



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Peer to Peer student mentoring: Supporting the transition into UG and PG study

Transition(s) the practice supports: The transition into undergraduate study, and the transition from UG to PGT study.

Abstract

Students in the School of History at the University of St Andrews have piloted two separate peer-to-peer student mentoring schemes to help ease the transition for new students into the School and University. In the undergraduate scheme, incoming first year students are paired with third year honours students. In the postgraduate scheme, incoming PGT and PGR students are paired with current PGR students.

Description

Why the schemes exists: The School President in History (an undergraduate student representative for the School) identified a support gap in terms of having a person that UG students could turn to with informal questions about their studies and early experiences of transition from School to University. The PG scheme developed from similar observations, and a desire to bring the PGT and PGR community in the School closer together. In 2015, it was decided to extend the scheme to incoming PGR students as well, mainly in order to create social connections and provide new PhD students with a friendly local contact in what can be an isolating transition into research. The scheme was also partly intended to encourage offer-holders to feel confident in taking up their offer and making the (sometimes considerable!) geographical transition to St Andrews.

Scheme coordination: In the UG scheme, the School President conceptualised a buddy scheme whereby 2nd, 3rd and 4th year undergraduate students in the school would be matched with an incoming 1st year student in Orientation week. The University's Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (CAPOD) was contacted to offer support in terms of scheme guidance and supplying a briefing session. In the PG scheme, a PG student representative coordinates the scheme and CAPOD provide similar support in the form of a briefing session and [online video](#).

The matching process: The UG scheme was a voluntary one, so the School President collated details of volunteers. 11 mentors came forward as did 22 mentees. Each mentor was therefore allocated two mentees. Both mentees and mentors were given a preference of which era of History they would like their partner to study e.g. medieval or modern, and whether they would prefer a male or female partner (or no preference).

Matches were made manually on this criteria and participants were informed at a face to face briefing session.

With the PG scheme, matching took place via [online sumac software](#), and 20 mentoring pairs were established (1 mentor: 1 mentee). Sumac enables the scheme co-ordinator to put together an initial 'joining survey' which will help match mentees to mentors. The 2015/2016 survey focussed not just on academic interests but also on other areas which it was thought might affect a student's successful transition to postgraduate study at St Andrews, for example whether they were an international, mature, or commuting student. Sumac suggests matches which can then be approved by the course co-ordinator.

Briefing: In the first week of term, participants in the UG scheme were invited to a launch session in the School. The School President introduced the scheme, and a member of staff from CAPOD explained how the mentoring scheme worked and raised awareness of necessary boundaries for both mentees and mentors to be aware of. Mentors and mentees split into discussion groups to talk about their expectations and fears of transitioning to University. Participants were then introduced to their partners and took part in an informal networking event. Further support was given in the form of a scheme handbook. A similar process was carried out for the PG scheme.



Meetings: Frequency of meetings was at participants' discretion, but data from an evaluation survey of the UG scheme indicated that a third of mentees had asked between 3-10 questions of their mentors, and a third had asked over 10 questions. The questions covered areas such as academic workload, module choices, library use, social activities and accommodation.

For the PG scheme, two-thirds of participants asked between 3-10 questions on a similar array of topics.

Impact: An evaluation survey of the UG scheme at the end of semester indicated that 50% of the mentees felt more positive about studying History at St Andrews as a result of the buddy scheme (and no one felt less positive).

The School President reflected that the scheme has been a positive force in the School and that the volume of enquiries that would normally be channelled to her has been reduced. "By having questions addressed to mentors, it's allowed the participants to gain experience in a mentorship role, an important transferrable skill".

Both UG mentors and mentees indicated that they'd benefitted from the experience:

- *"I really appreciated being able to give back to the school and feel like I was helping students who perhaps felt as overwhelmed as I did about starting the course." – UG Mentor*

- *“Invaluable advice” – UG Mentee*
- *“Just having someone to reassure me when I was not 100% sure about something.” – UG Mentee*
- *“It was lovely to have the opportunity to help first years settle in and to be there to guide them when needed.” – UG Mentor*

The postgraduate scheme recognises that although new PGT and new PGR students may be older and more experienced than incoming UG students, they often still need structured support in place in order to make their transition to a new university as smooth as possible. The links between PGT and PGR students enable PGT mentees to gain insights into postgraduate research and provides them with a potential source of guidance for their onward transition into it. Offering mentorship to incoming PGR students also recognises the potential social as well as intellectual challenges posed by a PhD, in which for the first time students will not be brought together in automatic class cohorts.

- *For my mentee, it appeared that the most important aspect of the scheme was simply having someone, who had gone through the MLitt programme before, with whom they could just talk. For me, it was most beneficial to be able to offer encouragement and serve as a listener most of the time. – PG mentor*
- *To know that if I had some problems I could talk to my mentor was a reassuring feeling and it helped to let out some concerns, worries and stress in general. – PG mentee*

Future Plans: The UG scheme will be handed over to the next School President, and the hope is to expand it in terms of the numbers of participants. It’s hoped that School can support by supplying details of incoming 1st years before they arrive at University to allow for contact to be made at an earlier stage. The student coordinator feels that it’s important the scheme remain student-led to retain an air of informality and approachability.

The PG participants indicated that they would also like to be matched earlier in advance of the semester, and there is every intention to continue this scheme in subsequent years, building upon new experiences and new lessons learned with each cohort.

Contact details:

1. Megan Bruce (Outgoing School President; graduates June 2016), historypresident@st-andrews.ac.uk
2. Dawn Hollis (PG scheme coordinator), dawn.hollis@st-andrews.ac.uk
3. Catriona Wilson, Head of Student Development, Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development. Cat.wilson@st-andrews.ac.uk 01334 462558