

**Title:** Student Peer Support - STEER

**Transition(s) the practice supports:**

STEER is open to any student in their first year at the university.

**Abstract:**

STEER is a University-wide student peer support scheme, providing mentors or buddies for any undergraduate or taught postgraduate student in their first year at the University of Stirling. The scheme aims to help mentees make the most of their time at the University and enable them to settle in as quickly as possible, and help mentors gain valuable skills and experience to increase their employability.

**Description:**

A STEER mentor/buddy is a friendly face for students to turn to for help and advice at any point during their first year at Stirling. A mentor/buddy will be available to answer questions and, if unable to help in the first instance, to guide the mentees to the appropriate resource. They are not expected to be a tutor, social worker, counsellor or financial advisor. They will be able to access additional support and resources through the STEER website, senior mentors and the STEER team during their year of mentoring/buddying. Mentors/buddies are fully trained and Disclosure checked.

STEER was piloted during 2008/09 as part of the sector-wide enhancement theme of *The First Year*. The pilot responded to research evidence on benefits to the first year arising from personalisation (Knox and Wyper, 2008) and the use of peer support (Black & MacKenzie, 2008). It also draws upon, and intersects with, a number of other enhancement themes and its implementation contextualises the themes within the University of Stirling, whilst continual evaluation of the scheme focuses on current impact and future potential for enrichment of the student experience.

STEER aims to:

- Provide supplementary support for students in their first year of study
- Help first year students to settle in to higher education
- Counter the effects of large class sizes
- Reduce stress levels among first year students
- Identify and tackle common issues/problems encountered by students in their first year
- Increase student retention
- Contribute to the development of mentors' employability skills.

Mentors/Buddies are recruited, trained and Disclosure checked in March/April to ensure they are in place for mentees when they arrive in September.

Mentees apply for a mentor through the student portal. The application form is auto-filled with details from the portal (e.g. course, year etc.) and asks what kind of support they are looking for (e.g. social, academic etc.), what their interests are, and a few additional questions that may help assign a mentor to them (e.g. whether they are care leavers, or first in the family to go to University).

STEER interns carry out the matching process. If a mentee has asked for academic help they will be matched with a mentor who does the same degree as them, or at the least in the same Division/School. Mentees are emailed with their mentor's name and told their mentor will be in touch with them. Mentors are emailed the contact details of the mentee and details of the support the mentee has asked for. It is the up to the mentor to contact the mentee and start supporting them.

This year there is a closed Facebook group for Mentors to allow them to ask questions and get advice from other mentors. This has proved an effective way for mentors to support each other and engage further with STEER.

#### Quotes from Mentees

- "STEER is a great opportunity to get support from a student's point of view and it makes the start at University a lot easier knowing that somebody is there to help you through." (STEER Mentee 2012/13)
- "It was nice to have someone to talk who went through the same things. Everyone should get one, it was good to know they were there." (STEER Mentee 2012/13)
- "It is so handy to have someone on hand who has already been at the university for a few years and will give you the REAL answers to your questions, not the answer they have been told to give." (STEER Mentee 2012/13)

#### Quotes from Mentors:

- [STEER has given me] lots of valuable experience, a feeling of pride after having helped several students settle into University and something useful to cite on my CV. (STEER Mentor 2013/14)
- [My work with STEER has] developed communication and listening skills which will be beneficial when I enter the job market. (STEER Mentor 2013/14)
- [STEER has given me] a better understanding of how certain things work at the university, as well as employability skills I would not have obtained elsewhere. (STEER Mentor 2013/14)
- Definitely do it [become a mentor]! It is a brilliant feeling and experience helping somebody out with university life. I feel like some of the bad times in first year were made worthwhile thanks to STEER - I was able to help people not make the same mistakes I did! (STEER Mentor 2013/14)

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