Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

IDEAS START HERE

PEER-LED TRANSITION

National Symposium

REPORT

From the event held in Dublin on 22nd November 2019

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT
THE PROJECT

This symposium was held as part of a project to develop a pilot model for peer-led social, emotional and academic transition. The project is part of the Irish Higher Education Authority Innovation and Transformation Fund's *Student Services: Retention and Engagement Strategy*. This is a collaborative strategy consisting of three work packages designed to address the increasing demand for mental health supports in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), overseen by Dr Deirdre Flynn (Trinity Counselling, Learning Development and Student 2 Student Services). The strategy aims to increase student retention and engagement by gaining meaningful data on support needs, collating and developing shared resources for counselling service providers and developing a peer-led transition programme for students.

Work Package 3, led by Ralph Armstrong-Astley, consists of staff from both Student 2 Student (student Mentoring and Peer Support programmes) and Student Learning Development (academic learning student support team) in Trinity College Dublin, working in collaboration with University College Dublin and Athlone Institute of Technology. Our pilot model, based on research into best practice nationally and internationally, will be launched in these three HEIs in Ireland in 2020-21 and will be subject to ongoing evaluation, review and redesign. The focus of the evaluation will be on the impact for first year students and the impact for volunteers when the materials are peer-delivered and the programme is student-led.

The purpose of the symposium was to open up the conversation on Peer-Led Student Transition Programmes nationally, and to provide an opportunity for HEIs around the country to have input on the development of Work Package 3's replicable model. WP3 aims to keep the national voice, both student and staff, at the core of what is designed.

42 people attended the symposium on 22nd November, including 10 students.

This report aims to bring readers unable to attend the symposium up to date, whilst serving as a reminder to those who were in attendance. It will begin with an overview of the core team and initial findings from WP3 as presented on the morning of the symposium, followed by the collated information from the five main topics for discussion which were addressed throughout the day.

Outputs from each discussion piece which are of particular significance to WP3's model are highlighted throughout this report in a 'Points of interest' box.

WHO WE ARE

The core team of Work Package 3 are:

Ralph Armstrong-Astley

S2S Co-ordinator and Project Manager on Work Package 3

Ralph is responsible for the project delivery of WP3 and ensures alignment with the overall *Student Retention and Engagement Strategy* project. She has worked in 3rd level Mentoring and Peer Support since 2011 and specialises in models of student leadership and volunteer care.

Clair Battle

Training Officer (S2S)

Clair is leading the development of a cohesive social, emotional and academic transition training programme for the Work Package 3 pilot, which includes:
- Working with Edel and the online community of practice to gather and implement ideas, materials, resources and feedback on the pilot
- Ensuring student feedback procedures and mentor support facilities are embedded in the pilot
- Implementation of recommended adjustments following evaluation

Edel O'Reilly

Student Learning Development Advisor (SLD)

Edel has been interviewing HEIs nationally and within the UK to explore current models of peer assisted learning and peer mentoring. She has also completed a literature review on this topic, and this dual approach to information gathering will inform recommendations for the pilot model. She will also be:
- Working with Clair and the online community of practice to develop a national network of ideas and resources
- Gathering and evaluating data from the pilot programme
- Making recommendations for the shared, replicable model

Research findings

To date, Edel has engaged with 8 universities and 5 ITs nationally, and 4 major universities in the UK. On the morning of the symposium, Edel gave a short presentation on some of the major themes emerging from both the literature review and interviews with HEIs. These themes were:

- Student Volunteer Training
- Student Engagement (first year and volunteer)
- Volunteer Support
- Staff Support and Engagement
- Evaluation
- Student Volunteers are Key

STUDENT VOLUNTEER TRAINING

This was a key theme, with widespread agreement that the quality of the training delivered to student volunteers is instrumental to the success of any peer-led transition programme. It was acknowledged that clarity and roles and boundaries are critical to ensure students don't attempt to offer tutoring/teaching or emotional support beyond their training. Training models are being developed according to specific programme aims at each institution, and with such a spectrum of topics being covered and approaches being taken it is clear that the pilot model cannot be one size fits all. It must be adaptable, and should be delivered in optional pieces rather than an "all or nothing" approach.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

This emerged as another strong theme within current models of peer-led transition. The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (National Report, 2019) speaks to how engagement is recognised as fundamental to the development of key capabilities for students. Where HEIs are strategically engaging both first-years and the student volunteers there is evidence of great success. Careful timetabling and tailored communication were reported as effective with first-year students, while the promotion of skills to be gained is contributing to successful recruitment campaigns for student volunteers.
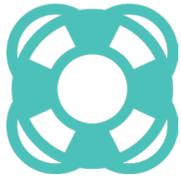
SUPPORT FOR STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

This was a consistent feature within the literature, and this consistency was mirrored by HEIs. Volunteer debrief was the most popular method of support employed by programmes. The importance of open communication was also heavily emphasised and facilitated through various other measures such as one-to-one contact and reflective group meetings.

STAFF SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

This arose as a key feature underpinning the successful implementation of peer-led transition programmes. All HEIs reported some level of difficulty when developing support internally for their programmes, and devising ways to overcome the barriers was a unifying experience. Through these efforts, a broad spectrum of internal offices and departments are becoming involved with these programmes, including; Careers Offices, Counselling Services and Transition Offices. In other cases, peer-led transition programmes originated in, and are still part of, these offices.

EVALUATION

There was a clear desire among HEIs to do more evaluation within their programmes. Qualitative evaluation was more prevalent than quantitative nationally. This practice runs in parallel with the literature, as it acknowledges the purposes of evaluation as providing feedback to student volunteers, academic staff and co-ordinators, to boost volunteers' confidence, and to learn what is not working in the programme.

STUDENT VOLUNTEERS ARE KEY

The success of these programmes undoubtedly hinges on our student volunteers. All HEIs spoke comprehensively about how impressed they were with the commitment from their student volunteers, and the development of their skills and confidence as a result. Volunteers' voices were recognised as crucial to the ongoing enhancement of programmes, with many HEIs incorporating focus-groups and feedback directly into future developments.

These core topics from the research findings provided context to the discussions throughout the day, and generated further questions to be explored by staff and students collectively.

STUDENT VOLUNTEER
TRAINING

Content of current trainings

- Boundary training (i.e. responsibility, referrals)
- Logistics – Campus tour, History, Presentation
- Program Specific training
- Confidentiality
- Communication and active listening (personal space, open/closed questioning)
- Personal support (i.e. questions students may be too embarrassed to ask)
- Empowering students and group facilitation skills (i.e. not giving answers, how to find own answers)
- Digital skills
- CPD
- Time management
- Referral skills (Responding to students in crisis, services such as Medical, Counselling, Chaplaincy, Accommodation, etc.)
- Student Leadership Programme (content delivered over 5 sessions)
- Being a leader
- Self-care
- Structured content for peer-led sessions
- Academic writing skills

Points of interest

The replicable model will not make recommendations for programme-specific training/content, but will instead focus on the generic skills students can train to deliver to their peers regardless of course/area. There is a possibility that the Community of Practice shared nationally by peer-led transition co-ordinators will be able to share specific materials/ideas related to courses and content. Over time, we may be able to identify common ground between these that would positively inform the more generic model.

Desirable training content

- Training sessions to be incorporated into timetable
- Orientation type day for training college wide
- Flexibility around timetabling
- Students to be freed up at certain times for training
- Recognition – exclusive opportunities
- Alumni links
- Training as ongoing modules (i.e. staggered/drip-fed information)

Points of interest

The wish list for training focused less on content/materials than it did on embedding our programmes, including our training, into the academic infrastructure. With further work and funding, there may be an opportunity to consolidate feedback and evaluation to draw a national picture of how training and experience in peer-led transition programmes for student volunteers informs and compliments their traditional academic learning and contributes to career/employability/graduate attributes/transferrable skills. This will help us to reinforce a recognition for the contribution to teaching made by peer-led transition programmes including, but not limited to, the academic transition of our first-year students.

Most worthwhile training elements

- Role play/real life scenarios for discussion
- Senior PASS leaders providing 'What If' questions
- Past leaders/mentors running mock sessions
- Open discussion with past leaders/mentors
- Have group size as small as possible
- Online training
- Summer training
- Resources available on Moodle/Blackboard
- Understanding participant motivation
- Situating the role of student volunteer within the wider context (for PASS leaders, knowing they are 1 of 8,000 in the world)
- Recognition of their role (cultivating the belief that they are 'part of something')
- Engaging/involving people outside the core team (i.e. sceptics, academics, professional staff, senior staff, etc.)
- Boundaries
- Taking enough time for the role to be developed

Least worthwhile/unhelpful training elements

- Running training at the wrong time of year
- Lecturing instead of practising and being interactive
- Having too much structure
- Ice-breakers that are not effective/conducive
- Inconsistencies across delivery (may happen when school have ownership of training)

Necessary for the model

- A model inclusive of variable content (one size won't fit all)
- A student-led model keeping the student voice central
- Inclusive of role modelling and scenarios
- Previous mentors providing guidance/delivering training
- An iterative process allowing for continuous improvement
- A model which includes Communication, Facilitation, Responsibility, Boundaries & Signposting, and Confidentiality
- Two full days if possible, or a realistic timeline (i.e. April/May/August)
- Capturing the diversity of mentors (and the 1st years)
- Department focussed
- Breakout groups
- Built-in online module as an independent aspect
- Preparation for first meeting of 1st years
- Inclusive of recognition (on transcript if possible)
- Inclusive of 'bonding' opportunities
- Inclusive of social critical education, 'Using your experience to create social change'
- Recognise the student volunteers' identity as leaders/mentors

Points of interest

There are clearly defined elements of best practice within these lists, including the following essentials for a replicable model:

- Contribution from existing/experienced volunteers
- Experiential model for delivery – student-led wherever possible
- Encouraging sense of belonging/community through participation
- Reflective practice embedded throughout
- Process for continuous learning/enhancement
- Online module/refresher
- Engaging with other areas/departments to secure buy-in

Elements of the training/model should be made available as a suite of electives/options to pick from, with interdependent content clearly marked.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

How and where are volunteers recruited?

- Email – conscious that students receive an overload of emails however
- Use existing relationships (supportive staff, existing mentors, etc.)
- Making class visits (with senior leaders/mentors/staff)
- Utilising word of mouth
- Holding information drop-ins over lunch/pizza night/mixer
- Promote subject specific benefits
- Careers rep to promote skills
- Online recruitment forms
- Student newspapers – print interview with student volunteer about their role and why they took part, etc.

On this question, the point was made by several attendees that the aspects of the student volunteer role that are used for promotional/recruitment purposes are often different to the parts of the role that volunteers engage most strongly with throughout the programme – may focus on soft skills, personal development etc. while volunteers cite wanting to help and be part of something as their primary reasons for signing-up.

Points of interest

The promotion of skills to be gained by student volunteers and accessible information about the programme are clearly effective tools for recruiting informed, committed volunteers. Role descriptions should be made available and regularly reviewed by engaged and by outgoing volunteers. Role descriptions are a useful tool for expectation setting, and should be included in materials produced by WP3.

How is volunteers' work recognised?

- Include role on CV
- Provide professional reference (from volunteer co-ordinator, Head of School, etc.)
- Provide student volunteers with: salary/once-off payment/vouchers/dinners, etc.
- Hold graduation/awards ceremony – attended by Head of School/Provost
- Use attendance at awards ceremony for profile photos on LinkedIn etc.
- Award credits
- Badge (physical or digital)
- Create posters with volunteer profiles
- Non-credit bearing hours counted for GAISCE award, etc.
- Medal – noted on transcript and physical award (One volunteer per year selected by peers and academics)
- Invite well known public figure/celebrity to attend ceremony – elevate the 'specialness' and exclusivity of event
- Advanced award for sustained commitment

There was discussion in the room regarding the risk that achieving an award or extra credits on top of students' degrees becomes the 'new normal', therefore creating pressure for all students to have these additional achievements, and it no longer being sufficient to graduate with a degree alone. This suggestion was explored, with varying opinions on the matter, and it's clear that no one solution would be right for all HEIs.

Points of interest

Recognition of the student volunteers is imperative, and will be a core element of the model developed. The digital badge system seems to be strongly welcomed by students, along with an awards night. The team aim to devise a recognition element fitting for the volunteer programmes, in line with resources available on the project.

How is supervision and debrief delivered?

- In person – can be difficult however to find suitable time and venue
- By department
- Emails – these are impersonal however
- Delivered by Head mentors/Team leaders – can be issues with consistency
- Logging activity – can be issues with consistency
- Compulsory number of attended meetings – volunteers and staff
- Attended by faculty champions
- Weekly meeting/debrief – use reflective journals to provide structure
- Structure necessary for debrief session
- Academic member of staff attending debriefs and mentoring volunteers
- Use system of logging and flagging issues to mentors

Points of interest

It's notable that there is a diversity of approaches to debrief. Some programmes mandate sessions, some host them individually while others hold group sessions. Some sessions are run by staff, others by Head/Lead Mentors, while some do check-in over email instead.
Purposes of debrief vary as well – while some are held to track and monitor activity, others are used to help volunteers raise questions, and some use reflective frameworks to encourage discussion

It was also noted that staff engaging in debrief and supervision need support and supervision structures for themselves. Development of a national framework for training and support could be a potential avenue for future expansion for the project, depending on funding.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT
AND SUPPORT

Posters were put up around the room to represent 14 different stakeholder groups. Each attendee was asked to vote on their top five stakeholders by sticking the post-its provided to each stakeholder they wished to vote for. Each post-it was of equal value, so they were not ranking their nominees from 1-5, we were purely reviewing aggregate data on the number of votes for each stakeholder group. Participants had 15 minutes to walk around the room and cast their votes. After the votes had been counted, a discussion followed which focussed on the top two stakeholders.

The stakeholder options and vote totals were as follows:

Bar chart values: 27, 25, 21, 17, 16, 15, 10, 9, 6, 5, 5, 4

Legend:
- Students
- Retention support
- Students' Union
- Access
- Academic staff
- Admin staff
- Counselling/ Chaplains
- Careers
- Senior management/ governance body
- Learning support
- Disability
- Others (2nd level career guidance, mature office, library)
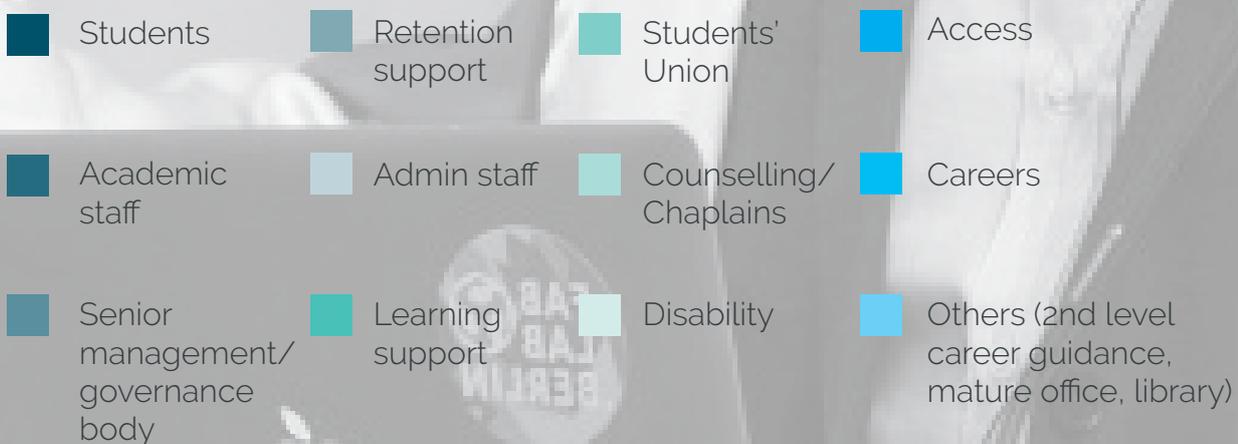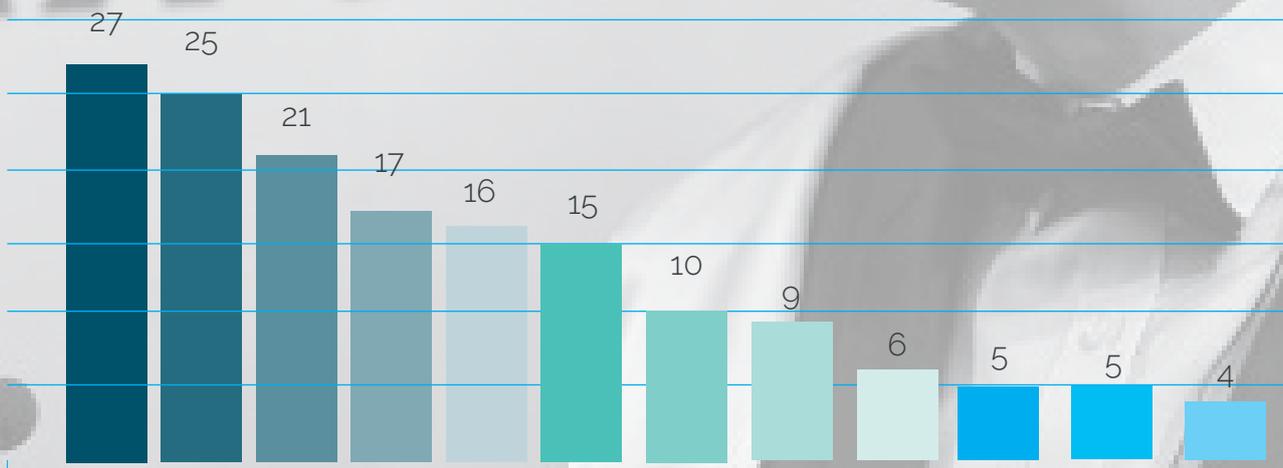
Students

The student body received the highest number of votes at 27. Many attendees prioritised students as a stakeholder based on the following points:

- Students' expectations should be central
- Expanding their skillset is a at the core of peer mentoring/learning programmes, i.e. Leadership, Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Team Building, etc.
- Involvement in the programme can benefit students who have struggled with elements of their transition, but there was some discussion about whether academic achievement should be used as a recruitment criteria as some programmes do choose to do this

Efforts to capture student engagement included:

- Programmes should be embedded into orientation, but if a student has missed orientation, they should still have information and access
- Designing programmes that are opt-out (students are automatically included in all events and activities unless they choose to remove themselves from mailing lists and do not attend meet-ups they are invited to)
- Recruitment of student volunteers is important, getting the right students on board
- An awareness that volunteering with a programme should be fun!

Academic Staff

This cohort received the second highest number of votes at 25. The majority of attendees were in strong agreement that without support and commitment from academic staff, peer mentoring/learning programmes could not operate. The points covered were as follows:

- In most cases there is no central team running the programmes, so this means increased admin for academic staff
- Timetabling is fundamental to engagement from first-years with these programmes, and to secure timetabling, buy-in and support from academic staff must be present
- Input is needed from academic members of staff when developing topics to be covered by student volunteers during sessions/meet-ups
- When academic staff advocate then students will come along, and when they do not they can negatively affect engagement

Efforts to gain support from academic staff included:
- Holding information sessions in which the programmes are explained, and sessions can be simulated/demonstrated
- nviting academic staff along to training sessions to better increase their understanding of the student volunteer role
- Emphasizing how these programmes will help retention and engagement

Points of interest

Research points to student volunteers who have struggled in first year being a good fit for volunteering transition programmes as;
a) they understand how difficulties can arise and can offer their own experience and
b) they can benefit more in terms of their own learning around emotional, social and academic engagement by delivering this material to their Peers.

Although there is an argument for protecting volunteer who need more time to study, as the role of Mentors in the pilot programme will be guiding, supporting and reflecting, and will not involve tutoring, their academic success to date will not be a criteria for involvement.

However, the pilot will seek input from across the board on other recruitment and selection models, and may offer a suite of options from which HEIs can choose their own priorities if they are adopting the recruitment/selection piece.

HEI experience definitively reflected the recommendation from programmes written about internationally, that models must be embedded in the students' timetables to succeed.
Recommendations about engaging staff in the training and/or providing accessible information must also be heeded, and the evaluation should include an evidence base for the advantages to academic staff of hosting/supporting peer-assisted programmes being equal to or or outweighing the contribution they have to make.

CREATIVE CHALLENGE

Each group was asked to nominate one person from their team to collect arts and crafts materials from the top table. They were advised that all materials they chose must be used up in their creation. The brief was:
*Can you visually represent what you believe transitioning into third level should be, using the materials provided?*

Blue students on the yellow path, assisted by Pink mentors & buffers along the path w/ cheerleaders on & off the path, which can fork in many ways
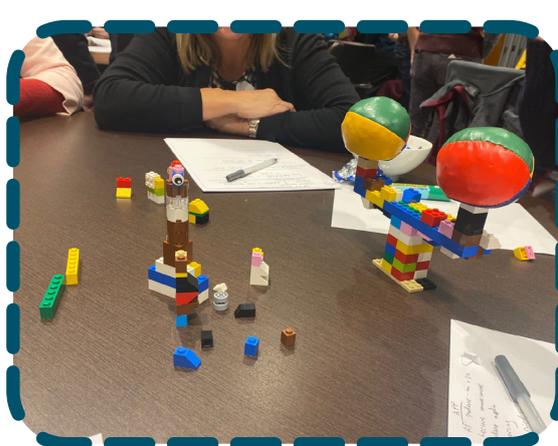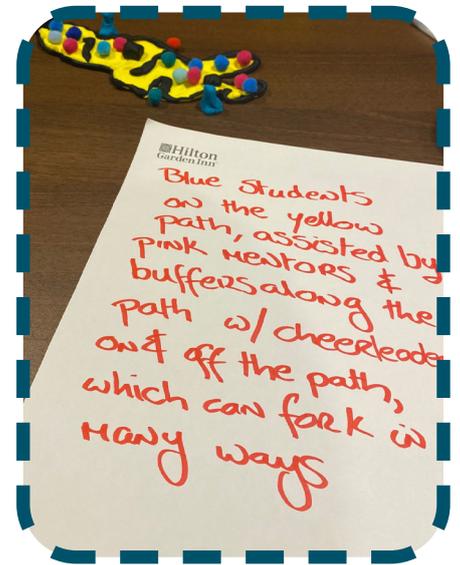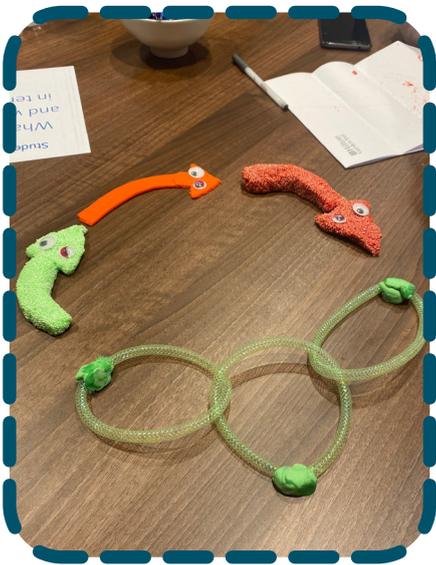
EVALUATION

Who do you get evaluation from?

- First-year students/mentees
- Staff (incl. academics)
- Peers
- Self-evaluation
- Trainers
- Stakeholder organisations
- Parents
- Mentors
- Those providing funding/benefactors

Who would you like to get evaluation from?

- Second-year students
- Final year students
- Non-engaging students
- Graduate mentors
- Targeted cohorts – Mature, Disability, HEAR, lone parents
- International students
- Students transitioning onto PG programmes
- Returning and non-returning mentors
- Other HEIs
- Counselling Service
- Parents
- Alumni
- Employers

What are the targets for your evaluation?

- First-year engagement
- Leader/mentor experience of their role

What alternative targets would you consider?

- Value of skills developed from mentor/leader role translating to future career

What are the targets for your evaluation?

- Start of term wide-ranging first-year evaluation
- Evaluation of mentor experience
- Evaluation for programme development
- Feedback to approach new departments curious about PM

Could you use it in other ways?

- For the purpose of producing an annual report
- Creation of form for first-years to write commendations for their mentors
- Use feedback to boost morale in mentors
- Sharing of feedback on peer mentoring experience from first-years with same first-years
- Arguments for further funding/resources

What should we use as evaluation in the pilot, so it is useful for you?

Responses to this question have been divided into three evaluation target categories: Student Focused, HEI Focused, and Statistical Data.

Student Focused Targets

- What were student expectations
- Were mentor/student expectations met
- What supports do mentors/students need to do more/better
- What worked and what didn't – mentors and students
- What was unexpected – mentors and students
- Include stories/testimonials from mentors and first-years/mentees
- Self-evaluation from student volunteers
- Compare and contrast impact/needs with different cohorts
- Interest level year-on-year
- What students' motivations are to get involved
- Interest for mentors becoming part of a national/international mentor community
- Impact on first year and volunteer resilience/engagement

HEI Focused

- Linking programme with internal supports
- Feedback/connection with lecturers
- Extracurricular/out of hours events
- Mapping leaders'/mentors' skills to Grad Attributes and Employability
- Measure internal HEI awareness of the services available
- Create bank of questions for evaluation questionnaires

Statistical Data

- Stats on first-year engagement with programme
- Retention stats
- Exam results

Points of interest

WP3 will be evaluating retention and progression for first-year students and student volunteers, as well as the impact on the development of generic skills (employability attributes) in both first-year students and volunteers. We are also eager to explore the possibility of alternative evaluative targets such as growth in confidence and resilience, and research on tools available is ongoing.

TAKE AWAYS

To conclude the symposium, objectives identified by the room going forward were addressed, and how to solidify our connections as a community was discussed. The to-do list that Work Package 3 core team committed to is as follows:

Shared access to repository of research covering:

- Identified issues with programmes
- Evidence based arguments for resources
- Stakeholders –obstacles and shared successes

Possible future research:

- Evaluation of students who do not engage with programmes – who and why

National Network:

Based on the shared learning Edel has started to compile from her interviews, and voiced during the symposium itself, it was suggested that we build on current momentum by developing a national network for staff and students engaged in peer-led transition programmes, including a shared communication channel, future symposiums and possible national training events for student volunteers.

Question bank:

The value of a bank of questions for evaluative purposes was discussed, to encourage sharing across HEIs and to inspire alternative targets for measuring the impact of programmes.

Reflective practice:

Feeding evaluation back to volunteers in a formalised manner as a means of crediting programme success was established as important to those in attendance.

student2student@tcd.ie

www.student2student.tcd.ie

01 896 2438

Contact Ralph Armstrong-Astley at astleyr@tcd.ie or by phone: 01 896 4316