

Peer Support Development Project

Examples of Practice, The Student Mental Health Evidence Hub

The Student Mental Health Project is an Office for Students (OfS) funded project that aims to help higher education providers develop their student mental health interventions. The project has developed a Student Mental Health Evidence Hub, a free resource consisting of an evidence-based toolkit, evaluation guidance, examples of practice and the results of our sector engagement and student panel work. The project was led by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) as part of a consortium with What Works Wellbeing, SMaRteN, Student Minds and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.

This document contains an example of practice to support student mental health in higher education. This is one of a number of examples which have been collated as a result of calls to the sector issued by TASO. Please note that the information contained in these examples is not endorsed by TASO, and TASO has not been involved at any stage of intervention development, delivery or evaluation. We are grateful to the participating higher education providers for sharing information to facilitate the development of these examples.

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Overview

Higher Education Provider:	King's College London (KCL) in collaboration with King's College London Students' Union (KCLSU)
Intervention Title:	Peer Support Development Project
Intervention Type:	Peer Support
Target Group:	Universal (non-targeted)
Date:	November 2023

Brief overview of the intervention

The Peer Support Development Project ran from March 2022 until June 2023. The project aimed to improve the quality and consistency of peer mentoring across KCL and understand the feasibility of having a central service within KCLSU to support peer mentoring schemes. The Project aimed to improve wellbeing and belonging for both mentees and mentors as well as the employability and a sense of service for mentors.

A team of three professional staff and 11 student staff equip and empower 100s of student leaders to build a community of good wellbeing across King's College London (KCL) through student-led health promotion activities, resources and peer support. The project produced a Training course, Handbook and Award for peer mentors and an Evaluation set for mentors and mentees as well as setting up monthly Peer Support Community of Practice meetings and yearly Peer Mentoring Advisory Group meetings. The project came about following a systematic review and a mapping of peer support exercise.

Intervention approach

Peer support and peer mentoring

Peer support refers to support provided by and for people with similar experiences (Gulliver & Byrom, n.d.) and peer mentoring is “a one-to-one supportive relationship between the student and another person (e.g. older student) of greater ability and experience (Topping, 1996, p. 321, as cited in Collings, 2014, p. 928).” A recent systematic review of university peer support for student mental health and wellbeing demonstrated that peer mentoring programmes show significant reductions in stress for students (Pointon-Haas et al, 2023).

A mapping of peer support at KCL in 2018 showed that peer mentoring lacks consistent training, expectations, rewards or evaluations across KCL. The inconsistency inhibits the sharing of best practice, impeding the development of peer mentoring so that it is a consistent, high-quality and well-evaluated support for students transitioning into university.

In the context of this project, peer mentoring connected incoming undergraduate and postgraduate students with higher year or more experienced students to support the transition into university. Peer mentoring is part of KCL's wider peer support model that includes varying levels of peer support to suit the mental health and wellbeing needs of different students at various times in their student journey. Peer support at KCL is overseen by the King's College London Student's Union (KCLSU) Wellbeing team, a student-led wellbeing service that is funded by the university to sit in the student union. The team equips and empowers students to build a community of good wellbeing.

Project design

The project was split into five phases, overseen by the Peer Support Coordinator in the KCLSU Wellbeing team, which was made up of 3 staff and 11 student staff.

The phases were as follows:

Phase one, March-June 2022 - Mapping and Understanding

Nine student staff in the role of Faculty Peer Support Assistants (FPSAs) spoke to 31 stakeholders representing 21 peer support schemes. The team found that although the majority of programmes provided some form of training and many had an evaluation, less than half had a handbook, and even less gave formal recognition for joining.

Phase two, June-August 2022 - Building

The project team planned and co-designed a central handbook, training, evaluation and a recognition scheme for peer mentors

Phase three, August 2022 - April 2023 - Implementation

The materials created in phase 2 were rolled out to faculties for use in the 2022/23 academic year. Departments with peer mentoring programmes recruited students to be peer mentors at different times based on their programmes' timelines from May to August. The central KCLSU Wellbeing team trained the peer mentors via an online, asynchronous course, with additional bespoke training delivered by departments. Incoming students chose to be paired with a peer mentor or were automatically paired with one depending on if their scheme was opt-in or opt-out.

Phase four, October-January 2023 - Mid-project evaluation

The team evaluated the previous phases of the project and gave recommendations for the peer mentoring scheme leads and Peer Support Development Project team to action in semester 2 of the 2022/23 academic year and in 2023/24 academic year.

Phase five, May 2023 - Evaluation

The End-of-Project Evaluation aimed to determine the future of this peer support embedded into the student journey.

Resources required

The implementation and delivery of this project required a collaborative network of departments, staff and students.

Overall those involved in this project consisted of:

- 1 Peer Support Coordinator from the KCLSU Wellbeing Team led project*
- 31 stakeholders from 21 different peer support schemes across the university*
- 9 Student Faculty Peer Support Assistants (FPSAs)*
- 2 Student Peer Support Assistants (PSAs)*
- The KCL Careers and Employability service (for awarding Peer Mentors)
- Peer Mentoring Advisory Groups

* These team members led on the newly developed Peer Support Community of Practice chaired by the Peer Support Coordinator. The group made up of staff and students consulted and collaborated on all parts of the project.

The project budget covered the full-time cost of the Peer Support Coordinator and the cost of part-time student staff at 12 hours of paid work per month (nine student staff for one term and two student staff for the academic year).

Intervention evaluation

Evaluation approach

The study used a mixed methods approach comprising a longitudinal study alongside a qualitative component.

The evaluation consisted of:

- Three pre-post evaluation surveys measuring mentoring aims, sent before, during and after the programme. This allowed the tracking of changes in attitudes and, personal development. The following measures were used within the three surveys:
 - Experience of the scheme - dosage measures, what participants gained, what had been discussed
 - Qualitative questions on how they found the meetings
 - Wellbeing measures based on ONS 4 (Office for National Statistics, 2018) and GP Core 14 (Core Systems Trust, 2020) instruments
 - A Sense of Belonging Measure (5 statements scored with 10 point Likert scale) (returning students asked all questions and incoming students the first 2 at enrollment, as a comparison group)¹
- Records of meeting logs to monitor programme engagement (completed by mentors).
- Qualitative feedback gathered from peer mentors, mentees and local departmental leads of programmes through Peer Mentoring Advisory Groups, thematically analysed.

Descriptive statistics were used for analysis of the longitudinal study. However, because of retention issues with mentor and mentee engagement in the survey, scope for statistical analysis of the data is limited. Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data collected. It was found that the main objectives of peer mentoring were to improve wellbeing and belonging for both mentors and mentees, improve employability and develop a sense of service.

The project did not measure student outcomes such as transition and retention but this is being considered for future evaluations.

¹ Please note, the Sense of Belonging Measure was developed at KCL. The questions are a 0 – 10 likert scale to answer the following statements 'I fit in with the King's community,' 'I feel supported by King's/KCLSU,' 'I feel optimistic about the semester ahead,' 'I feel that I can cope with my academic responsibilities' and 'I participate in student life beyond my academic commitments.'

Intervention impact

The team found that the training was the most successful with mentors from all the central resources, and that the training and the award were most popular with departmental leads. The qualitative feedback found that the members' main reasons for not using the resources were limited time and that they planned to implement more of them. The Peer Support Community of Practice was well attended and successful, attracting 43 members across 11 faculties. The popularity of the meetings suggests that a centralised peer mentoring system is widely supported.

The results of the quantitative evaluation were as follows:

- 447 enrolments in new Peer Mentoring Training, with 210 successfully completing.
- 25 mentors applied for the King's Mentoring Award and 22 completed the award with a pass. (The low completion numbers may be related to confusion regarding the number of peer mentoring hours needed for completion).
- 80% of mentees recommended their schemes to peers at the end of the academic year.
- Peer Support Community of Practice was made up of 43 staff and student members from across 11 faculties or departments.

High attrition made it difficult to find statistically significant results and measure impact, with the initial 34 responses dropping to two mid-year evaluation responses and five final evaluation responses.

Recommendations

The project recommends the use of a centralised system for peer support and peer mentoring, with a common set of resources as this allows consistent quality and evaluation of mentoring schemes across the university. The team also recommends that the core set of resources can then be used to create new and bespoke peer mentoring programmes to target more vulnerable groups. Finally, considering the high attrition rate, the team recommends in-course announcements and awareness-raising to ensure that all students who enrol complete the training and all scheme leads are aware of the resources available.

Next steps

The team would like to evaluate peer mentoring impact on transition, retention and potentially loneliness as long-term outcome measures. They would also like to scale up the project, using the model to pilot peer mentoring for specific groups of students, such as mature students, where a pilot has already been launched. Here, 20 incoming mature students have been paired with higher-year mature students, with the specific focus here on retention, as this is an issue amongst mature students at KCL. There are also plans in the next academic year to pilot a peer mentoring scheme for LGBTQ+ students, who have reported worse wellbeing.

References

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