Students as Partners in Peer Mentoring: Expectations, Experiences and Emotions

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Abstract

Increasing emphasis in recent years has been placed on how faculty, staff and students in higher education can be drawn into more collaborative learning relationships through partnership working. The significant challenges in terms of negotiating shifting roles and responsibilities have been well documented. Less attention has been paid to the affective challenges, and particularly the emotional labour involved. This paper focuses on the adoption of a partnership approach to first year peer mentoring and orientation in a large Social Science programme. Peer mentors played a critical role as designers of the programme, as partners delivering the programme, and as co-researchers, offering a unique understanding and insight into aspects of the peer mentor experience that often remain hidden. Our findings draw attention to the need to consider and manage more carefully the impact of students on each other in mentoring relationships but also suggest an opportunity to harness the mentoring experience to embed a partnership culture more fully.

Keywords Peer mentoring · Emotion · Students as partners · Sense of belonging · Student expectations · Student experiences

Introduction

Fostering and enhancing student engagement within the higher and further education context is of critical concern to a range of stakeholders. For policymakers and managers, it contributes to achieving ‘performance indicators’ such as high levels of

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progression and retention, critical to attracting and retaining core funding (Kenny, 2017; Lynch, 2015). For academics and students, higher levels of engagement lead to more satisfying learning experiences and can foster a greater sense of belonging with the institution and sense of responsibility to each other (Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). This collaborative, co-operative theorisation and approach to the higher education learning environment underpins the recent focus on ‘students as partners’ within higher education institutions and research. In part a reaction to the emergence of a broader ‘students as consumers’ culture, particularly within UK and US educational settings, much of the debate on ‘partnership’ has taken place within the literature on academic development (Bovill, 2019; Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Curran & Millard, 2016; King & Felten, 2012). The core arguments relate to a need to democratise higher education and the nature of partnership working as ‘a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’ (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6–7). Partnerships may be simple or multi-faceted but usually involve different agents such as staff/students, students/students working together (HEA, 2014) in an agreed process towards a common goal. This emphasis on process (Healey et al., 2014) is critical and in practice often results in messy, complex, and non-linear progression and development, uncertainty, and significant challenges in terms of negotiating roles, responsibilities and affective dimensions.

This paper focuses on the complexity and emotional experience of adopting an ambitious partnership approach to an already challenging activity - orientation to a new Social Sciences programme with a first-year intake of over 500 students. In 2018, social sciences peer mentors at University College Dublin were recruited by open application and, informed by a students as partners approach, invited to design orientation for their own peer mentees. While some of the academic literature conceptualises students who are slightly ahead of the mentees in the programme as ‘near-peers’ (Tenenbaum et al., 2014; Akinla et al., 2018), we utilise the concept ‘peer’ mentors in this paper as that is the one most widely used in our institution and the basis on which our participants were recruited. At our institution, the new orientation programme was devised to be ongoing, being initiated during a formal orientation week prior to trimester starting but continuing through the first trimester. During initial training, all peer mentors ($n=66$) were invited to join a research team with faculty and professional staff to co-research the adoption of this partnership approach; eight peer mentors volunteered, including two of this papers’ co-authors. The partnerships were of two types: student-faculty-staff and student-student, and were concerned with orientation planning, peer mentoring, and research activities. Building on previous recommendations to include students in the design of peer mentorship programmes (O’Shea et al., 2017), the peer mentors played a critical role as both designers and co-researchers, offering a unique understanding and insight into aspects of the peer mentor experience and partnership working, including the emotional challenge, that often remain hidden.

Peer Mentorship in Higher Education

Peer mentoring, involving senior students sharing their own experiences with incoming first years, is widely practiced across universities to assist the transition from second level to higher education (Bhatia & Amati, 2010; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). Research on student transitions has argued that those who have difficulties with the transition may perform poorly and/or disengage at an early stage from university life (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Managing this transition effectively is of high importance. Although there may be considerable variability in the role of peer mentor and how peer mentoring programmes are structured across institutions, a core feature is that it is a leadership role requiring mentors to share their understanding and knowledge of both the university and the academic course (Kram, 1983) with other students. It is a hybrid role, with mentors acting both as a link between the students and faculty and as an emotional support to students (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Much of the research on peer mentoring has focused on the experience of, and benefits for, incoming students: greater integration and connection with their university in comparison to control groups (Yomtov et al., 2017) and, according to some studies, improved average grades (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Leidenfrost et al., 2014). Feelings of integration and connection are linked to the sense of community built by peer mentoring (Chanchlani et al., 2018) and to the supportive social network which it creates (Robinson et al., 2010). Characteristics of effective peer mentors include empathy, trustworthiness, and supportiveness (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest that the role of the peer mentor is very much focused on providing social and emotional support for incoming students which enables them to reach their full potential.

Another body of research has evaluated the experience of peer mentoring for the mentors, identifying positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, mentoring facilitates friendship and genuine connection between the mentor and mentee (Bellon-Harn & Weinbaum, 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Peer mentoring may alleviate isolation for mentors as they interact with students who share their cultural and career values as well as giving them a sense of inclusion, purpose, identity, and meaning (Good et al., 2000; Won & Choi, 2017). Additionally, peer mentors also benefit from acquiring new skills (Beltman & Schaebe, 2012).

Peer mentors are usually full-time students and taking on the mentor role, in addition to study and other obligations, brings a range of logistical, interpersonal, and emotional challenges. There may be difficulties in establishing and maintaining contact with mentees (Heirdsfield et al., 2008), in meeting mentees face-to-face (Gilmour et al., 2007) and in finding appropriate times to meet (Bellon-Harn & Weinbaum, 2017). Mentors may be frustrated when mentees disregard the help they offer, do not respond to messages, do not turn up for pre-arranged meetings, or demand immediate attention (Bellon-Harn & Weinbaum, 2017; Gilmour et al., 2007; Won & Choi, 2017). Such experiences have the potential to impact emotionally on peer mentors, leading them to question both how they are perceived by their mentees and whether they have the necessary aptitude for the role (Gunn et al., 2017; Heirdsfield

et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2017). However, such challenges can help peer mentors develop and learn (Bunting & Williams, 2017) and may enhance their employability by providing useful experience and, by enabling them to develop resilience and team-based skills (Murphy, 2016).

Although this literature is rich and identifies many critical issues to consider, we argue for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of both the role and the relationship between mentor and mentee. Little is currently known about the *expectations* that peer mentors bring to the mentoring activity and how this influences their *lived experience* of peer mentorship. It may also be difficult to share or articulate these expectations with academics or professional staff, who may be viewed as figures of power and authority. Adopting a partnership working approach can therefore be extremely impactful in gaining a deeper understanding of the peer mentoring experience as it deliberately disrupts existing power relations, and empowers students to negotiate ideas, co-create learning, and share responsibility and challenges with one another and with academic and other staff (Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). Through a contemporaneous approach, that captures experiences and challenges in real-time as well as through reflection, the realities of these often complex staff-student and student-student partnerships (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) can be better understood.

Context

The context for this research is undergraduate social sciences programmes in a large, research-intensive university in the Republic of Ireland. Since 2007, enhancement of the first-year student experience has been a core part of consecutive institutional strategies (Gibney et al., 2011). The peer mentor programme at University College Dublin is in place to help first year students make a better transition to the University by developing social networks in their programme (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Incoming students are invited to campus the week before classes start to meet their peer mentor. In social sciences, volunteer peer mentors are students who are in their second or third year and who take at least one of the same social sciences subjects as their mentees. Each mentor supports a group of between five and 10 incoming students during orientation week when meetings and activities are formally timetabled. With the introduction of a new Social Sciences degree programme in 2018, peer mentors were empowered, working in partnership with support staff, to develop their own activities for their groups. The mentor/ mentee relationship was intended to continue informally for the academic year, supported locally by a programme manager.

Methodology

This research was organized around two key guiding questions: What were the expectations, experiences, and challenges of the peer mentors? What were the potential and outcomes of adopting a partnership approach to peer mentorship?

The study adopted a mixed methods research design which combined surveys, reflective diaries, and a focus group. From our population ($n=66$), 49 people volunteered to

participate in the research. All had been invited. The 49 students all completed the survey, 35 completed reflective diaries in addition to the survey, and five of those participated in a follow-up focus group. All were current undergraduates in their second year. The nature and purpose of the research was described to all mentors at a training day in May 2018 and signed consent was received from those who agreed to participate. There was no academic or monetary reward for participation and ethical exemption was granted by the University as this was primarily a pedagogical research project.¹ A limitation of the study was that it did not consider the mentees experiences of the programme. Secondly our participants were relatively homogeneous in terms of race, gender and ethnicity with the majority being white, Irish females. While this lack of diversity may be construed as a potential limitation of the data, the cohort involved are reflective of the general social sciences student body at our institution and nationally.

A survey comprising open-ended questions was administered to participants before the first of two training days, asking them to reflect on their experiences as first-year mentees and to consider what they thought would characterise a good peer mentor and peer mentoring experience. The purpose of this pre-training survey was to ask students to reflect on their own conceptualisations, expectations and potential biases before training began. Once the semester began, the new peer mentors were asked to keep reflective diaries guided by four open ended questions tracking their mentorship experience. The purpose was to gather an understanding of impressions and experiences of the role as it unfolded so that this could be compared with their initial expectations.

While the number of mentors recording their experiences was strong immediately during and after Orientation, it declined quickly. In order to gather greater insights into the experience of being a mentor, a lunchtime focus group was undertaken towards the end of the semester, with lunch provided as an incentive to participate. The focus group covered a wide variety of topics, from the expectation of the role before participating to the experience of being a peer mentor. In order to anonymise the source of quotes in this paper, participant comments from the reflective diaries are labelled according to the diary entry identifier (i.e. RD10) and focus group participants are labelled with their participant number (i.e. FG1).

Responding to calls by O'Shea et al. (2017) to include students in the design of peer mentorship programmes, this project not only engaged students in the design and delivery but also opened up opportunities for them to become co-researchers on an equal footing with two academic leaders in the College on the experience and effectiveness of the programme. This approach was very much in the spirit of our programme which aspires to have a very strong students as partners ethos. Because of the positionality of the two faculty members (one as Associate Dean and the other as Vice Principal Teaching and Learning) students may have felt less likely to be completely open about their experiences of the programme and mentoring. The focus group was therefore facilitated by some students who had volunteered to be co-researchers. This helped to create rapport and minimized any concerns of censure. The co-researchers had all participated in the survey and reflective diary-keeping so were able to empathise with focus group participants. Once the data collection was completed, one of the faculty members anonymized all of the raw data

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to ensure confidentiality. Data analysis thereby proceeded in a collaborative manner with the student co-researchers being trained ‘on the job’ by the two faculty members. Analysis of the surveys, reflective diaries and focus group transcripts was undertaken by the whole team in an iterative process. While not a core goal of our project, the collaborative approach to data analysis was a student-centred approach that valued the role of community in research methods (Nind et al., 2020). Reflective diaries were initially coded by one member of the team, and then cross-coded. An agreed set of codes were produced after discussion within the team to ensure joint understanding and inter-operator consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Important responses were highlighted and analyzed in terms of comparison and atypical cases (Tuckett, 2005) and grouped according to similar themes, working inductively to allow themes to be developed directly from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Data was then reduced and preliminary ideas were discussed and developed into findings (Tuckett, 2005). Their experiences and insights as peer mentors were an advantage here, grounded in their positionality but also demonstrating reflexivity. During the analysis stage, the co-researchers could draw on their own recent experiences. This added a layer of emotional understanding to the research findings, as the peer mentors could relate relatively easily to the participant experiences as they occupied both the space of participant and co-researcher. However, in order to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the reality rather than perceptions of the data, the iterative and collaborative engagement with the two faculty members was critical. These engagements enabled the co-researchers to remain acutely aware of their own personal investment in the project, attend to their feelings and be supported in giving them careful consideration. All 7 co-researchers were involved in writing up sections of a report for the university with 2 mentors (co-authors of this paper) volunteering to remain involved with the final step, producing a paper towards publication.

Results

Three key themes emerged from the analysis undertaken. Firstly, our study suggests that the perceived benefits of participation in the programme were conferred on the mentors: they were able to build relationships with staff and other peer mentors. These benefits, particularly the *relationships between mentors and staff*, may be the result of the partnership approach taken to the programme as mentors worked with staff for the mentees’ benefit. A second issue to emerge was that mentors’ *expectations* of the programme, even though they had played an important role in designing the programme, did not reflect the reality of the experience. The mentors initially perceived their involvement as altruistic: in reality, it turned out to be more pragmatic and less relational than they had hoped. Finally, the absence of relationship development between the mentor and mentee was experienced as a significant disappointment and produced strong emotional reactions from some peer mentors.

Perceived Benefits of the Peer Mentor Experience

Peer mentoring is strongly associated with integration (Collings et al., 2014) and confidence in university (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). While integration of incoming students is generally the primary purpose of peer mentoring programmes, Ehrich et al. (2002) have also discussed the positive impacts of mentoring for mentors, including network building and knowledge sharing.

Our research illustrates that peer mentoring plays a significant role in integrating current students taking on the peer mentor role, facilitating networking and deepening their sense of belonging to, and identifying with, the institution. Participants in the study reflected on the ways in which their friendships and their networks significantly expanded.

Peer mentors reported feeling more confident in approaching other students, whether they were taking the same course or not. They also reported feeling more relaxed and less stressed because of the existence of a bigger support group of other peer mentors. This is significant as friendship networks are a predictor of academic expectations and outcomes (Carbonaro & Workman, 2016). The expansion of friendship groups through peer mentorship can have resonance and impact beyond the immediate peer mentoring experience:

“I knew people [through the peer mentoring programme], I knew faces and I had interacted with a lot of them, so if I really needed something I could go like, ‘Oh hey, you’re in the same class with me, can I ask you a favour?’ Just the fact that you know the people around you is so much more relaxing and less stressful” (FG6).

Not only did peer mentors create and deepen connections with their peers, they also developed relationships with university staff as they worked alongside each other towards a common goal. The partnership approach adopted in this peer mentorship programme provided opportunities for mentors to work with staff as equal partners and maintain that relationship throughout the semester. Key staff through their particular sets of knowledge, expertise and efficiency smoothed the process of engagement between the mentor and the university, helping to remove potential barriers to information and support, and thus building a stronger and more positive relationship between the mentor and the institution as a whole. This led to an enhanced sense of belonging to the university, a key outcome of this kind of partnership work. As current students working in partnership with staff, they developed more enthusiasm and motivation to fulfil their role (Bovill et al., 2011). For some of the peer mentors, however, this level of engagement created a challenge and for some was experienced as an obligation: “it felt sort of pressured, like ‘We want you to organize this’” (FG4).

Kehler et al. (2017) have argued that power dynamics are underestimated in students as partners practice, even in well-intentioned encouragement to participate and to rise to the challenge of becoming equals. Peer mentors construed the encouragement to organise events as pressure, suggesting perhaps that greater attention needs to be paid by staff to the ways in which students perceive requests or suggestions. The pressure to participate felt by students suggests that mentors

were not yet fully comfortable with the partnership dynamic and that they did not consider themselves equal to the staff (and therefore in a position to decline requests or suggestions) and did not fully feel their ownership of the programme: “I think that the people organizing just above us that could help organize events should be presented as facilitators and that it is our own initiative” (FG4). This reflects Kehler et al.’s (2017) findings that significantly more attention needs to be paid to power in students as partners practice. In this case, neither peer mentors nor staff seemed to have fully transitioned into new power sharing arrangements and this may only be something that is built up over longer periods of time and practice, when the idea becomes more fully and widely embedded in the institutional culture.

A significant benefit reported by peer mentors was the personal growth that they experienced as a result of participation. They gained confidence in themselves and in their ability to use newly acquired transferable skills outside the university, thereby enhancing their potential employability: “Being a peer mentor made me become much more comfortable and confident in myself” (RD2183). “I feel as if my communication skills have developed” (RD7992). Being given responsibility for developing their own orientation schedules and activities enhanced students’ decision-making capacities. It involved improvising, creating events, and doing things in the peer mentor’s own style. There were a number of instances where peer mentors demonstrated flexibility and the ability to adapt and respond to change, reporting that they adjusted their plans to suit mentees or in response to mentees’ personalities, likes and dislikes:

“When it came to touring, both days I chose to discover the campus with them. I had studied the map and made some notes for each building I would be showing them, but when it came to figuring out the layout I walked around aimlessly with them and just made the connections as we went. I did it that way ‘cause I saw that with this group of mentees an overly structured and strict tour would be boring and a little overwhelming” (RD2183).

Some peer mentors also reported that they were able to apply these skills and experiences outside the programme and that they were motivated to look for more opportunities to improve themselves: “Looking to take on more leadership or mentoring/speaking roles if possible around campus to continue improving” (RD5992). Being a peer mentor opened up opportunities for a number of the students to progress into more prestigious roles such as college ambassador. These formal student roles are recognized on the students transcript, include opportunities for significant and diverse training, and involve the students representing the university at both internal and external events nationally and beyond. Student Ambassadors become the ‘face of the institution’ and the role is an important route to developing employability skills such as verbal communication and decision-making (Wye & Lim, 2009) and recognized by the students as such:

“Even if you didn’t do anything probably just pass it off as a peer mentor, definitely looks good on the cv. It gave me a bit of gratification for helping

other students when I could and also it led me to being an ambassador as well, which is a paid job at University College Dublin. I think you had to be extra active to get the other thing, but it gives you access to other opportunities as well” (FG5).

Such experiences provide examples of how students working as peer mentors through a partnership process engaged more fully with the institution and deepened their own sense of belonging to the university (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). The relationships peer mentors built were not limited to either the personal or professional arena, or the cognitive or affective domain. Hill et al. (2019, p. 3) have drawn attention to the value and transformative nature of this type of engagement suggesting that by “uniting these two realms that learning can be tackled holistically, supporting students to develop positive emotions and resilient academic behaviours through meaningful partnership interactions”. For many peer mentors, this partnership project may have been the only opportunity they had during their undergraduate education to work in such an engaged and collaborative way with other students beyond group-based assessments, as well as faculty and staff. For example, one student took the initiative to:

“do a huge group thing, where all the peers came together as many as I could get together and all the peer mentees came together. A lot of them weren’t from my peer mentor group.” (FG5)

Similarly, a different student worked closely with another peer mentor during orientation:

“I was lucky to be with another peer mentor with our mentee’s together, so we got to collaborate and present each other and build each other up. That helped.” (FG3).

It offered students valuable opportunities for personal growth and development.

Expectations Versus Experience

Based on the pre-mentoring survey data and mid-semester focus groups, it was clear that peer mentors had a well-developed sense of the particular traits and attributes essential to a good mentor. During the data analysis phase, responses to the open-ended survey responses and the focus groups were input into NVivo software to generate a frequency count of key terms (Fig. 1). Interpersonal skills were mentioned most frequently when describing the qualities of an excellent peer mentor with friendliness, approachability and enthusiasm considered essential traits.

A second cluster of attributes related to the disposition of the peer mentor; an excellent peer mentor was seen as showing leadership, enthusiasm and knowledge. These findings reflect other studies which have shown that students associate approachability and good communication skills with excellent peer mentorship (Smith, 2008). While being knowledgeable was considered an essential trait, some peer mentors felt that they did not necessarily have all the information they required

A word cloud of positive adjectives on a light gray circular background. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'knowledgeable' and 'friendly' being the largest. Other prominent words include 'approachable', 'welcoming', 'helpful', 'communication', 'enthusiastic', 'leadership', 'understanding', 'open', 'fun', 'skills', 'reassuring', 'organised', 'engaging', 'compassionate', 'empathetic', 'responsible', 'campus', 'passionate', 'questions', 'time', 'listen', 'guidance', 'kindness', 'confidence', 'information', 'advice', 'comfortable', and 'unwilling'.

Other attributes that the peer mentors drew out as central to the role included passion, kindness, and reassurance. These highlight a strongly altruistic motivation for volunteering to become a peer mentor, indicating the expectation that they would be helpful and play an important role in their mentees' transition into university. For example, one student described a good peer mentor as 'someone who is very welcoming, can guide them through their first few days and can be there to answer any questions/ problems that they might be having throughout first year'. However, the lived reality of mentoring was much more pragmatic: the reflective diaries reveal much of their time was spent for example, showing students where to go on campus (mentioned by 25%) and answering questions (mentioned by 19%). While both the idealistic and pragmatic are important, the data points to a significant gap between the expectations of good peer mentorship and the reality of the role, in contrast to earlier work by Hill and Reddy (2007) that reported on participants feeling their experiences matched their expectations. Using a partnership approach which involved students working as co-researchers and leading the data collection

and analysis, as well as the fact that data was collected during the process and not retrospectively may explain this difference. Mentors may have felt more supported to speak out about the discrepancy between their expectations and experiences in the supportive ‘community’ created through partnership working.

As mentoring in general is largely motivated by a focused altruism or a strong desire to help out of concern for the mentee’s welfare and satisfaction (Stebbins, 2006), it is understandable that our peer mentors expected to build a relationship with their mentees. A majority of peer mentors repeatedly mentioned their enjoyment of the experience and the friendship they had with their own mentor in first year and wanted to provide the same to incoming first years. Others described having had poor experiences with their own mentor and wanted to enhance the programme through their involvement. This altruistic dimension was critical to their engagement. It was also their primary motivation for applying to the programme, as opposed to other motivations including progress towards an academic award or enhancing employability, both of which were advertised in recruitment materials. Hartmann et al. (2014) have suggested that perceived benefits, like academic awards, are the primary motivations in applying to be a mentor. However, the participant population in that study consisted of business-to-business salespeople, providing a very different context for study. Motivation to participate in peer mentoring in higher education settings may be more personal, as fellow undergraduate students empathise strongly with incoming first year students.

While somewhat different to their expectations, peer mentors in our study found the experience in general to be positive and enjoyable. There was a sense of pride once mentees started to grow comfortable with one another, reinforcing the altruistic motivations brought to the programme:

“My peer mentee group were all very enthusiastic and interacted consistently with other group mentors in addition to interacting with myself. Due to the fact that everyone interacted well, the experience was very enjoyable, which was a fantastic outcome.” (RD2991).

A key issue, however, was a perceived discrepancy between the expectation and experience of the emotional dimension of the role. Peer mentors understood the role as involving emotional support, although this was not necessarily the reality: “Frequently a mentor (is) presented as emotional care” (FG3). However, peer mentees did not necessarily engage with their mentors in this way. As one respondent explained in the focus group

“We set up a Facebook group chat and stuff and trying to set stuff up but that’s just gone. Like if there’s anybody interested in this, “thumbs up”. “Same.” No response”. It felt good when you actually helped people, but then I kind of felt pretty shit when, as I said, I put a big heartfelt message and then just get a bunch of sayings. That’s what my group’s turned into, just a kind of message board” (FG4).

Some mentors felt that this should have been a core part of the training provided:

“I think yes, you might maybe give them a warning but you could get the negative reaction, it should also be there. That wasn’t portrayed at all and just like in any role really, if you have an expectation that things can go wrong to a certain extent, if you’re aware of that it’s a lot less disheartening to have it happen. Otherwise you might feel like you’re the only one, because everyone else in the mentor group is going to talk about what went well, but the ones that things didn’t go well for aren’t really going to speak up, they’re probably not even going to come back and be present. They’re going to dwindle off” (FG3)

Peer mentors seemed to have expected more personal engagement from their mentees but mentees saw the role as one of pragmatic guidance. It may be that mentees were unaware that their mentors were willing to offer emotional support. Alternatively, it may have been unrealistic for peer mentors to expect their mentees to emotionally engage with them having only just met. However, this lack of engagement did impact to a significant extent on the mentors particularly those who had invested heavily in the partnership idea.

The Challenge of Managing Emotion

An unexpected finding from our analysis was the degree of emotional labour involved in peer mentoring. As illustrated in some of the quotes above, peer mentorship took a toll on many mentors, and many mentors reported that they experienced unexpected challenges in dealing with their own emotional responses. Disappointment and feelings of rejection stemmed from mentors’ failure to establish a relationship with their mentees and from an unfulfilled desire to perform an altruistic role: “Most of my mentees have found their own way and did not really need me to be a constant presence” (RD9371). While this should be seen as a positive - the job of supporting transition was obviously successful - there is a recurring sense across the data that this caused disappointment: “It was disheartening not all were as willing to contribute” (RD512).

Peer mentors strived to create friendships with their mentees but encountered apathy in many cases. The net effect was a sense of frustration among mentors that they could not satisfy their altruistic impulses. Peer mentors overestimated this part of the role resulting in a reversal of the expected relationship of dependency; mentors needed more from mentees than mentees needed from them.: “What surprised me most however was how ‘dependent’ on them I became (in a way)” (RD2185). In some diaries and reflections, there is a palpable sense of rejection by mentees affecting the self-esteem of the mentor:

“It’s just like you recognizing that your mentees don’t actually need that much, it’s like you are there just in case, and kind of like blows your self-esteem a tiny bit but like but then you like get used to it...just coming to terms with the fact that maybe your mentees don’t exactly want you to be their friends” (FG6).

The coping mechanism employed by this particular mentor appears to have been an adjustment of their own expectations, but our research indicates that more generally

rejection had a significant impact on some mentors' sense of themselves and their abilities. Some mentors were highly regretful, blaming themselves if the mentees were not enthusiastic: "I feel like I could have involved those who were a bit more shy into the group better" (RD263); "I feel I should have been around a little more for them" (RD331).

It is important for the faculty and staff involved to acknowledge that this lack of engagement by mentees was very personally felt by mentors. However, many mentors downplayed the experience and focused on their own perceived shortcomings. This highlights the importance of creating a safe space for peer mentors to discuss and be supported through the emotional challenges of the programme, without a sense of feeling judged for not fulfilling their role. Rather than accepting that peer mentors need to just 'get used to' feeling rejected by their mentees, we suggest drawing on Hill et al. (2019, p.3) so that the partnership context could be developed to "support students to encounter emotions and empower them to develop resilience, leading to positive wellbeing". One way in which this might be achieved is to encourage and facilitate open critique of the peer mentoring programme. While the experience of giving criticism can be uncomfortable, there is learning for both parties in it. It should be noted that mentees' unwillingness "to contribute" - as one mentor put it - is a challenge that is common to both mentors and academic staff. According to Reeves et al. (2018), university staff also struggle to engage students with extracurricular activities relating to the Social Sciences, and experience disappointments similar to those reported here. This recognition opens up a potential avenue for future partnership working and for research into the affective dimensions of student engagement, thereby facilitating "an opening up to the possibilities and exploring the potential that partnership working can offer to enhance wellbeing" (Hill et al., 2019, p. 15).

The coping strategy of students who demonstrated higher levels of resilience to perceived rejection was to blame the system rather than themselves: "It was quite a lot more overwhelming than expected due to the huge size of the group that I ended up with" (RD52). Others recognized and celebrated their own efforts rather than focusing on how they were received.

"I was really happy with my group. Only two people didn't engage too much but that's their fault and I gave them ample opportunities to join in, but they weren't too interested which was perfectly fine" (RD5992).

This variability demonstrates the importance of de-homogenising the mentor group and recognising the impact that different levels of confidence prior to participation can have on the experience. Those who were less interested in relationship-building seemed to handle mentees lack of interest better: "Three out of the eight replied on the Facebook chat, one person exited the group. I was very excited and happy that some of them were receptive of my efforts" (RD595). Colvin and Ashman (2010) argued that when deciding to become a peer mentor, the mentor is made vulnerable and risks rejection if students do not respond. The danger is that excessive rumination on unsuccessful interactions leads to strong negative feelings and might lead to negative coping (Kubiak et al., 2008) and reduced commitment (Krott & Oettingen, 2018) or inhibit them from engaging in similar schemes at another time.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Our findings show that there is a good fit between partnership working and the development and delivery of peer mentoring programmes. Student partners taking on the mentor role have the opportunity to work in an engaged and collaborative way with other students, faculty and staff to co-create experiences for their peers. The results point to benefits in terms of integration and campus engagement similar to those found in other high-impact undergraduate experiences identified by Kuh (2008), including undergraduate research, study abroad and intensive first year seminars and in other studies on partnership working (Healey et al., 2014). Drawing on the Cook-Sather et al. (2014, p. 6-7) definition of partnership as providing ‘the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’, we argue that partnership working can be a particularly effective way of enhancing student engagement across a range of cohorts, and an efficient way to develop and deliver large-scale but bespoke orientation models. For this reason, the learning from the experience and process at our institution is relatively easily transferable to other contexts albeit that attention would need to be paid to the context and specific demographics of the institution and student body to ensure that some of the limitations of our sample are taken into account.

Several implications for the organisation and design of high-quality peer mentor programmes follow on from this study. Firstly, we echo previous research on student transitions, that has suggested that clear expectation setting should be a critical element of the peer mentor training process. Secondly, recruitment processes should attend to motivations of students for mentoring that go beyond financial or other remuneration. In our case, those who volunteered to be peer mentors were driven most strongly by altruism – which partly created vulnerabilities. Developing recognition mechanisms that do not solely rely on monetary reward is important. In our case, students were ‘rewarded’ with an opportunity to have a professional profile photo taken for their cvs and social media presence to support their career development. Thirdly, support should be provided to help peer mentors deal with the emotional labour associated with peer mentoring. Adopting a partnership model might mean that peer mentors themselves develop mentoring relationships with faculty and staff. This could be one route to ensuring more attention to relationship building, a key aspect of working in partnership. Incoming students could be supported to play a more active role in the peer-to-peer relationship between mentor and mentee. They could also usefully be made aware of the potential impact of disengagement and withdrawal on their mentors. Partnership working should explicitly include building trust so that where issues arise, student partners understand that they will be supported and feel comfortable raising them. In this study peer mentors felt it was their personal responsibility to cope with their emotions and feelings of disappointment about their relationships with mentees, sharing them with other peer mentors but not with staff partners.

There are also implications for future research on students as partners. To date, the focus has largely been on the importance of power dynamics in partnership working: disrupting traditional power relations between staff and students and dismantling perceived hierarchies. Limited attention has been paid to student/student relationships within learning partnerships such as those uncovered in this paper. The dynamic of these peer-to-peer relationships is often taken for granted as the power imbalances and dynamics that sometimes characterise staff/student relationships are assumed to be missing. Our research points to the need to better understand these peer-to-peer relationships and the potential impact, albeit sometimes unknowingly, of particular behaviours by some students on others. The impact of students working in partnership with each other as part of larger co-creation projects needs further investigation.

Conclusion

This paper outlines the opportunities for engagement and the challenges created by, the introduction of a partnership approach to orientation for incoming students. The literature on peer mentoring has explored many facets of this activity, but research to date has largely focused on the incoming students, the mentees, and has largely taken an institutional viewpoint. In contrast, this study drew on research conducted in partnership with peer mentors, allowing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the role, perceived benefits and affective challenges experienced by peer mentors to be captured. Peer mentors developed new skills and relationships; their friendships and networks significantly expanded; partnership working offered an important opportunity to work in a collaborative way with other students, faculty and staff. A key finding however was that there is a significant disjunction between the peer mentors' expectations and their experiences of the peer mentoring relationship. Mentors perceived the role to be altruistic and a desire to help incoming first years was often a significant motivation. However, disappointment and feelings of rejection were experienced by many mentors who attempted to establish a relationship with their mentees.

Drawing on Healey et al.'s (2014) conceptualisation of partnership as a process, we argue that developing and scaffolding on an ongoing basis these nascent staff-student and student-student partnerships will be crucial for their future success and sustainability. We also see a potential for peer mentors and mentees, faculty and staff to work together to develop partnership strategies that extend beyond a limited 'orientation' period as one way of embedding a partnership culture or ethos across the wider programme.

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Authors' Contributions All four authors:

1) made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data.

- 2) drafted the work or revised it critically for important intellectual content;
- 3) approved the version to be published; and.
- 4) agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Data Availability The data is not publicly archived. It supports our published claims and complies with field standards.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval An exemption was received by UCD Human Research Ethics Committee – Humanities (HREC-HS) Reference Number: HS-E-18-93-Moore-Cherry. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent The nature and purpose of the research was described to all participants and signed consent was received from all.

Financial Interests Sara O’Sullivan and Niamh Moore-Cherry are employees of University College Dublin.

Non-financial Interests Sara O’Sullivan was Associate Dean of Social Sciences (2014–2019); Niamh Moore-Cherry is Vice-Principal for Teaching and Learning in the College of Social Sciences and Law; Andrea Andres was a peer mentor; Christina Seery was a peer mentor.

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