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Citation: Hayman, Rick, Wharton, Karl, Bruce-Martin, Claire and Allin, Linda (2022) Benefits and Motives for Peer Mentoring in Higher Education: An Exploration Through the Lens of Cultural Capital. Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 30 (2). pp. 256-273. ISSN 1361-1267

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2057098 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2057098>

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Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmet20

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To cite this article: Rick Hayman, Karl Wharton, Claire Bruce-Martin & Linda Allin (2022) Benefits and motives for peer mentoring in higher education: an exploration through the lens of cultural capital, Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 30:2, 256-273, DOI: 10.1080/13611267.2022.2057098

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2057098

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MENTORING & TUTORING: PARTNERSHIP IN LEARNING
2022, VOL. 30, NO. 2, 256–273
https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2057098

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Benefits and motives for peer mentoring in higher education: an exploration through the lens of cultural capital

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ABSTRACT

Despite the large and diverse cohorts recruited annually across the globe to university sport programmes, few studies have assessed the value of peer support within sports education settings. Even more surprising is the lack of research to have explored the encounters of peer mentors who help deliver these schemes and the impact it had on their professional development. Conducted at a post-92 English university, this study explored the benefits and motives of students volunteering to become peer mentors in their second year of university. Drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts as the guiding theoretical framework, the study suggests that participants, who were predominantly first generation to attend university, engaged in peer mentoring to develop cultural capital for their chosen professional field, but also to give back and support the development of social and cultural capital for mentees. Practical implications for developing future peer support programmes are presented, as are future research avenues and limitations.

KEYWORDS

Bourdieu; cultural capital; peer mentoring; sports students; university experience

Introduction

Peer support schemes (PSS) are globally recognized for the role they can play in supporting students settle into university (Buddeberg-Fischer & Herta, 2006; Hill & Reddy, 2007; Naidoo, Yuhaniak, Borkoski, Levangie, & Abel, 2021). Successful university transition is reflective of newly arrived students feeling they have settled promptly, confidently and happily, made new friends and networks and developed a sense of belonging with peers and academic staff (Farhat, Bingham, Caulfield, & Grieve, 2017). Yet, considerable research has shown how many find adjusting to social and academic demands to be the most challenging aspect of their early university experience (Murtagh, 2012; Turner et al., 2017). New students, and particularly groups from underrepresented backgrounds, including those who commute daily, are first generational and from low-participation neighbourhoods, are more likely to disengage, underachieve and withdraw

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from their higher education (HE) studies if they feel unsupported and when their expectations are only partially addressed (Byrne et al., 2012; Thomas, 2012). There is further evidence that many enter their studies lacking understanding of what HE level learning entails (Allin, Coyles, & Hayman, 2017; Gamache, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2003), as well as feeling underprepared for the teaching and assessment methods they are likely to face (Allin et al., 2017; Farhat et al., 2017).

Literature review

Studies spanning several decades highlight the many benefits that PSS can offer in helping students to integrate academically and socially into university life (Goodman-Wilson, 2021; Hillier, Goldstein, Tornatore, Byrne, & Johnson, 2019; Naidoo et al., 2021). Collings, Swanson, and Watkins (2016) found peer mentored first year psychology students were less likely to consider leaving university and encounter mental health issues than non-mentored peers and Foy and Keane (2018) revealed how a PSS provided a platform for first year human biology and biomedical science students to reappraise their expectations of university and to develop a course identity and belonging. Ragavan (2014) showed how a PSS helped with reducing attrition rates, supporting integration and creating a sense of community for international students at an English university.

A criticism of this literature has been the tendency to investigate experiences from the mentee perspective. However, a number of recent studies now demonstrate the academic, personal, professional and social benefits that undertaking a peer mentoring role can provide including Haber-Curran, Everman, and Martinez (2017) and Larose (2013) who found the mentor role helped students to develop self-development, career awareness, self-efficacy, teamwork and organisational skills and Maccabe and Fonseca (2021) who showed the main attribute peer mentors valued was in helping to support their peers sense of belonging.

Rangel et al. (2021) found 16 undergraduate student mentors who supported an afterschool STEM program for underrepresented elementary schoolboys over three semesters did so for both intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Booth, Merga, and Roni (2016) showed how peer mentoring exposed postgraduate students to a range of new disciplines, created additional opportunities for professional networking and supported their social needs and project management skills.

Connolly (2017) explored the experiences of first-generation undergraduate students who undertook a peer mentoring role, finding it improved their leadership, confidence, problem solving and time management. Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris (2005) found high school students who undertook mentoring roles exclusively for self-enhancement purposes were more likely to have unsuccessful relationships with their mentees whilst Shotton, Oosahwe, and Cintrón (2007) showed how positive peer mentoring relationships failed to materialise when mentees perceived their mentors as being involved for solely self-serving reasons. West, Jenkins, and Hill (2017) reported how student peer mentors at

a United Kingdom (UK) university found the role complimented their leadership, critical reasoning, listening, explaining, presenting and questioning skills. Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, and Hodapp (2016) explored the motivations and experiences of 17 university students who acted as peer mentors for post-secondary peers with intellectual and developmental disabilities, finding it improved their teamwork skills, resilience and community involvement.

Theoretical framework

Due to Bourdieu's notable works in the sociology of education and his concerns with social class and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) we have chosen to analyse the findings of this study through his conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field (see Grenfell, 2008). The concept of habitus refers to a system of dispositions through which someone perceives and acts – that is, schemata or ways of being that are acquired through social conditioning and internalised through life experiences. The type of dispositions acquired are related to the kind of positions a person lives through and their 'capital' or resources (cultural, social, symbolic or economic) gained and which have value in a particular social 'field' of structured social relations.

Bourdieu was particularly concerned with inequalities of power and proposed that the amount of capital one possesses ultimately influences the position gained within a social 'field' where particular dominant forms of capital and habitus are valued and which are always in a state of struggle or contestation (Bourdieu & Lacquant, 1992). For example, university involves gaining and converting capital through acquisition of appropriate educational qualifications and the appropriate finance, but university success also involves being able to make the best of the opportunities and learning offered in order to gain a good degree. Whilst the relationships between habitus, capital and field are intertwined, in this study we focus on the concepts of social and cultural capital as we seek to understand the benefits of voluntary peer mentoring.

Bourdieu's concepts have been applied in the volunteering literature, in relation to understanding social class distinctions in volunteers (Storr & Spaaij, 2017) and how volunteers develop forms of social capital, or valuable and beneficial social networks, through their volunteering (Harvey, Lévesque, & Donnelly, 2007; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). Social capital has also been used as a framework to understanding coaching mentor relationships (Sawiuk, Taylor, & Groom, 2018) but has been less applied in the peer mentoring literature. More recently, studies have explored and highlighted the value of peer mentoring in developing social capital at secondary school level (e.g. Wexler, 2020), which is beneficial primarily for the mentee. Arguably, peer mentoring schemes in HE could be considered volunteering opportunities for those

mentors who apply and are also potentially beneficial relationships between mentor and mentee that can be valuable for developing forms of capital for both participants.

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is also particularly pertinent to this study on peer mentoring in that it originated as a way of understanding 'the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17). Cultural capital may be embodied (through the development of embodied dispositions), objectified (in the form of cultural goods) and institutionalized, in the form of educational qualifications and credentials. It is also the case that cultural capital can be converted, for example into economic (or financial) capital through success in the job market. Cultural capital is proposed as being transmitted initially through the family, who pass on their values and knowledge, often unconsciously, to their offspring – for example, in the value they place on reading, education, theatre going, sport, confident forms of speaking, behaving or dressing.

According to Bourdieu, the education system is based on the assumption of the possession of cultural capital, which, for students from lower social class backgrounds – or families where there has been no previous experience of university education – may be lacking. This often means that children from such backgrounds are disadvantaged (Sullivan, 2001), may be more likely to feel they lack the right behaviours, skills or ways of interacting necessary for university success, or may face adjustment challenges (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021). Bourdieu's theory on reproduction through education has been subject to critique and may be an oversimplification in how habitus and capital are accumulated and valued (e.g. Nash, 1990). However, in this study we suggest his concepts have potential value in understanding the benefits of activities such as peer mentoring.

Study aims and objectives

Undertaking a mentee or mentor role can be a valuable undertaking for university students (Rangel et al., 2021). But despite the large and diverse cohorts recruited each year to UK HE sport programmes, few studies have evaluated the efficacy of peer support schemes within sports education settings. Even more surprising is the limited research to have explored the motives of peer mentors who help deliver these schemes and the influence upon their professional development. Whilst recent growth in studies exploring peer mentors' experiences is an encouraging step forward, many are atheoretical and use only North American participants from across a narrow range of subjects. Using Bourdieu's theoretical concepts, the aim of this qualitative study was to explore the motives of undergraduate sports students for engaging in a peer mentoring opportunity and the benefits they gained from this experience.

Organisational context

This study was conducted at a post-92 English university (hereafter referred to using the pseudonym MWH). The origins of MWH are rooted in the need to provide practical and vocational education and this remains a core feature of its current provision. MWH is nationally renowned for teaching excellence and ensuring fair access and reducing educational inequality are underlined as key strategic outcomes in its 2020–21 to 2024–25 Access and Participation Plan. When compared with the national HE sector, MRH has traditionally recruited higher student numbers from underrepresented backgrounds, although this figure has fallen slightly since 2015. MWH has long encountered retention and progression issues with first year sport student cohorts, particularly those characterised as having entered from backgrounds not typically considered traditional, including those who enrol with vocational qualifications, are from low-income families, are the first in their family to enter HE or who come from neighbourhoods where HE is not a common destination (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Turner et al., 2017).

Peer mentoring scheme format, recruitment and training

In recent years, MWH has had a small number of PSS operating at departmental levels (e.g. Nursing, Midwifery and Health) which were designed to aid student transition and integration into university. The aim of the sport PSS was to further support first year sports students to transition confidently and promptly into university life and acquire the study and transferable skills needed to successfully complete a sport degree. The PSS schedule was developed by the first author as a series of four separate 60-minute timetabled workshops during the academic year 2019–2020. Each workshop was delivered face-to-face by a second-year peer mentor in a supportive and informal setting. Session one took place in mid-October 219 and provided advice for settling into university life. Session 2 was in mid-November 2019 and focussed on preparing for assessment. Session 3 occurred in early February 2020 and focussed on developing study skills (e.g. paraphrasing and referencing). Session 4 took place in early March 2020 and explored lessons learned during the first year at university and guidance on preparing for year two and beyond. All face-to-face sessions were delivered in small groups with an approximate ratio of 15 students to one peer mentor.

Peer mentor recruitment began in late September 2019, with all second-year undergraduate sports students receiving a recruitment email to their university accounts. This briefly outlined the PSS objectives and defined the peer mentoring role and boundaries should they accept the invitation. In total, 10 second year undergraduate sport students were recruited, trained as peer mentors and completed the role. All peer mentors completed a three-hour face-to-face

training programme in early October 2019. This training was delivered by the first, second and third authors and overviewed facilitation skills, interactive delivery methods, managing group dynamics, effective questioning, session structure and producing resources to fit the needs of students. The session underlined how peer mentors were expected to facilitate and not teach, be active listeners, offer reassurance and to share personal insights in a welcoming and positive environment. A peer support organisational site was created within Blackboard Ultra by the first author. This online repository housed a central bank of adaptable resources to assist with session planning and delivery and was accessible to all mentees and peer mentors.

Methods

Participants

A self-selecting sampling approach resulted in six of the 10 full-time second year sport students who undertook the peer mentoring role agreeing to participate within this study (male = 1; female = 5; mean age = 19.7). Five of the sample were the first from their immediate family (e.g. parents and siblings) to attend university, four had completed a Business and Technology Education Council (BTec) sport qualification either at college or school sixth form, two had completed A levels and three were living at home and commuting daily to university.

Design and procedure

In this qualitative study, six participants completed online semi-structured interviews during December 2020 using Microsoft Teams. Every interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was undertaken by the second author at a convenient time for each participant. The interview schedule was pilot tested with a peer mentor who did not Wish to participate in the study. This confirmed an approximate completion time of 25 minutes, with all wording considered understandable for second year undergraduates. A copy of the final interview guide is available on request from the first author.

It is important when undertaking qualitative interviews for the interviewer to quickly build trust and rapport with consenting interviewees, so that they feel reassured and relaxed to freely discuss appropriate topics. The interviewer had experience of undertaking qualitatively based HE pedagogic research which helped to establish positive bonds with participants (Patton, 2002). They took the role of 'active listener' during interviews to assist participants in telling their peer mentoring accounts in their own particular manner. Every attempt was made to understand the unique experiences of each participant rather than following a standardized list of questions. Using open-ended questioning, the first stage of

each interview unpacked participants' motivations for undertaking the peer mentoring role. In the second stage, questions explored their experiences of being peer mentors and the impact of doing so on their professional development.

To draw greater depth and meaning from responses, questions when necessary were supplemented by probes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This enabled the direction of interviews to be guided by participants, rather than dictated by the schedule, and made it possible to follow up any additional information discussed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Example interview questions included 'what were your reasons for undertaking the peer mentoring role', 'discuss the impact being a peer mentor has had on your level five university experience' and 'what would you say your key highlights of being a peer mentor were'. This flexible questioning approach supported participant centeredness, making it possible to follow up conversations where appropriate (Lincoln & Gubba, 1985).

Analysis

In line with guidelines published by Braun and Clarke (2020), each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. In the first phase of analysis (data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes), each transcript was read multiple times by the first and second authors, with notes reflecting theme statements and their meanings placed within margins (Patton, 2015). The next stage involved the same authors independently annotating each interview transcript with their personal interpretations of the data. Thematic coding employed an inductive approach to allow for themes to be generated from initial coded data. Primary associations and connections based on similarities and patterns between derived themes were made, resulting in the creation of two main themes. Once complete, direct quotes representing each theme were selected.

The final stage involved developing written accounts from identified themes which were reviewed and redrafted several times by the first and forth authors. The fourth author acted as a critical friend to the first author during the latter analysis stages by challenging initial data interpretations through critical feedback. This was an iterative process and resulted in some minor changes in categorization. For example, the early themes of 'mentoring role as a platform for personal and professional growth' and 'moral duty to provide institutional citizenship' were changed to 'mentoring role as a platform for developing cultural capital' and 'moral duty to support the social and cultural capital of mentees'.

Trustworthiness and credibility

Six weeks post-interview, each participants undertook a brief member checking telephone conversation with the first author to establish if they were satisfied that the proposed findings were accurate reflections of their peer mentoring

experience. This process reduced ambiguity, increased response validity and enabled participants to add things they may have forgot to initially mention (Lincoln & Gubba, 1985). Additionally, the author discussions and ongoing communications through the coding process further strengthened confidence of the findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Results

The study findings are presented under two key themes which reflect the motives and benefits of the study participants.

Theme 1: mentoring role as a platform for developing cultural capital

All study participants enjoyed undertaking the peer mentoring role, explaining how it helped develop a range of transferable skills. They particularly talked about how the role helped improve their confidence, leadership, time management, digital literacy, communication and networking skills, similar to the findings of Connolly (2017).

> *I improved my communication skills, time management, and how to conduct yourself and present yourself in front of others. (P1)*

> *Doing this scheme has improved my self-esteem and confidence as well as my outlook on what you can achieve. You could see the opportunities that it provided for you to develop. (P2)*

> *I just think it is another good experience at uni that is offered to you, so why not take it. You know it looks good on your CV for when you are applying for other things and then it obviously improves a load of skills, like communication, punctuality, confidence, teamwork and things like that. (P3)*

In identifying the types of skills they developed, participants were recognizing how they were important for personal development. At the same time, they indicated that these were not just tangible skills, but also embodied behaviours such as 'confidence' and 'how to conduct yourself'. Mentors recognised the value of these skills as additional resources that would enhance their curriculum vitae (CV) and, as P3 identified, be helpful in obtaining a job. As such, we suggest they saw peer mentoring, in part at least, as a means of developing additional cultural capital which was relevant for its convertibility in the job market.

The type of skills developed in peer mentoring were also specifically relevant to teaching. This was significant, in that almost all the mentors were sport students who had decided already to pursue careers in teaching, specifically in physical education (PE). Mentors especially gained from learning about and testing a series of inclusive and student-centred approaches. For example, time in the peer mentoring workshop was mainly spent completing hands-on

learning rather than mentees passively receiving information from mentors. Mentors supported their mentees to solve problems, communicate ideas and to share and reflect upon practical examples and personal experiences through individual tasks and small group discussions. The value of these teaching-specific mentoring experiences to mentors are outlined below:

> *I have developed how I present myself in front of a class, how I keep them engaged, get them involved. Some of them did not want to speak out or engage and it was finding the different ways to allow them to speak out. So, I did stuff like post-it notes on the wall, write questions on the post-it notes and share so it engaged them and allowed them to have a group discussion. (P1)*

> *I feel I learned on the job to make my sessions more interactive. I realised it was not just giving everyone else the information and boring them. It was not a simple them asking questions to each other, putting PowerPoint on the screen and everyone looking at it. I became more confident and got to know my class as much as possible. I would ask loads of questions and get them to interact as much as possible. (P5)*

> *When we planned the sessions, we tried to do a range of activities rather than just giving the information. We used video analysis, so we would watch a video and then note things down. We also did group as well as individual work. (P6)*

What was evident through this was that mentors were learning and adjusting to, both consciously and unconsciously through their experiences, the kinds of effective practices and embodied dispositions such as confident self-presentation (Bourdieu, 1977) consistent with good teaching and learning. P4 explicitly made the connection between the development of these skills and its value for their future aspiration as a PE teacher.

> *I want to be a PE teacher when I am older. So, it (peer mentor role) has helped challenge me like to talk in front of a class and prepare sessions. (P4)*

It was also notable that engagement in the mentoring training and implementation improved participants' awareness of day-to-day pastoral issues which mentees were likely to encounter or were relevant to teaching. For example, participant 1 said:

> *Doing the role made me realise there is a lot more behind working in education than just teaching that subject. There is the emotional side, the mental health and wellbeing, there is a lot more that comes into it that students need support with.*

As such, it may be argued that mentors were developing both overt teaching skills, but also a deeper understanding of professional values and the 'rules of the game' (Grenfell, 2008) associated with working in education and the more hidden cultural knowledge and ethics of care.

The mentors specifically talked positively about the value of mentoring in shaping their employability credentials and career prospects. During consequent teacher training interviews, for example, mentors indicated that they

were often questioned about any previous teaching encounters, with most mentioning their peer mentoring role. These exchanges were generally well received by panel members at Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) interviews. As reflected in the below passages, peer mentoring was viewed as cultural capital which was valued for accessing the professional teaching field.

> *I have applied to do a PGCE and I spoke a lot about doing this peer assisted learning role when I was interviewed and how I definitely think it helped me develop my teaching skills. (P1)*

> *Being a mentor opens doors especially if you are going into a teaching profession. It was one of the main things I talked about in my PGCE interview. (P3)*

> *Doing this mentoring has given me more experience to literally just develop as a person, develop communication, organisation and timekeeping skills. Stuff like that is all going to help in the future when I do hopefully become a primary school teacher. (P5)*

Participants further indicated that the role had helped them to stand out against other candidates applying for teacher training positions, and that they viewed the cultural capital they were developing as valuable for giving what Bourdieu would term 'distinction' in the competition for real or perceived profit in the job market. They discussed how friends studying at other universities had gained teaching related work experience within school settings but how these tended to be shadowing roles with limited responsibility and opportunity to prepare and deliver. Mentors explained this by talking of 'standing out from the crowd' being 'one up' or having the 'edge' on other candidates.

> *At the beginning of level six (final year undergraduate), you are applying to all things like PGCE's and stuff like that. And I have managed to be successful with getting accepted and in my interview I talked about the peer mentoring scheme because I put that within my personal statement. They were asking questions about it and I think that probably put me one up from the other interviewees beside me who did not have the opportunity to do this. (P2)*

> *It helped me stand out a bit from the crowd in a sense because I think most of the people on my interview did not have experience in a classroom setting and they had all pretty much just coached a wide range of sports so I think doing the role gave me a bit of an edge. (P6)*

Theme 2: moral duty to support the social and cultural capital of mentees

A further key finding was that in explaining their motives for participation, student mentors wanted to fully support newly arrived peers to transition quickly and positively into MWH. Many felt obliged to help and lead by example, having themselves begin their own university journey feeling overwhelmed and under-prepared on entry as first-generation students. This may have been

through their instinctive feelings of an initial lack of 'fit' between their early habitus and the social and academic norms and values in the socially structured field of university to which they had later adapted (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

Participants wanted to make a difference to the people around them, viewing it as their duty to help develop social bonds, strength of character, belonging and the setting of good academic habits and standards with their mentees. Given that almost all were first generation students themselves, using Bourdieu's concepts, this can be interpreted as the mentors having become aware of their own limited cultural capital on entry to the academic field and were keen to help develop the social and cultural capital to support the transition for others who were likely to be from similar background or non-traditional circumstances.

> *One of the main reasons that I wanted to be a mentor was to help other students who may have had the same problems as I did in first year. (P2)*

> *I wanted to help them in their first year because I know it is quite a daunting year to come into uni. Especially if you are away from home. So, I wanted to give back and make sure if they had any questions about any assessments or anything that I could help answer from my own experiences. (P4)*

Participants took comfort in giving back to the university, wanting to make new connections and networks. They were keen to develop friendships with fellow peer mentors who shared similar educational goals and aspirations, but to also fly the flag as outstanding mentors, despite some being nervous as to how to build successful relationships, both with other mentors and their mentees.

> *At the beginning I was a bit nervous because like I say I did not know who these students were, I did not know whether they would communicate with me, whether they would listen. (P1)*

Some mentioned their own experiences of peer support as first years and the lasting impact it had on their transition into MWH. They explained how their own peer mentors had inspired them and made them feel special at a time when they felt generally low on confidence and in need of reassurance. It was clear how the peer mentors were now showing the value of social capital, in terms of beneficial relationships which could aid acquisition of institutional cultural capital and how to succeed.

> *The peer mentoring I had was very useful and helped me in many ways to get used to university. (P3)*

> *I think I have always been someone who likes to help and when the opportunity was there I thought I could help someone because I know having someone my age to help when I was doing it (entering university) helped me. (P6)*

Several spoke about having enjoyed supporting mentees to settle into their new surroundings. In doing so, they gave their mentees insight into their own personal experiences of transitioning into MWH which was well received, putting mentees at ease and quickly earning their trust. For They discussed their fears about the transition, workload, independence and responsibility, highlighting and sharing their own lack of the dominant educational capital. Participants were particularly empathetic towards those mentees who had concerns about meeting academic expectations of university or fitting in socially and making new friends.

> *I would say from the beginning, especially the first half an hour of the first session you could see students wanted to say things but did not know how to say it, and by the end of it they were just literally saying this is what I need, this is what I am struggling with or we have got this assignment due, what did you do? How did you do that? And I just felt that was a big highlight seeing them quite shy wanting to say something but not knowing how to say it, to by the end of it just literally asking me absolutely anything, whether it was about the accommodation, whether it was about the student nights, whether it was the academic side but that was a really big highlight for me seeing I had helped them to open up. (P1)*

> *It was really satisfying. Noticing that you are helping people because I think, well a lot of them told me at the end of it that the lessons did help them, you know improve with their uni, which is good. (P3)*

> *It was nice when we came back, I think it was after Christmas, and they said what marks they had for some of their assignments, and none of them had referencing flagged up as something to improve on. I would not take credit for all of it, but I would say that I think us mentors probably did help them feel more confident in their assignments. (P6)*

Generally, participants found their mentees lacked understanding of what university level learning involved and worked hard to fill this knowledge gap. That is, they recognised the cultural gap between school and university experienced by their mentees. This was particularly the case for those who undertook BTec, rather than traditional A level qualifications. For example, participant 2 said:

> I *wanted to show them how studying at uni was different to college and sixth form and give some ideas on how they could best make the switch over.*

In the mentoring sessions, participants explained to mentees the main differences between school and further education learning settings compared with those expected in university where study is more student led, research informed and independent. Time was allocated in every mentor-mentee session for further supporting students who may have entered their studies feeling worried by the teaching and assessment methods they were likely to encounter. We suggest that through their building of trusting relationships in this way, mentors supported the development of appropriate social and cultural capital in mentees that would help lead them to university success. We further suggest that this process of cultural capital generation may be reproduced across future cohorts of widening

participation students who themselves have benefitted from peer mentoring offered by universities, showing the value of ongoing peer support opportunities across the undergraduate curriculum.

Discussion

Using Bourdieu's theoretical concepts, this study explored the motives of undergraduate sports students for engaging in a peer mentoring opportunity and the benefits they gained from this experience. The positive impact of peer support on the retention and success of university students is well supported in the literature (e.g. Collings et al., 2016: Ragavan, 2014). In recent times though, those without sufficient academic and social support have felt increasingly isolated and emotionally destabilised by their new environment and more likely to fail or withdraw from their studies (Farhat et al., 2017). This has particularly been the case for first generation students who may have little insight into the cultural expectations of university or the social networks to ease their transition (Allin et al., 2017).

Drawing on the workings of Bourdieu (1977, 1986), this study highlights how participants on a peer mentoring scheme developed cultural capital, through the gaining of skills, but also cultural knowledge and culturally relevant ways of behaving, teaching and learning, which were valued in education and specifically in the professional field of teaching. In this way they were learning and adjusting to the 'rules of the game' (Grenfell, 2008) through acquiring embodied dispositions, professional values and effective practices for success. Students also showed awareness of how their enhanced cultural capital could act as a form of distinction when accessing the teaching profession and supported the conversion of their social and cultural capital into later economic capital.

Mentors formed new networks, both with mentees and fellow peer mentors, developed professionally and gained valuable teaching and resource development experience. By acting as peer mentors, participants were also gaining social capital as humans through helping, supporting and nurturing their mentees and fellow mentors who they felt may have lacked such networks. Most mentors in this study were first generation students. This is perhaps surprising in that most volunteer research highlights how volunteering is typically undertaken by those with already higher levels of capital (Taniguchi, 2012; Wilson & Musick, 1997).

In terms of motives, their actions and behaviours may be explained in two ways. Firstly, they seem to have recognised their own limited cultural capital that research shows often leads to a lack of understanding and awareness of the cultural codes of university and a need for first generation students to adjust (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021). In adapting to the field they had also recognised how possession of capital alters a person's position in the field (Grenfell, 2008). They were aware of the need for accumulation of relevant cultural capital for their future career.

Secondly, they were motivated by feeling they wanted to help others from similar backgrounds through this stage of their life, to aid and give something back. These collective findings suggest participants entered the mentoring role to develop both their own cultural and economic capital, but also to support the development of social and cultural capital in, and with, mentees. As Claussen and Osbourne (2013) suggested, 'one of the challenges of education is how to increase a student's stock of the dominant cultural capital, regardless of the nature of any prior capital they may, or may not, already have acquired' *p*. 59. In this study, we suggest that peer mentoring schemes may be one way in which university educational systems can fulfil this role, particularly for widening participation students, who may lack traditional forms of cultural capital for academic and university success.

Implications for practice

Several implications emerged from the study to aid the design and delivery of future PSS. Firstly, student rather than tutor centred approaches to peer mentoring are recommended as they can help mentees to feel more valued, understood and part of university life from day one. Secondly, whilst much emphasis is placed on peer support once new students arrive on campus, there is increasing recognition that this could begin prior to their actual arrival during freshers. We, therefore, recommend that universities provide prospective students with access to virtual peer support opportunities so they can see beforehand what help is available, who the peer mentors are and the academic and social benefits of engaging with the scheme. We also propose that academic colleagues widely publicise the development and employability benefits a peer mentoring role can provide, especially for those students who enter from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Limitations and future research

We noted some limitations in this study. In every case, interviews took place with a research team member rather than a student researcher which could have led to the non-disclosure of sensitive topics (Byrne, Brugha, Clarke, Lavelle, & McGarvey, 2015). The study relied on retrospective recollections, and whilst only a short recall period, participants may have been liable to lapses of memory. Interviews were conducted remotely instead of face-to-face because of Coronavirus pandemic restrictions, whilst the sample was small and homogenous, thus limiting generalisability of findings. The power dynamic between students and academic staff members could have led to participants withholding negative information or discussing their experiences in a less critical manner. Therefore, future research should consider using student researchers as interviewees, so participants feel as

comfortable as possible to talk freely and openly. Longitudinal studies which monitor peer mentors' experiences over extended time periods (e.g. years rather than month) are also recommended.

Contribution to literature and conclusions

This study provides some important conceptual additions to the wider literature base as well as supporting the findings of previous work in the value of peer mentoring (e.g. Booth et al., 2016; Connolly, 2017; Maccabe & Fonseca, 2021). The key findings provide HE colleagues working across wide-ranging subjects with evidence to develop future PSS that best support the transition of diverse student populations into, through and out of university and into employability or further study. Additional benefits may also include improved retention and progression outcomes, higher satisfaction ratings and increased proportions of good honours awards.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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