

A picture paints a thousand words: Using Photovoice to explore belonging and engagement through peer mentoring in Higher Education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of episodic, peer mentor-facilitated activities on undergraduate student experience at a post-92 university in England. Using Photovoice, a participatory visual method new to this context, qualitative data from 58 students was collected over a two-year period. Thematic analysis revealed peer mentors supporting induction and networking events were critical in promoting integration, engagement, transition, and professional development. These activities fostered a strong sense of belonging, with students describing familial and communal bonds that helped them navigate academic and social environments. However, institutional structures, systems, and resource allocation enabled and limited the effectiveness of mentoring. Students provided constructive feedback on improving these systems to support more inclusive, co-created approaches. The study proposes a conceptual framework for effective peer mentoring and calls for further theorisation to support broader adoption. It contributes to debates on student voice, inclusive pedagogy, and strategies for enhancing belonging and success in higher education.

Full paper

Background:

A growing corpus of research has advocated the concept of peer mentoring as an approach to support the student experience in HE (Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Andrews and Clark, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2012; Reeves *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, evidence would suggest peer mentoring has gained widespread popularity and has been described as an approach that can provide both short and long-term benefits to students as well as positively impact key performance indicators related to student success (Collier, 2017; Sneyers and De Witte, 2017; Sharp, 2021; Graham *et al.*, 2022). The effectiveness however, of using peer mentors across the student lifecycle remains under explored. This study conducted at a post-92

university in England, investigates the impact and effectiveness of a series of co-constructed, episodic peer-mentor facilitated activities designed to support students at key transition points. Photovoice, a participatory visual methodology, was employed to examine students' lived experiences and explore how peer mentoring could be operationalised more effectively. The study also examines the resource and design considerations required to embed such practices within inclusive, institution wide strategies.

Methodology:

This descriptive study employed Photovoice over a two-year period with 58 undergraduate students across levels four, five, and six from a single undergraduate programme. Informed by a critical theoretical perspective and situated within a broader participatory action research (PAR) framework, the methodology prioritised student voice and lived experience. Photovoice captured students' experiences of engagement with peer mentor-facilitated activities and assessed the effectiveness of these throughout their academic lifecycle. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and report the empirical findings as themes and subthemes.

Findings:

The findings of this study indicate that the episodic peer mentoring activities had a positive effect on the student experience across the undergraduate lifecycle. Participation in induction supported smoother transition experiences for new students, enhancing their early engagement, integration and orientation within the HE environment. Formally scheduled networking events maintained relationships and/or promoted new ones and contributed to students' academic and professional development. It was also established that students benefited significantly from their involvement in the peer mentoring programme and over-time developed peer/staff relationships akin to a family or community and were able to function effectively in different environments. Institutional systems and resourcing were identified as factors that both supported and hindered the success of peer mentoring, with students offering constructive feedback for improvement. The study identified several key functional components underpinning successful mentoring and student experience outcomes, which informed the development of a conceptual framework designed to support broader institutional application and alignment.

Conclusion:

This study provides empirical evidence supporting the value of episodic, peer mentor facilitated activities in enhancing the undergraduate student experience over time. The findings highlight the importance of promoting psycho-social, environmental, and academic orientation not only during induction but throughout the undergraduate lifecycle. These activities contributed to students' psychosocial growth, fostered a sense of belonging

and facilitated the formation of meaningful relationships with peers and academic members of staff. The success of this approach, however, is largely determined by the administration and operationalisation of such activities, as they are influenced by multiple institutional process and resource related factors that promote and inhibit the functionality of peer mentoring activities. The study presents a conceptual peer mentoring framework that offers practical insights for institutional implementation and has potential relevance for the wider HE sector. Further theorisation and refinement of this peer mentoring framework are necessary to strengthen its conceptual foundations and enhance its applicability across different institutional contexts. With ongoing development, this framework could serve as a valuable tool for informing inclusive and sustainable peer mentoring strategies aligned with engagement, satisfaction, continuation, completion and progression agendas.