

[O10] Using student ambassadors to aid retention of first year students

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Abstract:

This paper presents the Student Ambassador Scheme that has been running within the Computing and Technology (C&T) team at Nottingham Trent University since the academic year 2007/8. The aim of the scheme is to encourage first and second year students to engage, and to recruit better and more students on to our courses. There are two distinct major parts to the student ambassador role: supporting students in lower years; and representing the C&T team at outreach activities. This paper will concentrate on the support role – providing the encouragement to prevent a new student from giving up on an assignment, or even worse, failing their degree.

A select number of high-achieving second and final year students have been recruited as ambassadors to the scheme in the past two years. All first year students have a designated ambassador, who they meet and work with for the first time during Welcome Week. Throughout the year, each of the ambassadors arrange a weekly one-hour slot when they will be available to meet with their mentees either informally for a friendly chat or more formally to help with some course work. This is an opportunity for first year students to work with someone who has already done all the studying they are about to do. The ambassadors also contribute to one of the first year modules 'Personal and Professional Development' – giving a useful and realistic student view on matters such as time management.

This support continues through the years, with final year student ambassadors also supporting second year students. In particular, this includes student ambassadors, who have completed their placements, helping second year students in their pursuit of industrial placements. Student ambassadors also help support their peers by manning the C&T Student helpdesk.

This paper will describe the steps taken to deliver the scheme, and will report on its progress so far, in particular its impact on student retention. The paper will compare and contrast this scheme with other similar peer support schemes that have run at other British universities.

Background

Retention of students in science and engineering is a problem acknowledged across the discipline. The strategic aim of the Computing and Technology (C&T) student ambassador scheme at Nottingham Trent University is to reduce the number of students withdrawing from or failing programmes by improving the support, communication, and ultimately their learning experience. The objectives are the enhancement of the learning experience for all students and the professional development of the student ambassadors as individuals.

The C&T student ambassador scheme was piloted in the academic year 2007-08. The student ambassadors were recruited by inviting thirty high-achieving Computing students in the current second and final year to join the scheme. Twelve students were ultimately recruited.

The pilot project was sponsored by Nottingham Trent University's CELS (Centre of Effective Learning in Science) in the form of a one-year part-time TIPSTOPS sabbatical¹.

¹ TIPSTOPS: Teams for Integrated Projects across Science/Teams for Outreach Projects in Science

Introduction

All students know how hard it can be to settle into university life. This scheme is an excellent way of assisting students to settle in quickly and to continue to make the most of the opportunities available to them. This is an opportunity for first year students to work with someone who has already done all the studying they are about to do.

Second year and final year Computing and Technology (C&T) students will probably remember how hard they (or perhaps some of their friends) found the work in the first year. Technology assignments can leave even the brightest students feeling totally stuck and unable to know where to start. One of the roles of a student ambassador is to provide the encouragement to prevent a new student from giving up on an assignment, or even worse, failing their degree.

Supporting Students in Lower Years

Student Ambassadors hold regular meetings with their mentees. These meetings may be informal - meeting for a friendly chat over a coffee or meeting in a quiet area to discuss academic work - or sometimes will involve taking part in the first-year PPD sessions alongside the personal tutor. Mentee participation is voluntary – one of the underpinning principles of Supplemental Instruction (Capstick and Fleming, 2002).

Opportunities for paid work are also available in the form of rota-ed work on the Student Help desk in the Computing and Informatics building.

Representing the C&T team

Student Ambassadors have the opportunity to help at School open events as a paid tour guide. Prospective students find it useful to chat to current students about the courses, the University and Nottingham. Student Ambassadors may be asked to help with interactive/demo sessions, which are an integral part of the open events. There is also the opportunity to get involved in other outreach or volunteering activities.

Training and Feedback

The ambassadors are provided with training at the beginning of their role. This includes an overview of the role, the commitment required, how to deal with difficult mentoring situations and generally what to expect. It is emphasised to ambassadors that their role is that of a facilitator not a counsellor or tutor – another principle of Supplemental Instruction (Falchikov, 2001; Capstick and Fleming, 2002).

Support is also available in an informal manner throughout the two years. There are meetings each term which provide an opportunity for the ambassadors to give feedback about the scheme, to share any good practice, and to receive feedback on the mentoring process.

Scheme Aims

The aims of the Student Ambassador scheme are to:

- develop confidence and leadership skills;
- provide an opportunity to establish new personal and career goals;
- develop listening and communication skills;
- improve employability potential;
- develop organisational and problem solving skills; and
- develop the ability to undertake roles both independently and within a team.

Student Ambassador Pilot Scheme (2007/08)

The C&T student ambassador scheme was piloted in the academic year 2007-08 (Hartley, 2008). The student ambassadors were recruited by inviting thirty high-achieving students in the current second and final year of the Computing courses to join the scheme. Twelve students were ultimately recruited in October 2007, having attended an information session detailing the ambassador role. The second-year ambassadors were allocated a personal tutor group each.

The final-year ambassadors were put into pairs, and each pair was allocated a personal tutor group².

The ambassadors helped out with open events and manned the Student Helpdesk from September 2007.

A mentoring training session was held in November. The training session included a presentation about the role of mentoring and some group work involving a number of case studies. Some mentoring sheets and log sheets/action plans were also disseminated at this point. The ambassadors met their mentees for the first time at a drinks reception held by the C&T team. Soon after this, the ambassadors met their mentees again and promoted the scheme at one of the first year students' seminars.

The mentoring process then began in earnest in January 2008. The ambassadors emailed their mentees inviting them to get in touch with any problems. The take-up was disappointing. In February 2008, a feedback/information session was held. The ambassadors were given the first year students' assessment schedule. As it was thought that more targeted emails might increase the attendance at sessions. The ambassadors were advised to look at the schedule and offer timely sessions on particular subjects accordingly. A slight improvement in attendance was seen.

Student Ambassador Feedback for the Pilot Scheme

Feedback was collected from student ambassadors at regular intervals throughout the pilot scheme. Early feedback in the first term of the 2007-08 academic year indicated that the ambassadors felt that the scheme should have run from the beginning of term and that the mentees needed more information about the scheme.

Some of the feedback revealed the value of the scheme. For example, one ambassador had sent a few emails to a first year student who was thinking of leaving. The result of this was that the student chose to stay. Another ambassador provided the following feedback after lengthy communication with one mentee: "He thanked me a lot for the help I gave him and seemed happy so I'm calling it a success".

General comments included that participation in the ambassador scheme would make a good contribution to a CV, and that they were learning helpful career skills. This feedback is in line with feedback from other Supplemental Instruction schemes (Donelan, 1999). Also, ambassadors were enthusiastic about having a dedicated student ambassador room.

Mentee Feedback for the Pilot Scheme

First year students were informed of the scheme in the first term. One response to this communication was "It will be nice to have someone who has gone through this year to just help me through topics which I'm finding hard". With this being the main focus of the mentoring sessions, it was encouraging to see that the message was clear at the beginning of the process.

Feedback forms³ were emailed to all (over one hundred) Computing students at the end of their first year. These students had all been allocated student ambassadors, but may have chosen not to get involved in the scheme. Only two forms were returned. The results from this limited response are presented in Table 1.

The limited feedback suggests that the mentoring sessions did not have the take-up that was hoped and expected. However, the feedback provided indicates that guidance was provided in professional and personal development in both instances.

² Personal tutor groups are groups of between ten and twelve first year students. The members of a personal tutor group are all on the same course and attend the same lectures, seminars and labs at all times.

³ The feedback form can be seen in Appendix A.

Table 1. Mentee Feedback from 2007/08

Question	Respondee 1	Respondee 2	Average
Mentor communication	Less than once a term	Once a fortnight	Twice a term
Length of mentoring meeting	15 minutes	15 minutes	15 minutes
Guidance provided	Professional and personal development	Professional and personal development	Professional and personal development
Anything learnt from your mentor?	Yes	Unanswered	N/A
How valuable is the scheme?	3	Unanswered	3

Further Development of the Scheme Beyond the Pilot

A number of changes have been made to the ambassador scheme for the academic year (2008/09). The pilot scheme involved just the Computing courses. The second time of running, the scheme was expanded to include all of the Computing and Technology courses. The ambassador recruitment process for 2008/09 began in May 2008. This time, all first, second and placement year cohorts were invited to a meeting to learn more about the role of the student ambassador. This was followed up an email to each of the C&T student cohorts in June inviting them to apply for one of the student ambassador positions. The email included an electronic copy of the application form and job description. The closing date was set to the end of July. This allowed time for further correspondence, by letter, to the high-achieving students - identified after the June exam boards. The letter suggested the recipient would be the ideal candidate for the ambassador role and paper copies of the application form and job description were included. The response to the advertisement after the letters had been sent was encouraging. Ultimately, this resulted in eighteen applications from good students. Seventeen ambassadors were subsequently recruited based on their grades. A day's induction and training was given before the beginning of the Autumn term.

Having experienced a variety of levels of enthusiasm by the ambassadors for the scheme during the previous year, it seemed appropriate to get the ambassadors to work in pairs or triplets. This should reduce the impact of an ambassador becoming temporarily or permanently dis-engaged with the scheme (whether this be due to perfectly valid reasons or not). It also enables ambassadors to work together and support each other and share good practice.

An observation made during the pilot feedback sessions was that ambassadors like to be needed, rather than feel redundant. So, the student ambassadors have been helping out with specific tasks throughout this second year. They started off by being involved in the C&T induction. They introduced new students to university life through tours of the campus, leading a set induction task, and general chat. They were also asked to attend some of the first year module seminars to give a valuable student perspective on some of the aspects of professional development. It is considered that second and final year students are best placed to help first year students in their study skills (Longfellow *et al*, 2008).

The ambassadors continue to provide support on the C&T Student Helpdesk, help out at outreach activities and arrange weekly mentoring sessions (targeting particular subjects and having designated time slots to improve attendance).

The promotion of the scheme has improved this year. During the ambassador induction, the ambassadors were asked to produce a poster marketing the scheme. This poster was

subsequently displayed throughout the C&T building. The ambassadors promote their sessions during any first year module seminars that they attend, as well as providing continual email encouragement.

Running the scheme from the beginning of term, improved marketing and better use of the ambassadors has resulted in better attendance at the mentoring sessions so far this year.

Student Ambassador Feedback for 2008/09

Feedback over the second year of the scheme was again collected at regular intervals. The feedback was encouraging in that the ambassadors had a lot more attendees at their sessions than had been evident in the previous year – although this was still sporadic with some groups. As with last year, the ambassadors felt that the scheme was valuable to them as a distinguishing factor on their CVs, and enhanced their time management skills and other professional and personal skills. One ambassador was concerned that the scheme “could be perceived as talking down to the first years, saying that they need help”. However, the scheme does focus on the course rather than individuals, so this should not be the case.

Positive comments included “Thank you for allowing me to do it. It was a worthwhile experience” and “I learnt to communicate verbally with greater confidence, especially to groups of people.”

Mentee Feedback for 2008/09

The same feedback forms⁴ as in the pilot year were emailed to all (over two hundred) Computing and Technology students at the end of their first year. Although all of these students had been allocated student ambassadors, some may have chosen not to get involved in the scheme. This time four forms were returned. The results from this limited response are presented in Table 2.

The results do not differ significantly to those found in Table 1 (from the previous year). Although it is interesting to note that all the respondents include “Academic development” as the guidance provided by their mentors. Presumably, this is a result of advertising the sessions as targeted help in particular subjects during different parts of the year.

Table 2. Mentee Feedback from 2008/09

Question	Respondee 1	Respondee 2	Respondee 3	Respondee 4	Average
Mentor communication	Once a term	Once a term	Once a fortnight	Once a fortnight	Twice a term
Length of mentoring meeting	Less than 10 minutes	15 minutes	15 minutes	15 minutes	15 minutes
Guidance provided	Academic development	Academic development	Academic development	Professional, personal and academic development	Academic development

Future Development of the Scheme

Many of the ambassadors were involved in manning a student helpdesk as part of their role. This ensured that first year students were able to ask a peer for technical help every weekday during term-time (such as logging on, printing, compiling programs etc). However, the student helpdesk was not well used. This may be because this support is now available through their own ambassadors. So, it is currently being considered that the money spent on manning the student helpdesk may be replaced by paying the student ambassadors to help out in certain classes that

⁴ The feedback form can be seen in the Appendix.

are perceived as difficult by the first year students. Also, mentoring sessions will be included on the first year students' individual timetables, to encourage participation (Smith *et al*, 2007).

Conclusion

The C&T ambassador scheme has the potential to increase student engagement with the courses, and subsequently improve student retention. In the main, the ambassadors have engaged fully with the scheme. The student ambassador participation in the first year seminars was a positive addition from the student, ambassador and tutor perspective. So this will continue in future years, with the possibility of increasing the number of sessions to be attended.

The student ambassadors' results have been compared with similar students who chose not to become involved in the scheme. The comparison revealed that on the whole, the ambassadors' results showed a more upward trend than the other (still high-achieving) group. This is an important result, as it must be ensured that the additional efforts of the ambassadors must not be detrimental to their academic studies.

References

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Appendix A**Student Ambassador Feedback Form**

Please return this form to:

Dr Joanna Hartley

or Joanna.Hartley@ntu.ac.uk

Computing and Informatics Building

Clifton Site

Nottingham Trent University

Nottingham

NG11 8NS

by 31st July 2009.

First Name:

Last Name:

Degree:

Year (2nd, placement, final):

Mentor Relationship Feedback

Please circle those statements that are true

How often did you communicate with your mentees on average?

Less than once a term

Once a term

Once a month

Once a fortnight

Once a week

More than once a week

Approximately how much time did you spend with your mentee(s) at each meeting?

Less than 10 minutes

About 15 minutes

About half an hour

About an hour

More than an hour

In which area(s) were you able to provide your student with guidance? (Tick all that apply)

- Professional development (i.e. career guidance, industry insight etc.)
- Personal development (i.e. speaking skills, University insight etc.)
- Academic development (i.e. course selection, coursework or exam advice etc.)
- Other:

Did you learn anything from mentoring?

Experience Feedback

Why did you become a Student Ambassador?

(Tick all that apply)

- I wanted to give back to the School
- I wanted to help the students
- Personal and CV development
- Personal satisfaction
- Other:

Did you receive enough support from the School in preparation for mentoring?

- 1 2 3 4 5
 Not enough Too much
-

Was the amount of structure appropriate for the scheme?

- 1 2 3 4 5
 Not enough Too much
-

Overall, how effective was the administration of the scheme?

- 1 2 3 4 5
 Ineffective Very effective
-

Overall, how valuable do you feel the scheme is?

- 1 2 3 4 5
 Not valuable Very valuable
-

Other comments or suggestions:

Did you learn anything from your mentor?

Overall, how valuable do you feel the scheme is?

1 2 3 4 5
Not valuable Very valuable

Other comments or suggestions:

In which area(s) were you provided with guidance? (Tick all that apply)

- Professional development (i.e. career guidance, industry insight etc.)
 Personal development (i.e. speaking skills, University insight etc.)
 Academic development (i.e. course selection, coursework or exam advice etc.)
 Other: