

Building Belonging: The Vital Role of Peer Support in Enhancing Student Retention and Transition into University

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Context

The Student Mentor Scheme at Cardiff University was established in 2012 with the aim of supporting all first-year, undergraduate students with their transition into university.

Student mentors help first-year students by offering impartial, up to date advice based on shared experiences and are equipped to signpost new entrants to many of the support services offered by the University. Every first-year student can connect with a student mentor from the same academic school and their student mentor will contact them before they arrive at university. This offers students the opportunity to ask any questions they may have prior to their arrival and helps them feel familiar with a fellow peer, potentially easing any feelings of apprehension.

The student mentor scheme

Each student mentor is responsible for a group of first-year students (also known as mentees), to encourage social connections to be developed at course level. Student mentors are responsible for organising regular meetings with their group of first-year students and providing them with practical advice on non-academic topics such as housing, budgeting and time management. Additionally, student mentors will guide their mentees around to assist them in navigating their new environment and help them identify both academic and social spaces. Mentors are encouraged to adopt a mentee-centred approach, as actively involving the mentees in the process will lead to the development of a greater rapport with their mentor and they will be more likely to continue attending mentoring sessions.

Following each mentoring session, student mentors are required to submit a brief report detailing the topics discussed during the session and the names of the mentees who attended. This process allows the Student Mentoring Team to track student engagement with their mentors. If students have not connected with their student mentor within the first few weeks of the semester, the Student Mentoring Team will proactively reach out to them to offer support.





Mentors who host a minimum of four of sessions for their mentees receive a University certificate in recognition of their service.

Our evidence demonstrates that peer support can develop positive peer to peer relationships, create a sense of belonging and reduce the potential for early withdrawal. According to Lizzio & Wilson (2010) developing connections with students and staff creates a strong sense of belonging. In 2024-25, 63% of students said that having a student mentor helped them settle into and feel part of Cardiff University.

Student mentors can support with academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993) which is exemplified by the following mentee feedback, “For some students, the integration into university life can be challenging to navigate.” Positive peer relationships foster a sense of belonging, which supports student retention and a smoother transition into university. Each first-year student has a unique experience, and this peer support scheme offers an opportunity for them to share their story. It helps students build connections, gain confidence, and prepares them for both academic success and personal growth at university.

Impact

One of our student mentors said: “The thing I'm most proud of is the influence I had on first-year students, making them feel more at ease and secure during their time at university. It can be quite intimidating to start university, so I appreciated being there to help, whether it was by helping them with their coursework, giving them helpful advice, or simply being a listening ear” (student mentor, 2025).

‘ I felt like I had a real impact when I saw students become more self-reliant, involved in their education, and even willing to ask for assistance when necessary. It gave me great satisfaction to know that my work helped them succeed and eased their university transition. ’

Student mentor, 2025

‘ Having a student mentor is very helpful as going into university for the first time can be intimidating and it can be hard navigate around the university and get used to it. My student mentor has really helped me settle in and give me support and advice when needed. ’

Mentee, 2025

‘ Thank you so much for running this scheme! I’ve found it invaluable, just to ask those ‘silly’ questions that I might not have asked otherwise. I couldn’t recommend getting engaged with the scheme more to any new students. ,
Mentee, 2025

‘ It’s really helped me settle into university life. The new way of living/studying was overwhelming at first and the mentoring scheme has made it a lot easier. It has enabled my work to be as good as possible. ,
Mentee, 2024

In 2024-25, 104 first-year students considered withdrawing from their courses and 31% of those reported that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay. Between 2016 and 2025 a total of 866 first-year students considered withdrawing but 64% of those stated that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay.

Feedback from mentees and mentors further highlights the positive impact of having a student mentor.

Since its inception, we have trained over 6,000 experienced undergraduate students to be student mentors and to provide academic and non-academic support to a total of over 50,000 first-year students.

References

Lizzio, A. & Wilson, K. (2010) *Strengthening commencing students’ sense of purpose: Integrating theory and practice*. In 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference. Adelaide, Australia: Griffith University.

Tinto, V. (1993) *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.) Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

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Find out more about the project on the QAA Cymru [website](#).

