

Diversifying peer mentors: working collaboratively with students to enhance engagement of under-represented groups

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Abstract

Nottingham Trent University have delivered a large-scale student peer mentoring programme since 2017, with the objective of fostering a sense of community and belonging for first-year students. This case study describes a project undertaken in 2021 during the Coronavirus pandemic which aimed to increase the proportion of student peer mentor applications from students from traditionally under-represented groups in higher education. This project was delivered collaboratively with students and recent graduates and involved fully reviewing and adapting mentor recruitment processes. This case study describes the methods utilised, as well as the opportunities and challenges raised during this project, which ultimately succeeded in increasing the representation of several student groups, including mature students, students entering university with a BTEC qualification, and students reporting a disability.

Introduction

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) introduced an institution-wide peer mentoring scheme for first-year undergraduate students in 2017 as part of its 'Success for All' strategy. Further to the now well-evidenced link between sense of belonging and student retention (Thomas, 2012; Pedler et al., 2022), and more specifically the role that peer mentoring schemes can play in building sense of belonging to support retention (Keenan, 2014; Hall et al., 2020), the scheme aims to support first-year student transition, engagement, and retention through enhancing a sense of community and belonging, particularly amongst under-represented groups of students within the institution. Peer mentoring is embedded within every course, and each year approximately 700 student mentors are recruited within a paid capacity to support first-year students.

Analysis undertaken in 2021 showed that the pool of applicants for the mentoring role, and therefore the resulting team of mentors, did not fully reflect the characteristics of the student body at NTU. At this time, males were under-represented in the student mentor applicant pool by 18% in comparison to the wider student body; students coming to university with a BTEC were under-represented by 8%, and mature students (age 21 or above at the time of starting university) were under-represented by 4%. Differing levels of engagement between student groups is a known theme in the sector – research from Stuart et al. (2011) demonstrates that groups such as mature students, working class students, and students from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be involved in university-linked extracurricular activity. For mentoring specifically, females are more likely than males to participate (Jackson and Dean, 2022).

The higher education sector is increasingly recognising the importance of making student engagement schemes inclusive and accessible (Sims et al., 2017). There are multiple reasons why it is important that mentoring schemes are inclusive and that student mentors reflect the characteristics of the wider institution's student body. Research shows that some groups, for example students who are the first in their family to go to university, may be less likely to report a sense of belonging at their institution (Pedler et al., 2022). Ensuring that there is diverse representation and role models within higher education can support traditionally marginalised student groups (Senior, 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2013). For mentees, having the opportunity to interact with student mentors who have things in common with themselves may be more desirable (Bailey et al., 2016). Equally, cross-cultural interaction between students can enhance their transition experience (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021) thus there may also be benefit to first-year students who do not share the same characteristics or experiences.

Data from the Office for Students (2022) shows that students with characteristics that were currently under-represented in student mentor applicants at NTU (male, mature, or coming to university with a BTEC qualification) have statistically lower continuation, completion, and attainment rates, however participation as a mentor in the NTU scheme has been shown to be positively associated with higher grades, higher module pass rates, and higher final degree classifications (Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021). The inclusivity of mentor recruitment and mentor support processes is therefore imperative to ensure that these potential benefits can be realised by participants regardless of background. As Chan and Luo (2022, p. 887) reflect: "each individual has something unique to gain as well as to offer, and most importantly, they grow from this mentoring process."

Description of the project

A project was initiated to review and adapt student mentor recruitment processes with the aim of increasing the diversity of students applying to the mentoring role. The project aimed to increase the proportion of student applicants from groups that were previously under-represented (male; mature; coming to university with a BTEC qualification), and to achieve continued success engaging students with some of the other characteristics that are statistically associated with lower continuation, completion, and/or attainment outcomes: students from disadvantaged areas; students who report a disability; and students from minority ethnic backgrounds (Office for Students, 2022).

At the time the project was initiated in January 2021, the UK was in lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Creating and maintaining a sense of belonging and connection without being able to meet face-to-face created new challenges; students were less likely to report a sense of belonging during the pandemic (Mulrooney and Kelly, 2020), and many extracurricular schemes experienced lower than usual engagement, with the participation gap widening for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021). Whilst peer support schemes had a particular role to play in offering an opportunity for students to feel "a sense of belonging and purpose, which was vital for both...happiness and mental health"

(McMillan and Farrell, 2022, p.13), the project faced a new challenge of raising awareness of the mentoring role despite lower-than-usual levels of first-year engagement with the mentoring scheme, and lack of a campus presence.

Much has been published about the benefits of working directly with students to create change, and the importance of “doing with rather than doing to” (O’Shea, 2018, p. 18); arguably in such an unprecedented context where students were predominantly isolated from campuses, this was more important than ever. Therefore, the project was delivered collaboratively with a team of current and previous student mentors. Mentors were initially asked for feedback to gain a broad perspective of barriers and enablers when deciding to apply for the role. In terms of enablers, students shared that having conversations with existing mentors and members of staff helped to build understanding and confidence and provide clarity around the benefits of engaging with the role. Perceived barriers to applying for the role included: lack of confidence; lack of understanding of the role; a fear that the role was only for students who had prior experience of mentoring or who were considered ‘perfect students’; the length of the application process; and balancing the requirements of the role alongside other commitments. This reflects literature from the sector which suggests that students can experience a lack of confidence and feel anxiety about taking up extracurricular activities (Strudwick et al., 2017), particularly where schemes involve selection processes (Marquis et al., 2018). However, highlighting the broad range of potential benefits from participation can enhance inclusivity of recruitment processes by appealing to a wide range of motivations (Sims et al., 2017).

The project team of staff and mentors explored solutions as to how the identified barriers could be addressed. The first solution was to create a new promotional campaign. Building on the feedback that hearing real experiences helps to inspire confidence, the resulting campaign included photos and videos of student mentors relating their experience of the role in their own words. This echoes findings from the sector which indicate that the presence of real and diverse role models can encourage engagement (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021). In the promotional materials, mentors explicitly described any concerns they had felt before applying for the role, for example about being shy and lacking confidence, moving away from providing typical examples of the ‘ideal’ mentor to enhance inclusivity (Chan and Luo, 2022).

Additional communications were designed that aimed to engage specific groups of students, by highlighting how their experience thus far could support first-year students. These were created by a previous student mentor working on the project to ensure peer-to-peer voice and tone was used, an approach recommended by Stuart Boyd as reported by Sutton (2017) to increase the likelihood of students engaging with emails. The targeted communications were sent to students returning to study after a year in industry, to mature students, students coming to university with a BTEC qualification who had engaged with transition support, and students enrolled on NTU’s Black Leadership Programme.

A parallel word-of-mouth campaign was launched, led by mentors. The intention of this was for the role to be promoted in an authentic way by student mentors, using their own words, images, or videos to promote the role to their peers and/or mentees,

giving them the freedom to use platforms that were outside of the reach of the staff team, such as TikTok, snapchat, Discord, and LinkedIn.

Supplemental recruitment materials were revised: job adverts were edited with the aim of reducing intimidation around the role, and an FAQ document was created to directly address many of the concerns and barriers that mentors had shared as part of the project. Building on the feedback that applicants gained confidence from hearing the lived experiences of students already in the role, mentor-led promotional sessions were delivered.

Lastly, the application process was adapted. Building on best practice within NTU and externally, situational judgement testing was introduced, alongside one written question. Situational judgement testing assesses applicants by asking them to indicate their chosen response to a series of scenarios directly aligned to the role they are applying for. This type of application methodology has been shown to have the potential to increase diversity and widen access (Juster et al., 2019), as well as having the intended benefit in this instance of building understanding of the role by giving examples of situations that successful applicants may encounter. The questions were written by two previous student mentors so that they accurately reflected the experience of being involved with the scheme and used appropriate and relatable language.

Evidence of effectiveness and impact

Analysis of applicant data revealed that this project increased the diversity of students applying to the student mentor role in several key areas. Mature students were now over-represented in the applicant pool, at 3% above the wider population at NTU. This was also the case for international students, who were 6% above the wider population, and disabled students, who were 2% above. Students with BTEC qualifications were still under-represented in comparison to the wider student body, however the gap decreased from the previous year by 5%. Other groups (students from disadvantaged areas; students from ethnic minority backgrounds) remained comparable to the wider student body, however male applicants remained under-represented by 18%. Evidence from the student employment agency that goes on to do the official employment of mentors indicated that after the project a greater proportion of students who were not already registered with the agency were recruited than in previous years, suggesting that the project was successful in reaching those students who do not already engage in extracurricular paid opportunities at NTU.

These findings are interesting given the backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic, as it had been expected that it would be more challenging to engage students from these groups at the time, due to emerging evidence of the widening participation gap (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021). It may be that the paid element of the scheme had a positive impact, as many students who had previously relied on part-time work in service or hospitality industries whilst studying would have been unable to take up these roles and could have been looking for other opportunities to earn. Additionally, peer support schemes provided a platform to build student-to-student connection during the pandemic (Malm et al., 2022) so it could be that the role of student mentor

was more appealing given the limitations on in-person socialisation. Finally, it might be that lockdown conditions were of particular benefit for some groups of students, for example commuter students, who no longer needed to consider commuting time and costs when considering involvement with extracurricular activity.

In terms of the success of individual elements of the project, data collected at the point of application evidences the effectiveness of the updated promotional campaign. 42% of applicants in the main phase of student mentor recruitment indicated that they applied for the role further to receiving an email from either the university marketing team or from the project team. It may be that email was especially effective in this campaign because of the Coronavirus pandemic and the need to spend increased amounts of time using digital tools, although there are studies that suggest a lack of student engagement with emails even during the pandemic (Mulrooney et al., 2022). It may be that the emails were more engaging as they were written by students for students; for example, the targeted communications were far less formal than in previous years, including memes and short paragraphs rather than incorporating lots of copy. One of the targeted communications was sent to all eligible first and second-year mature students at NTU, and it is likely that this directly contributed to the increase in mature student applicants who went from under-represented to over-represented in the applicant population.

The strength of student-generated content is further emphasised by the results of the mentor-led campaign, which generated 10% of applications in the main phase of recruitment. The drawback of this approach is that it is difficult to track reach and monitor which messaging worked, however it does provide powerful evidence of the effectiveness of working in partnership with students to communicate opportunities. Another such example is the mentor-led promotional sessions, which were held online via MS Teams. These were well attended, with 80 students attending the two sessions that were held, and attendees asking a number of questions to aid their understanding of the role.

To evaluate the fairness of the application process, situational judgement testing scores were analysed, and it was found that average scores were comparable across all groups of students, indicating that the question set enabled all groups to perform equally successfully. Feedback from conversations with students suggests that they found these questions helped them to prepare for the reality of the role, as well as being good practice for future job applications.

Reflections and future plans

This project demonstrates the power of working collaboratively with students to increase diversity within student engagement programmes. In this case, working directly with students to understand and carry out the required changes led to a recruitment process that was more appealing and accessible to a wider range of students. This is important as it means that more students from under-represented groups can reap the rewards of involvement in extracurricular activity, and, for peer support schemes, means that first-year students (peer mentees) experience the advantages of having a diverse team of mentors supporting them.

Reflecting on the project, there are a number of challenges that could be addressed to enhance processes in future academic years. For example, a limitation of the project is that it is unable to pinpoint which specific tactics led to positive results. As there were a range of tactics taken to make recruitment processes more accessible, it is challenging to identify in isolation any one reason for the increase in the diversity of applicants. In future iterations of the project, it would be beneficial to collect additional data from applicants to better understand what persuades students to apply for the role and how the recruitment processes are experienced – though the method of collecting this data should be considered carefully, so as not to reintroduce the barrier of a lengthy application process.

The project involved collaborative working with students, and whilst this was felt to be a positive experience which led to an impactful project, this did present challenges. For example, although all mentors were invited to get involved with the project, only 18 mentors were willing to be involved past the point of the feedback form so it may be that resulting decisions were not representative of the entire cohort of mentors. A similar challenge was experienced when creating the promotional materials – all student mentors were invited to participate, however only a small number did. As a key element of the promotional materials was that they should reflect the wider student body of the institution, it became difficult to ensure key student groups (in this case, males) were included, and the team had to directly appeal to some male mentors to encourage them to participate. There are a range of reasons why students may not engage in partnership initiatives such as time, awareness, and confidence (Marquis et al., 2018), and whilst working with the students who put themselves forward to participate in the project was insightful and impactful, the accessibility of involvement in future projects should be carefully considered. Furthermore, it is recognised that by only working on the project with students who were already engaged with the mentoring scheme there were a range of views not being represented and acted upon. This includes students who were unaware of the mentoring role, and those who were aware but chose not to apply. It is essential to gain understanding of the experience of these students; it is therefore recommended that future iterations of the project seek to involve students who have not previously been engaged with the scheme, and to explore ways to ensure that the students on the project team reflect the diversity of the wider student body.

Whilst this project proved effective in terms of increasing the proportion of applications from under-represented student groups, there is now a need to further explore the shortlisting, recruitment, training, and mentor support processes to ensure that enhanced diversity in the applicant pool then leads to a diverse group of mentors who are retained and engaged through the full academic year. Furthermore, although the overall analysis of applicant demographics is promising, there is a need to examine this at a more granular level, to understand the data within different academic schools and courses. Although there were observed increases in the representation of some groups of students overall, these may be clustered within specific academic schools or courses, and it might not be the case that all first-year students are able to see the benefits of this on the ground.

From the data, it can be seen that males are still under-represented in the applicant (and resulting student mentor) pool, as are students with BTEC qualifications

(although this gap is now reduced). More research is needed with these groups of students to understand why this is the case and how this could be overcome.

Lastly, as noted previously this project was undertaken during the Coronavirus pandemic, and so the work undertaken by mentors and colleagues to diversify recruitment was heavily focused on the digital environment. There is a need for this to be built upon to explore how these solutions can be adapted to the physical campus environment.

Conclusion

This case study provides an example of the positive impact of partnering with students to engage under-represented groups in higher education. Through the creation of authentic student-generated content, the dissemination of messaging via students' own social channels, and the collaborative review and improvement of key recruitment materials and processes, applications for the mentoring scheme at NTU became more representative of the wider student cohort. Several key issues now need to be explored to develop knowledge and practice in enhancing diversity in mentoring and other student engagement schemes. The first is lower male participation in mentoring programmes, as this is not just a local issue but is known within the sector (Jackson and Dean, 2022). The second is an exploration of processes beyond applying to the role: what happens to students from under-represented groups at shortlisting, training, and beyond? Finally, input needs to be sought from students who are not already engaged in mentoring to ensure the voices of these students are heard and acted upon; working with students who are already involved is less likely to generate a thorough understanding of barriers to engagement.

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