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Creating a Supportive Research Culture in the Disconnected University through Peer Mentoring

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Abstract: In the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK, doctoral students who were new to their roles were hit particularly hard by university closures (Levine et al., 2021). Support for doctoral students, particularly in the early phases of their research, is key for inculcating them into a supportive and developmental research culture. Building on work started in 2016 to develop a peer mentoring programme for students starting their MPhil/PhD, this paper will explore the purpose of such a community and how it evolved through various stages, culminating with the move to online mentoring groups during the COVID-19 lockdown. Ongoing research on the transition to online peer mentoring support may reveal opportunities for improving provision when universities return to a blended model of engagement, as well as how doctoral students work inside and outside the university, and the implications this might have for future mentoring and opportunities for informal learning.

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Drawing on my own experience of isolation in the first year of my MPhil/PhD, I developed a peer mentoring scheme for new doctoral students. After successfully receiving funds to develop and pilot the programme, I started by reviewing literature on peer mentoring schemes in HE (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). HEIs see peer mentoring as a valuable intervention for supporting the “retention, academic success, and educational experience of their students” (Terrion & Leonard, 2007: 149). Case studies from other universities, such as Aston (Andrews, Clark & Davies, 2011), as well as literature highlighting risks associated with peer mentoring (see Colvin & Ashman, 2010), were instrumental in supporting the development of our programme.

The next phase of development entailed considering how existing research could be applied to our context. Data was collected from fellow doctoral students through a survey and focus group: the survey was distributed to first year doctoral students, while the focus group involved more ‘experienced’ doctoral students in their second year of study or beyond. A focus group was used to engage peers in discussion around their lived experience with doctoral study, focusing on both the

positive aspects of the support received as well as aspects they felt were lacking. A questionnaire was then drafted and distributed to all first-year doctoral students, focusing on their perceptions of the value of a mentor scheme as well as more practical aspects, such as frequency of meetings. Another essential question for both groups focused on the proposed role of the mentor, which emerged as an important theme in both Terrion & Leonard (2007) and Colvin & Ashman (2010). Because our institution already offered academic support, we chose to focus more on psychosocial support that would promote a sense of community, as well as developing doctoral students as future academics (Austin, 2002).

The Doctoral Community developed through three key stages: initial (15/16- 16/17), transitional (17/18 – 18/19), and online (20/21). The initial stage was characterised by seeking input from students on the development of the programme to embed it within the CDE. For the pilot, students were put into small groups with a mentor who held weekly sessions on campus. The second stage involved the introduction of more social workshop events in addition to regular mentoring, which focused on networking and academic skills development. The final stage, saw the move to online support because of COVID-19 university closures, with continued regular mentoring meet ups and workshops to support academic skills development.

While the move to online support may have provided a social lifeline for PGR students, in particular those who were just starting their PhDs, it may have also provided more inclusive support for distance learners. PGR students are often presented as a homogenous group of full-time, continuing students, when in reality many PGRs studying education are part-time, returning students with diverse caring responsibilities. Online sessions might be more accommodating for students with diverse responsibilities, promoting a sense of belonging to the university when students are not able to study in person. However, we cannot ignore the potential for a change in the atmosphere or impact of the mentor programme when it is conducted remotely. Missing, in particular, are the spontaneous discussions that occur in the corridors of the university or in the canteen—these provide spaces for connections across phases of study and disciplines that are harder to make online (Lomas & Oblinger, 2006). However, the preponderance of online seminars and informal drop-ins such as writing rooms and virtual coffee mornings have also demonstrated that we can provide informal spaces online.

Ongoing research on the transition to online peer mentoring support may reveal opportunities for improving provision when universities return to a blended or face-to-face model of engagement. It may also reveal how doctoral students work inside and outside the university, and the implications this might have for future mentoring and opportunities for informal learning.

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