COVID-19 Student Reflection: Is Supporting Others, Supporting Yourself?

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This paper outlines the personal development of two final year Sheffield Hallam University BSc Psychology students during the COVID-19 pandemic, working alongside our studies as Peer Advisors. The scheme was set up by the BSc Psychology Course Leader, aiming to support our peers to enhance the student learning experience, help students to embrace university life and foster a culture of peer support. The role involved meeting struggling students, training and promoting the scheme. Peer mentoring programmes benefit both mentors and mentees, by providing a learning coach, student advocate and a trust friend (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), with students more likely to follow advice from a peer mentor than a hierarchical mentor through sharing a common perspective (Collier, 2017). The pandemic placed strain upon students and staff, in the transition into working virtually or the external stress affecting study focus and grades. Advisors had to adapt to working from home, without university facilities whilst supporting our peers which was challenging since we were still figuring out how to approach the situation ourselves. Here we aim to provide comprehensive insights from students during an unpredictable final year of university, who utilised supporting their peers to their advantage, in university and beyond.

As peer advisors, we provided vital support to struggling students, but the scheme created beneficial experiences for ourselves too. As a result of the pandemic, many students felt isolated, but by being a part of the Peer Advisor community during a year when university felt distant helped us feel more together and offered a sense of belonging and purpose which was vital for both our happiness and mental health. The community united us, allowing advisors to feel we were part of something greater than ourselves, we met new people and friends, virtually in a time where interaction was limited which fuelled our life satisfaction. Working alongside students allowed us to discuss university assessments leading to an increase in our motivation as we felt supported despite the changes made to university teaching. Such motivation was integral to our studies being third year students, reducing the stresses we faced. Moreover, many of our skills were strengthened including adaptability, communication and resilience, which opened further career opportunities in policing and clinical routes.

COVID-19 provided many challenges for student engagement within higher education as documented by Hill and Fitzgerald (2020). For example, first year students struggled in adapting to learning through computer screens without building relationships with course peers or staff. All students across the cohort had difficulties moving online, with many counting on face-to-face interaction and academic surroundings such as library resources and quiet rooms. Final year students had to tackle the issue of conducting online research to the same standard whilst remaining professional, many dissertation projects were held over Zoom or email, hindering the quality. These barriers caused a lack of motivation and extreme stress, coupled with isolation. In preparing to promote the scheme, it was indubitable that the scheme itself was going to have to adapt and become flexible alongside the pandemic and its ever-

changing regulations to meet our aims. Previously peer advisors met face-to-face during lectures to discuss course-related issues and recruit new advisors; this was not then possible due to online learning. Workshops or quiet meetings offering personal conversations to develop existed to support students, again restrictions denied this, so we evolved the scheme.

Our efforts were not always successful; we attempted to run online evening meetings where private support conversations could be held, no students attended these, therefore they stopped after only one month. Understandably, students had engaged with online meetings and lectures more than they had wanted this year, so why would they willingly spend their evenings on more? Therefore, we interacted with them in important compulsory lectures, including module choice selection and dissertation selection. This was very successful, with students in every breakout room asking advisors for our own unique experience and knowledge; tutors reported that this peer perspective was valued by the students during the feedback to us, with some students even thanking the advisor immediately, explaining their input had finalised decisions they were unsure of making.

Furthermore, we utilised an Instagram page to engage students, that previously ran alongside the scheme amassing a small following. Non-classroom course activities like blog pages, are shown to engage students more than conventional approaches like lecturers, after the transition to online learning (Perets et al., 2020). To revamp the page, we posted photos of each advisor alongside their email addresses, allowing us to become accessible which had proved difficult. The following quickly increased, through advisors promoting the page during online lectures, aided by incentives such as online vouchers giveaways at 'follower milestones'. Instagram became our primary mode of communication, we created designated days: Motivational Monday, Tuesdays Topics, Wellbeing Wednesday, and Fridays FAQs. Thursday allowed an unstructured, flexible interaction between advisors and students. Consequently, consistent personalised support for students academically and emotionally was achieved, posting on areas they had requested through direct message, for example tips on staying motivated from your bedroom.

Personal reflections as Peer Advisors using the learning cycle outlined by Kolb (2014).

Sinead

Concrete Experience: A career within the police has been cemented for me since secondary school, I was passionate about gaining justice and helping those in need. I planned on volunteering for the police in my second year to gain insight and build key skills, due to the pandemic this was not possible. As I continued to look for specific police-based opportunities, I saw the opportunity of a peer advisor, I spoke with the leader regarding the scheme and my ambitions. I thoroughly enjoyed the role whilst gaining so much from helping others, further fuelling my passion to be of assistance to individuals.

Reflective Observation: To be a successful police officer my skills needed development. These included approaches to help panicked or stressed people, interpersonal communication and building trust. Due to the pandemic, students

struggled to adapt to university, felt as if they did not belong, or feared coronavirus. I spoke with many students regarding their concerns and empathised with them whilst providing tips and advice which I or others had found useful. A listening ear often helped students as they felt connected to university whilst simultaneously feeling like they were speaking to a friend. Building trust came jointly with communication skills and calmly approaching the situations that arose.

Abstract Conceptualisation: Being part of a group that supported one another represented the united stance of the police. I gained a greater sense of belonging whilst improving the lives of others. On a deeper level the role brought me a level of comfort and support as Lunsford et al., (2017) seconded, that peer mentoring programmes increased a feeling of belonging. The role not only brought me opportunities but allowed me to better myself through being in a position of responsibility. It taught me about my inner strength, resilience and adaptability in times when I and others were struggling to adapt to a new and rapidly changing university experience. Although I gained vital experience there is room for improvement within my skill set, at times I struggled to regulate my own emotion and workload to cater for the needs of others. I most certainly have seen improvement in my organisational skills allowing me to be a dedicated member of my current and future teams. I still require more time to develop it to be my strength.

Active Experimentation: Recently, I have been accepted into the police force. Throughout my interview I was able to reflect on my time as a peer advisor in both a positive view of things I had done well and also for improvements. I am utilising skills I gained through being a peer advisor in my current role as a secondary teaching assistant and primary school playworker. The children I care for are either very young or SEN teenagers who can lack the ability to express their emotions, thoughts or concerns very much like a stressed lost university student who is aware they need some support but is not aware of what support they need. The approach I learnt through being a peer advisor of taking time, making appropriate interpretations, and clarifying with the individual have been successful and I have been able to find root issues and offer solutions.

James

Concrete experience: In the summer before my final year of BSc Psychology, I aspired to work within the notoriously competitive clinical psychology area. I began delving into the future career positions I may choose; it was apparent that the jobs I wanted required existing support experience alongside my academic achievements. Lacking this, I applied for volunteer positions, but I was declined due to the influx of applicants since the pandemic resulting in no available positions. Entering my final year, I became a peer advisor, and began supporting students academically and emotionally, all while being separated from university due to COVID-19 lockdown regulations.

Reflective Observation: Despite these rejections, I reflected that I was already supporting individuals in a person-centred way, as a peer advisor. I was investing my time to improve the mentalities and grades of those around me, albeit virtually as best I could. I believed my confidence was growing with each task I helped with as an

advisor but moreover, when I was meeting with peers, university appeared not so distant, and my connectedness increased while engaging with the scheme. Therefore, I reflected that by helping my peers understand theory or online learning, I was offered a sense of normality in exchange. University was different for everyone, but by taking on that role, I believed it helped us know we were part of something bigger, more exciting than an online lecture from our bedrooms.

Abstract Conceptualisation: Through this observation, I recognised that potentially I may not need to be applying for external positions as a support worker, when I am developing my skill set within university itself. If I could convey that most of the skills I was obtaining (such as interpersonal, leadership and communication skills) reflected what I would be using in external paid settings, I could use this experience to acquire a mental health support worker role later down the line, which at present felt extremely difficult to achieve. Furthermore, I recognised if I could engage with the Peer Advisor Scheme as much as possible, and the variety of tasks that began to be asked of us, then not only would my skill set grow more, but I would be able to feel part of the university during my final year at Sheffield Hallam, which may in turn help my grades.

Active Experimentation: Based on this, I reflected the peer support I offered onto job applications, and then in interviews, which led me to my first support worker position. To further my skill set, I began speaking in lectures to younger cohorts and explained the process I have outlined, which then recruited more individuals to the scheme to help themselves, but again helped me, by talking to over one hundred people, I improved my confidence and public speaking skills, albeit over a virtual meeting. I believe this experience had a direct impact on my academic achievement, because it allowed me to remain in a healthy mindset throughout my third and final year of BSc Psychology, where I achieved First-Class Honours.

To conclude this reflection of our experiences as Psychology Peer Advisors, we believe that we were offered a chance to grow academically and personally, which in turn helped place us in better positions for our careers than we were before the covid-19 pandemic took hold of society. As a team, we made decisions on how we could best support students and make them feel connected, no matter how far away we all were. The opportunity for us to help our cohort was successful for the students, despite the pandemic, due to our adaptability, and from that our own future goals seem that bit closer. Therefore, we believe that in supporting others you can really be supporting yourself, and we hope that in the future, universities will incorporate a similar Peer Advisor Scheme for the benefits mentioned, and in turn for students to engage with it both as mentors and mentees, as in our experience both sides can benefit immensely.

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