

Peer Support Development Project: Executive Summary

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Background

Peer mentoring programmes at King's connect incoming students with higher year or more experienced students to support the transition into university. A 2018 mapping of peer support at King's showed that peer mentoring lacked consistent training, expectations, rewards or evaluations across the College. This affected our ability to share best practice and develop the peer mentoring programmes. The Peer Support Development Project - launched in March 2022 and completed in June 2023 - aimed to create a centralised peer mentoring structure overseen by KCLSU Wellbeing, our student-led wellbeing service. The staff and student project team co-created training, evaluation, recognition and other supportive resources for peer mentoring schemes, in addition to forming a Peer Support Community of Practice. This group encouraged members to discuss their challenges and successes related to peer support schemes via monthly meetings and resource sharing. The group marked the first time that departments and teams were collaborating to improve peer support together. This project was about understanding the feasibility of having a central service, led by a full-time Peer Support Coordinator, to support peer mentoring schemes to become consistent, high quality, and well-evaluated support for students transitioning into King's. Our evaluation of the project 1.5 years later has proved that this is not only possible but an extremely effective way of achieving these aims.

What We Did

The Peer Support Development Project team was comprised of nine paid student Peer Support Assistants between March and July 2022, and two paid student Peer Support Assistants between November 2022 and July 2023, with one full-time Peer Support Coordinator overseeing the project at all times. In the first phase of the project - Mapping & Understanding - the team met with 31 stakeholders representing 21 peer support schemes in order to understand them and their needs. In the second phase, Building, the team used the knowledge gained from the stakeholder meetings to create a central KEATS-based Peer Mentoring Training course, three evaluation surveys, and, together with King's Careers & Employability, a King's Experience Award called King's Mentoring. This was in addition to a customisable Peer Mentor Handbook, a Handbook Cheat Sheet and a Peer Mentor Meeting Log. The team also produced a document with suggested communication strategies for each faculty. These new materials were rolled out to scheme leads in August 2022 and marked the beginning of the Implementation phase, which ran until April 2023. This phase saw the commencement of the monthly Peer Support Community of Practice meetings and the Peer Mentoring Advisory Group meetings held with mentors, mentees and scheme leads in semester

two. Additional resources were also created, such as a Peer Mentoring page on the KCLSU website sharing the contact details for various schemes. Phase 4, Mid-project Evaluation, was completed in January 2023 and evaluated the first two phases of the project. Phase 5, End-of-Project Evaluation, evaluated the third project phase and was finished in June 2023, signifying the end of the project.

What We Found

Out of all the central resources we provided, the training was the most successful with mentors, and the award was the most popular with scheme leads. The Peer Mentoring Training gained 447 enrolments, with 327 attempts on the qualifying quiz and 210 successful completions of this. 10/21 scheme leads said that they'd shared the King's Mentoring Award with their students, with 75 mentors applying and 22 finishing the award with a pass. The low completion numbers may be due to confusion over the 20-hour suggested time commitment, which mentoring alone is unlikely to achieve. The inconsistent response numbers to the Peer Mentoring Evaluations made it difficult to measure impact, with 34 responses to the Start of Year Evaluation, 2 to the Middle of Year Evaluation and 5 to the End of Year Evaluation. However, the responses from students who did complete the evaluations were positive, with 80% of mentees recommending their scheme to peers at the end of the academic year. Qualitative feedback was also gained from the six peer mentoring schemes that took part in the Peer Mentoring Advisory Group meetings as well as from the King's Mentoring Award activities. The Peer Support Community of Practice was a success, attracting 43 members across 11 faculties or departments, Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care being the only one of the nine faculties not to have representation. Between August 2022 and March 2023, there were 45 attendees across seven meetings. Several Peer Support Community of Practice members have reported that their reasons for not using more of the materials provided were limited time and resources on their end, and that next academic year they plan to implement more of them. The number of staff and students who engaged in the project, or plan to, is evidence that the centralised peer mentoring structure is widely supported and beneficial to scheme leads, mentees and mentors.

Recommendations

1. Ensure all scheme leads, especially those who are new, are aware of, have access to and use the Peer Support Development Project resources where this would benefit the scheme
2. Look into the results of the 2023 King's Wellbeing Survey and compare these with the findings from our own evaluations, particularly with regards to incoming vs returning students
3. Consider investigating why students leading peer support schemes do not participate in Peer Support Community of Practice meetings
4. Remind all students who enrol on the Peer Mentoring Training to complete it, e.g. through in-course announcements
5. Integrate the King's Mentoring Award into the Champion for Change Award as both seem similar in their submission requirements and activities considered

Conclusion

The Peer Support Development Project endeavoured to understand if having a central support structure could improve the quality, consistency and evaluation of peer mentoring projects across King's. With the successful co-creation of a range of resources, as well as the formation of the Peer Support Community of Practice, the function of the Peer Support Coordinator has been established as critical. The role ensures that King's harnesses the potential of peer mentoring to improve students' transition in a consistent way, which in turn has the possibility of impacting student wellbeing, belonging and retention. In addition, the developed structure allows for King's and KCLSU to identify key priority groups together as part of wider strategic priorities that may benefit from the accessibility and more informal support that peer mentoring offers.

As the new structure has only been in place for one academic year, it is important that we build on the progress that was made, amending the resources according to what was learned and supporting those schemes that were unable to implement the changes due to various constraints. There is also the possibility of expanding the work to support specific groups, for example neurodivergent students, as has already been done with a pilot mentoring scheme for mature students, also led on by the Peer Support Coordinator. By the end of the next academic year, the centralised peer mentoring structure will be embedded in the culture of peer mentoring at King's, ensuring high-quality, consistent, well-evaluated support for the foreseeable future and contributing to our whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing.