The role of student peers in HE student mental health and well-being

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Abstract

Purpose – There is evidence that students' experiences in higher education can be adversely affected by mental health issues, whilst well-being can be bolstered through a sense of belonging. This study aims to draw from Student Minds research into student mental health to consider the importance of peers to constructing a sense of belonging.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws from a thematic review of 12 focus groups – involving student services staff in six UK universities (69 participants) – conducted as part of the consultation and creation of the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter. The schedule considered student support, service structures and developments to enhance student well-being and manage mental health risks.

Findings – A significant theme explored here is the positionality of student peers in terms of relatability, and the importance of orientation and belonging for student mental health and well-being. The findings also consider types of peer involvement (formal/informal) and the influence of structure, training and boundaries in interventions.

Research limitations/implications – Findings reveal the importance of feeling a sense of belonging in the university community to achieve well-being and good mental health. Peer support is an important contributor that supports transitions into university and creates a sense of belonging, which is important to all students, but more so to those less familiar with university, who lack role models and more easily feel isolated.

Practical implications – The research has implications for higher education providers, which should inform the promotion of peer support within student services, based on the recognised contribution to well-being and mental health. This is important for student success and related opportunities.

Social implications – Success in higher education will open opportunities and create improved future prospects for individuals. This will not be realised for individuals who face boundaries and barriers to successful transition through university. The importance of belonging and role of peer support has implications for those who find themselves excluded in society.

Originality/value – This is a qualitative study which gives voice to individuals in universities across the UK. The theme of peer support within this context and linked with mental health and well-being is underexplored.

Keywords Student Minds, Peer support, Well-being, Mental health, Belonging

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

This research was conducted by Student Minds in the consultation for the University Mental Health Charter (UMHC) (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). As part of the research and consultation, focus groups (FGs) were conducted with student services staff to better understand the current range of support provided across UK universities, and the challenges faced by student services staff and their interventions. The findings presented in this paper are drawn from the thematic review of the FG findings and the contributions of participants relating to peer support and mentoring.

In 2016/17, 53,045 students had a recorded mental health condition (Johnson, 2018), with the number disclosing mental health conditions increasing over the previous 10 years

(Batchelor *et al.*, cited in Thorley, 2017). In 2019–20, 17% of HE students were registered with a disability, of which 5% had mental health condition – 96,490 students. This is a significant increase from 33,500 in 2014–15 (HESA, 2021). The effects of Covid-19 although are not yet fully known, yet seem likely to increase student's risk of mental health issues (Tinsley, 2020). The increase in mental health issues represents significant concern for students and HE providers as poor mental health can adversely affect the academic performance of students and their retention in university. Hence there is increased focus upon student mental health and wellbeing, requiring universities to increase support for students diagnosis with mental health conditions during their time at university and prior to joining university. Student Minds launched the University Mental Health Charter in December 2019, setting out standards for delivery of services and informing best practice in terms of support to students (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). The theme that will be explored within this article will be the place of student peers in supporting students' mental health. There will be an initial review of literature considering peer mentoring in HE and potential benefits, followed by a brief account of the research approach, the qualitative findings and a final discussion.

Literature review

Peer mentoring and support has become increasingly common within higher education (Collings *et al.*, 2016; Ford, 2015; Lane, 2020). Cornelius *et al.* (2016) emphasised the importance of peer mentoring in offering emotional and practical support during periods of transition. Peer mentoring is significant in terms of aiding transition into university, helping students to settle, thus offering important support for students, which promotes well-being in the journey into and through university (Plaskett *et al.*, 2018). Plaskett and colleagues researched the experience of non-traditional students entering HE in the USA, and found those with mentors felt supported both practically and emotionally. This was associated with mentors being just a couple of years ahead, so giving up-to-date and relevant advice. Alcocer and Martinez (2017) found students from minority groups asserted that peer mentoring created a sense of relatability, which was based upon an holistic approach and increased openness between mentors and mentees. Collings *et al.* (2016), in considering peer mentoring during the transition into university and the impact upon experiences of stress and well-being, connected peer mentoring with a buffer against ill-health. The peer mentors offer insights into systems and signpost to student support services.

Peer mentoring helps skill development, through the dual mechanisms of role modelling and advice. Plaskett *et al.* (2018) used social learning theory to find mentees viewed mentors as reassuring role models, helping them navigate the learning environment. McKellar and Kempster (2015), in an Australian survey-based research project with midwifery students, found peer mentoring supported the development of soft skills, such as time management and organising workload. Yomtov *et al.* (2017) considered the importance of mentoring in the settling stage of student life and the benefits of sharing practical advice at a time of uncertainty, helping the mentee become more familiar within the university environment. Gorczynski *et al.* (2017) found significant links with mental health associated with the organisation of services, as increased transparency and understanding was equated with reduced stress. Consequently, guidance is important, and knowledge brought about by mentoring can increase well-being and reduce negative effects upon mental health. Pascarelli *et al.* (1998) notes that "mentors establish trust, demonstrate empathy, and function as a guide, advocate, and supporter to their mentees" (Efrat *et al.*, 2017, p. 27).

An important aspect of peer mentoring is the distinction between mentors and staff members in terms of what is offered and perceptions of the role. Ford (2015), in considering peer mentoring within nursing, found mentors to be of a similar age, but more experienced, so able to offer support, whilst being viewed as more approachable than university staff. Plaskett *et al.* (2018) placed importance upon the establishment of trust and compatibility

within the mentoring relationship. Bohannon and Bohannon (2015) associated peer mentoring with the creation of a safe space that allowed the mentee to grow in confidence, through guidance and role modelling. Cornelius *et al.* (2016) identified that the mentor–mentee relationship provided a "real-world perspective" on the university experience, which was contemporary as the peer was on a similar footing, albeit at a more advanced stage. There are some specific challenges for students related to their academic discipline. Cardwell and Lewis (2018) found peer support important for students on professional courses who experience similar stresses to other students such as academic workload and financial pressure, but also from the effects of "death and suffering". Hence, support from colleagues in the workplace and the university helped them overcome these challenges and had positive effects upon well-being. Lane (2020) linked peer mentoring and the support in becoming established within university as significant in recognising and reducing the possible effects of stress and anxiety.

Peer mentoring is associated with helping the mentee gain connections and become more networked within the university community. McKellar and Kempster (2015) identify peer mentoring as essential to settling into university, which they associated with the relatability of the peer, generally being just one step ahead. Lane (2020) identified issues such as student loneliness as they struggled to fit into student life. Some specific groups of students were identified as more likely to feel that they do not fit into university, which adversely effected their mental health. International students can be more prone to loneliness as they attempt to study within the UK. Penn-Jones *et al.* (2019) found that international students were more likely to feel lonely and subsequently experienced lower self-esteem.

Penn-Jones *et al.* (2019) found around 20% of university students experienced mental health problems at any time, and that a key factor was loneliness. Cacioppo *et al.* (2006) found loneliness and depressive symptoms linked with social isolation, in turn leading to increased risk of depression. Additionally, they found satisfactory interpersonal relationships improved well-being amongst students and improved academic performance. Vasileiou *et al.* (2019) asserted that loneliness was a significant risk for students, which negatively impacted upon mental health including increased risks of depression, self-harm, suicide and unhealthy behaviours. They found loneliness disproportionately, adversely effected younger people and that as students entered university, left home and relocated, loneliness became apparent. Furthermore, Spear *et al.* (2020) found depression and anxiety to be prevalent amongst university students based on a fear of failure and being in unfamiliar environments such as lecture theatres, with existing underlying mental health problems potentially triggered because of the stress. Consequently, a sense of belonging and feeling able to relate to the environment and other students proved significant in a positive university experience.

Peer support is increasingly recognised as a way of supporting those with mental health issues (McKellar and Kempster, 2015; Lane, 2020; Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Cornelius *et al.* (2016) identified formal and informal mentoring, with formal mentoring most popular and supported by universities, and recognised as helping students feel settled and achieving a sense of belonging and encouraging participation. However, dispute exists about whether the mentoring process should be formal or informal, and Darwin and Palmer (2009) assert that mentoring should be more informal, thus based on who individuals find themselves drawn to. A key consideration in mentoring is the risks to mentors, which makes boundaries significant and can lead to more formal approaches being favoured. Lane (2020) asserted that organising peer mentoring required careful consideration and planning, to ensure that it was fit for purpose and as such should not be left to chance. Cornelius *et al.* (2016) found that successful peer mentoring required frequent meetings, organised centrally by the university, including initial and ongoing schedules to share ideas. O'Shea *et al.* (2017), in examining the development of peer mentoring programmes, found the inclusion of students as partners was highly beneficial to success and increased the levels of successful uptake. This partnership approach was based on collaboration and

appreciated the knowledge students brought, which helped create "accessible guidelines" for the students (O'Shea *et al*., 2017, p. 114). The focus upon students as partners meant control was shared between staff and students meaningfully.

Consequently, existing literature identifies increased recognition of the benefits of peer mentoring within university, indicating positive outcomes for student's well-being and mental health. Nevertheless, a knowledge gap remains in terms of how this might be achieved, and further understanding of how mentoring might be organised would be beneficial, which links with the purpose of this study.

Research methodology

Student Minds led this research as part of the consultation for the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). There were six university events that gathered experiences from across the UK, and the events ran from March to May 2018. The host universities were University of Staffordshire, University of Leeds, University of Arts London, University of Strathclyde, University of Ulster and University of Cardiff; other universities were invited to participate through a series of one-day events.

Participants: The FGs considered here were made up from people linked with student services. This comprised 12 FG with 3–12 participants in each and 69 across all FGs, including a small number of student mentors or ambassadors. There were a range of researchers engaged, who were provided with a guide developed by Student Minds, with a mandate for some flexibility in line with a semi-structured approach.

Method

FGs of 1 h were used. FGs are defined as group interviews or discussions (Gill *et al*., 2008). Parker and Tritter (2006) find them to be an increasingly popular way to gather rich qualitative findings through participants' conversations, reducing researcher input and time. Kleiber (2004) explores FGs as an inquiry method which can extend and initiate new understanding. The researcher team later undertook thematic reviews of the findings, which they have been involved in collecting. Thematic review is important to move the findings from being viewed chronologically into significant themes, intertwining themes from various sources (Holliday, 2016). Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a useful framework to support thematic analysis, which gives a systematic way to organise and explore themes, through structures and different ways of viewing the findings, which was used in the themes explored in this review. During thematic review, key areas were identified, some of which were particular to the university or local environment, but one theme considered here is the place and potential of student peers in supporting both mental health and well-being. There were different areas of focus within this theme and the findings below show the various aspects of the FGs discussion.

Ethical approval was gained through the lead of the research team and this was subsequently approved as researchers from other organisations and universities became involved. There was a reminder of ethics and sensitivity of information, with the right to withdraw from the FG maintained throughout. The omission of names from information aimed at removing identifying factors related to the participants. Participants were given the option of leaving the FG at any time if they found the discussion challenging and contributions were voluntary. The next section will consider the findings related to the theme of student peers.

Findings

Student peers

Significance of student peers. A significant theme from the student services staff FGs was the place of student peers within university mental health and well-being initiatives. Student

peers were recognised as significant throughout all the FGs, although different approaches were evident in initiatives and practices, including variation in formal involvement and deployment. Some participants viewed peer support as an "add on" based upon shared experiences, whilst others considered the student peers/mentors as filling gaps within provision. For some participants, student peers were viewed as significant partners, critical to service delivery and some universities recruited students specifically for the purpose of peer support.

> The 'success team' have employed six recent graduates [...]. [who advise on how to be] a successful student with a focus on wellbeing (Strathclyde).

This initiative was promoted throughout the university "corridors" and aimed at helping students build "identity" and understand appropriate goals, to reduce "anxiety". In this case, the focus was upon well-being:

> "To support your wellbeing do these things [...]"/"typically students thrive if they behave this way" (Strathclyde).

Plugging gaps and understanding perspective. Some of the participants commented that the student peers were important to service delivery as the growing demand upon mental health provision was difficult to meet.

> [...] the peer-to-peer stuff that's trying to plug the gaps [...] [reflecting a] powerful response from peers offering their experiences [...]. (Cardiff).

This was common across the groups although it was seen to require structure and a need to train students to become well-being representatives. Peers were seen to be an important source of understanding in terms of university life, able to provide an open, honest and contemporary view.

> Our Student Experience Team is made up from "recent graduates of our institution [...] who have a range of training and advice- [including] metal health first aid" (Leeds).

The perceived benefits of student peers related to the shared experience and understanding the journey into and through university from an insider perspective. Participants recognised these benefits from various viewpoints, including distinct in communications and shared understanding amongst "younger people".

> The age group, 16 to 25, never really want to talk to an authority figure, they talk to their friends about their problems (Leeds).

The use of peers was associated with relatability and age, with recognition of the "age" gap and how university staff might be seen. For example, a female participant described herself as being "approachable" as a student mentor, showing understanding and empathy from the student's perspective, drawing upon her own experience as a student and now as a student mentor.

> [...] I would find it very daunting going over to a member of staff [...] I would think 'oh God, they're adults and I'm not' and you are an adult, but that's just how you feel [...] So people will come over and ask about wellbeing support and needs assessments (Ulster).

The discussion showed that peer involvement and participation were important in creating services that were appropriate, but also demonstrated how involving student peers could create a link for the new students who were anxious about seeking support. The participants discussed how some students could have false expectations of what university was like:

> The prospectus with smiley person on each page [...] it's going to be fine [...] in fact it's going to be awesome [...] And, then, when you are hit with the challenge of study [...]. You experience these big waves of anxiety (Leeds).

Hence, student peers were viewed as helping show a realistic account of the university experience.

> Expectations are really dangerous in the way that you think it's going to be a certain way […] (Ulster).

Marketing of university experience was seen to create images of finding like-minded people and fitting in, whereas the reality might be limited social contact and feeling disappointed. This meant images of university were seen to be unrealistic, and the transition was very challenging.

Belonging. The feeling of not belonging within university was viewed as a significant barrier to participation, which could create anxiety and stress, with risks to mental health, including the increased likelihood of depression. Belonging was viewed as a priority for students:

> "Not feeling part of the University is important"/"need peer support or places for them to go where they can talk about their life and how things are going" (Strathclyde).

The Ulster FG discussed ways of becoming involved and how the use of a mixed group of students could support the settling-in process:

> […] there's a really big social aspect to it, and a lot of students have come to me and said, "I would love to get involved in the project because I'm not great at making friends, that social aspect I'm not good at." So, as well, it's giving you social support […]. because it means that you know that you're not the only one feeling that way, there are other people that are in the same situation, going through the same thing.

Shared experiences and support. The participants found the creation of a shared experience helped students manage difficulties, including loneliness and the anxiety of not fitting-in or finding a social group. Student peers were able to offer support in navigating the space and processes within the university.

The participants discussed difficulties experienced by Widening Participation students when attempting to settle into university, who were less likely to establish an early sense of belonging, making encouragement and mentoring from peers critical. The Staffordshire FG discussed groups which lacked role models for university attendance, including care leavers, who were identified as "learn [ing] by following the herd" as they join and navigate a system, that was hit and miss, making them vulnerable. They were also viewed as likely to experience a "culture clash", between their own experiences and those within university. Peer mentors could reduce anxiety and risks associated with not fitting in. Increasing times and opportunities to meet with peers was seen to be beneficial to others identified as vulnerable, including "international students", "LGBT students", "trans-students" and students who are "care leavers" and "carers". Students in these groups were viewed as more likely to struggle to connect with others at university or find students with common experiences, and hence the connection created by student peers was important in making them feel understood and cared for. The Ulster FG described issues effecting individuals settling in and identified the issue of "Imposter syndrome" amongst some students who felt they did not belong to university. There was consideration of negative implications for students who felt they had to prove themselves and the link with "perfectionism", which was associated with pressure to not only succeed but be the best. These created stress and anxiety around the risk of failure. This created a downward cycle associated with a limited sense of belonging.

> […] students who are feeling like they don't fit in […]. which created anxiety (Cardiff).

When considering the challenges around "fitting in", the Leeds FG described the additional support required by widening participation students who lacked role models and international students who might not be dealt with a culturally competent way. In relation to such issues, a Leeds participant commented:

"Students Union is really helpful", describing them as "key allies" – Including provision of "BAME Ambassadors".

Additionally, the UAL FG identified the Students Union as offering societies to "increase integration". A Strathclyde participant described the importance of Students Union in building relationships, with the "student associations" actively creating change through linking students together.

Well-being. The FGs discussions reflected the significance of an holistic approach to the student experience and the value of promoting well-being. This included numerous well-being events provided by support staff, including "Well-being Wednesday", "Mind your mood" and "Feelgood February", aimed at offering practical and emotional support to students; such initiatives involved student peer participation and delivery. "Mind your mood" was an initiative organised by students on placement at the University of Ulster, which included very practical support for well-being that helped student orientation to the university. The initiative includes sleep hygiene, time management, budgeting, work–life balance, "stress management" and "mindfulness workshops".

> […] it just really shows the importance of peer led stuff […] people are just more comfortable talking to a student […] and if students are willing to be involved and they are adequately trained […] I think now 'how did I work without it?' Because you're having chats with students every day and they are mentioning 'mind your mood' (Ulster).

"Wellbeing Wednesday" was another initiative discussed during the Ulster FG whereby the student contribution was viewed as essential in terms of students influencing this holistic approach. The purpose of such initiatives was complex but was a proactive approach that seemed to begin with the wish to challenge the stigma around mental health and raise awareness of issues. Significantly the promotion of well-being through a combination of practical and emotional support initiatives all included peers as role models sharing practices and experiences. There was also indication that peer support was an important part of a proactive/social prescribing approach, which included promotion of well-being through activities such as exercise, yoga and mindfulness. These activities were viewed as promoting well-being and bringing people together through group activities that increased a sense of belonging as groups formed.

Participation. Peer support was described as both formal and informal. Informal peer support was identified as including supportive friends, who were viewed as important in raising concerns around mental health, including encouraging fellow students to access services by raising awareness and sign-posting. This informal interaction was viewed as encouraging the formalisation of "participative" networks of student peers. The formalisation, co-creation and co-involvement of student peers with student services were highlighted as beneficial in effectively promoting issues and services, helping students overcome "smaller problems" and avoiding them becoming "bigger problems". There were numerous approaches to engaging student peers; examples included "Peer-to-peer academic support", "[…] graduate students who are paid to be hall wardens" and "Peer assisted learners […] increasingly running emotional wellbeing-workshops".

Managing boundaries. Whilst the place of peers was valued, there was significant consideration of the importance of managing boundaries and training to student peers, reflecting awareness of restrictions around student peers.

> We do training for [peer support], which is really good, but one of my worries is the vulnerability and impact of student volunteers. We have got students giving a huge amount and dealing with a lot of traumas. We boundary the mentoring strongly (Leeds).

There was feedback that roles and expectation needed to be clearly defined and established to protect the student peers and those seeking support. The participants clearly

saw that the student peers enhanced the services delivered but were not necessarily able to provide the level of specialist support required by students on occasion.

This shows the importance of clear guidance for student peers to enable them to understand their role and purpose and their limitations, and, additionally, ensuring they were supported through awareness of referral processes and signposting. Hence, a partnership approach to support peers involved in mental health and well-being provision was viewed as vital, as was acknowledging the pressure peers experienced. This meant that whilst peer support was accepted as positive, the complexity surrounding it was recognised:

> I think the gold star one is where you've got peer support […] then that's like […] proactive […] [but] to set that up takes so much energy.
>
> It's really hard (Leeds).

Service development and co-design. Peer support was identified as part of a practical solution to difficulties facing stretched services, which were identified by participants as creating challenges in relation to suitable provision. Limited resources meant that prevention activities such as outreach were sometimes viewed as unachievable, in spite of being accepted as reducing mental health risks. Some participants described services as being reactive and accommodating only the worse cases because of restricted staffing and spaces. However, limitation could be practically overcome as services were broadened as peer mentors become partners in the delivery of provision. The support staff experienced daily shortages and saw increased collaboration as a practical solution.

Another significant area of student participation was the co-design of services, through active consultation with students in the development of mental health and well-being provision. This was commonly explained in terms of understanding and engaging with issues experienced by students. Part of the discussion is centred around common understanding as follows:

> […] we are very keen […] we need more focus on codesign and less on us sitting in an office and saying 'right this is what our students need' […] life is very different to what it was when I was a student X amount of years ago and we need to recognise that and listen […] engage students who are interesting in being part of the conversation (Ulster).

Another participant outlined the importance of promoting "[…] student engagement led mental health services […]" (Ulster).

The Cardiff FG outlined their new well-being strategy and the importance of student participation:

> […] drop-in and groups for anyone feeling home sick or anxious […]. I'm hoping it will become student led.

Not only were there examples of understanding between student peers and wider student experiences, there was recognition that staff needed to engage with students to understand what was needed from their perspective.

> There is a real disconnect between what students think is the answer and what everyone else think is the answer […]. So we need to work in partnership with them and do something with them […] (Stafford).

The development of services was based upon engagement with students. Some participants suggested this might best be achieved through course-based representation; however, peer mentors often came from related academic areas; for example, well-being workshops got better attendance from areas such as "life science" and "psychology" (Ulster). In contrast, other subject areas experienced limited student participation in peer support, which created imbalance in the areas able to offer discipline-specific mentoring.

In spite of restrictions, there was an overwhelming positive reaction to the impact of peers and their favourable influence within the university provision:

> Because the student voice is louder than the staff's voice (Strathclyde).

In summary, the key themes identified within the findings show increased evidence of peer mentoring as a tool for support around mental health and well-being, which is both formal and informal. A key benefit is associated with the potential of peers to support through role modelling, guidance and showing the systems. A significant attribute of peer mentoring is associated with the proximity of student peers, which creates understanding, role modelling and opens networks and shared spaces to aid connections and a sense of belonging to university. Across all FGs, there was recognition of the importance of support and connections to avoid loneliness. There was focus upon the challenges of some student groups which peers were able to help with, not least in terms of creating a more realistic view of university life.

Discussion

Peer support is recognised as being valuable in the delivery of university mental health and well-being services. Student involvement in mental health and well-being services, and the co-creation of such services, is increasingly evident and recognised as highly beneficial. Promotion of well-being is recognised as important for students, and peer participation in depicting role models is viewed as having a significant positive influence. A central attribute of student participation is relatability, which is recognised in terms of age and shared experience, making such connections beneficial in increasing engagement. Student engagement activities relate to university experience and ways of adapting in daily living as well as academic skills, which reflects a holistic approach. The collaboration between student services and student peers in the delivery of mental health and well-being services shows a genuine commitment to a learner-centric approach. Furthermore, there is recognition that the peers can form a bridge between the university staff and students, as student peers pose relatability, whereas staff are seen to be "adults" and can add to feelings of anxiety.

A significant aspect of peer mentoring relates to gaining an understanding of mental health and well-being to promote coping strategies to help students flourish in university. Hence, an important part of peer mentoring is normalising the experiences of initial anxiety associated with entering a new environment, including peers sharing their experiences to help newcomers settle into university. Peers can provide a more realistic view of university experiences, potentially differing from highly positive, "advert"-type images. There is tension in universities wanting to show what institutions offer to entice people to join, whilst peers can create a student perspective of university that balances benefits alongside challenges. The images of university do not always link well with the realities of academic demands and the transition into a new situation, which can be unexpectedly challenging. Peer-mentors can provide insight into the obstacles that might be encountered and ways of overcoming them, enabling new students to better adapt.

The success of the peer mentoring role hinges upon the person being seen to be an equal, just a little ahead in terms of stage of study and experience, able to share know-how and create a realistic view of university. The peer represents an important source of information in terms of day-to-day skills for study and life, becoming significant in the orientation process. However, peers also demonstrate a reassuring normality in relation to managing change in a new situation, including issues which might be experienced through a sense not belonging/fitting in/struggling to understand systems and processes within university. Hence, the relatability of the peer is critical to the role and relationship. Peer-mentors provide opportunities for an open and honest exchange, including tips on how to manage and adjust which prove significant in addressing stress and anxiety.

Becoming part of a university is associated with finding people and community that a student can orient towards, which creates a sense of belonging and well-being. Peers help students settle into the university, introducing them to the environment and the services available, which proves crucial for academic development and social and emotional support. The connection to the university and other students creates a link through peer guidance and support, which proves instrumental in constructing networks, enabling new students to meet people. The sense of belonging combats loneliness, so potentially reducing the mental health risks of depression and anxiety. There are those who can have predisposition to mental health issues and as such might be at greater risk. There are also those who have depended upon support from family and friends in their pre-university life who can come to realise their vulnerability without this support. Once a network is achieved, there will be alerts for individuals who are struggling, and signposting towards support is more likely to be provided.

Peer mentoring proves to be important in filling gaps within services. Throughout the FG discussions, it was often noted that teams are stretched in terms of the provision they can offer. A common response amongst participants was that they would like to offer more preventative interventions but were challenged because of the demands. This meant services tended to be more reactive, focused upon those in greatest need, meaning work promoting well-being and reducing the deterioration of mental health was often limited. However, student peers were most often involved in promoting well-being, meaning peer involvement created a much more diverse and effective service. However, whilst support from student peers was viewed as important to service delivery, participants stressed the priority of student peers receiving training and supervision, so they could give effective support without experiencing undue personal pressure. An essential part of the training was linked with role awareness and the creation of a good knowledge of the importance of maintaining boundaries. A further important aspect was knowing when a referral was required. It was felt peer mentors must receive training and support to understand when additional interventions from services are required, which was identified as being important to confidence and success within this role from both individual perspective and organisational outcomes.

Positive role models who are of similar age and background can be important to success at university. There can be a cultural mismatch for care leavers, widening participation and international students can form a challenging barrier and a negative view of whether they will fit into university, caused through limited experience throughout their lives. Comparatively, peer connections can help create clarity around academic life, as role models with similar backgrounds demonstrate pathways to becoming part of the university, helping with integration and reducing stress and anxiety. A sense of belonging through joining groups and societies and being welcomed into the university can be more important for those who are not traditionally part of the university environment. However, there can be a dilemma as peer support is based on a friendship model, yet the situation is orchestrated and as such not a friend-based relationship, which means there is a need to manage expectations and boundaries. Nonetheless, the opportunities and social settings that can be opened up through the peer mentoring will create chances for friendships to develop.

Co-creation is critical to successful services that promote well-being and combat mental health issues. The key attribute of partnership is valuing each person's contribution in terms of the different experiences they can bring. Relatability and insider knowledge prove influential to the successful input from student peers and valuable to student's positive university experience. Whilst specialist mental health services are important, peers are seen to be knowledgeable insiders who understand the contemporary situation. There will be an array of different qualities brought by peers, but this commonality seems critical to success. Mental health and the well-being of students is a major concern and one which is not easy to solve, yet there are those who have much to offer in a naturalistic way. The Student

Charter shows an intrinsic link between students' experiences of mental health and well-being and student success at university, and student peers are an important contributor to student success.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the significance of peer mentoring, which was an area discussed amongst support staff considering factors contributing to student well-being and positive mental health. Peer mentoring's success was linked with relatability as peers were of a similar age and circumstance to those they supported, allowing a more open and honest account of university life. Further aspects highlighted were associated with the importance of belonging, which showed potential to reduce risks around stress and anxiety, also reducing depression exasperated through loneliness. Role modelling and orientation into university life seemed critical to success, and student peers offered support that staff could not easily replicate. Peer support was identified as providing ways to overcome some limitations in services, representing both formal and informal ways to broaden support. The potential gains from peer mentoring should be considered as an important source of support to university students' mental well-being.

Recommendations

Student peer relationships should be encouraged and valued as a way of promoting well-being and orientating students to the university community.

Universities should create space for peers to connect both formally and informally. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that this may require increased creativity, including student lead virtual spaces.

Mental health and well-being should be considered holistically, including understanding the varied experiences of students and the ways they can support each other.

Peer mentoring should be used to create a wide reach through a broader range of subject specialisms, as any student can be susceptible to compromises to well-being and mental health.

Implementation of support patterns identified within the National Student Charter is vital to success.

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Further reading

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