Red Guides
Paper 58

Peer Mentoring: What students want to know

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Introduction

This guide is a tangential outcome of research which was initially conducted to ascertain students' views and needs in respect to Peer mentoring. Peer Mentoring is a preferred means employed by many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to assist in the integration of first year students into their discipline at university and has been found to be effective not only as a way to improve the first year experience of students (Parker & Montgomery, 1998; Watson, 2000; Farrell et al., 2004) but also as a means of increasing rates of student retention and achievement for a relatively low cost (Shrestha, 1999; Playford et al 1999; Bruffee, 1999; Packham & Miller, 2000; Boud, et al 2001; Dook, 2002; Hodges. & White. 2001).

As part of the original questionnaire based investigation the first statement on the student questionnaire was an open-ended one:

> *"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"*

This statement elicited the fullest and most heartfelt responses to any question we had asked over many years of conducting research with our students.

For this reason we decided to capture some of these responses in this guide in the hope they will be useful in helping academic and support staff determine what information students would like on various aspects of University life.

To give a flavour of the responses received, here are some 'appetisers':

- *'No matter how quiet or shy you are, you'll have a great time and it gives you a great amount of independence'*

- *'Not to get so worried about making new friends and meeting new people because everyone is in the same boat therefore everyone is making the extra effort to be friendly'*

- *'That everyone is out there on their own and very few people care...'*

- *'Take everything in your stride. Chances are everyone else is in the same boat and, if it is that bad you can always talk to someone at Uni welfare or flat/course mates'*

- *'Relax and enjoy the first year. Yes, you're there to learn but making friends is important too'*

- *'The importance of experiencing as much of the social life in first year as possible. When you reach second and third year, the workload becomes too great'*

- *'That in the first few weeks, everybody is as scared as you are, even if they don't look it, they're just better at hiding it! Just try to enjoy it, because before you know it you'll be graduating and it will all be over (sob)!'*

Some of the above comments echo responses in Jarkey's (2004) study where students, asked to describe their experiences of the first few weeks of first year, responded expressively: "Nightmare", "LOST LOST LOST", "stressed out", "awkward", "isolating", "impersonal", "fearful", "scary", "confusing", "extremely sucky, hell-ish, and bollocks". Many of these students said they were overwhelmed and unsure of the best choices for them and how to get the support they needed.

As one Northumbria first year student commented:

- *'Who do you ask? You know if you're already struggling to come to terms with 'Where are the classrooms? Who are the lecturers?', how can you*

possibly find someone…bearing in mind you're all in the same boat together, until you get to know the other people on your cohort, how do you get to know who the more experienced are?'

Jarkey (2004) recognises how, in the first week of semester, students are inundated with information while having to cope with accommodation and transport arrangements, learning their way around campus, finalising their enrolment, figuring out their timetables and classrooms, receiving unit outlines and purchasing textbooks, and finding out about clubs and societies. It is unsurprising that they feel overwhelmed and confused and that little of what they are told in the early weeks of the first year is assimilated by them.

Student responses to our 'killer question' could be categorised under seven headings. These headings were used again in a smaller scale study which comprised postcards containing the same statement, distributed to students during a 'roadshow' around the campus. Table 1 illustrates the percentage responses within each category for the two years.

Table 1: Category of responses

Issue	2006	2009
Academic	19	40
Time/timetabling	8	14
Financial	20	27
Technology	8	4
Accommodation	5	3
Location	12	5
Social	28	7

In 2006, clearly social issues were the primary concern of students, also these have decreased over time it is notable than concerns have shifted to be more academically

related. Some of the comments received in each of these categories are now expanded upon.

Academic issues

Academic-related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'That it is VERY different to school because everything you do is independent and you don't get the same level of community or support as you do at school. It makes you become an adult'*

- *'How independent the teachers expect you to be – you have to figure a lot of things out for yourself about work, exams, etc'*

- *'How important it was to attend classes the first couple of weeks, despite knowing that making friends was essential'*

- *'That you have to be organised from the start i.e. file each weeks lecture notes with the relevant seminar work'*

- *'Independent learning is essential, timetables change all the time and the subject modules are interconnected'*

- *'What was expected of me by way of levels/standard of work'*

- *'To know what is expected of you and more information regarding layout of course etc'*

- *'How few hours we spend in University and how much of work is self directed'*

- *'How hard it would be to manage my son and the workload. As a single parent felt guilty constantly in first year. Felt I wasn't spending enough time*

with my son or not working as hard as I could have'

- *'How hard it would be sometimes to balance work and play'*

- *'That lecturers are not like teachers in school! You can talk to them if you're struggling, you can get extensions on work and there is no such thing as detention in University!'*

- *'Not to try to buy every book on the module reading list'*

- *'There's tons of information about [social activities]. It seems… even when you go for your one to one with your personal tutor at the beginning…they said that they didn't need to talk to me because I wouldn't have any housing issues, or anything like that… so really they didn't want to have anything to do with me… There needs to be more about the academic side than the social side'*

- **'**Knowing where I can get info about services and facilities the Uni provides. Even being here for more than a year, I have not known many things which are provided by the Uni and facilities that will be useful. There are things we won't know there is as we don't even know they exist'*

Table 2: Major themes –academic needs

Major themes which emerged from the students' comments in respect of academic needs revolved around wanting to know what was expected of them in terms of:	
Independent learning	The difference between University and school especially in respect of having to engage in independent learning, be self-motivated and to develop good organizational skills.
Subjects of study	A full explanation of what will be studied, in order to help them make more informed choices • e.g. in the prospectus (one student commented on a perceived imbalance in the chemistry: biology content of their course) • e.g. at open days geared more specifically to courses • e.g. in-depth guide to modules prior to starting
Teaching methods	The importance of seminars • e.g. how to engage in group discussion
Assignments/marking	The kinds of essays and exams that they would have and the volume of feedback they could expect • e.g. how much, how often
	Support available • e.g. resources, strategies to employ

Resources (reading)	How much reading would be expected and what might be useful to research prior to attending lectures
	- e.g. obtaining reading lists before the course in order to prepare for the demands of subjects and lecturing staff
	- e.g. which reading is essential, can it be found in plentiful supply in the library.
	- e.g. Is there a core text worth purchasing?
Resources (staff)	To know who lecturers, personal and guidance tutors are and where they may be found
	- e.g. contact lists
	- e.g. open surgeries

The literature corroborates the importance of these issues. Yorke and Longden (2008) found that, whilst most students claimed to have understood what was expected of them academically in HE, roughly one-third of their respondents said that academic work was harder than they had expected it to be. Younger students especially (i.e. aged less than 21 on enrolment) felt they had made a poor choice of field of study and that their programme was not as anticipated. Their feeling that they were making insufficient academic progress meant that many first years had considered withdrawing from their courses and, in Yorke and Longden (2008)'s study, 40% of those who had little or no prior knowledge of their programme had considered withdrawal, whereas only 25 per cent of their better-informed peers had done so. Also, with respect to younger first years, Yorke and Longden (2008) found a limited willingness to 'read around' the subject of study.

Reason et al (2006) found that first-year students' perception of the support they received was the single greatest influence on their development of academic competence. Students who reported feeling that the staff at their HEI provided the academic and non-academic support they needed, and who felt they had good relationships with staff, were more likely than similar students at other HEIs to report greater gains in academic competence.

The additional and increasingly diverse range of students now entering HE means increased pressure on the availability of one-to-one contact time with staff, and students are expected to become increasingly self-sufficient in their learning. Increasing class sizes and reduced tutorial support can make for a difficult transition from school to university. The change from a structured learning environment to one where study requirements are less well defined can be particularly difficult for first years, especially those in large classes. Socially, large class sizes can exacerbate the difficulty of the school to university transition, particularly for students who do not come with a school cohort and for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hofmeister, 1998). Many of these classes have high failure rates, and high attrition rates

Round (1995) has discussed student retention issues in some detail. Round cites research which promotes frequent student: teaching staff interaction as fundamental to student retention (Chan, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Taylor & Bedford, 2004) but unrealistic given current staff: student ratios and the level of resource.

Bekhradnia et al (2006) comment how, until recently, HEIs rarely provided information to prospective students about what they could expect by way of contact with their teachers, and the amount of formal teaching. This meant that students interested in such questions have had to rely on indirect and unsatisfactory sources of information, such

as newspaper league table analyses of staff: student ratios – a misleading proxy for teaching contact.

Time and timetabling issues

Time and timetabling related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'How difficult it can be balancing coursework with free time, guidance on how to manage time would have been very helpful at the beginning, instead of having to learn the hard way (doing all night cramming sessions) etc'*

- *'How difficult it would be to get books from the library/access tutors as the assignment deadlines approached. I should have done more earlier to avoid these problems'*

- *'The fact that the course takes up a lot more time than you would think, time management suggestions/help would have been useful'*

- *'My lectures would be from 9am-8.30pm with marked attendance - not great for those with chronic illnesses!'*

- *'It would have been really useful to have a better idea of the number of hours work that would be required of me. This would have helped massively in finding a job with the appropriate number of hours'*

- *'Just how demanding it is on my time, especially being a mature student with a young family. It is difficult to give yourself to one without neglecting the other'*

- *'The timetable, to organise childcare well in advance. I'd have relaxed & enjoyed it so much more had I felt I knew home life was taken care of & not spend freshers' week & week 1 hanging onto every word to give me a clue!'*

- *'The truth about Uni not the fake lies they tell you at college and schools. It is about stress, the one thing they conveniently leave out'*

Table 3: Major themes – time/timetabling needs

Major themes which emerged from the students' comments in respect of time and timetabling needs revolved around wanting to know in respect of :	
Timetable	What a timetable for a typical University week looks like
	How to interpret a timetable (some of which appear very complex and are subject to change)
	Early starts and late finishes (inconvenient for those with childcare/carer responsibilities)
Time management	How to make best use of free time between lectures and on 'days off'
Workload	A concomitant accompaniment to the heavy workload is stress, experienced by a number of respondents

Yorke and Longden (2008) found that 39% of the first year students in their study said that they had difficulty in balancing academic and other commitments. This was especially true for more mature students. UK-domiciled students with dependants frequently referred to stress

associated with their programme and the heaviness of the workload. This came out at Northumbria too, where

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'How to get to know other part-time or mature students, as a member of both groups I did feel slightly isolated on entering the Uni environment'*

- *'How they can accommodate mature students with children'*

There were other groups in the diverse student community who expressed concerns, e.g. access to learning support for students with mental health issues and access to dyslexia report. In relation to the latter, students needing to supplement their income would appreciate advice on part-time jobs for dyslexic students.

Financial issues

The issue of finance and special needs was raised by Yorke and Longden (2008)'s report of a mature disabled student who had to take a year out because she had got herself into debt.

Finance related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'How vital a part-time job would be in supporting me through my three years at university'*

- *'How difficult financial matters would be, and how hard it is to work part time and ensure you get all your work done, without having to worry about paying rent and bills, as well as deadlines'*

- *'All the different places you can get student discount!'*

- *'How much money I would have to spend buying books for my course'*

- *'How much money I would waste on alcohol'*

- *'That although Student Loans may sound like a lot of money, they really don't stretch that far!'*

- *'Your overdraft has to last for 3 years, not one term'*

- *'I don't think students are informed enough about the financial side. Working part time and studying for my degree has been very tough – I thought University would be so much fun but it's been nowhere as enjoyable as I expected!'*

- *'The easiest way to set up a bank account for international students'*

Table 4: Major themes – financial needs

Major themes which emerged from the students' comments in respect of money needs revolved around wanting to know in respect of :	
Sources of funding,	Bursaries, grants, student awards/sponsorship available
Banking	Overdrafts, use of (free) ATM machines
Budgeting	Approximate costs to be given beforehand – course fees, house rental, materials costs, parking charges etc
Money management	General support and guidelines on money issues, avoiding debt
Workload	Balancing Uni workload, part time work, social life

Resource costs	How much textbooks cost and how useful they would be
	- e.g. use of Amazon vs Uni Bookshop - e.g. fact there was a discount available at the Well Read Bookshops on a Saturday - e.g. purchase of second hand books

Yorke and Longden (2008) found nearly 60% of the first year students in their study were worried about financing their studies. This was more significant for older than for younger students. Again, nearly 60% said that they had had to undertake paid work in order to support themselves while in higher education. A number of students in their study pointed to the problems that they had found in balancing employment and academic study and handling debt.

IT issues/library and learning services

There was a feeling among students in Briguglio's (2000) study of ESL students that they should not always be left to their own devices and to find out things by trial and error for themselves especially with respect to University systems such as IT and the library and learning resources. Some second years in Briguglio's study were unaware of the availability of certain services, e.g. study skills support.

Northumbria students' IT-related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'Location of computers etc, how to print out. it's not easy at first'*

- *'All those things that you find out later anyway (printing, library) but it would make you feel more comfortable in the rather confusing beginning'*

- *'That the majority of modules and assessments require the usage of a computer'*

- *'How to access emails, Blackboard and journals efficiently'*

- *'Where and when labs were open as when I asked tutors they did not know opening times. This is very important to University life as often I can't visit during 9-5 so have to go in the evening'*

- *'Where each of main buildings were & what facilities they had on offer, e.g. 24 hour computer access'*

- *'How to research and locate relevant texts/resources for assignments via the Internet or through the library'*

- *'How to use NORA!! 4 years here and still no idea'*

Table 5: Major themes –ICT/library needs

Major themes which emerged from the students' comments in respect of ICTs/library needs revolved around wanting to know in respect of :	
IT knowledge generally	e.g. spreadsheets
Virtual learning environment	e.g. features of BlackBoard
Library usage	e.g. interlibrary loans e.g. Understanding how to use NORA
Citations	e.g. academic referencing, avoiding plagiarism

Generally IT and library-related issues featured seldom. This is hardly surprising given that Northumbria was named the 'UK's most IT-enabled Organisation' at the Computing Awards for Excellence 2006

In their study Yorke and Longden (2008) found that students who did not have access (or cheap access) to the internet from their rooms and who were obliged to use general institutional facilities, found such facilities were not always available to them. In Yorke and Longden's study the most frequently mentioned dissatisfaction in the general area of institutional resourcing related to the standard of halls of residence: In a separate ICT study conducted by the researchers students were asked what was their main residence during term-time. Just under a third of respondents continued to live with their own family. Only 10% of students resided in University accommodation, the majority of students (49%) saying they lived in a shared private rental accommodation. The students were then asked what most accurately reflected their access to the internet. The vast majority of students, 82% of the cohort stated they had full private access to the internet in their place of residence with a further 12% saying they had frequent shared access with only 1 respondent saying they had no access to the internet.

Accommodation issues

Northumbria students' accommodation-related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'Not to get a house before Christmas with people you don't know very well. They can turn very quickly! Wait until you know everyone better. There will always be houses to rent'*

- *'Advice about moving accommodation as I was very unhappy with arrangements in my first year'*

- *'How much bills are in shared accommodation for 3,4,5,6 tenants etc'*

- *'How difficult it might be living with strangers'*

Northumbria halls of residence featured in only one response:

- *'How tough it was to live in halls. All the noise and being alone or surrounded by people'*

The main concern expressed was about learning to live with other people and a few students made reference to finding and funding accommodation.

Location issues

Location-related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'Where all the buildings etc were that you'd be using most so there wasn't a mad panic in the end of freshers' week when you didn't know where you were going'*

- *'How to get around the campus to start with! How about some guided tours of the site for all new students - part time, mature as well as all the youngsters!'*

- *'How the room numbers were abbreviated on university timetables, particularly when dealing with classroom numbers preceded by several zeros'*

- *'What happens/what was available in each of the different buildings'*

- *'More about the city itself, the university sells all of the cultural side of the city but these are actually areas that we don't frequently use, local day to day information would be more useful than art gallery and pub and club information'*

- *'More information about Newcastle city night life, where students go, and what areas are popular. How to get there and back?'*

- *'That fresher's week wasn't just for people who didn't live in Newcastle or surrounding areas in fact it was for everyone. also more information about it would have been ideal as I never participated in it and I really regret that'*

The chief issues involved the need for more directional assistance both in terms of having a campus map but also maps of the city and its surrounds incorporating guidance on shops and transport, including taxi ranks.

Whilst the students discussed academic issues, they also touched upon a number of other personal, social and economic issues. As McInnis et al (2000) point out, personal and emotional issues have direct consequences on successful studying so there is a need for institutions to take an holistic approach, supporting students as 'whole' people – socially, emotionally and physically as well as academically. Yorke and Longden (2008) report how younger students (i.e., aged less than 21 on enrolment) in their study suffered to a greater extent in respect of making the school – university transition, indicating greater difficulty with making friends with fellow students, accommodation and homesickness, and indicating lower levels of enthusiasm regarding the city or town in which they were studying

Social issues

Northumbria students' social-related responses to the introductory statement to the questionnaire included the representative comments:

"One thing which would have been most useful for me to know about University life when I started was…"

- *'An early awareness of the social facilities available in the school as well as students available to welcome and assist freshers who arrived late, (because I arrived late)'*

- *'Being an international student it would have helped to know what kind or activities were possible plus getting to know ho to join and what societies where there for all of us'*

- *'Different societies existing like ISOC for international students'*

- *'Help to find a local church that is student friendly'*

- *'How going home even once a fortnight can ruin your 1st year experience. Bonds are harder to form. Boyfriends at home if a long way away is a BIG mistake. Don't do it. It will NEVER work'*

- *'You really can't afford to have a late night with a 9 o'clock lecture the next morning!'*

- *'Become an insomniac…it's the only way not to miss anything and still get your work done!'*

- *'City nightlife guide, e.g. good nights out, cheap nights out, good clubs, good bars, places that air sport, etc'*

- *'Don't bring a TV. A really good way to make friends is to sit watching telly in a communal area instead of locking yourself up in your room'*

- *'The first year should be spent doing social activities and joining clubs. My course in the first year has very little relevancy to the final year now and the opportunities offered by the Students' Union should be taken'*

Comments relating to social issues centred around issues of loneliness and home-sickness and 'breaking the ice' with other students. Failure to socialise could result in students finding it hard to fit in. This emerged in relation to international students. Newcastle has a reputation for being a 'party city' and for a 'booze culture' which proves difficult when cultural or religious issues mean that students cannot join in. Yorke and Longden (2008) found some of their respondents indicated that they had found it difficult to integrate socially into their community and this was expressed as a personal dislike of a 'partying' culture:

Gannon-Leary, Crane and Buckley (2009) found that, for many 'local' students at Northumbria, their University experience involves travelling into University to attend lectures/seminars and travelling back. If there is sufficient time between lectures they may return home; if there is insufficient time, they are likely to work in the library. They do not join clubs or societies or engage in sports and they have friendship groups based around school and home. Statistics for 2007/8 indicate that 79.5% of full-time students were from North East England (Facts & Figures http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/cppdf/factfig0708.pdf). Yorke and Longden (2008) similarly report on how these commuter students find it difficult to make friends despite the fact that friendship formation is a crucial element of a positive HE experience. They point out how HEIs can assist in friendship formation through the approaches they adopt to teaching; for example, by engaging students early on in activities that involve collaboration.

Studying at university is a social and cultural experience as well as an educational one, and students benefit from developing abilities to interact with people from different backgrounds in addition to acquiring knowledge and skills. In some instances, peer mentoring schemes have been designed to match home and international students and involve both in the mentoring process (Devereux, 2004). Without any prompting, one Northumbria student responded to the 'killer' question with a plea for peer mentoring:

- *'I would have benefitted from having a mentor whom I could have contacted prior to starting Uni. This mentor would be more appropriately suited if they were a similar age (perhaps) but definitely undertaking a similar course. I think the facility would benefit many starting Uni and for the mentor to gain experience plus sharing experience'*

Northumbria University staff are advised to contact Joanne Smailes, Learning and Teaching Advisor for Staff Development, if they are interested in finding out more about peer mentoring.

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