

Compendium of effective practice in higher education: Volume 2

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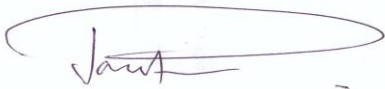


Foreword

Written at a time of unparalleled social and economic change and uncertainty, this Compendium provides a unique insight into how universities are seeking to promote a positive learning experience for students enrolled across a range of programmes in the UK and further afield. The notion of ‘innovation for learning’ underpins many of the interventions discussed, showing that despite unprecedented cutbacks and changes, colleagues across the sector continue to work hard to promote a positive and meaningful student experience.

Encapsulating a wide variety of opportunities for engaging students, the following pages reinforce previous arguments that there is not a single ‘correct’ approach to enhancing the student experience. Looking through the pages of this Compendium, the need for institutions, colleagues and students to work together to stimulate a “win-win-win” situation becomes ever more apparent. While student belonging remains key to success, other factors such as the use of proactive support systems, including mentoring and tutoring, combine with the implementation of forward-thinking staff-development interventions and the appropriate use of learning technologies to contribute to a synergetic and cohesive learning experience.

Although many of the interventions showcased in this Compendium focus on one particular programme, the potential for cross-disciplinary learning and the sharing of good practice is boundless. Each of the different interventions described in the following pages may be adapted or amended to suit individual and organisational needs and requirements. Built on an ethos of “sharing good practice”, this Compendium represents more than a pedagogical tool: it is a living document and a testament to the efforts of colleagues and students working together to promote excellence in learning and teaching. What is evident from the following papers is that the higher education sector in the UK and elsewhere has much to offer. Indeed, it is vital to the future success of global society.



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Introduction

The UK higher education sector is currently undergoing a period of unprecedented change, with the way in which university is perceived and experienced rapidly evolving as policy drivers influence not only how education is funded, but also what students expect from their time at university. More than ever, employability is a priority for all stakeholders, with employers, parents and students alike keen to know how a degree will equip future graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to succeed in the workplace. Concurrently, international competition is forcing many universities to look outside their traditional boundaries and in doing so seek to recruit potential students from across the world. With the concept of the 'global student' becoming a reality across almost all programmes offered in the UK, the challenge for institutions is not only how to attract more students, but also how to engage and retain those students following recruitment.

Set against the backdrop of raised student expectations, many institutions are actively seeking new ways to enhance the student experience. In doing so, a range of different interventions has been developed, tried and tested – with curriculum development and pedagogic practice becoming increasingly valid areas of academic research. It is within this setting that this second edition of the *Compendium of effective practice* is launched. Colleagues from across the UK sector and internationally have contributed their ideas and interventions to what has become a snapshot of good practice in 2013. Developing the work conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation under the auspices of the What Works? programme, the Compendium is divided into six distinctive categories – each one looking at a different area of the student experience. The six categories are:

- 1** Transition: This section explores all aspects of transition from the move into university onwards.
- 2** Learning and teaching: Different approaches aimed at fostering independent learning and promoting student success are discussed.
- 3** Supporting students: Student support is cultivated through interventions such as peer mentoring and the integration of current students.
- 4** Participation and belonging: The interventions in this section address the way institutions promote student engagement to develop a sense of belonging.
- 5** Utilisation of data and information communication technologies: This section discusses how data and technology can be used to support and enhance learning.
- 6** Strategic change: The six interventions discussed in this section demonstrate broad and creative approaches to bringing about strategic change.

This Compendium offers interventions which not only aid student transition but also promote staff development in learning and teaching. Many layers of support are proposed which engage students across an array of modules, courses and disciplines.

Curtin University mentor programme: Connecting every beginning student to a mentor

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Keywords

- peer mentoring
- peer support
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- student experience
- retention

Nature of intervention

Curtin University co-ordinates a campus-wide student mentor program in which every commencing undergraduate student is provided with a senior student from their own course as a mentor.

Focus of intervention

The mentor programme has the goal of enhancing student experience as new students are assisted in making a successful transition into the university. The program effectively manages the risk of new student attrition as mentors assist with campus and information systems orientation, with academic and social components of student life and with connecting new students to support services.

Mentoring relationships are reciprocal (Haggard *et al.*, 2011) and the mentor programme also benefits mentors in a number of ways. For example, socially they are connected to new students, to other mentors and to university staff. Mentors also have opportunities for professional development of high level, transferable skills and competencies, such as leadership, time management and communication skills.

Description of intervention

At Curtin University in Western Australia, concerns about student retention led to the development of a Student Retention Implementation Plan in 2007 and its formal adoption in 2008, comprising a number of interventions (Curtin University, 2007; 2008). Developing a student mentor programme was considered to have strong potential as an intervention that would impact positively on student retention measures, and was further linked to a number of other key retention initiatives such as early identification of students who are at risk, improving orientation and transition, and connecting students to sources of help in a timely manner. There was a particular focus on ensuring these interventions targeted first year undergraduate students. The key intended outcome of the student mentor programme was therefore to reduce attrition rates amongst beginning undergraduate students. Formal measures of retention indicate that this goal has been achieved. There have also been a range of other outcomes, beneficial to all participants (Elliott *et al.*, 2011).

Over the period 2008 to 2012, the programme has been progressively extended to include every new undergraduate on the main university campus. The fundamental goal of the mentor programme is to engage senior students to assist new students to make a successful transition into the university during the first semester of study (Curtin University, 2011). Mentors provide a welcome at orientation, act as positive role models, are available as a contact for support/advice, and generally enhance the experience of the new student. Developing a model for the mentor programme derived from consultation with professional peers in Australia, and a review of existing literature. A brief overview of the development of the programme is described in Elliott *et al.*, (2011).

The basic structure of the model adopted includes the following features:

- All new students are assigned to a mentor; they may choose to opt out of the programme. This aspect of the programme differentiates it significantly from other mentor programs where new students may apply for a mentor.
- Senior students act as mentors to new students enrolled in the same course – that is, the point in common between mentors and mentees is their course of study.
- A centrally managed training and preparation programme for all mentors is run by START (Student Transition and Retention Team).

- A co-ordinating academic staff member (usually the first year co-ordinator) in each participating teaching area works with the mentors.
- Ongoing support for mentors is provided by START and the co-ordinating staff member in each participating school as the mentor programme is delivered.
- Each mentor is assigned 10 to 15 mentees, who may request a change of mentor if they have concerns. Random assignment, where possible, results in diverse groups of students, which has been a beneficial aspect of the programme. Some local co-ordinators incorporate self-selection of mentors and other mentors work with existing tutorial groups.
- The precise delivery of the programme will vary according to the needs of the participating schools but in most cases the programme operates over the period of one semester.
- A structured evaluation occurs at the end of each semester of the programme with mentors, mentees, and participating staff.
- Student mentors' contribution is formally recognised by the university in the form of an honorarium payment, presentations and comments on their academic transcript.

How the intervention engages students

New students' engagement with the university is facilitated by the mentor programme in a number of ways. During orientation, mentoring groups are usually formed and students are able to meet and interact with other new students as well as their mentor. Mentors assist their mentees to engage with academic and social aspects of the university as they provide information, offer support, and connect new students to each other as well as to relevant staff as needed.

Mentors' engagement with the university is also enhanced. The central training programme includes interactive activities which model collaborative, supportive group processes that can be used with their mentees. Mentors report their enjoyment of working with and getting to know new students, their increased knowledge of university systems and support services, and their increased connections with staff, including a feeling of enhanced status within the university. This is promoted by formal recognition of their role.

Link to the What Works? findings

The programme builds a sense of belonging and engagement through peer relationships that offer friendship and support. The ongoing relationship between mentors and programme co-ordinators develops meaningful interaction between staff and students, and also facilitates interaction between those staff and new students. As mentors are drawn from the same teaching area, a stronger sense of identity with the school is fostered. The mentors also provide an effective and positive role model for new students, many of whom subsequently aspire to become mentors themselves.

The mentor programme is centred on students' academic pathways, and is consequently directly relevant to the immediate demands facing new students. Mentors are often engaged in volunteer organisations or are student members of professional bodies and organisations. Such mentors act as role models, encouraging mentees to join and actively engage in similar activities which lead to the acquisition of professional skills and the formation of networks in preparation for their entry into the workforce. Some mentors develop their professional identity further and become mentees in the NEXT STEP mentor program whereby students are mentored by Curtin alumni in relation to networking, job application preparation and realistic future career goals based on an understanding of their industry.

Evidence of effectiveness/impact

Comprehensive evaluation data have been collected from mentors and mentees from 2008 to 2012. Although the evaluation surveys have been slightly modified and improved from time to time, the data have been consistently positive.

Surveys include rating scales and mentees' responses that typically "strongly agree" or "agree" with items. For example, the data from semester 1, 2011 and 2012 mentees, as illustrated in Table 1, show that 65% of the 2,543 mentees who responded agreed or strongly agreed that their mentor provided them with useful information about Curtin. Similarly, 57% of respondents believed their mentor to always be available if they needed help or advice.

| My Mentor. . . | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Unable to Judge |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|-----------------|
| ...provided me with useful information about Curtin. | 21% | 44% | 5% | 5% | 25% |
| ...helped me with study tips. | 14% | 33% | 13% | 8% | 32% |
| ...gave me confidence in beginning at Curtin | 15% | 38% | 9% | 6% | 31% |
| ...helped me feel I belong at Curtin. | 14% | 35% | 10% | 6% | 36% |
| ...was always available if I needed help or advice. | 22% | 35% | 5% | 6% | 31% |
| ...was approachable. | 32% | 38% | 3% | 5% | 22% |
| ...directed me to appropriate resources and services at Curtin. | 21% | 36% | 7% | 5% | 31% |

Table 1: Mentee perception of mentors in semester 1, 2011 and 2012 (N=2, 543)

A key goal of the mentor programme is to improve student retention, and to determine if the programme is achieving its goal, students are asked: “Were you at any point considering withdrawing from Curtin?” A follow-up question asked: “If Yes, did your mentor make any difference to your decision to continue at Curtin?” In 2012, Semester 1, 14% of students had considered withdrawing and, of those, 17% believed that their mentor assisted with their decision to stay at Curtin. These data are consistent with the same data obtained in previous years of the mentor programme. When extrapolated from this sample of mentees to the entire mentee group of 7,000, the data indicate that the mentor programme had a direct effect on the retention of approximately 166 students who had considered withdrawal in semester 1, 2012.

There is evidence that the programme is of benefit to mentors in various ways (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012). Surveys from 2009 to 2011 of 858 individual mentor responses were analysed and there were 1,285 separate benefits reported which could be grouped into four main categories. Most benefits were:

- *Altruistic* (47.2%), such as gaining enjoyment and satisfaction from assisting new students.
- *Cognitive* (17.8%), including learning about the university and developing communication and leadership skills.
- *Social* (14.7%), such as developing new friendships and networking with other mentors and staff.
- *Personal growth* (13.8%), where mentors reported developing confidence, empathy and pride.

Whilst the mentees were assisted in the beginning phase of their university life, this reciprocal intervention also benefited the senior students in the student mentor programme.

Conclusion

Curtin University’s mentor programme has delivered clear benefits to participating students who are involved as mentees and as mentors, and to the participating teaching areas and the university as a whole. Evaluation data clearly indicate that the model used contributes to improved student retention rates and enhanced quality of the student experience. The particular aspects of the Curtin model that are recommended include:

- It is desirable to construct an institution-wide mentor programme. In this way, core quality standards can be ensured by a central facilitating area while allowing the programme to be tailored to suit the demands of specific teaching areas.
- Initiating an institution-wide mentor programme in larger institutions is best done in stages over several years rather than all at once. In particular, the beginning stage should take place in teaching areas with a strong wish to participate. This approach develops “champions” of the programme amongst teaching staff and increasingly makes extending the programme into other areas easier.
- An “opt-out” model offers advantages over an “opt-in” model. If every new student is provided with a mentor rather than requesting one, there is a greater probability of offering support to students who may initially be unaware that they need it. In this context, it becomes especially important to link mentees to mentors as early as possible, preferably integrated within the orientation programme.
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- Designers of mentor programmes are advised to give attention to the benefits that will accrue to mentors and participating teaching areas. Typically, the focus of mentor programme design has been on benefits to mentees, which is obviously desirable. However, the delivery of the programme is dependent on the participation of mentors and (in this model) on key academic staff.
 - In recruiting and supporting mentors, it is important to clearly communicate the gains they can expect from the programme.
 - For teaching staff, there are potentially altruistic and cognitive benefits similar to those gained by mentors. But teaching staff may be interested in more tangible benefits. It can be worth noting that staff frequently find that a mentor program reduces their workload, especially in dealing with repeated low grade requests for information from beginning students which are often easily handled by mentors. Formal ethics approval for the use of evaluation data was obtained prior to commencement of the programme, and some staff have taken advantage of this to present papers at conferences or publish in appropriate forums.
- Evaluation materials should be developed upon commencement of the programme. Some mentor programme facilitators delay this step until the program is operating; however developing evaluation processes upfront requires clear articulation of the goals of the programme. It also assists in mentor training if mentors are absolutely clear on programme goals and evaluation processes, because they are then able to modify their own behaviour accordingly. Evaluation should also ensure an effective feedback loop from all stakeholders to assist with regular review and improvement of the programme.

Mentor programmes such as Curtin's university-wide opt-out student peer mentor programme result in a triple-win in effective practice. New students, current students and staff all benefit. The return on investment of time and resources for all is highly worthwhile.

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Website

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Related publications, resources and further information

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