One size does not fit all: Tailoring Peer Support Programmes for optimal student engagement

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Peer Support Programmes (PSPs) have long been a feature of student engagement activity at the University of Exeter. Peer Support at Exeter started over eight years ago, with just two discipline-specific programmes. Since then, the number of programmes has increased significantly, but throughout this period of growth the bespoke nature of the programmes has been retained. All PSPs are student-led and, crucially, they are tailored to meet the specific needs of the student group involved. We, the authors, are firmly of the opinion that ‘one size does not fit all’ and that tailoring every programme to the specific needs of each student group is vital if it is to be successful. It is now recognised that engagement in interventions such as PSPs can play an important role in improving student retention and success (Thomas, 2012) and that an understanding of ‘local contexts’ can enhance the efficacy of such programmes (Thomas et al, 2017). However, this was not as well understood when PSPs were first introduced at Exeter. This short paper seeks to present an overview of the evolution of PSPs at the University of Exeter, which may provide others with a useful insight into the development of tailored PSPs for optimal student engagement.

The first two PSPs at Exeter were developed within subject disciplines by academic members of staff and students who had recognised the need for such support. Shortly afterwards, our team of education advisers was invited to support the projects and train the student mentors. This led to the oversight and promotion of peer support across the university, resulting in the development of a wide range of programmes. Many remain within subject disciplines and align to the needs of the students transitioning into their first year of higher education (HE). Student retention and success have repeatedly been linked to successful transitions in this context and there is a wealth of literature exploring these themes (Cree et al, 2009; Thomas et al, 2002); further corroboration is evident at Exeter, where the informal, student-led structure of our current PSPs affords first-year students the opportunity to engage academically and socially and, moreover, to develop a ‘sense of belonging’ (Thomas, 2012).

It has been suggested that a pastoral and social focus should dominate initial transitional peer support, with an academic emphasis being added after the first term (Andrews and Clark, 2011). Thomas (2012), however, champions the ‘academic sphere’ as being the most important site for encouraging engagement and fostering that all-important ‘sense of belonging’. Indeed, we have found that, by employing a discipline-specific framework, a seamless transition into more academically-focused support is possible. As students get to know one another, they become more relaxed and trusting of their fellow students and peer leaders (Capstick, 2004; Keenan, 2014). This familiarity engenders confidence, which in turn encourages students to engage more easily – they seem to feel comfortable with their peer leaders, with whom they frequently discuss concerns (be they pastoral, social or academic) that they would be unlikely to raise with a member of staff.

This level of comfort might be considered comparable to a sense of belonging, viewed by many as a fundamental human motivation (Bauminster and Leary, 1995), and which helps students to feel part of the University (Andrews and Clark, 2011). Theories of belonging have been discussed at length in the literature and have been associated, amongst other things, with improved levels of attainment, increased academic confidence and lower rates of attrition in HE (Andreanoff, 2016). Providing opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging should be of the utmost importance. Yet belonging, retention and success are arguably narrow, institution-centric narratives which do not take into account the complexity and heterogeneity of student cohorts (Thomas, 2015). These narratives of belonging,
retention and success tend to be used in a way that implies a common understanding; yet each will mean something subtly different to every student and may well be at odds with institutional understanding. Thomas states that belonging is: 'most successfully nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in' (2012:6). Yet she also reports that a range of factors present barriers to students' being able to: 'participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE' (2012:5). Factors proposed by Thomas (2012) include: choosing to live at home and commute, combining work and full- or part-time study and being a mature student (over twenty-one on entry). There are, arguably, many more factors that make it overly challenging for students to engage. Thus, it is of vital importance for those in HE who work in partnership with students to develop an awareness and understanding of the difficulties they face and, in particular, the local contexts (Thomas, 2012).

We are now actively seeking to support students who sit outside the perceived ‘traditional student’ mould; students who are putatively ‘hard to reach’. Definitions of precisely which students are represented by this term are not easily found in the literature. Some have suggested that ‘hard to reach’ may include: black and ethnic minority, mature, postgraduate, disabled and students with dependants (Sims et al, 2017). Others believe that the term ‘hard to reach’ is divisive and negatively associated with working-class students, merely serving to reinforce the ‘deficit model’ whereby working-class culture is deemed ‘deficient’ and involvement in HE is a tangible means of securing upward mobility (Loveday, 2014). Clearly there is no simple explanation of this complex concept.

We believe that tailored, student-led support can be particularly effective in engaging WP students (Andrews and Clark, 2011). Such students, who are often considered to inhabit the peripheries of university life, are considered unlikely to engage in large-scale, extra-curricular interventions (Stuart et al, 2011). Our WP students are disparate in their needs, expectations and experiences; we therefore believe that we need to be flexible in our provision of engagement opportunities and seek out the ‘hard to reach’ students in order to support, in the best way we can, the complexity and heterogeneity of their needs. We have sought to understand the specific local context and have increasingly tried to work in partnership with under-represented student groups identifying as ‘non-traditional’; most recently, these have included mature students and care-leavers. Whilst both these groups may be identified as part of the Widening Participation (WP) agenda at Exeter, they are under-represented and feel that what they perceive as the ‘authentic student experience’ is not necessarily what they want; consequently, they are disinclined to engage fully in the life of the University. As a response, we have recently started to develop two new PSPs, each specifically aligned to the respective needs of mature students and students who are care-leavers, and, in the process, have had to adopt novel strategies in order to reach out to both groups.

One such strategy has involved approaching the University’s Wellbeing Services to discuss how we might support the work they already undertake with care-leavers. The Office for Fair Access to HE (OFFA) reports that people with experience of having lived in care are likely to have significantly fewer good outcomes across a variety of measures when compared to those who have not been in care (OFFA, 2017). Very few enter Higher Education (5.6% in 2012) and there is an increased awareness of the need to provide support for transition, success and progression outcomes for this specific, under-represented group. It is recommended that students who are care-leavers should receive tailored information and, we would argue, tailored support, though there can be difficulties in providing these, as their student status needs to be handled discreetly and sensitively (OFFA, 2017). However, through collaboration with staff and students, we have set up a student focus group to take this support forward. This approach has helped us to learn about the specific needs and expectations of our care-leavers and has enabled us to develop a bespoke PSP in partnership with the students.
It has not been possible to adopt a similar strategy for reaching out to mature students. A potential barrier to engaging our WP students in general is that there is not always an obvious university service with which to liaise. Such students are often dispersed across disciplines and years and, with the exception of the care-leavers, are generally not supported by a specific service. Some institutions in the UK have departments which are dedicated to supporting adults returning to study (for example, ‘Lifelong Learning’ at the University of Sheffield), but, for this group at Exeter, there is no obvious student support service with which to liaise. As a proactive measure, we have therefore used centrally-held data to recruit mature students to be peer leaders for a new pre-entry transition PSP. Mature students are much more likely to leave HE in their first year of study than young students (HEFCE, 2017). Thus, a PSP that supports transition into HE was considered most appropriate for mature students. Our decision was not simply a case of responding to HEFCE statistics; it was also informed by discussions with mature students engaged in other targeted interventions in disciplines containing high numbers of mature students.

In summary, we believe that ‘one size does not fit all’. In order for Peer Support Programmes to provide appropriate opportunities for optimal student engagement, they must be tailored to the needs of specific student groups. This is especially true for so called ‘hard-to-reach’ students who are frequently those for whom the cultural divide between their lived experiences and the institutional concept of the authentic student experience is the greatest. Key to the success of student engagement interventions such as PSPs is a willingness on the part of the institution to try to understand the complexities and heterogeneity of the difficulties and needs of ‘hard-to-reach’ students. Rather than waiting for ‘hard-to-reach’ students to engage in activities for which they have little or no appetite, the onus of responsibility to reach out should rest with the institution and its agents.

Reference list


Theme 6: Peer Learning Communities


