It can be hard to find people like you at university. Students who feel connected to their university and its community are more likely to stay (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt, 2021, 406). However, UK higher education remains predominantly designed for a traditional, 'ideal' student who fulfils certain academic and social expectations (Tett, 2004). Such notions of the 'ideal' student make groups like mature students and care leavers feel like outsiders (Gregersen and Nielsen, 2022; Marvell and Child, 2023), impacting their sense of belonging and retention at university.

In **peer-peer mentoring, 'Peer Mentors'** in their 2nd-final year use their lived experience to guide 1st year students ('**Mentees**') like them. Connecting with more experienced peers through such schemes can help new students adjust to HE both emotionally and academically (Andreanoff et al., 2024, 15).

Since 2017, our Peer Support team has offered schemes designed to specifically support underrepresented students with the transition to university and foster 'belonging'. We now provide undergraduate mentoring for: mature students (aged 21+ on entry), students with disabilities, and care-experienced and estranged students. This poster summarises how these 3 widening participation (WP) schemes have adapted over time to meet these students' needs. NB: Mentor/Mentee data from 2017/18-2021/22 is scarce but is included to help illustrate how the schemes have evolved.



Care Leaver & Estranged Student Peer Mentoring Mature Student 21+ Peer Mentoring **Disabled Student Peer Mentoring** 2017/18 Percentage of mature entrants at Exeter rises from Percentage of Exeter students declaring a disability 32 course offers made to care leavers in 17/18, but only 3 accepted rises from 13.1% in 2012/13 to 17.4% in 2017/18 (University of Exeter, 2019, 5) 5.2% in 2013/14 to 6.3% in 2017/18 (University of Exeter, 190 Mentors (University of Exeter, 2021, 6) 2019, 4) at Exeter Scheme inaugurated on Streatham & St Luke's campuses 12 Mentors **50 Mentees** What does mentoring look like (2017-2020)? Mentors and Mentees meet how and when they 9 Mentors, none returning like once put in contact (via email from us). On 2018/19 Increasing (but still low) Mentee data lost student awareness of the Mature scheme, they are matched pre-220 Mentors First 'Meet the Mentors' event, run as part of Study Zone's peer support schemes arrival (before Fresher's Week) to allow at Exeter Mature student induction, to help new students find the scheme Mentees to ask any questions they have before starting their studies 20 Mentors, none returning 2019/20 **57 Mentees** 259 Mentors at Exeter What does mentoring look like (2020/21)? January 2021: Students contacted team about creating a Mentoring moves online during COVID-19 2020/21 21 Mentors, returners data lost scheme supporting students with disabilities pandemic using Yammer, Teams, emails and 55 Mentees Summer 2021: Students ran an online transition event for 430 Mentors 350+ unique Yammer Mentor-Mentee interactions Zoom new students with disabilities promoting the scheme at Exeter Scheme inaugurated on Streatham & St Luke's campuses 2021/22 Scheme inaugurated but no sign ups 23 Mentors, 2 returning July 2021: Online 63 Mentees training resources **56 Mentors** What does mentoring look like (2021-23)? 905 Mentors 300+ unique Yammer first offered to all **142 Mentees,** 21 become Mentors in 2022/23 or 23/24 at Exeter Continued emphasis on delivering mentoring interactions Mentor-Mentee Peer Mentors Core elements of Mature Student scheme (including preinteractions; email preferred online (but meeting in-person if comfortable) arrival matching) used on this scheme by student request increases engagement, particularly for remote learners 2022/23 1 Mentor **57 Mentors,** 14 previous Mentees **17 Mentors,** 2 returning (from 2018/19 and 21/22) Mentoring remains voluntary and unpaid; option **O Mentees** 101 Mentees 1 applied for and achieved AFHEA for Mentors to apply for Associate Fellowship **707 Mentors** Scheme not 48 Mentees (AFHEA) first offered in 2021/22 at Exeter run All 3 schemes offered to Penryn campus for the first time; Penryn Mentees outnumbered Mentors, making matching difficult 2023/24 63 Mentors, 4 returning Mentors, 16 previous Mentees **21 Mentors,** 2 previously a Mentor or Mentee **7 Mentors,** 1 returning from another peer scheme **500 Mentors** 5 Penryn-based, 3 remote 1 Penryn-based, 1 remote All Streatham or St Luke's-based, 1 remote 2 applied for and achieved AFHEA at Exeter 2 applied for and achieved AFHEA **3 Mentees**, 4 applied 187 Mentees, 195 applied **75 Mentees**, 78 applied 1 Penryn-based 23 Penryn-based

9 Penryn-based

2 Mentors hired from these schemes as our first 'Peer Support interns' to transition to **student-led** peer mentoring

Collaboration sought with Student Guild's peer groups

Core elements of Mature Student scheme used (including pre-arrival matching) Collaboration with Exeter Cares to raise awareness of care-

experienced and estranged student support

To emphasise peer mentoring as an 'aid to transition' to new students, Peer Support represented all schemes at Enhanced Induction transition day with a LEGO 'building belonging' session, at 3 online Mentor-led 'Meet the Mentor' events, and at 1 online 'transition to university' event for disabled students (as per Summer 2021)

What does mentoring look like (2023/24)?

Asynchronous and synchronous Mentor online training offered; synchronous withdrawn as asynchronous SharePoint training most popular due to flexibility Introduced 'happy to be matched with someone online' question to Mentor-Mentee matching form

Introduced 'check-in' form for accurate Mentor/Mentee engagement and withdrawal figures, reflected in lower 2023/24 numbers (13/27 withdrawn Mentors never heard from Mentees)

Shift of Peer Support experience beyond the Mentor/Mentee interaction, including playful learning events, Mentors leading Fresher's Fair stalls, and social media takeovers. Online and hybrid Mentor events less popular, but better attended when a student has met **us**; reflection needed

Postgraduate students continued seeking this type of support; research began into how to set up equivalent schemes for underrepresented PG students

July 2023: Mentor SharePoint created, with scheme-specific resource pages

2024/25?

Successfully recruiting across all 3 campuses with better uptake in Penryn (as of September 2024)

Continued use of virtual training, resources and social spaces to facilitate Mentor and Mentee participation on our schemes

Scheme-specific resource pages (introduced in 2023/24) highlighted in training; positive feedback given with some Mentors saying they didn't know these services existed for their own use Continued visibility of our team through training videos, events and personalised emails; this has increased engagement with us because of the sense that we are invested in our Mentors and Mentees as individuals and not as a homogenous community. Targeted scheme-specific resources have aided this

Carers added to Care Leaver and Estranged Student Peer Mentoring scheme due to increasing demand for support; this has proved popular; will likely be its own scheme in 2025/26 1 Mentor-led transition event run for **all** 3 schemes, acknowledging intersectionality of identities (students often join 2+ schemes); best attended Q&A event to date

Postgraduate Student Peer Mentoring scheme launched to support underrepresented groups at all levels of study Lack of student awareness of what constitutes 'mature', 'disabled', 'carer' continues; reflection needed on reducing this barrier

Increasing paid chances for students to lead these schemes; this widens participation to students who normally would not be able to take these volunteering options, and makes schemes run 'for students, by students' – our ultimate aim. Paid chances include:

- Introducing student peer programme organisers (SPPOs) for all 3 schemes (following success of Access 2 Internship 'Peer mentor interns' roles 2023/24)
- Hiring 6 Mentors at Enhanced Induction

Supporting a sense of belonging: Exeter's journey of offering peer-peer mentoring for underrepresented students

Emma Norman



Andreanoff, J., et al. (2024) 'Student-led peer learning and support – Literature review', Advance HE, pp.1-39. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-led-peer-learning-and-support Gregersen, A.F.M., and Nielsen, K.B. (2022) 'Not quite the ideal student: mature students' experiences of higher education'. International Studies in Sociology of Education, 32(1), pp.76–95. Available at: Marvell, R., and Child, S. (2023) "I have some trauma responses, but it's not my identity": furthering social justice for care experienced and estranged university students, International Studies in Sociology of Education, 32(1), pp. 96-117.

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