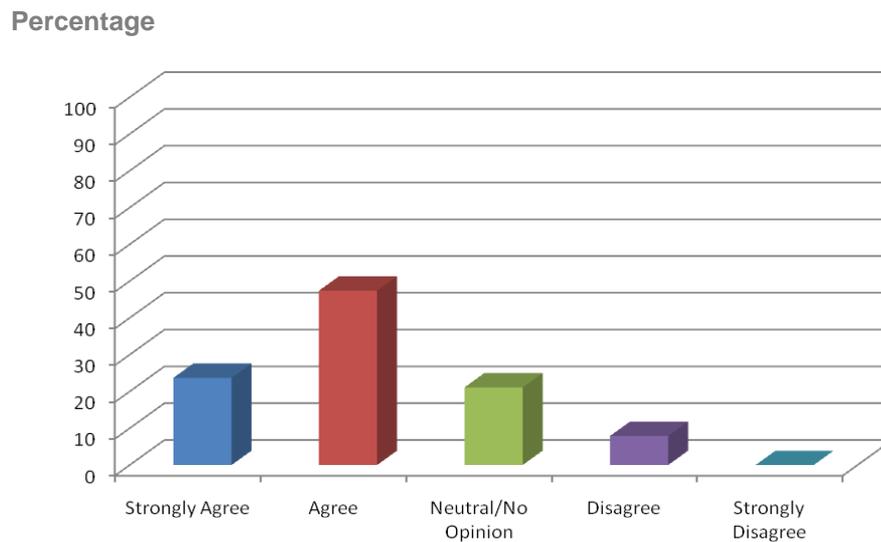
Whilst transitional / pastoral peer mentoring are not academically focused, for the majority of students, participation in peer mentoring proved to be a positive learning experience as depicted in Figure 13.

**Figure 13: Participation in Peer Mentoring Has Been a Positive Learning Experience**



Critical to successful peer mentoring relationships is the fact that they are reciprocal in nature. Such reciprocity entails both parties being responsive to each other's needs. Figure 14 shows the importance placed on responsiveness to individual needs.

**Figure 14: Participation in Peer Mentoring Has Met My Individual Needs**

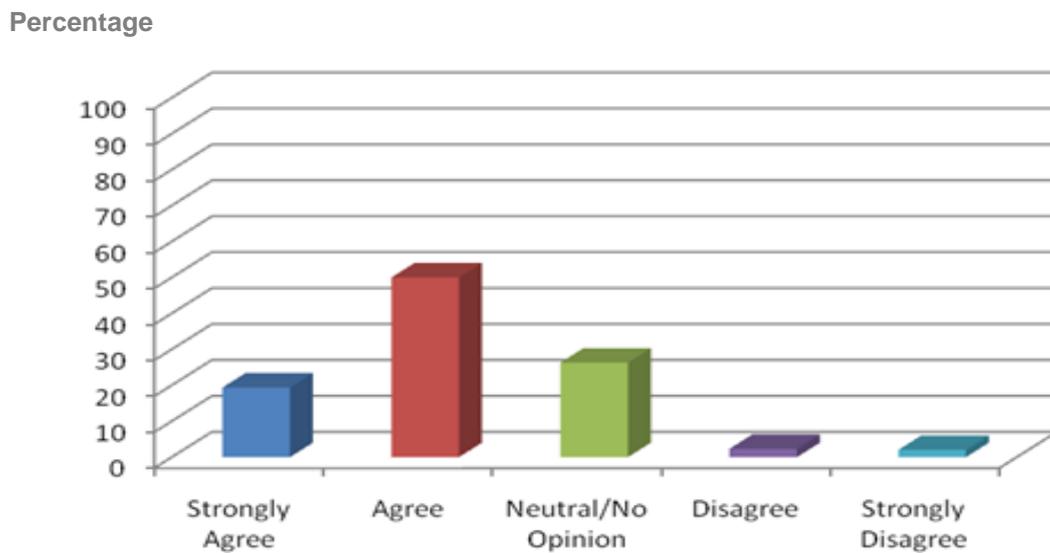


In order to identify how peer mentoring meets individual needs a series of questions were developed to look at the issues a little deeper. These focused on the nature of the relationship between mentor and mentee.

Peer mentoring differs from traditional mentoring because it is centred upon a relationship between 'equals', thereby alleviating the issues around hierarchy that might be experienced in a traditional mentoring relationship.

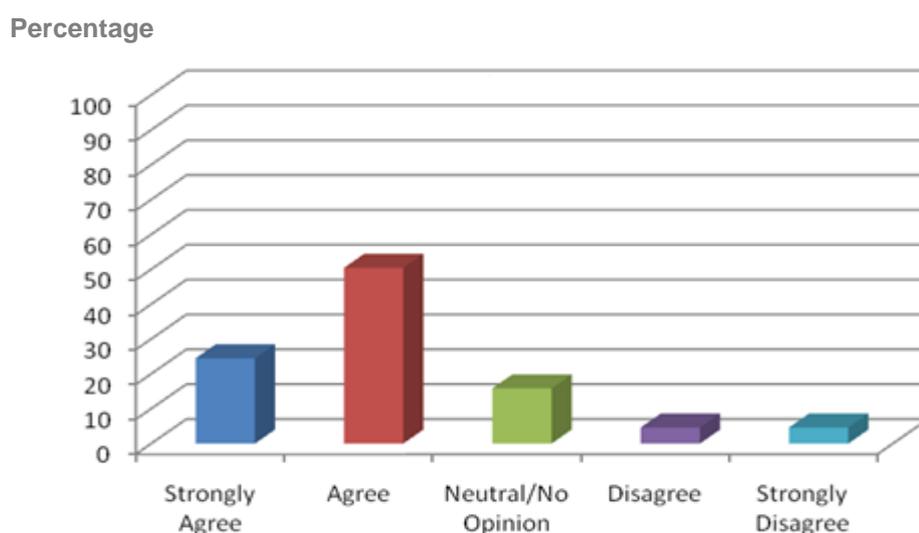
One of the ways in which peer mentoring meets individual student needs is to afford the opportunity for students to work on a one-to-one basis in a semi-formal and supported manner. Figure 15 shows the importance of developing one-to-one relationships in peer mentoring.

**Figure 15: The Opportunity to Develop a One-to-One Relationship is an Important Part of Peer Mentoring**



Associated with the opportunity to build one-to-one relationships, is the way in which students relate to each other during mentoring sessions. Figure 15 shows that just under 75% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to relate to their mentor or mentee. This is depicted below in Figure 16.

**Figure 16: During Mentoring Sessions I Felt Able to Relate to My Peer (Mentor / Mentee)**



This section has provided a brief overview of the survey research findings about Pastoral peer mentoring. The survey represents a 'snapshot' of students' perceptions of peer mentoring; in doing so it provides evidence that peer mentoring works. However, in order to find out **how** it works, a much more in-depth investigation was carried out using qualitative methodologies. The results from this are given in the following chapter which uses the students' own words to show how and what works.

## Section 5: In the Students' Own Words

Using the students' own words, this chapter provides a unique insight into how and why transitional and longer-term pastoral peer mentoring 'works' in enhancing the student experience and, in doing so, promotes success.

In total 61 students, of whom 29 were peer mentees and 32 peer mentors, were interviewed in four different HEIs. In each Institution the peer mentoring Programme differed slightly in the way that mentoring was managed and administered. The below table provides details of the programmes included within the study in each Higher Education Institution<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 14: A Comparative Table of Four Mentoring Programmes**

<p><b><u>Aston University</u></b> University wide pastoral peer mentoring [non-discipline specific]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Voluntary participation: Both mentors and mentees 'Opt In'</li> <li>- Peer mentors and mentees paired together in the first few weeks of term</li> <li>- All mentoring relationships are one-to-one – most students select to have a mentor from their own area of study.</li> <li>- Programme lasts for the duration of the first year</li> <li>- Programme covers all academic years.</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Oslo and Akershus University College</u></b> Recently established pastoral peer mentoring in one Faculty [Pre-School Education]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Voluntary participation: Both mentors and mentees 'Opt in'</li> <li>- Targeted ostensibly at students from a 'non-traditional' or 'minority' background</li> <li>- Most mentoring relationships are one-to-one although some are two-mentees to one mentor.</li> <li>- Programme lasts for the duration of the first year</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Bangor University</u></b> Pastoral peer mentoring across the whole University – 'Opt-Out' Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All first year students allocated a 'Peer Guide' on their first day</li> <li>- One peer Guide takes responsibility for a small group of students</li> <li>- Peer guiding tends to be 'Faculty Based'</li> <li>- Peer guides welcome students as they move into their accommodation – providing a friendly face and an instant link with the University</li> <li>- Peer mentoring relationships often continue beyond the first few weeks of term into the first few months and beyond</li> <li>- Welsh-speaking mentors available</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Sheffield University</u></b> Pastoral peer mentoring across the much of the University – 'Opt-Out' Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All first year students allocated a 'peer guide' on their first day</li> <li>- The aim of the programme is to provide mentors for the whole of the 1<sup>st</sup> year.</li> <li>- Some targeting of 'non-traditional', 'minority' and 'at risk' students for longer term mentoring programmes.</li> <li>- One peer guide takes responsibility for a small group of students.</li> <li>- Peer guiding tends to be 'Faculty Based'</li> <li>- Peer relationships often continue beyond the first few weeks of term into the first few months and beyond</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that each University offered numerous different models of peer mentoring. However, due to practical restrictions, the decision was taken to include only one type of mentoring Programme from each Institution within the study. Thus, the most comparable types of mentoring were analysed.

In undertaking the interviews, and writing-up the findings, the need for the research team to guarantee institutional and individual confidentiality was paramount. Thus all of the quotes in this report are anonymised in terms of institutional and individual details. The types of mentoring programme analysed were purposively selected so as to elicit comparable data. Thus, the interview questions were written in such a way so as to be applicable to both types of mentoring, and the same interview guide was used for all participants – irrespective of institution.

This section shows that peer mentoring works in four distinctive areas: Transition: Academic support: On-going support, and: Benefits for peer mentors alone. In addition to highlighting the benefits of peer mentoring, the final part of the section looks at the challenges.

## **5.1 Tackling the Trials and Tribulations of Transition**

Relating to the first few days and weeks of the first term, the period of transition can potentially be one of the most challenging experiences a new university student has to face. Almost all of those interviewed described their main concerns about starting university as being related to whether they would fit in and make friends.

The ‘fear’ experienced by students manifest by worries about making friends was raised by the majority of interviewees with one student describing succinctly how it felt to make the transition to university:

*Anyone that says they're not scared is lying because there is that fear. Everyone has those giant fears of am I going to be liked, am I going to make friends, how am I going to feel living away from home... .. you know... you're afraid of everything, but you've got to grow up some time*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

The first few weeks can be difficult for all students; even the more mature students can feel intimidated and somewhat isolated:

*In the first few days for me it was feeling out of it... I felt even more intimidated because being a mature student, I am forty odd and they are all so young... they were all in groups and groups...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK 'Mature' Student: Female: Mentor]

Fears of isolation and of not fitting in were not uncommon; indeed, for the majority of those interviewed such fears were the main area of concern irrespective of nationality, age or gender. As such they were expressed over and over again:

*As an international student I was thinking to myself ... .. am I going to make new friends, am I going to cope, am I going to settle there?.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Female : Mentee].

*I was worried about like getting on with other people and fitting in... .. I wasn't worried about the work or anything, it was just fitting in.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

*The main concern in my first year was just that I was going to form some good relationships with friends - the course didn't come into it.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Male: Mentor]

Transitional peer mentoring works because it provides new students with a key person who befriends them and makes them feel welcome right from day one of the new term giving them the confidence to succeed:

*Peer guiding gives people a friend before they arrive at uni, because like I was talking to my peer guide the summer before I came, so when I got to uni, it's like yeah, I know someone and like they'll help me meet the other people.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*It gave me the confidence to talk to other people, because I'd had that first conversation with my peer guide, so it made me feel like I could do it.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*... you're given a friend on the first day... ... your peer guide is given to you, and they're trained to get on with you and put lots of effort into getting on with you. And if you don't you can change peer guide, but ultimately you're given somebody who is going to be your friend in those first few days.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

For many of the students interviewed, transitional mentoring tended not only to focus on the first two weeks in term, but, having built a strong relationship, continued into the first year becoming more akin to longer-term pastoral mentoring as time went on. Longer-term pastoral mentoring captures those students, who having made it through the first week, then experience difficulties in settling down on their course:

*... in the first few weeks you don't have friends on your course. Your mentor is someone to talk with, you feel relaxed actually. You can share with someone. It's not only mentoring. It's friendship.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

*I think it helps more people to stay in university and not drop out because they don't feel as lonely when they first arrive... They've always got someone to text or to talk to.....*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

Peer mentoring is about much more than providing a nominated friend. For many of the students peer mentoring works because it provides a 'Safety Net' that gives them someone who they can rely on and, if necessary, fall back on:

*I felt like it was something to fall back on. Because I had a couple of times [ ] where I felt a bit lost, and I knew I always had someone that I could just phone up and they would drop what they were doing.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

*... For me it was a safety net. I was new in School and it was good to know I had someone to work with and to ask questions...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: European Student: Female: Mentee]

*I have the feeling my peer guide felt responsible for me, so she was asking how I was. They were concerned about us, kind of caring, so yeah I think it's good to have...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*I like to make the students feel as welcome as possible, [ ] it's that initial week that really makes or breaks whether the new students like university or not.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

For peer mentors in two of the three universities, an important part of their role involves meeting new students as they arrive on the campus. This initial meeting provides the opportunity not just to make the new students feel welcome, but also to talk to parents accompanying their offspring:

*And settling down the parents as well, I think that's just as important if the parents are happy that their child's going to be happy here then that's half of your job done. If you can convince them it's a nice place to be its safe, we're not all drug taking boozing maniacs. You know. Job done.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Female: Mentor]

*And it was, I feel a lot of my welcome weekend was spent talking to parents, they related to me as a mature student, as an older person, most of my comforting seemed to be going towards the parents.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Male: Mentor]

*I spent quite a large percentage of the time sitting in kitchens in the flats talking to the parents and reassuring them. And not only that just general background university history and the city and things like that, but about student life.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

The trepidation experienced by new students in making the transition to university has been widely discussed in the literature (for further discussion see Yorke & Longden, 2008). However, what this study has shown is that new students' concerns can be successfully dealt with by offering them a 'nominated friend' in the form of a peer mentor from the moment they arrive at University. One of the main strengths of peer mentoring at all four Institutions included within the study is that it engendered a sense of belonging, acting as a safety net, 'catching students' who otherwise might have floundered.

## **5.2 Academic Support and Peer Mentoring: Addressing Academic Anxieties**

Whilst settling in and making friends was the most frequently expressed concern for new students during and before the transition period, academic matters proved to be an issue later in the term. Unlike peer tutoring, peer mentoring is not about providing academic assistance. However, by allowing students to support students experiencing problems with various 'generic' study related issues, both transitional and longer-term pastoral peer mentoring provide a student-focused support mechanism with which institutions can begin to combat attrition.

For many new students, making the step academically from 6<sup>th</sup> form, college or work to university is daunting. Having got over the initial worries about making friends and settling in, for many students the next big hurdle is their first assignment. Different expectations, more critical writing styles and a more demanding level of study can result in students struggling academically. For some of the peer mentees, having a more experienced peer to go to for advice made all the difference:

*I find it really, really difficult writing, like stepping up from sixth form to university and kind of writing essays then for university. And then so just to have my peer guide there just to be able to kind of ... I don't know ... kind of just help me do research on it, to improve my grades. But I don't know, I find it really, really helpful... .. So I think it's just like helpful little hints or books to look at.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

Peer mentoring provides the means by which more experienced students can help new students 'learn to learn'. In doing so it promotes independent learning:

*The first thing she helped me about was when I had to start writing essays for my coursework during the first time in the first term. I had no clue how to search for the electronic journals or books in the library. .... She showed me everything like how to do it electronically, how to look for different types of topics in the library where the sections are and everything, and it was so useful because after her advice I was able to actually do it myself and start preparing because otherwise I wouldn't have done anything.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU Student: Female: Mentee]

For many new students, the sheer size of university is difficult to cope with. Several described feeling anonymous. The 'personal' nature of peer mentoring meant that they felt far more comfortable approaching their peer Mentor for advice than they did their lecturers or tutors:

*In my experience ... you're in a lecture with like 400 students who they teach twice a week. They've not even seen your face before, let alone know anything about you. So there's no sort of personal element to it, so it's better to ask your mentor in that respect... ... it's better to ask your mentor, you feel like you're not bothering them and you can ask them lots and lots of questions, whereas your lecturer you feel like it has to be quite a significant question for it to be worthy of going to ask him.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

*I think if you ask help for lecturers, you need to see them in office hours and you can only probably ask your lecturers about questions about your coursework or probably about the academic problems. They don't know you. They have so many students. But if you talk with your peer mentor [ ] you are more relaxed and also you can talk almost whenever you want...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Female: Mentee]

Many new students find it difficult to go to lecturers for advice. Peer mentoring provides an accessible and informal alternative to approaching a formal lecturer. Many of the interviewees discussed this, noting that unlike academic and other university staff, peer mentors tend to be readily available and able to offer advice on the more 'generic' aspects of study:

*I was afraid to ask staff members for advice... Whereas if I asked my mentor, because she's more like a friend, she don't mind if you bother her at nine/ten in the evening*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU 'Mature' Student: Female: Mentee].

*In the first term I got asked "Can you help me with this assignment or can you help me with that?" Because they don't want to ask their tutors because they feel like they can't go to them and ask them... ... So I sat down with a few of them and said, "Look, have you looked at doing this and have you looked at it from this sort of point of view."*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

*Yeah it was good that it was somebody who wasn't necessarily a staff member as well, so you could ask the questions that are relevant to you as a student*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

For all students, module selection can be a difficult experience. However, this is particularly the case for first year students who have little or no idea of the potential demands particular modules will place on them – or indeed, of other less tangible factors, such as the personality of the lecturer. Peer mentoring offers the ideal forum in which students can exchange tacit knowledge that is not available elsewhere. Such tacit knowledge can vary in nature, depending on whether mentoring is school or university-wide. By sharing their experiences, mentors help 1<sup>st</sup> years make informed decisions about their studies, this ultimately enhance the student experience and promotes success:

*The peer guides talked to us about the modules, helping us decide...  
... they were like, "Well do you want exams or do you want like assignments to do?" And if we said that, "Well like I'll do this one because..." they helped us choose. And also they told us which lecturers are nice and stuff like that.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

*... my peer guide helped me to choose the modules, because when I am first here, I don't know ... if this module, whether this it is for me or not. Because the peer guide, she used to study this, she talk to me, and tell me what this module is about. What the teaching is, the Professor, my peer guide says he speaks very fast, so you should be careful or use some machine to help you to listen to your lectures...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Female: Mentee]

Peer mentoring enables more experienced students to act as a 'Study-Buddy' to newer students. For one mentor this involves encouraging students to work:

*I told my mentees to “Go and work”. That was difficult... I mean I happen to be a fairly assertive person, and even I was struggling. But I managed. You need that social interaction to make those things really effective and make the learning effective.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year Student: Female: Mentor]

For some of the mentees, the advice proffered by their mentors provided invaluable:

*I was getting confused about the academic work. If the teacher told me to read one page I would read one and a half pages, and if they tell me to read two pages I would read 10 pages. I was getting overloaded and that overload was stressing me out. In fact I was really stressed out in terms of the academic work... I talked to my mentor about it... He told me what modules are really important, what I need to learn....*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Male: Mentee]

*... We talked about starting to study, reading, and what are the most important things in the curriculum... and stuff like that... I had difficulty with applying the theory... She gave some tips on what to do... I learnt from her experience.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU Student: Female: Mentee]

Exams are integral to success at university. Peer mentoring provides the means by which newer students are able to get advice on study and revision techniques, whilst also being provided with reassurance from someone in a similar position:

*... me and my mentor [ ] mainly talked about the course and about what books to buy because I was confused about those...and we talked in November because I started panicking about the end of term exams and she was basically just saying don't panic, don't worry...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year Student: Female: Mentee]

*My mentor gave me a lot of guidelines about what we had to do in terms of [ ] revising. We had exams in January. He told me I was doing the wrong thing. I was studying in the wrong format, which wouldn't help me, which would just make me gain knowledge but wouldn't help me score marks. So he helped me revise*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year International Student: Male: Mentee]

*At least my mentee knows more about what to expect in the exams than I did, and how strict the marking is, and that sort of thing.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year Student: Female: Mentor]

*...because the two girls I mentored, when we met up it was more talking ahead on what they should prepare for in exams and how to make the best of the weeks ahead...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year EU Student: Female: Mentor]

For peer mentors, one of the main advantages of helping new students with their study skills is the opportunity to reflect on prior learning and refresh knowledge acquired in the first year of study:

*I think you get quite a lot because you get to refresh what you learnt in the first year.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

*Also it helps you revise your topics because a lot of people forget the stuff that they learnt in the first year so if your mentee comes up and says "Can you explain how such event occurs" then it's good for you to refresh your memory and to explain. Obviously not give them the answer, but help them achieve it for themselves.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

For others, being a peer mentor helped with more tangible study skills:

*It's [ ] had an impact to help me on my presentation skills also because it was easier to talk in front of people. And from the country I come from there's no such emphasis on presentations, so here when you learn how to communicate in front of people, how to manage your own ideas and present them, and this is knowing how it works on presentations.*

[EU Student: 2<sup>nd</sup> Year: Female: Mentor]

*For me being a mentor helped me become a better student. By showing my mentees how to use the library, the electronic catalogues and things I learnt more myself. When they asked me questions about studying that I didn't know rather than loose face I went and found out. That's benefitted me a lot.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

The academic step into university is a significant one. What this study has revealed is that by working with a peer mentor, new students are not only helped in make the 'social transition' into university, they can also be helped academically.

It is important to note that peer mentoring is not peer tutoring. Peer mentors do not directly help with academic work; however, they do assist new students in becoming 'independent learners' by sharing tacit knowledge such as how to access the library and by giving advice about module selection. Furthermore, by revisiting the skills acquired in the first year, peer mentors reinforce and further develop their own approaches to learning.

### **5.3 On-Going Support and Peer Mentoring: Belonging and Relationships**

With high attrition rates (Rodden, 2002; Arumlampalam, 2002), the first few weeks of university are noted for being a time when students need high levels of support. However, for some students the rest of the first year can be equally

traumatic. Indeed, with an average first year attrition rate of around 8% across the UK (HESA, 2011) it is clear that support mechanisms need to be put into place to prevent new students dropping out. Leaving higher education without completing the first year can significantly damage an individual's life chances. Peer mentoring works not only by helping students make a smooth transition into university, but by supporting them throughout their first year, embedding a sense of belonging based on strong peer relationships.

For many of the peer mentees, the on-going support offered to them following fresher's week shaped their later university experience:

*The real test is not necessarily how much you spend in the first week, because they might see you every day for the first week... .. It's more like the months and the times afterwards. Because I didn't see her every single day in fresher's, but she's always been there for me ever since and that's been really supportive. I maybe need it less than I did in the beginning but it's still good to have someone there who's friendly.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*I think it's important that being a peer guide is not just for two or three weeks at the start of the year. It kind of continues on. I still speak to mine now. For example, one of them asked me to look at their summary work the other Week, just to have a look over it and stuff. I think it's important to have access further than those couple of Weeks.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

*I feel really comfortable with her so everything I need help with I ask for. She made it really clear to me that any problems I can always call her...that was one thing that I thought was really great ... She said any time you need help with something I am always here for you and that is really great...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*Yes, I kept in touch with mine... She was really amazing. And she was interested in both the educational side and the social side, but she emphasised the educational aspects. I think she was more interested in how I was getting along academically, and she was really brilliant.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

With a long term commitment, comes long term responsibility. Throughout the interviews the degree to which the majority of mentors took their role seriously was evident:

*Yes, I think the message needs to be reinforced, new mentors need to be told that they should be committed and motivated. You don't just go into it because you're going to get a certificate, but it's about people, you should care about people, treat others the way you'd like to be treated. And it's really, really rewarding, because you make an impact on these people's lives, so they should really, really go in for it and put in the amount of time and effort to just make it a memorable experience for the new students.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Senior Mentor]

*But if you have one of your fresher's that really struggles to make friends on the course, like I have one guy who even now, he still spends every night of the week in his room, so I always make sure that once a week I give him a ring and drag him out with me regardless of if that's what everyone else is doing or not, just so I know he's had some social interaction because he's had some problems with it. He's mentioned it to me and I told him I'd keep an eye on it, unfortunately he's just not confident enough to make friends. But he's made more friends with peer guides and second years and third years than he has with anyone on his year. He doesn't socialize with them at all but then he'll come out with me and my friends or the other peer guides who know what he's like.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Mentor: Male]

One particular area where peer mentoring proved particularly valuable is in the support given to overseas students. For some peer mentors this means spending a little bit of extra time, showing they care or providing advice and guidance about day-to-day living:

*... my mentee is somewhere that feels to her like the other end of the world ... and life's horrible and she wants to go home. She's from Malaysia and suffers a lot from homesickness. I arrange to meet her, we meet up, talk things through and it's all alright again. She just needs someone to spend a bit of time with her, to say 'what's up?'*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female]

*And the first time I met my mentee who's from Spain we sat down having a coffee and a general chat... Our first meeting it lasted like two or three hours because we ended up like going to the bank and going to the student advice centre, because [ ] she wanted to know about bank accounts and things like that.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

Throughout the interviews, the sense of responsibility felt by the mentors towards their mentees was evident. However, it is the reciprocal nature of peer mentoring that is of the greatest value – indeed, it may be argued that peer mentoring works because it provides the means by which students are able to build long-lasting friendships

*I'm friends with my mentee to a great extent really. But again, as you said, you don't meet up, you don't text her and say, "Let's meet up." It's, "Do you want to meet up?" So you're still in the situation where you have a duty to be there if they need you, but they don't have a duty to meet you if you don't want to. But yeah, we talk about other things other than coursework or something like that, so I would say that we have a friendship.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

*My mentor is my friend now and I am as close to her as other people I have met at uni which is really great...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*I get on really well with my peer guide ... we're really close...  
I can still talk to him, we get on really, really well....*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

*But that was, she's just like, how you would do with your friends. She's become quite a good friend.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU Mature Student: Female: Mentee]

Whilst the vast majority of students interviewed as part of this study had participated in successful and worthwhile mentoring relationships, what this study has shown is that for mentoring programmes to work both peer mentors and peer mentees need to adopt a responsible attitude towards their 'mentoring partner'.

## **5.4 Benefits for Mentors**

In many respects, the benefits of peer mentoring are universal – similarly experienced by peer mentors and mentees alike. However, one of the unexpected outcomes of the study was the discovery that some of the benefits were experienced by peer mentors alone. These benefits were focused in two different areas: Enhanced Employability Skills; and, Personal Benefits.

### **- Enhanced Employability Skills**

For the majority of the peer mentors, one of the key benefits of participating in the peer mentoring was the opportunity to gain transferable employability skills. Such skills ranged from learning how to give advice to having the opportunity to gain management, organisational and leadership skills:

*It was the same thing, you learn about how to give advice, like you've been through it yourself and that you're in a job, when I have I will have to give advice to my staff and it's a good learning experience and yeah, I thought it would have that, because they said to me it would have like courses in different, how to, yeah, give advice and stuff, yeah.*

[EU Student: 2<sup>nd</sup> Year: Male: Mentor]

*I've gotten better at organizing things, and I'm better at empathizing with people now - because some of my fresher's had the same problems that me or my friends had last year, so I knew how to deal with them. I've become better at helping people deal with problems than before...*

[UK Student: 2<sup>nd</sup> Year: Female: Mentor]

*I think the amount that peer Guides get out of it is really important. The skills I've gained from being on the organising committee include kind of managing a team, team-building, organising and planning. I gained all these new skills about leading groups and working with people.*

[UK Student: 3<sup>rd</sup> Year: Senior Peer Mentor: Female]

*It is good for my CV as well. That wasn't the main reason I got involved but that was a small part of it, you know being able to show that I've done something else...*

[UK Student: 2<sup>nd</sup> Year: Peer Mentor: Female]

Several of the peer mentors discussed how participation in the peer mentoring programme would help them gain employment:

*... the CV aspect of it is good, if nothing else... If I was an employer looking at two people and one had done mentoring, I would certainly look at them very differently from the person that just hadn't done anything because it shows all sorts of skills.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

*I think it gives you a lot of skills as well to write on your CV and to also get in placements in graduate jobs in a few years' time. I think a lot of employees find it important, I think they value skills like that as well because they obviously have mentoring in their organisations as well. I think it's just a good scheme to get involved with. It's not too time consuming which means you have still got time to do your work as well, which means you can still carry it on to the final year.*

[4<sup>th</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

#### - **Personal Benefits**

Whilst the opportunity to gain employability skills was highly valued by the peer mentors, the majority deemed such skills to be less important to them than the opportunity to help others. Almost overwhelmingly the peer mentors interviewed expressed altruistic reasons for getting involved with the programme these included: Personal satisfaction: Reciprocal motivations: A desire to help others. Other less tangible altruistic reasons reflected the mentors own experiences of being a mentee.

For many of the peer mentors, one of the key benefits was personal satisfaction:

*I'd say, yeah, it's satisfaction, like you're seeing people, like you're seeing everyone arrive ... not really knowing anyone and then within a day you sort of see little groups forming and like little friendships making and then by looking at them now you can see these friendships that were made like the first day are still like there now,*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

*... the respect that they give you because they know that you're like an older student ..... we're meant to know what's going on and everything, so they come to you with the questions and like give you that respect as well which was quite nice.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

One of the key reasons students' become peer mentors is to 'put something back' into the university:

*And I just like really enjoyed like just meeting new people, because I made so many new friends because of it and they did help me so much in my first year that you just feel like you want to give something back to the uni and like help other people.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

*Yes to give something back I think. Certainly as I said from the point of view of not living in and being older, erm there was nothing really the first year that I was here for mature students... .. Again older women and families and things like that and, as you said, we have shared experiences.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Female: Mentor]

However, the most frequently expressed reason for becoming a peer mentor was to help others:

*I just like meeting other people as well, helping them out. Because I'm also local as well, I think it's quite handy if people want questions about any locations or whatever, I can give them the right information...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Female: Mentor]

*For me it was knowing that you were helping someone to starting by themselves at uni.... , and just being able to say that I helped them make friends, I helped them choose modules, and I helped them settle in. Just part of that was pretty good.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

*I became a peer guide because of I wanted to make a difference. It was like "I want to be able to help other people."*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

Perhaps not surprisingly, the study findings with regards to the benefits of peer mentoring for peer mentor mentors reflect similar work looking at the benefits of volunteering in wider society (Davis-Smith, 1992; Wardell et al, 2000; Hustinx & Lammertyn 2004). Peer mentoring helps student peer mentors develop as individuals, both academically and socially. It also affords the opportunity for them to gain 'first-hand experience' in a responsible position where they are able to make a real difference to another student's university experience.

## 5.5 Challenges of Peer Mentoring

Whilst the majority of students interviewed spoke positively about their experiences as mentors or mentees, a small minority identified some minor difficulties they had experienced both as mentors and mentees. Such difficulties can be divided into two main categories: Institutional issues, and: Problems of communication.

### - Institutional Issues

One or two of the students discussed the recruitment process with one individual believing that the feedback she received on her application was not sufficiently expeditious:

*I didn't think the feedback [on my application] was good enough actually.... you have to make your application, and then you have to get two references . And then I didn't hear anything and it just went on and on and I kind of forgot about it... so I asked "what's happening because, am I a peer guide or am I not a peer guide?". She said if I was I would hear, if I wasn't I wouldn't, which I found a little bit disconcerting. I thought it could have been slightly better organised.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> year: UK Student: Female: Mentor]

Another felt that the mentoring programme was not adequately advertised or organised in her particular school of study:

*Everything was done to advertise it apart from in the [ ] School.....  
The [ ] School is quite big, so it's quite a lot of people that missed out on that opportunity. It's like discrimination in a way. I asked about this and she said there was nothing they could do because it was too big to do.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

It should be noted that from the students' perspectives, institutional issues negatively impacting peer mentoring were rarely noticed. However, one issue was identified in relation to training of peer mentees. All of the mentees interviewed who discussed training tended to view it somewhat negatively. Some indicated that, as mentees, they failed to gain anything from training:

*The training? I don't remember what the training was, to be honest. Once we started I did a few workshops.... But the training gave me a little clue what I should do...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*Really giving mentees the training sort of thing they had, and telling you what it was all about, you didn't really help... .. they tried to tell you what it was about, and what not to expect. But they didn't explain it well. So realistically, you didn't really take anything away from that.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

Whilst others suggested training should really be focused on peer mentors alone:

*Honestly, the training was useless. They would just [ ] assign you peer mentors - but the training wasn't anything.... it was just sitting there for a long time ... .. Maybe mentors need training but not mentees*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Male: Mentee]

One student indicated that because of the requirement to undergo training, some students actually missed out on peer mentoring altogether:

*I think the training was a bit of a waste of time. It wasn't necessary. I think it would have been better if you'd just applied to have a mentor and then sort of they work it out so then you skip the whole going to a training thing.... I think a lot of people as well kind of, with the best intentions, think "Oh, I'll go to the next training session. I'll go to the next one." And because they had so many I think you could end up not going and then not getting a mentor for no reason really.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentee]

That some students may miss out on having a peer mentor because they are unable to fulfil the requirement to attend training is a matter of some concern – particularly given the positive difference that having a peer mentor can make to the student experience.

Whilst this study did not formally capture staff perspectives, several staff were informally interviewed about their perceptions of peer mentoring. From these interviews three institutional issues were identified: Difficulties with the 'logistics' of managing a university-wide, opt-out transitional peer mentoring programme indicative of increasing workloads and reductions in staff: Problems balancing the expectations of students in university-wide, opt-out transitional mentoring where the resources each school allocated to the programme varied greatly – meaning that the students received a different service depending upon their school: Image related issues associated with school and university-wide 'opt-in' programmes whereby some students wrongly assumed that peer mentoring was only offered to 'weaker students'.

#### - **Problems of Communication**

Throughout the research the importance of belonging and building long-lasting friendships was raised by both peer mentors and mentees alike. Conversely, on

the occasions when the mentoring relationships didn't work it was because the students concerned had not managed to communicate effectively and so failed to build such friendships:

*My friend applied for peer mentoring too but her mentor just didn't turn up. A couple of times she turned up and she was a last year student and then we tried to contact her but she didn't turn up again so probably some of them are not really interested.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Female: Mentee]

*I didn't know what it was for, and she didn't know what it was for. She was about my age maybe slightly younger, and she worked part time at the University. I think she was quite blasé about everything... .. she said well you won't have any problems... ..  
... it just didn't work...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Female: Mentee]

*... she did e-mail me after six weeks and asked me if I wanted anything else but I don't think I responded because I got so little out of it...she looked like she was bored and she had to get back to work, it was in the middle of a work day so she sneaked off and asked me to meet her in coffee revolution so it felt much more about ticking a box than making a friend...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

For the odd one or two, a breakdown in communication meant that the mentoring relationship never actually got off the ground:

*I contacted my mentee but she never answered me so I kind of lost her... .. I don't have any contact now.  
I guess in the beginning I thought this would be an easy project but it is not. I kind of failed I guess...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: EU Student: Female: Mentor]

*Yes because some mentors haven't even met their mentees.  
They exist in the system and everything but they just haven't  
met each other which is quite frustrating.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

### **5.5.1 Turning the Challenges Around: An Unexpected Observation**

In addition to discussing the challenges of peer mentoring, several of the peer mentors went on to describe how a poor experience as a mentee influenced their decision to become a mentor. This was particularly noticeable in university-wide, opt-out programmes where a small, but notable, minority of student mentors cited poor practice by their own peer mentor as the main reason why they chose to engage with the programme when the opportunity arose. Such students were determined to make sure others following on from them had a better experience of transition:

*Personally I thought he could have been more approachable.  
We could have spent more time together. These are the things  
I want to correct when I become a mentor is spending more time.*

[1<sup>st</sup> year: International student: Male: Mentee]

*I became a peer guide mainly because mine was useless and  
I wanted to do a better job...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK student: Female: Mentor]

*The reason I got involved was because mine was so rubbish.  
So my first couple of days were crap really and I didn't want  
that to happen to someone else*

[2<sup>nd</sup> year: UK Student: Male: Mentor]

That students were not dissuaded from becoming mentors following a negative experience as a mentee is encouraging – perhaps reflecting the overall efficacy of the programmes analysed as part of the project. Indeed, despite the

challenges there is evidence to suggest that a 'bad' mentoring experience can actually become a strong driver for the mentee to subsequently excel as a mentor.

Issues reflective of organisational problems suggest that, as in any institutional wide programme there is room for improvement. With regards to difficulties with communication between mentor and mentee, this could be addressed with training.

## **5.6 The Functions and Challenges of Peer Mentoring: Summary of Section 5**

1. **Transition:** The first few days at University are vital in shaping students' university experience. University-wide transitional peer mentoring helps students make those vital first steps into higher education. It provides a 'Safety Net' that helps them make the transition from their previous life into University. By providing a 'catch-all' approach, this transitional peer mentoring is not viewed as a 'deficit model' of student support – instead it is embedded in institutional practice and as such represents a major strength where it is offered.
2. **Academic Support:** Whilst transitional and longer-term pastoral peer mentoring are not about providing academic support, this study showed that peer mentoring relationships can provide the ideal forum whereby more experienced students can offer first years' generic academic support and guidance. Furthermore, in institutions where peer mentoring is offered on a school or faculty basis, peer mentoring can provide new students access to the tacit knowledge necessary to succeed at university.
3. **On-Going Support:** Belonging and Relationships are pivotal to success at university. In addition to providing new students with the means by which they quickly gain a sense of belonging, transitional peer mentoring can provide on-going support to new students. Such support often lasts into the

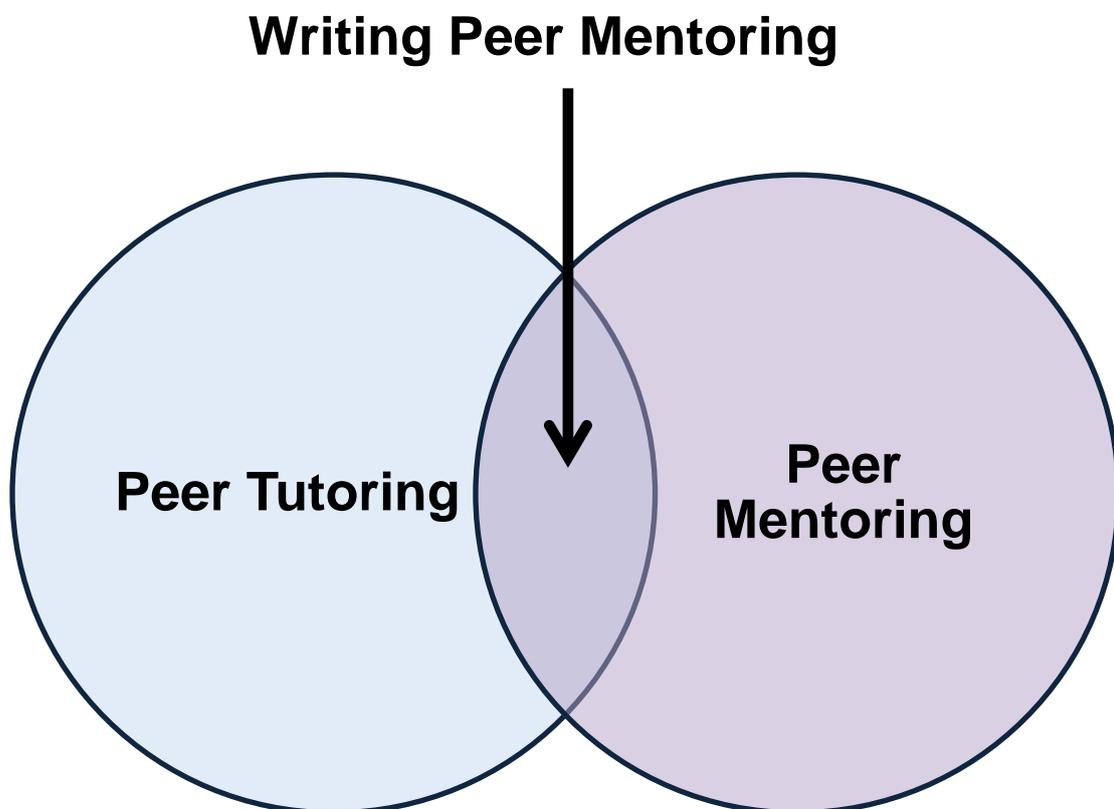
first term and beyond. The other approach examined in this study, longer-term *opt-in* pastoral mentoring provides the ideal means by which students are able to build meaningful, supportive and reciprocal relationships. With regards to this type of peer mentoring, it is the concept of dual voluntarism that makes pastoral peer mentoring programmes a success.

4. **Unique Benefits for Peer Mentors:** Whilst most of the benefits of peer mentoring are experienced by peer mentees and mentors alike some benefits are experienced by peer mentors alone including enhanced employability skills and personal benefits. Participation in peer mentoring offers student peer mentors with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in a responsible position. In doing so they gain valuable and transferable 'employability skills'.
  
5. **Challenges of Peer Mentoring:** From the students' perspectives most of the challenges associated with peer mentoring tended to reflect communication issues although in one institution the main problem identified by peer mentees related to the requirement that mentees attend training alongside mentors. This was perceived by the students concerned as not being the best use of their time. With regards to mentoring relationships, on the rare occasion when communication either didn't happen or broke down the relationship would inevitably fail. However, some of the peer mentors who had experienced this the previous year as mentees, were driven to make sure the same thing didn't happen to others – and so volunteered to become peer mentors. From staff perspectives, for those charged with managing university-wide 'opt-out' programmes, it appeared that the greatest challenge reflected restrictions issues around resources. With regards to 'opt-in' university or school based peer mentoring programmes, the greatest challenge for staff was related to 'image' and the need to make sure the programme wasn't viewed as a deficit model of support.

## Section 6: Writing Peer Mentoring: In the Students' Own Words

Previous studies have drawn attention to the role of peer tutoring in the classroom, with much attention being paid to the pedagogical value of peer learning within a formal class based setting (See for example, Boud, 1988; Topping & Ehly, 2001; Topping 2005). This study is distinctive in that it closely examined a type of peer learning that is undertaken out of the classroom, and is not discipline specific – that of writing peer mentoring. Indeed, in many respects it may be argued that writing peer mentoring fits into the 'space' in between peer tutoring and peer mentoring, representing a synthesis of the two. This is depicted below in Figure 15.

**Figure 15: Writing Peer Mentoring: A Synthesis of Peer Tutoring and Peer Mentoring.**



The writing peer mentoring discussed in this chapter represents an analysis of the writing activities undertaken in three different Universities: Aston University: Liverpool Hope University [LHU]: and, London Metropolitan University [LMU]. Each of these Universities employed a small number of student writing peer mentors within a Writing Centre, (between 8 and 10). Drawn from the wider student body, the writing peer mentors were carefully selected and given appropriate training. Managed by a permanent member of staff, each peer writing mentor worked for between 6 and 8 hours per week.

The overall aim of writing peer mentoring is to provide an accessible, high quality service for students seeking advice about developing their own writing skills. Writing mentoring offers mentees the opportunity to engage in a supportive dialogue through which the mentee can discuss and enhance their academic writing skills. North (1984, p 438) suggested that the role of writing mentors is to 'produce better writers, not better writing', as such they focus on attitudes and approaches to writing as well as writing style, format and other writing and study skills (from planning and organising writing, to writing in an analytical and critical manner). The emphasis is on employing students to help other students become independent learners by providing bespoke writing advice, which avoids a remedial deficit-model approach to academic writing support.

The writing peer mentoring activities discussed in this chapter represent the views of 36 students (20 peer mentees and 16 writing peer mentors) who were interviewed in small group interviews and on a one-to-one basis. It should be noted that due to institutional cutbacks, the writing centres in two of the HEIs included in the study have now closed down.

## **6.1 What Do Writing Peer Mentors Do?**

This section looks at what writing mentors 'do'. The study revealed that writing peer mentoring activities can be in five distinctive areas: providing reassurance that students are 'on the right track': helping to improve structure: increasing marks: helping with referencing: providing 'last minute' advice and support: and,

of these, help with structure and referencing were the most frequently mentioned.

For many of the students, the availability of a peer writing mentor, willing and able to give advice and support about writing is an important part of their learning experience. In some cases, students seeking support from writing peer mentors were simply looking for reassurance that they were on the right 'track':

*... Sometimes it's just the simple things. Like they're worried in general but actually they're doing absolutely fine – they just need help with confidence. Someone to say, "Yeah, you're doing fine".*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

*Even after the second assignment I didn't feel that confident. So I just went along again and to a different writing mentor, who was just really friendly, and who took their time with me, helping me through, making me feel more confident that my work was OK.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

For many of the mentees, writing mentoring is invaluable because it provides the means by which they are able to get advice about how to structure their work:

*First we looked at all of the structure, the structure of the essay; like how many paragraphs and how many spaces between the paragraphs. My sentences were a little bit wrong like structure again. And then we talked about what I need to include and what I don't have to include. She asked me what I think was wrong, and we talked about what I need to change.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU Student: Female: Mentee]

*Student writers ask for help with problems with structure and clarifying their arguments; how to order a paragraph and things like that. A few students will come with different problems. Such as the tone and things like that... .... From time to time you get something completely random but it tends to be getting people used to writing in an academic style. Helping them find their own voice within that strict way of doing things. This is definitely important because there's no point in imitating someone else's style for three years. It never works.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

The study suggests that for many students, the writing issue that concerns them the most is referencing:

*It was mostly referencing. The majority of times it was asking about referencing. I think them three sessions is what made me more confident doing my referencing. Now I don't have to ask for help. I think just having a few sessions with somebody talking me through it and showing me where I'd gone wrong and where I'd gone right helped me a lot.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*I think the help with referencing is very useful because the university now is getting quite hot on plagiarism, I think that's quite important ...*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Mature Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

Whilst much of the writing mentors time was spent helping students with generic writing and study skills, peer writing mentoring works because it is not simply about students seeking support because they are struggling with their writing. Many students use the service because they want to improve their work:

*I used the Writing Centre to get higher marks... Sometimes I think you just generally need somebody else's opinion on how to structure your work, to make sure you get the right things your tutors are looking for... .. although I know what I am saying but that extra support really comes in handy.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*Well some will say that they want to go up to the next mark... I tell them to enjoy the work, follow the guidance we're giving, follow the guidance on the website, look at the book "Writing essays at university," make sure you're following the structure that we're advising, but enjoy it!*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

One area where writing peer mentoring is particularly valuable is in the support given to students whose first language is not English:

*I chose to study in England because I already spoke English... but then I got here and after the second or third week I was just crying and completely lost thinking "I can't do this it's way too difficult". ... I'm doing all final year classes as well and was just completely confused. But during our introduction week they mentioned a Writing Centre and when one of my tutors said "Why don't you try that" I made an appointment... I've been here three times since, every time for a different thing*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: EU Exchange Student: Female: Mentee]

*Because I'm from Bulgaria and I had some problems with grammar I wanted to talk about how I've connected my sentences and get help with my grammar... .. to see if it does or doesn't make sense.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: EU Student: Female: Mentee]

*Sometimes there's language barriers and they feel like their written English isn't as good as it could be. So I just let them talk, and listen. Eventually they get round to the writing.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

## 6.2 Pastoral Support in Peer Writing Mentoring

Whilst the main value of writing peer mentoring is writing support, the 'added' value of the writing peer mentoring is that by providing formal peer support outside the classroom an environment is created in which students feel able to discuss more than writing problems – they also feel able to talk about wider issues and concerns.

Several of the writing peer mentors discussed how they supported students by simply listening to them:

*But then as soon as they realise you are also a student and that they will be freer talking to you about their problems than to a member of staff ... they sometimes feel they can kind of confide in you. They find you more willing to listen to them, more ... than a staff member might be.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: International Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

*... there's one example of a mature student similar to myself. Her husband wants a cup of tea and she had the kids to deal with and the essay due. I just let her blow off steam. Sat listening to her. That's what she needed the most.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

The mentees' perspectives reinforced the value of having someone to talk to:

*It was really ... I felt really at ease. I mean the mentor was really friendly. We even discussed some things.... we talked about what are you going to do this weekend? How are your lectures going?" and this kind of stuff. And she was trying to like make me feel at ease and not make me feel nervous. There was nothing to worry about. There was nothing to be nervous about. That was basically it. It was really, really good being able to talk.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Female: Mentee]

*It's just different when it's a student, because when you're talking to the lecturers you don't want to show that you're not confident doing something, or you don't open up as much. You don't feel like they can empathise because they're not a student themselves. It's better talking to other students...*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: International Student: Male: Mentee]

Whilst most of the support given by writing peer mentors occurs in the Writing Centre, several described supporting students outside their hours of work. For one student this involved accompanying a first year student to speak to a lecturer:

*I had one girl come in the other week and she was in floods of tears because she thought this lecturer didn't like her. And I said "That's probably not true, you know. He's probably got a lot on." She said "I really need to know about this and I can't go and ask him again because he'll think I'm stupid." I said "He won't think you're stupid at all. Don't worry about it."*

*She was that upset I said "Do you want me to come along with you, as a friend just to listen to what ..." And that's what we did. We went.*

*She just needed that bit of support, I suppose, and then she was able to ask the questions that she wanted and the tutor was more .. She said to me "oh, he's being fine with me." I didn't really do anything. I just came along and said "Hi, my name's Jessie and she really wants to do well in her subject but she's just a bit, you know, doesn't want to bother you.*

*I've just come as a bit of support for her to see if I can understand anything as well."*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

Unlike traditional and pastoral peer mentoring, writing mentoring is not about forming long-term friendships. It is more about offering episodic support on an 'on-demand' basis. Despite this, some writing peer mentors and mentees indicated that Writing Tutorials had resulted in friendships:

*I actually have made a friend...there's a girl, I don't know if I should say her name but she is actually on my course and I didn't know she was on my course and she came in one day and she was so anxious and it was the first time that anyone had ever cried in a tutorial and she was just so stressed out with all her deadlines and I really did feel like a counsellor in that sort of position, because we didn't even talk about the writing, we talked about deadlines and time management, but we didn't actually discuss any writing and she told me about troubles at home, and where her computer is at home, you know its noisy in her house and she can't concentrate, she had got little siblings all running around everywhere, and all these things and I really felt like I had connected with her and since then I have met up for lunch with her a few times at uni, and yeah we do talk about uni but you know she is a friend I will keep in contact with her so that's cool when you really do connect with the person and they really appreciate the time that you give them because it really is something that lecturers can't really give...not to every student anyway, so that's definitely the most enjoyable part*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

*Basically I think it breaks barriers, because I've made friends with a lot of the students who I've done tutorials with. I see them on campus when I wouldn't have before.... I think it breaks barriers when you're a student. If they were to hire someone from outside the university, like a professional, I'm guessing they'd try to be in a position of authority and a student would feel that.*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Writing Mentor].

Students seeking help from writing peer mentors were from all years of study (not just the first year); indeed, in some cases the peer writing mentor was in a lower year than the student who they were helping.

### 6.3 The Challenges of Writing Peer Mentoring

Whilst the study findings were mostly positive, some challenges were identified. This section provides an overview of those challenges which on the whole tended to centre upon the need to manage mentees expectations.

For many of the writing peer mentors one of the main challenges related what they perceived to be the unrealistic expectations of the mentees:

*..... you do get the odd person that expects you to teach them how to write, which doesn't make sense because you either can do it by now or you can't, you can only improve on what they have already got. And there's the proof-reading, and to some extent there's the grammar... when it is really dire you probably **could** help but you are not really supposed to – it's a bit of a fine line If you can't read the essay because the grammar is all....*

[4<sup>th</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

*I think I personally find it a bit more difficult because they expect certain things from me in terms of content that I can't always give.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: EU Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

On several occasions the writing peer mentors described difficulties with balancing mentees expectations that their writing problems could be solved with little time to spare before the assignment was due to be handed in:

*Sometimes they leave it too late. If they come in at the last minute, I just quickly tell them anything major that they need to change. But sometimes even if there are major things to change it might not be good to point it out but if they can sort it out in the time that they have then it's good to mention it*

[2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

*Literally last week I had someone come in with an hour before it was due in, so you have to try and put it in a really nice way, "Maybe next time, come a bit earlier."*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Male: Writing Mentor]

Whilst some of the writing peer mentors identified unrealistic expectations as being problematic, some of the mentees expectations were influenced by what they perceived to be the limitations of the writing peer mentors:

*... in a way I have like a limit as to how much I would accept their advice. With the first one I saw I was like, "OK, no, something's not right, I'm not too sure about that, maybe it's because they don't understand what I'm trying to like outline in my essay". So there is that limit. I would take the advice but I would really, think about whether what they're saying is right.*

[ 2<sup>nd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

*If like they're from a different discipline they can't really understand your essay, so it's not always obvious if it's not been written very clearly ... Like a few times when I was in my session the mentor would read something and be like, "Oh why haven't you referenced this. Or is that common knowledge?" ... So I had to watch what I took as advice.*

[1<sup>st</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Mentee]

For some of the writing peer mentors, difficulties in balancing expectations did not reflect mentees unrealistic expectations but instead reflecting the fact that some students disliked taking advice off other students:

*I've had a few who didn't realize we're students. Sometimes you get someone who's in the same discipline as you but in a higher year and they sometimes can be a bit aggressive once they find out that you're a student and worse, that you're at a lower level than them. There have been a few who have come and just expected someone who was older.*

[3<sup>rd</sup> Year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

*It's a confusing role actually, a confusing role. The bad thing is, sometimes they may look upon you as if you're incompetent. Especially the PhD students. Because they come in expecting a 30, 40 year-old person to be reading their work, and they find an undergraduate. So I sometimes sense a feeling as if they don't trust what you're going to say. As you're going through you have to prove yourself... even more, because you have to show them that you know what you're talking about, you know where they're coming from...*

[3<sup>rd</sup> year: UK Student: Female: Writing Mentor]

## **6.4 Writing Peer Mentoring: Summary of Section 6**

This section commences by arguing that writing peer mentoring represents a synthesis of peer tutoring and peer mentoring in that it is not discipline specific and is not offered in the classroom; it is however, a type of peer learning and support that focuses on generic academic skills and is open to all students.

Unlike the peer mentors discussed in the previous chapter, writing peer mentors are paid by the university in which they are employed. Their activities, which focus on helping students improve their writing, may be divided into two main categories: help practical help with writing; and, pastoral support.

Help with writing comprises a number of different activities ranging from reassurance about how an essay is marked, or that a writing mentee is 'on the right track', to practical advice about structure and referencing. Of equal importance are the activities that writing peer mentors do not undertake – these include proof-reading and help with content.

Pastoral support, whilst less obvious than that offered in other peer mentoring relationships, represents a significant part of the role. This may be offered on a one-off basis to mentees using the service, or on a longer term basis when peer mentors and mentees develop friendships.

The main challenges of writing peer mentoring are manifest in the need for writing peer mentors to balance the expectations of peer mentees with the boundaries of the role. Additional challenges reflect negative views held by some peer mentees of writing peer mentors as ‘tutors’ – in such cases, the experience and expertise of the writing mentors generally overcomes any prior misconceptions.

From an institutional perspective, the main challenge centres on resources. In two of the three institutions included in this study, financial cutbacks have resulted in the closure of the writing centre. The impact of this on student achievement has yet to be determined.

## Section 7: Discussion

This report represents one of the most extensive studies ever conducted into peer mentoring in the UK. With the Higher Education Sector being subjected to unprecedented change in the way it is funded and managed, the study, with its deliberate focus on the student voice, is both timely and relevant. When considering the impact that transitional and longer-term pastoral mentoring has on transition and retention the three HEIs which formed part of the research for the main part of the study have attrition rates that are well below the national average. This is depicted below in Figure 15.

**Figure 15: Attrition rates of the HEIs included in the study (Transitional / Pastoral Mentoring)**

Institution	Attrition (drop out) rates
Aston	3.9%
Bangor	6.7%
Sheffield	3.6%
<b>National Average</b>	<b>8.1%</b>

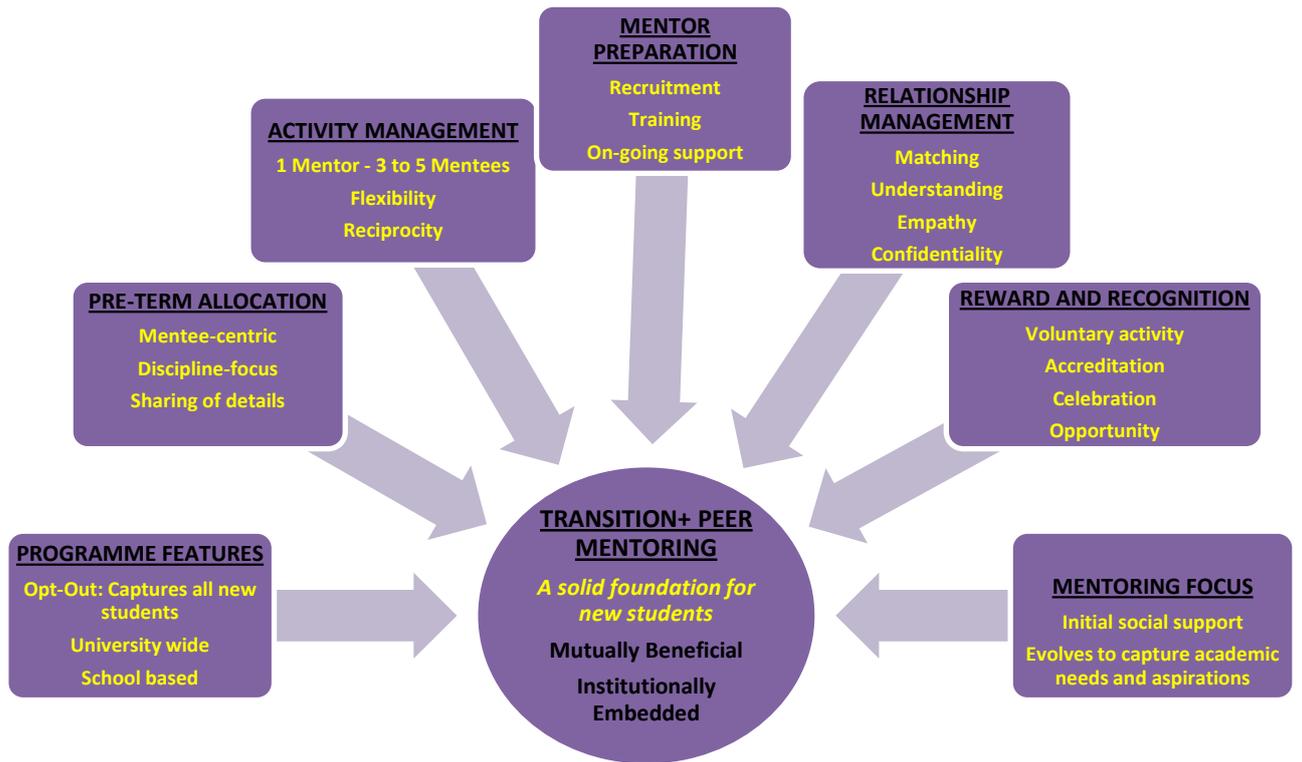
Whilst the above average rates cannot be attributed solely to the impact of peer mentoring, as there are many other issues which impact on the student experience, given the evidence cited in this report it is not unreasonable to postulate that the additional support given to students in the form of mentoring does make a significant difference to the numbers of students dropping out – particularly in the early part of their academic careers.

This study has demonstrated the value of peer mentoring in promoting a smooth transition into university and providing a solid foundation upon which students can build their university careers. In considering all of the evidence,

the university-wide, opt-out transition mentoring programmes offer the most value. Moreover, in terms of providing excellent ‘economies of scale’ such programmes are ideal in that they ‘capture’ all new students – irrespective of socio-demographic, academic or other criterion. This fact in itself means that problems encountered by those institutions offering ‘opt-in’ programmes do not materialise – as peer mentoring becomes embedded as part of a student-focused institutional culture for **all** new students.

In drawing together all of the findings of this project, including those from the: Pilot Study: Quantitative Questionnaires: Focus Groups: Interviews, and: Observations, this study has captured the perspectives and experiences of around 1,000 students. Building on these findings, and considering them together with the UK wide Institutional Mapping undertaken at the beginning of the project, an ideal ‘Peer Mentoring Approach’ has been developed. This is depicted below in Figure 16.

**Figure 16: “Transition+” Peer Mentoring: The Features of an ‘Ideal’  
Mentoring Programme**



## 7.1 The Constituents of Transition+ Peer Mentoring

- ❖ **Programme Features:** The recommended model for those institutions wishing to address transition and retention together is Transition+ Peer Mentoring. This approach captures all new students on an *opt-out* university-wide basis. It is generally centrally managed but with identified 'Peer Mentoring Coordinators' provided within individual Schools or Faculties.
- ❖ **Pre-Term Allocation of Mentees to Mentors:** Selection and training of peer mentors in the previous academic year enables matching to occur once the students have accepted a place. Early matching enables students to exchange contact details and to communicate electronically. Matching is generally done within disciplines. Early communication between mentee and mentor helps alleviate some of the concerns new students have before starting university about 'fitting in' and 'belonging'.
- ❖ **Activity Management:** Small group mentoring is recommended whereby one student peer mentor is allocated between three and five peer mentees. Flexibility needs to be built into the system so that, if required, mentees can 'swap' mentors. The reciprocal nature of the relationship needs to be made known to both parties right from the onset.
- ❖ **Mentor Preparation:** Recruitment should occur in term 3 and training in term 1. This will allow Transition+ Peer Mentoring to 'kick off' just before term 1. By recruiting and training next year's mentors from the current year's mentees institutions can use existing peer mentors to help inform and guide the next cohort. In this way, Peer Mentoring becomes self-sustaining. Both peer mentors and peer mentees should be offered on-going support, with a member of staff identified as being the individual responsible, throughout the year.

- ❖ **Relationship Management:** Matching students on a large scale is difficult, yet it is important to take account of certain cultural or other requirements when matching mentor to mentees. Peer mentees need to be asked if they have any preference in terms of gender, ethnicity, home-country and religion. Peer mentors can be expected to be more flexible, although exceptions should be made if a prospective peer mentor indicates that they would prefer not to be matched with individuals from a different gender or religious background.

The need for the mentoring relationship to be confidential in nature needs to be stressed to both parties. Peer Mentor training should discuss ethics and confidentiality in some depth. In some institutions students may be asked to sign a 'agreement of understanding' that can cover confidentiality and other issues relevant to individuals.

- ❖ **Reward and Recognition:** Peer mentoring should always be a voluntary activity for both peer mentors and peer mentees. The contribution to peer mentoring made by peer mentors can be recognised in a variety of ways including: formal accreditation of activities – as part of an 'employability module' or 'university certificate: the awarding of certificates of participation outlining skills gained and activities undertaken: and, celebration events which may include awards for peer mentors nominated by their mentees.

Having been accepted as a peer mentor, many students go onto to use their experience in employment. Within the university itself peer mentors are often used as University Ambassadors or Guides on open days and during other events.

- ❖ **Mentoring Focus:** In Transition+ the mentoring focus is initially on the 'settling in' period. However, within a few weeks the onus switches to more academic issues – such as using the library or accessing electronic resources. Mentoring training needs to encapsulate both social and

academic issues with peer mentors being made aware of the boundaries placed upon them in their role.

## 7.2 Final Project Typology of Peer Mentoring

Having developed the Transition+ approach to peer mentoring, the next stage of the analytical process was to consider where this approach should 'fit' within the original typology developed for the purposes of this project. Figure 17 below places Transition+ mentoring in between one-to-group peer mentoring at transition and one-to-one longer-term peer mentoring, suggesting that this approach is a synthesis of the two.

**Figure 17: Final Typology of Peer Mentoring**

Type of Peer Mentoring	Form of Mentoring	Constituents
<b>Pre-entry peer mentoring</b>	Generally offered via social network sites or e-mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Targeted or generic [all first years]</li> <li>- Offered on an opt-in or opt-out basis</li> </ul>
<b>One-to-one Peer Mentoring at transition</b>	Generally offered to particular individuals or groups depending on individual and institutional needs and norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resource intensive in terms of organisation and administration</li> <li>- Requires careful 'matching' in terms of cultural and, if appropriate, academic requirements.</li> <li>- Usually offered on an opt-in basis</li> </ul>
<b>One-to-group Peer Mentoring at transition</b>	Often known as 'Peer Guiding' this form of Peer Mentoring has the advantage of providing a 'friendly face' upon arrival, making transition positive for students (and in many cases their parents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Often offered on an 'opt-out' basis whereby all new students are allocated a mentor</li> <li>- Institutional, School or Departmental</li> <li>- Can be 'targeted' depending on institutional and student needs</li> <li>- Some matching may be possible</li> <li>- Generally one mentor to four or five mentees (in some cases this is higher)</li> </ul>
<b>One-to-group Transition+ Peer Mentoring</b>	A synthesis of transition and longer term peer mentoring. This form of mentoring has the advantage of enhancing transition whilst then continuing to provide on-going support thereby helping deal with issues around retention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offered on an opt-out basis as above</li> <li>- Centrally organised and managed but operated at a school level.</li> <li>- Allows for 'targeting' of specific groups if required.</li> <li>- One mentor to around five mentees.</li> <li>- Social focus at the beginning but evolves into providing study skills support</li> </ul>
<b>One-to-one longer term Peer Mentoring</b>	Pastoral in nature this form of peer mentoring tends to be carefully managed. It can involve an element of informal peer counselling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resource intensive</li> <li>- Needs close allocation / supervision of student pairings</li> <li>- Student peer mentors may additional support</li> <li>- Usually involves students from a 'higher' year mentoring those in years below</li> <li>- Can be cross-university or school / subject focused</li> <li>- Relationships often last throughout the mentees university career and beyond.</li> </ul>
<b>One-to-group longer term Peer Mentoring</b>	Pastoral in nature this form of peer mentoring tends to be less formal than one-to-one longer term mentoring. Often School or subject focused.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less resource intensive than one-to-one peer mentoring</li> <li>- Mentors may need support with group dynamics</li> <li>- Usually put in place within [across] a year group</li> </ul>
<b>'Partnership-led' Peer Mentoring</b>	Two nominated 'peer mentors' lead a small group of between four and ten (possibly more). Can be long or short term.  In some cases, it is appropriate to appoint two mentors for one mentee.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can be offered on an inter or intra year basis</li> <li>- Offered on a long or short term basis</li> <li>- Particularly useful at transition into university</li> <li>- Particularly useful for international students who may require a mentor from their own country and a UK mentor</li> </ul>
<b>Group Peer Mentoring</b>	A group of students specifically placed together with the purpose of mutual support. This form of mentoring relies on group cohesion and reciprocity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can be resource intensive as management of peer support groups may be problematic</li> <li>- Generally School or subject focused.</li> <li>- Usually offered on a short term basis [one term or less]</li> </ul>

### 7.3 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, recommendations have been articulated for four different stakeholder groups: Higher Education Institutions – Executives and Management: Staff within HEIs responsible for developing Peer Mentoring Programmes: Students, and: Policy Makers. These are given below.

#### - **Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions – Executives and Management.**

- Consider embedding peer mentoring as part of the institutional transition and retention strategy
- Appoint a dedicated person, or persons, to manage and administer the programme (depending on the form and numbers)
- Consider academic credit / recognition for mentors.
- Encourage schools and departments to appoint a person to work with the centrally appointed 'mentoring department' or 'officer'.

#### - **Recommendations for Staff within HEIs responsible for developing peer mentoring.**

- Design a robust and well managed programme
- Ensure effective marketing of the programme
- Introduce a rigorous mentor selection process
- Begin recruitment as early as possible for the following academic year.
- Match mentees and mentors within 'subject / discipline' areas to ensure that both social and academic needs can be covered.
- Where necessary, match mentees and mentors taking into account demographic or other criterion as necessary (particularly relevant in targeted mentoring).
- Institute high quality training for mentors
- Engage with staff across the institution right from the onset – and continue doing so.
- Provide on-going support to peer mentors and mentees throughout the year

- Introduce a level of flexibility into the programme so that, if necessary, mentees can 'swap' mentors should they wish to.
- Evaluate the programme at an appropriate point or points in the year
- Listen to, and act upon, student feedback
- Introduce formal 'recognition' of peer mentors efforts [a certificate of achievement / participation]
- Consider introducing 'celebratory' events

#### **- Recommendations for Students**

- When initially selecting which HEI to attend, take note of those which institutions offer the opportunity to participate in peer mentoring as such programmes take away much of the anxiety associated with making the transition to university.
- Where peer mentoring is offered make the most of the opportunities on offer by contacting your peer mentor / mentee as soon as you can
- Even if as a new student you feel that you do not need a peer mentor, if one is offered to you – make contact, it could lead to an enriching friendship
- If the opportunity arises consider volunteering to become a peer mentor.
- If your University does not offer peer mentoring, contact your School or Department and ask them to consider developing a programme. If all else fails, ask the Students Union to raise the issue with the university management – or indeed, to establish a programme within the Union itself.

#### **- Recommendations for Policy Makers**

- Encourage HEIs to adopt peer mentoring as part of a widening participation strategy
- Provide assistance and support for those HEIs wishing to develop peer mentoring
- Introduce policies that recognise the voluntary contribution made by university students and consider develop ways of recognising this contribution.
- Offer additional funding to those HEIs offering peer mentoring as part of their widening participation strategy.

## 7.4 What Next?

In focusing on the students' perspectives this study has made a notable contribution to knowledge, practice and policy. In order to further enhance the student experience it is recommended that future studies should consider:

- ❖ Gathering statistical evidence of the pedagogic value of peer mentoring within those institutions offering 'opt-in' peer mentoring. This would involve 'data trawling' and then undertaking a comparative analysis of the academic marks of those students who engaged with peer mentoring compared with those who did not.
- ❖ Undertaking a similar study focusing on peer tutoring and other forms of peer assisted learning.
- ❖ Closing the 'academic, evidence and research' loop by analysing the benefits of peer mentoring for students as they progress through university to the point of graduation.
- ❖ Looking at the issues around peer mentoring from the Institutional or Managerial perspective in order that administrative and management problems can be identified and critiqued, and solutions found

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has reaffirmed the belief that making the decision to attend university to embark on a course of study is a significant and often difficult step in a person's life, irrespective of social background or level of previous study. For the majority of students included within this research the most worrying aspect of making the transition to university reflects fears about whether they will settle in and make friends. This study has shown the peer mentoring works by addressing such fears and by providing the means by which new students quickly feel as if they belong.

In recommending an alternative approach to peer mentoring, that of Transition+, the writers of this report believe that the success of peer mentoring is not just reflective of the support given to new students in the first few days and weeks of university but instead is indicative of the longer-term relationships made between peers. Possibly the most aspect of peer mentoring is that it 'formalises' the informal relationships many students make naturally. By providing a positive environment in which peer mentoring relationships can grow and flourish, HEIs can do much to enhance the student experience.

An important aspect of the Transition+ approach to mentoring is that it starts with a 'social / pastoral' remit and then, over the course of the first academic term, develops to encapsulate academic as well as pastoral support. The Peer Mentoring Works Project has shown that, before they start their undergraduate courses, the majority of students are confident that they have the academic wherewithal to succeed at university. Yet, many struggle academically once they actually begin studying at degree level. Transition+ peer mentoring works because it engenders peer relationships that, without breaking any academic boundaries, grow to include the 'tacit' study related knowledge students need to succeed at university level.

As the UK higher education sector moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the demands on institutions to support student success are likely to increase as students expectations rise to match the high course fees most will be paying. Much is at stake for all of the parties involved.

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## Further Outputs and Publications

In addition to this report the Pathways to Success team have produced a number of outputs and publications all of which will be available from November 2011 from

<http://www1.aston.ac.uk/eas/research/groups/eerg/>

These comprise:

- A critical literature review focusing on reciprocal peer learning and support in higher education
- Peer Mentoring Works: Executive Summary
- Peer Mentoring Works: Institutional Guide
- Peer Mentoring in the UK: A document 'mapping' peer mentoring provision across the UK
- A paper critically discussing the findings of an pilot study into peer mentoring
- Peer Mentoring Works! Peer Mentor Recruitment Package.
- Peer Mentoring Works: Evaluation Toolkit

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**Jane was employed as the Senior Researcher on the Peer Mentoring Works! Project**

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Robin Clark gained a BSc(Eng) (1<sup>st</sup> Class Honours) Degree in Mechanical Engineering in 1986 from University College, London; where he continued his studies graduating with a PhD in Mechanical Engineering in 1990. He later gained an MBA from Western Connecticut State University in 2003. Robin worked as a professional engineer in the UK and USA from 1990-2003, working his way up to the position of Vice President. He began working in Higher Education in 2003 when he was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in Engineering Management at Aston University. Robin is currently Programme Director for all MSc Engineering Management Programmes at the University, and is also the Head of the Engineering Education Research Group. He is one of the leading researchers in Engineering Education in the UK, and has established a Higher Education Academy Special Interest Group in this area. He is on the Editorial Board of the European Journal of Engineering Education and is one of two EU representatives on the governing board of the International Research in Engineering Education Network (REEN). He has been active in Engineering Education Research since 2005. His current research work includes leading several funded projects on Engineering and Applied Science Education, one of which is a collaborative project looking at graduate competencies in Engineering Education. Another project he is leading is focusing on employer-HE relations and employer input into the curriculum. Robin is a Fellow of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers and a member of several other professional organisations including the Chartered Management Institute. He is also a member of the Higher Education Academy and a National Teaching Fellow.

**Robin was overall Project Manager and Primary Investigator on the Peer Mentoring Works! Project.**

## Appendix 1: Overview of the Case-Study Organisations<sup>4</sup>

### Aston University:

- A small university with an ethnically diverse population of students.
- Strengths include Business and Management, Engineering and Applied Sciences, Life and Health Sciences, Languages and Social Sciences.
- Aston pioneered the sandwich course and was one of the first UK Universities to offer undergraduate degrees in subjects such as Business Management, Human Psychology, Translation, Pharmacy, Audiology and Optometry.
- Aston Business School is over 60 years old and the School of Pharmacy is over 90 years old. Aston has also been offering science and engineering programmes since 1895.

### Bangor University:

- In October 1884 the University College of North Wales opened with 58 students and 12 members of academic staff.
- A bi-lingual institution offering programmes in English and Welsh
- The institution's new title, University of Wales, Bangor, was formally approved by the Privy Council in 1997, and changed to Bangor University in 2007
- The University is currently organised into 22 Academic Schools grouped into five Colleges: Arts, Education and Humanities; Business, Social Sciences and Law; Natural Sciences; Health and Behavioural Sciences; and Physical and Applied Sciences. The School of Medical Sciences is a new School within the College of Health and Behavioural Sciences offering a degree in Medical Sciences BMedSci and an Intercolated degree in Medical Education.

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this report information about Aston: London Met: Liverpool and Sheffield Universities was obtained from 'The Complete University Guide'. Accessed 27/10/2011. <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/> For Liverpool Hope the information was attained from [www.hope.ac.uk](http://www.hope.ac.uk) Accessed 27/10/2011. For HIOA Oslo, information attained from <http://www.hioa.no/eng/About-HIOA/More-about-HIOA> Accessed 27/10/2011.

### **Liverpool Hope University**

- Founded in the early part of the 19th Century
- Sited on two campuses, Liverpool Hope concentrates on the Liberal Arts and Sciences.
- Campuses and facilities are state of the art. The Creative Campus, the Capstone Building, is situated in the heart of Liverpool. This is home to the Centre for Music, Performance & Innovation and is the UK's only University based Steinway School.
- The only ecumenical university in Europe

### **London Metropolitan University**

- A large post-1992 university with a diverse student body.
- A modern, forward-thinking university situated on two campuses in the capital
- London Met courses are accredited by a wide range of professional and statutory bodies ensuring the professional currency of qualifications on offer. These include among others: Royal Institute of British Architects; Law Society; General Social Care Council; Chartered Institute of Marketing ; Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA Gold Status); British Psychological Society; Institute of Chartered Accountants; Chartered Insurance Institute, and Chartered Institute of Bankers.
- London Met is a Centre of Excellence for Purchasing and Logistics, awarded by the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply

### **Sheffield University**

- A large, Russell Group University that was granted a Royal Charter in 1905
- Winner of four Queen's Anniversary Prizes in 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2007.
- Highly rated for architecture, town and regional planning, geography, mechanical engineering, music, English, Russian, politics, history, Asian studies, computer science, dentistry, journalism and religious studies.
- Other areas of excellence include, electronic and electrical engineering, automatic control and systems engineering, the biosciences.

## **Oslo and Akershus University College**

- A student body of approximately 16,000 students
- Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) is Norway's largest state university college.
- HiOA was established on 1 August 2011, after a merger of Oslo University College and Akershus University College.
- HiOA has four faculties: Faculty of Health Sciences: Faculty of Education: Faculty of Social Sciences: Faculty of Technology, Art and Design

## Appendix 2: Table Showing Properties of Peer Mentoring Programmes Analysed

Institution	Type of mentoring	Training	Payment	Purpose
Aston	1 <sup>st</sup> year – Pastoral 1 to 1 opt-in programme. Available to all students. Mentoring run over the course of an academic year	Single Session	No	Longer term mainly social support of first years
Aston [2]	Writing mentoring	Training over a number of weeks	Yes	Support with academic writing
Bangor	1 <sup>st</sup> year – Transition and if needed beyond. 1 mentor to groups of 4-5 mentees. Opt-out programme. Offered across whole of institution. Welsh speaking mentors available	Single session	No	Initial social support over the vital transition period – then into first term and beyond when needed.
Liverpool Hope	Writing mentoring	Training over a number of weeks	Yes	Support with academic writing [this programme has since been withdrawn due to funding cuts].
London Met	Writing mentoring	Training over a number of weeks	Yes	Support with academic writing [this programme has since been withdrawn due to funding cuts].
Sheffield	1 <sup>st</sup> year – Transition and if needed beyond. 1 mentor to groups of 4-5 mentees. Opt-out programme. Offered across whole of institution.	Single session	No	Initial social support over the vital transition period – then into first term and beyond when needed.
Oslo	1 <sup>st</sup> year – Pastoral 1 to 1 opt-in programme. Available to all students. Mentoring run over the course of an academic year	Single session	No	Longer term mainly social, but also including some academic support, support of first year students from a minority background

### Appendix 3: Mapping Against Target Groups for ‘What Works’ Programme

Target group	Covered in peer mentoring project	Comments
Ethnicity	Yes	Over 50% of the students included in two of the HEIs were from BME groups.
Disability	Yes	Around 25% of writing mentees had a specific learning disability were included within the study. However, these are not identified in the project because of ethical issues
Mature (age)	Yes	Those students who identified themselves as ‘mature’ are identified in the findings
Gender	Yes	Both males and females were included in the sample
Non-traditional	Yes	5 of the 6 HEIs included in the study target non-traditional students – thus the majority of the sample were from this group
Social class	Yes	5 of the 6 HEIs included in the study target non-traditional students – thus the majority of the sample were from this group
Those ‘at risk’	No	
Those who stay	Yes	The project looked at how PM enhanced the experience of those who ‘stay’
Those who leave	No	
First year	Yes	All mentees were first years
Second year	Yes	The majority of mentors were second years
Part time	Partially	One or two of the sample were part-time
Local	Yes	In two of the HEIs at least ½ of the sample were local
International	Yes	International students were included in all stages of the research and are identified in the qualitative section
Subject area	No	