

## Using e-Learning to Help Transition from School to University: Innovations in Student Support Practice

Iliyan Stefanov, Antonella Reitano, Joan Muszynski, Alessandro Astorino

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on the development, implementation and results of an innovative approach of providing students support in the University of Dundee, Scotland. A Peer-led support system has been introduced and developed followed by a mirror image based on e-Learning. The results show that the importance of e-Learning to students grows with fast rate but there is not matching decline in the use of the traditional student support resources.*

**Key words:** *Web-Based Training, Transition, Peer Support.*

### INTRODUCTION

The transition from School to University is a smooth one in most cases. However, a growing number of new students experience hardship of different magnitude in the first few months since they begin their courses. This inevitably hampers their ability to perform and worsens their student experience. Traditionally the problem has been tackled by specialised student services departments but this proves ineffective. The main reason for it being the unwillingness of new students to come forward and seek help when they need it most and then drop out before help is offered.

Recognising this, some universities have tried to reach out to students and have developed peer-led support schemes. Although this approach has been a step forward in providing support it has not made use of the e-Technologies, thus leaving unexploited an important way to communicate and educate young people. Building on the existing student support structure and on the success of the peer-led support the University of Dundee has taken first steps to implement e-Learning support tools and provide support to new and existing students.

### BACKGROUND

The University of Dundee is home to 17,883 students and more than 3,000 staff, of which 12,506 are involved in undergraduate studies. Distance learning students account for almost 20 per cent of all students (including undergraduate and postgraduate). Each year approximately 3,500 new students come to campus and some 1,800 of them choose to stay in University Residences. This cohort has proved to be the most vulnerable as the rest have much closer family support available or are already use to more independent life and do not require much support even during the first few months of their University life. Hence, students in University residences have been chosen as the main target group for e-Learning.

Additionally, Student Support Assistants and Peer Connectors have been introduced for some time to reflect the need for some sort of befriending and mentoring of students seeking help for transition issues and with feelings of isolation and also from Wider Access for students who were facing particular difficulties or transition issues [1].

Following an initial needs analysis, which took place in February 2004, when a survey was conducted of students, there was a very positive response to the idea of a peer befriending/ buddying and mentoring scheme being available for new students. Many students surveyed at that time felt that this would be of benefit to future students and would have been helpful to them when they were in their initial year at University of Dundee. However, even back then, some students enquired whether any support can be provided over the internet.

The above has become the basis on which a two tier system of student support has been gradually introduced. The scheme has been further developed over the past 6 years. The number of student volunteers and connections to them increased, and the scope and scale of the scheme was broadened and mainstreamed. Some of those students have done their own research on support in specific areas, such as: living away from home; budgeting; and sexual health. That research was used to produce courses for new students based on e-Learning platform.

### **THE SCHEME**

Student Services deals essentially with 3 areas – crisis / transition support and personal and professional development. Our scheme bridges all of these aspects by offering a broad cross-campus approach not solely confined to the constraints of subject area or academic work. On the one hand, it allows students from different disciplines to meet, mix and work together thus creating a community ethos and greater understanding between students. On the other hand, it offers them an internet based way to explore a particular problem they are faced with and try to resolve it with their own newly acquired knowledge and skills.

The broad aims of Peer Connections are to enable students to get the information they need to find their way around and settle in, help them meet, mix with, learn from, to share information and experience with other students. It also enhances personal development of both volunteers and students being supported [2].

There are 3 continuing strands of activities: welcoming, buddying / befriending and mentoring (informal). Befriending and mentoring are a good ways of reaching out to the student body and encouraging support within and from the student body as well as encouraging volunteerism, community empowerment, personal development and enhanced employability for the students involved. Peer support is acceptable and more accessible to students [3].

There are many different roles which volunteers can get involved in. The principle role is one of befriending and buddying other students; offering a listening ear, helping fellow students to consider their options and answering questions about life in and around the University. Peer Connectors support students in an informal mentoring relationship helping them to make choices, set goals and offering ideas.

Peer Connectors work together in small teams of between 3 and 4 volunteers to offer support to others. They take on a wide variety of related tasks especially: welcoming new students to University of Dundee – attending events throughout the academic year to welcome new or prospective students, answering questions, showing people where to go and assisting at induction events. Teams visit university student residences regularly meeting and speaking with students. There are also roles for anyone wanting to be involved in Student Services campaigns (especially those relating to wellbeing), campus (& residence) sports events, Peer Connections social events (Open House events), responding to student emails (e-buddying), running buddy groups for new students, regular 'Drop In' sessions and outreach within the university residences encourage other students to volunteer for Peer Connections and assisting with promotion/publicity distributing materials for Student Services in relation to services or campaigns e.g. health, volunteering. Most volunteers do a combination of roles within Peer Connections.

Peer Connectors meet regularly (usually once a week) with students who need further support or informal mentoring. These meetings between students and Peer Connectors usually last for about 1 hour and no less than 30 minutes. Occasionally meetings will take longer depending on the purpose of the meeting and may include an activity e.g. shopping, cinema, museum, walking, art gallery, have a coffee etc.

Further specialised training (sometimes from external bodies) is also offered to student volunteers to take on additional roles e.g. assisting with presenting suicide awareness sessions as part of our ongoing suicide awareness and prevention strategy, health related information / peer education activities, peer mediation.

Typical issues that Peer Connectors have dealt with have included : problems in locating places during first semester/ on arrival, eating disorder/possible eating disorder, self harm, problems with flat mates, social phobia, depression, culture shock, homesickness, isolation, attempted suicide/ suicidal thoughts, compulsive behaviour, wanting to find out more about Dundee/ Scotland/ University, concerns about other students, low self esteem, concerns about course / academic workload, personal issues, time management, mental health/ psychological difficulties and disabilities [4].

Student volunteers (Peer Connectors) are drawn from all Colleges within the University, across all disciplines and include undergraduates, mature students and postgraduates. Potential Peer Connectors must provide personal and academic references, they are informally interviewed by the co-ordinator and receive further specialised training. Each year there is a pool of 50 Peer Connections volunteers.

Further developments to the support for students at University of Dundee occurred in academic year 2008-09 when further 10 student volunteers were recruited and trained as Student Support Assistants working within university residences. It was considered that this was a bolstering of the support already being provided by the Student Support Worker and the Peer Connections team.

There are two Student Support Assistants allocated to live in each university residence helping to provide welfare support. They are all students and along with the Peer Connectors they have undergone specialised training. As they live in the University residences they provide a convenient first contact for students living there who have a welfare problem. The Student Support Assistants, work together under the supervision of the Student Support Worker and similarly to the Peer Connectors deal with many issues, such as: flat disputes; noise related issues; relationships between two or more flat mates; loneliness; homesickness; self harm; depression; alcohol misuse; stress related issues; bullying and harassment. They will also help to direct students to appropriate services within the University. Although they will not deal with discipline matters as such, they provide full co-operation with the Authorised Officer in the University when necessary.

Volunteers are given comprehensive training in order to support their roles that includes teambuilding, boundaries and confidentiality, self care, needs awareness, the helping continuum, personal safety, diversity (cultural / disability), student issues, interpersonal communication and listening skills [5]. Additionally Student Support Assistants receive additional training relating to their work within residences e.g. fire drill procedures, safety, discipline rules and procedures, team working etc.

Both Peer Connections Co-ordinator and the Student Support Worker also take referrals for from different parts of the university – academics and other units within Student Services at University of Dundee. Students may also self refer and additionally the Peer Connections Co-ordinator actively contacts students prior to arrival offering the support functions of Peer Connections to new students – thus providing links into the university and also reassurance.

In a wider national context the Peer Connections scheme and the functions of the Student Support Worker and Student Support Assistants also fulfil a role within the University in terms of support for transition and employability (Higher education enhancement themes from Quality Assurance for Higher Education –QAA in Scotland). They also fulfil a role in retention of students who may otherwise drop out from the university. In 2007 Peer Connections was awarded “Approved Provider” Status at best practice level by the UK wide Mentoring and Befriending Foundation in collaboration with

the Scottish Mentoring Network. This award places Peer Connections in the top 10% of all mentoring and befriending schemes in the UK.

New volunteers when coming forward at recruitment often cite the reason for volunteering as being related to feeling that the welcome and support they received from Peer Connectors and the Student Support Assistants when they first came to the University was very helpful and positive and they wish to become part of the process giving the same experience to other new students in subsequent years. This participation is not just a reflection of the development of activities and the increasing awareness of the student body about the scheme it is also an endorsement from the students who have been active participants in shaping and developing the scheme [6].

The use of student peers in University has proved very successful, both as an efficient way to enhance student experience in University and as a cost effective method of delivering knowledge and skill to the wide student population. The ever increasing academic demands in modern university education require a more flexible and informal approach to resolving problems that students have or encouraging them to excel. Proactive Peer involvement in all this provides just this.

The success of the peer-led support has been followed up by its e-Learning mirror image. This has two strands. The first one is responding to student emails (e-buddying) by the Peer Connectors and Student Support Assistants. The second one is the e-Learning tools on 'Living-in-Halls', 'Budgeting' and 'Sexual Health'.

Initially, the support team has employed the email system to interact with students in need but swiftly moved to a designated area, user name and password protected, where students, including peer supporters, could meet in the virtual space and seek information, discuss problems, learn new skills.

The internet based support became more and more used by students during 2005-2008 but then the numbers began to decline as students proved to be more interested in using Face Book, Linked-in etc. platforms. The fact that those much more popular web sites could not allow for controlling and thus taking responsibility for the support that is provided over them made them of little use. Hence, the idea of developing courses provided to students on e-Learning basis gathered pace.

The advantages of those courses include that they have been based on research done by students who had the personal inclination to peer support and have had considerable experience providing it in real time. Therefore, not only the substance of the courses appealed better to students but also the language used for the courses felt more appropriate and attractive to users.

The scheme also gives the user a two tiered approach to solving a personal problem. On the one hand, it provides the theory behind the issues of the transition. On the other hand, it offers the student a concise way based on a small number of steps to follow and practically resolve the problem on their own. Another positive side of the scheme is that it also allows students in need to come back with more questions and/or suggestions and get specific to their particular issues answers.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK**

The results of our efforts to improve student support and help vulnerable students achieve their full academic potential show that e-Learning alone falls short of providing comprehensive results. Although there is a growing number of students who predominantly communicate over the internet, still there are some students who avoid using the technology when it comes to very personal issues. Yet, not using the e-Learning way of reaching out to students only widens the gap between student and staff and hampers the efficiency of the higher educational system. Our experiment and consequent observations have shown that the importance of e-Learning to students grows with fast

rate but there is not matching decline in the use of the traditional student support resources.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Dr Iliyan Stefanov, MA, MBA, PhD, Student Services Directorate, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland, UK, Phone: +44 1382 385534, e-mail: [i.s.stefanov@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:i.s.stefanov@dundee.ac.uk)

Associate Professor, Antonella Reitano, Department of Business Administration, University of Calabria, Phone: +39 0984 492270, E-mail: [a.reitano@unical.it](mailto:a.reitano@unical.it)

Mrs Joan Muszynski BSc, Student Services Directorate, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland, UK, Phone: +44 1382 384932, e-mail: [j.m.muszynski@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.muszynski@dundee.ac.uk)

Temporary Research Associate, Alessandro Astorino, University of Calabria - Department of Electronics, Computer and System Sciences, MP: +39 338 21 938 78, E-mail: [alessandro.astorino@gmail.com](mailto:alessandro.astorino@gmail.com)