Staff Articles and Research Papers                    TU Dublin Access and Civic Engagement Office

2015

# Mentoring Case Studies in the Access and Civic Engagement Office, Technological University City

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## Recommended Citation

# Mentoring Case Studies in the Access and Civic Engagement Office, Dublin Institute of Technology

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**Abstract**

This is a collaborative paper by staff members working with Students Learning with Communities (SLWC) and the Access Service in the Access and Civic Engagement Office (ACE) at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT).  Through two case studies, this paper examines various types of mentoring operating within these two programmes, as well as identifying; 1) the purpose of each type of mentoring relationship, and its specific structure 2) the desired outcomes of the mentoring relationships and 3) areas in which mentoring relationships can grow.  This paper aims to contribute to the development of best practice for mentoring in higher education.

*Keywords:* Peer Mentoring, Access, Community Based Learning

**Introduction**

In many workplaces, the establishment of mentoring programmes among colleagues has led to greater productivity, creativity and personal development for those involved.  It has been well established that mentoring (whether formal or informal) delivers benefits for the mentee in two distinct areas:  career development, which is linked to professional growth; and psychosocial development, which is linked to personal growth (Kram, 1985).  A range of positive outcomes for mentees participating in formal or informal mentoring programmes have been recorded by several researchers, including greater flexibility of roles (Scandura, 1992), satisfaction with performance (Koberg et al., 1994), and enhanced support for minority groups in the workplace (Douglas, 1997).  Those who serve as mentors accrue benefit from participation in mentoring relationships as well.  Mentors, for example, "receive a variety of extrinsic rewards or tangible benefits, and a range of intrinsic rewards or intangible benefits (such as increased network of friends; and feeling appreciated by first year student mentees who valued their help)" (Fowler and Muckert, 2004, p.1).

Similarly, research has indicated that *peer* mentoring (the exchange of advice and guidance among those on a similar developmental level) offers "an important alternative to conventional mentoring relationships by providing a range of developmental supports at each career stage" (Kram and Isabella, 1985, p. 111).  Peer mentoring can provide a new employee or student with a contact with whom they can readily identify.  It is noteworthy that "the social identity attached to membership in a mentoring group may help reduce feelings of uncertainty by providing a gauge of normative behaviour and the security of potential future group membership" (Heirdsfield, A. et al., 2007, p 426).

Higher education institutions have a role to play both in enhancing staff and student development with mentoring programmes, while preparing those involved to reap maximum benefit from future mentoring relationships.  Staff in the Access and Civic Engagement (ACE)

office at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in Dublin, Ireland are currently engaged in developing and delivering effective models for staff-staff and student-student mentoring relationships within the higher education access and community engagement sector, preparing socio-economically disadvantaged students for college life and enhancing the capacity of academic staff new to develop community based learning and community based research projects.

***The current context of Access and Civic Engagement in the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland***

DIT is one of the largest third-level institutions in Ireland, awarding qualifications from certificate to the doctoral level. The Institute emphasises applied learning and research, and has strong links with both industry and local communities. Since 1996, DIT's Access & Civic Engagement office has been addressing educational disadvantage and widening participation to higher education on local, national and international levels. *The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* (Hunt, 2011) highlights civic engagement as one of three pillars of the Irish Higher Education sector and points to the DIT ACE office as a best practice model for third-level engagement with local communities.

The ACE Office rests within DIT's Directorate of Student Services and the work of the ACE office is driven by *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, as well as internal documents including the *DIT Strategic Plan (2011-2014)*, the DIT Student Engagement Strategy (2013) and the DIT Widening Participation Strategy (2010). The work of the ACE office is focused on growing and fostering civic engagement activities and promoting access to third-level education for students from non-traditional backgrounds. The ACE office is currently undergoing a process of developmental change as a response to greatly reduced levels of resources available to the higher education sector in Ireland. These changes are affecting how ACE staff position and deliver their work across DIT, as well as with local communities. As such, the ACE office has articulated its role as one that enables and supports access and civic engagement within DIT. To fulfil this role, the ACE Office has identified the need to concentrate on embedding access and civic engagement further within the Institute. This positioning has led to a shift in the day-to-day work of the office, moving away from a model where ACE staff deliver standalone projects, to an approach where projects are delivered in collaboration with DIT staff supported by the ACE office.

In concert with the re-articulation of the role of the ACE Office within DIT, the five different ACE programmes, including 1) the Access Service, 2) the Mature Student Access Programme, 3) the Programme for Students Learning with Communities, 4) the Ballymun Music Programme, and 5) Computer Learning In Communities, are envisaging different approaches to structuring and carrying out their work.[1] The shift in the broader position and context of the work of ACE, as well as the local developmental changes to ACE's mandate, are further influenced by a more practical development—changes to the actual physical location of the ACE office and staff. In 2012, the ACE office moved from an office space where each of the programmes within ACE were physically separate from one another into a shared open-plan office, on site in DIT Grangegorman in the north inner city of Dublin. This physical shift has fostered greater staff interaction and has allowed for staff to share ideas, knowledge, and expertise more explicitly than they did previously on a day-to-day basis.

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[1] [For a full description of each of the five programmes working in ACE in DIT see http://www.dit.ie/ace/]

Locating staff of five distinct access and civic engagement programmes in the same office, under the same management is a unique development in Irish higher education. In Irish third-level institutions these activities are often separated and spread across different academic and administrative departments. DIT's unique arrangement of its access and civic engagement initiatives and its efforts to embed related work across the institute, among both staff and students, has presented scenarios where mentoring relationships could be of value. Mentoring relationships provide a formal and informal avenue through which staff and students could communicate frequently and directly with each other, learn from each other's experience, join up aspects of their work, develop initiatives or services together, and share and communicate essential tacit knowledge about particular aspects of access and civic engagement.

Through two case studies, this paper examines the benefits of this knowledge transfer relating to the development of mentoring programmes within and between two DIT ACE projects: the Programme for Students Learning with Communities (SLWC) and the DIT Access Service.

**Case Study One: Mentoring in the Programme for Students Learning With Communities (SLWC)[2]**

The programme for SLWC is DIT's centre for Community-Based Learning (CBL) and Community-Based Research (CBR) (also known as Service Learning and/or Science Shop) and has been supporting academic lecturing staff, and students engaging with CBL and CBR since 2008, as well as building links with communities. These projects involve DIT staff and/or students collaborating with underserved community partners (local groups, not-for-profit organisations, charities) to develop real-life curriculum based projects for mutual benefit. Catherine Bates and Elena Gamble (2011) discuss the theoretical position of the SLWC programme. They state the programme draws from the American tradition of service learning and the European science shop movement and outline the different philosophies employed by both approaches towards developing collaborative projects between students and community groups. The term 'service learning' is used in the United States instead of community based learning, and the term "service" demonstrates the social origin of service learning, which is based in volunteer work. Bates and Gamble explain that the European science shop model places more emphasis on community-based research than community-based learning. Science shops have their origin in Dutch universities in the 1970's. Since then they have extended across Europe and combine technical research with social concerns. The SLWC programme draws from both of these models. It develops community-based learning models aligned to the US tradition and DIT's vocational roots and community-based research in line with the European science shop model.[3] This fits in well with the Irish Government's *Higher Education Strategy to 2020* which states that 'service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection, to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities' (Hunt, 2011, p.77 ). The staffing of the

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[2] Part of the Programme for Students Learning with Communities case study was published in Living Knowledge, International Journal of Community Based Research, No. 10 in May 2012.

[3] A fuller discussion of the use of CBL in DIT can be found in the following papers; Bates, C. (2011) 'Engaging and Preparing Students For Future Roles- Community –Based- Learning in DIT' paper presented at the Learning Innovation Network's 4th. Annual Conference, October 27th. A detailed discussion of the use of CBL/CBR in DIT across a range of disciplines as an alternative to work placement can be found in: Bates, C. and Gamble, E. (2011) 'Alternative to Industrial Work Placement at Dublin Institute of Technology', Higher Education Management and Policy Journal, 23 (2).

SLWC programme consists of one full time co-ordinator and one part-time project officer. In 2013/2014 the programme supported over 900 students, 100 community partners, and 45 academic staff members working on CBL and CBR projects.

The supports provided by the SLWC programme for academic lecturing staff, students and community partners engaged in CBL and or CBR are determined by their needs and demands. The supports are aimed at fostering meaningful engagement towards mutual benefit between these stakeholders. Two distinct mentoring relationships have emerged as key supports. The first key support is for SLWC staff who participate as *mentees* in a formal mentoring relationship with staff at another Higher education institution. The second support is for the academic staff engaged in CBL and or CBR projects who the SLWC staff support- where academic staff members new to CBL and/or CBR can participate in an informal mentoring relationship with an experienced academic staff member. The benefits of these mentoring relationships will be outlined below.

After working within DIT for a few years, SLWC staff realized that some DIT academics had a lot of experience in CBL and had the capacity and knowledge to informally mentor staff new to this area. In 2011/2012 staff on the SLWC programme piloted an informal mentoring relationship between two lecturers involved in CBL: Mary Moloney of the BSc (Hons) Human Nutrition and Dietetics progamme, who has years of experience in CBL projects, and Sara Boyd of the Higher Certificate in Pharmacy Technician, who was new to CBL work. SLWC staff asked both lecturers to review the process after six months and to write down the benefits they found. [4]

### From the Mentor
Moloney mentions the benefits for her career development and professional growth, as well as for her psychosocial development and personal growth, just as Kram identifies in her work (Kram, 1985). For example, Moloney articulated her objectives for partaking in the role of mentor as an opportunity to form meaningful professional relationships with colleagues within the institute that may contribute to the advancement of her own professional development. She also highlighted that the role of mentor provided her with an opportunity to demonstrate her leadership skills and expertise in CBL projects. As well as this, Moloney recognized that the mentoring relationship may provide an opportunity for her further professional development in terms of the possibility for collaboration on future research projects (Moloney, 2012). Finally, the mentoring relationship provided an opportunity to further embed CBL in DIT, as having an additional lecturer teaching through CBL provides more opportunities for DIT students to engage with real life CBL projects. As well as providing a professional level of support for the mentee, Moloney identified a number of personal supports that emerged from her participation in the mentoring relationship which, when examined further, can be identified as psychosocial supports. Moloney sought to create a non-threatening and positive space where she could encourage ideas and plans that the mentee had made for the CBL project. She saw this as a way to facilitate motivational and inspiring triggers for the mentee working towards her new CBL teaching method. As well as this, the mentor shared her own real-life experiences of working with students through CBL and highlighted the positive experiences those projects brought along with the challenges. Moloney sought to encourage the mentee with her project, as well as explore solutions to any potential hurdles that she may face with the CBL project in the design phase.

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[4] The data from Moloney and Boyd was gathered through phone and e-mail personal correspondence with one of the authors. (Moloney and Boyd, 2012)

*From the Mentee*

By examining the mentee's experience a number of psychosocial supports can be identified as having benefited Boyd in the design stages of her CBL project. This is evidenced in how Boyd describes the peer mentoring relationship with Moloney as 'very positive' and that Moloney was very available, generous with her time, and easily accessible. Boyd describes the benefits of hearing another lecturer's practical experience of teaching through CBL. She speaks about the benefits of hearing how the lecturer went about the project, as well as how the students and communities engaged with it and this made her feel confident that this way of teaching can work, and that it can have a positive effect for all stakeholders.

It is clear that these psychosocial supports, provided through the peer mentoring relationship, enhanced Boyd's confidence to undertake her CBL project. The relationship provided an opportunity for her to hear about her mentor's on-the-–project practical experience of similar projects. Boyd highlights the importance of the 'mentoring match'. She felt her pairing with Moloney worked very well as their projects had many similarities. In this vein, Boyd states that 'although we are working within different disciplines, I could certainly identify how transferrable some of the processes and techniques could be to my project and discipline group' (Boyd 2012). Boyd mentioned the mentoring relationship gave her important insights into various aspects practicalities of setting up CBL projects including;

- Allow enough time for securing a community partner.
- Clearly identify the goals and outcomes of the CBL project- Clarify what exactly is expected of the student in terms of participation both independently and as part of a group and the associated outputs.
- Inform students that it's a partnership – both groups should benefit from the process. Clearly identify what the community partners should get out of the CBL project, as this outcome is dependent on the students level of participation.
- Allow plenty of time for planning and preparation of the CBL project.
- Consider the communication skills that students have, and the communications skills they will need in advance of the CBL project.
- Consider appropriate ice-breakers and hospitality for when students and community partners meet.
- Consider the practicalities of access to the building if the community partners are coming into DIT.
- If there is a return visit built into the project, consider the lag phase in between. Maintain the momentum of the project.
- First time round keep the CBL project simple and achievable.
- It is important to have feedback sessions with students consider asking a colleague to facilitate this.

Boyd noted that being able to incorporate these into the planning stages of her project was really valuable (Boyd, 2012). It is clear from Moloney and Boyds' review of their mentoring relationship that it had a positive impact on their personal and professional development.

***SLWC staff participation in formal mentoring relationship with staff at Queens University Belfast***

Since 2010 as part of the Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement

Society (PERARES)[5] project, staff working on the SLWC programme made formal an existing informal mentoring relationship with the staff at the Science Shop at Queens University in Belfast. Staff at both institutions work at similar levels making the mentoring relationship a form of peer mentoring. However, with over twenty years of experience in developing CBR projects, the staff at Queens University serve as the more senior partners in the mentoring relationships. Aligned with the work of the PERARES project, the peer mentoring relationships focus on issues relating to coordinating CBR projects in the respective institutes. As one of the authors of this paper is a staff member mentee in this relationship, she has insight into the formal workings of the relationship including that staff members between the two institutes communicate as frequently as their diaries and work schedules permit and all communications are focused on issues relating to CBR work and all meetings have an agenda. These communications include face-to-face meetings, conference calls, e-mail, phone calls, seminar and conference participation.

*SLWC benefits from the peer mentoring relationship*

The peer mentoring relationship provides on-going development and insights into the following areas of SLWC's work:

- It helps to build on the on-going process of creating networks and relationships with colleagues and peers engaged in CBL and CBR at national and international levels.
- It aids staff at SLWC to looks at ways of influencing DIT institutional policy to be inclusive of CBL and CBR.
- On a national level SLWC and QUB are founding members of the Irish Network for Community Engaged Research and Learning (INCERL) for co-ordinators of CBL and CBR which is focused on ways to support and make visible CBL and CBR on a national level.
- SLWC staff communicate with staff at QUB frequently, and acquire input from staff at QUB on CBR projects, models, practices, experience and policy contexts.
- SLWC staff work to mobilize and adapt knowledge gained from the experience of staff at QUB to the DIT context to continue to grow, and support CBR projects in DIT in line with best practice.
- It provides a space to sound out new ideas on CBR projects and related operational issues and ideas.
- It provides possibilities for research and collaboration.

*SLWC operational benefits gained from the peer mentoring relationship*

The mentoring relationship provides invaluable support, insight and learning which has led to the development of SLWC on an operational level, enhancing all aspects of the work, with particular focus on the CBR aspects of the work including:

- Building procedures for developing and maintaining relationships between SLWC staff, academic staff, communities, and students when setting up CBR projects. Examples of procedures include; meeting checklists; application forms for students; a CBR process

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[5] PERARES; is a four year project funded by the European Community's 7th Framework Programme and started in 2010, and is working across Higher Education Institutes in Europe. The PERARES project aims to strengthen public engagement in research by involving researchers and community organizations in the design of research agendas, and projects.

map, guidance on the roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders involved in the CBR project, and a timeline agreement form for all parties in a project to agree and sign.

- Looking for opportunities for promoting CBR projects in DIT including: e-mailing heads of school with updates on CBR projects in their school, faculty board presentations, asking for a short window in a lecture to present CBR topics from communities to students in high demand areas (such as IT), advertisements in student journals, production of promotional material, writing articles and research papers and policy work to embed involvement in CBR within DIT.
- Developing processes to ensure SLWC office and communities receive research results of CBR projects after they are complete.
- Seeking opportunities to share CBR work practices and experiences- e.g. in January 2010, SLWC invited staff at QUB to a seminar hosted by DIT and the Higher Education Authority on civic engagement. CBR was discussed at this seminar, with valuable input from QUB staff, which also contributed to a follow-on seminar in May 2011. At the Living Knowledge Conference in Bonn in 2012 SLWC staff co-facilitated a workshop on policy contexts for CBR with staff from QUB and staff from University College Cork- who are also members of INCERL. In 2013, SLWC staff co-facilitated a seminar on engaged research with QUB staff at QUB to PhD students.
- Development of SLWC operational plan in 2013.
- QUB staff are members of SLWC Advisory Board.
- At a national level, through efforts to influence relevant policy via the work of SLWC and INCERL, as well as the emerging opportunities through INCERL aimed at growing and developing CBL and CBR in Ireland. These features have the potential to further embed CBL and CBR within DIT, as well as to grow national platforms, and networks that support CBL and CBR in Ireland.

*QUB on Benefits of the Peer Mentoring Relationship*

The staff at the QUB Science Shop acknowledge various benefits they have experienced through being involved in the peer mentoring relationship, including;

- The mentoring relationship requires them to reflect on their practice.
- They can bring models of practice from DIT back to QUB.
- They can point to DIT as an example of another successful Science Shop in Ireland and this helps provide a national context for the work.
- They can use DIT staff as a sounding board for new ideas and issues.
   (McKeena 2012)

**Case study two: student-student mentoring in the DIT Access Services**

The Dublin Institute of Technology Access Service is one of five projects administered by the DIT ACE Office. The Access Service aims to deliver academic, social and financial supports to socio-economically disadvantaged young people (under 23 years of age). The staff team, consisting of two Post Entry Project Officers, works to support approximately 850 DIT students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (known as 'Access Students'). These supports seek to smooth the transition from secondary school to higher education for students in this cohort. As part of this effort the staff team coordinates a student-to-student Peer Mentoring programme in which current socio-economically disadvantaged students participate. The staff team approaches this programme from a personal development perspective, aiming to blend structured opportunities for self-development into both training for the Peer Mentors and into activities for first year mentees.

*Aims and rationale*

The aims of the DIT Access Service Peer Mentoring programme are as follows: 1) Delivery of an effective support for new first year students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage which will serve to smooth the transition from secondary school to higher education; 2) Leadership building and personal development experience for upper year students; and *3)* Enhancing the student-centred focus of DIT Access Office staff in approaching student engagement and administrative tasks. Brief rationale for each of the above aims follows:

1) Support for first year students—Studies show that young people from socio-economically disadvantaged areas may find higher education institutions unapproachable and inaccessible (Reay, 2001). The provision of a peer mentor, a young person who is also a student experiencing disadvantage, can serve as a resource which will encourage new students to feel comfortable as they make the transition from secondary school into higher education. New students from backgrounds of disadvantage may initially find one of their peers more accessible than a member of staff. Additionally, higher education peer mentoring programmes often contribute to better student success rates (Astin, 1984). Other studies highlight how critical the first few weeks are for socio-economically disadvantaged young people in making the transition from secondary school to higher education. Zepke and Leach write that "orientation programmes have the greatest impact among underprepared students, especially disadvantaged students, which makes them one of the key interventions within a holistic development paradigm" (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.53). As such, introducing new disadvantaged higher education students to their peer mentors in the context of a targeted orientation programme may increase the effectiveness of the peer mentoring programme.

2) Leadership building for upper year students—The student-to-student model of mentoring bears fruit not only for the mentees, but also for the mentors. Students who step forward to serve as peer mentors may find the experience an opportunity to build their own leadership skills within a supportive, nurturing environment. Indeed, the very process of applying to serve as a peer mentor demands that young people articulate their own skills and talents and explain why they are motivated to engage with new students as mentors. In their 2012 paper, "Student Engagement as Transformation," Alison Wright and Marco Angelini write that in serving as a mentor:

> … students experience a development in their ability to critically reflect on their skills, knowledge and approaches to learning. From this increased awareness of their learning conceptions, and critical evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, mentors actively develop new methods to accelerate their academic and personal development. In this way, the act of mentoring other students seems to enable the mentors to develop a more critical learner self-concept. Through this process, many mentors experience a transformation from the learner they were before they took the mentoring role. (p.158)

Indeed, first-year students may witness this transformation and thus feel drawn to serving as mentors themselves in future years.

3) Enhanced Service Delivery/Reflection on Practice - Including peer mentors as informal advisors in the day-to-day provision of student support ensures that administrative tasks are carried out from a student-centred point of view. Incorporating a student voice not only in the approach to building a sustainable and effective mentoring programme, but also in the office on a day-to-day basis leads to a sharing of key observations from both student and staff

perspectives. Coordinating peer mentoring programmes and listening to student feedback leads to "knowledgeable, better-briefed, personal tutors (who know students better) and other support staff" (King, 2012, p.122). For the team of Post Entry Project Officers in the DIT Access Service, this is an invitation to reflect on what is being delivered to students and to enhance the delivery of student support services. The provision of key on-site support for first year students—in the form of Peer Mentors—ensures that the Mentors are the first point of contact for the new first year students. As Dublin Institute of Technology delivers courses to undergraduate students across more than 10 sites located all over Dublin city, it is not possible for the Access Service's two Project Officers to be available to support Access Students in person. Access Service Peer Mentors frequently provide basic information to new students about their specific course or college. This allows the Access Service's two Post-Entry Project Officers to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable students.

### *Brief description of programme structures*
With these three aims (as identified above) in mind, the DIT ACE office delivers a peer mentoring programme for new socio-economically disadvantaged first year students arriving to study at DIT. Each spring staff in the DIT Access Service recruits roughly thirty 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-year students to serve as Mentors for the following academic year. A job description detailing what is expected of an Access Peer Mentor is posted on the Access Service's website. Interested students complete brief application forms, which are then reviewed by the staff team.

The staff team also recruits one additional senior student to serve as the 'Access Service Peer Mentor Coordinator'. This voluntary role is a recent addition to the programme - the goal is to ensure that those students serving as Mentors have a mentor themselves. The Coordinator assists the staff team with delivering the programme, taking a lead organising training sessions and communication with the mentors. The Coordinator provides staff in the office with a knowledgeable student voice on operational decisions relating to the peer mentor programme.

All Access Service Peer Mentors are asked to attend the annual DIT Access Service Orientation Programme for new socio-economically disadvantaged first year students. This orientation programme is an intense 5-day seminar designed to ensure that new students from this cohort feel they can bridge the gap between secondary school and higher education successfully. An afternoon and evening are set aside at the week-long Orientation Programme for Peer Mentors to meet their new mentees. At the afternoon session, Access Service Mentors are assigned a group of roughly 10-15 first year students. Students are assigned to a particular group based on their course of study so that Mentors and first year students are on either the same or similar courses. The afternoon is planned by the Peer Mentor Coordinator in collaboration with the Mentors, so they feel some ownership of the session. The afternoon session usually involves a presentation by the Peer Mentor Coordinator to all the new first year students, followed by smaller group meetings facilitated by each of the Access Peer Mentors. In the evening, a social event in the city centre is planned to encourage Mentors and mentees to socialize together. A day-long training session is delivered to all Mentors each year. This training focuses on child protection, confidentiality, the boundaries of mentoring, and provides practical advice and suggestions on how best to assist the new first year students.

During the academic year, Access Service Peer Mentors invite their mentees to three small group meetings. The agenda for these meetings is focused on building strong bonds between the first year students, teasing out what may be challenging for them and suggesting ways forward. Peer Mentors are expected to prepare a report on how the meeting went, which

they provide to the Post-Entry Project Officers in the DIT Access Service. Additionally, the Peer Mentors accompany their mentees to social events which are organized for new Access Students by the Access Service during the academic year. At the end of the academic year, the Mentors' commitment to the Access Service is recognized at a ceremony hosted by DIT's President at which each student receives a certificate and praise.

In the 2012-13 academic year, a new element was developed and built into the Peer Mentoring programme. In January 2013, after the Mentors had experienced one term of mentoring, Mentors were invited to attend an additional training day. This day provided Mentors with a forum to share their successes and frustrations with the programme half-way through the academic year. In addition, each mentor was asked to reveal areas of personal development they would most like to improve upon. The Access Service then set dates interactive skill-building workshops focused on the areas the students reported they would most like to improve. Feedback from these sessions was very positive. The staff team will be continuing to target the professional development needs of future Peer Mentors by incorporating continuing personal development workshops into the programme, based on reported and observed needs.

### *Review and critical analysis*

A critical analysis of the peer mentoring processes employed by the DIT Access Service (as described above) reveals significant strengths, along with areas for growth. Between the years of 2009 – 2013 the staff of the DIT Access Service evaluated the peer mentor programme using a number of tools, including: questionnaires for first year mentees, surveys of upper year mentors, interviews with students and anecdotal evidence noted by staff members.

In relation to each of the three programme aims (as articulated above), clear strengths and areas for growth have emerged from these reviews. In relation to Aim 1: Support for first year students:

- **Strength**: A real commitment and enthusiasm on the part of the Mentors as well as a first-hand understanding of socio-economic disadvantage
  - o **Benefits for first year students**: First year students report that having a young person with whom they can identify, especially in the critical first few weeks of college, is reassuring. Many of them are the first in their families to attend higher education and they may not have access to the kind of advice and guidance informally available to children of parents/guardians who have previously attended higher education. The Access Peer Mentors implicitly understand this and are eager to share whatever knowledge they have amassed with the new first year students. This strong sense of identification is a key factor in assisting socio-economically disadvantaged students make the transition to higher education.
- **Strength**: A focus on social integration into college life
  - o **Benefits for first year students**: The Peer Mentor Programme includes structured events, including funded social events. These events encourage first year students to get to know their Mentors in an informal setting. They also assist first year students in familiarizing themselves with Dublin. Many first year students report that these events are valuable to them, particularly at the beginning of the academic year.
- **Strength**: Sharing of key knowledge about expectations and realities of academic work

- o **Benefits for first year students**: The knowledge built up by Mentors over their previous years in higher education is something which they may take for granted, but which the first year students often struggle to learn.  The passing on of tips and advice in relation to lecturers, assignments, assessments and class attendance from one student to another emerges as a key support for first year students.  Mentors are trained to recognize when a first year student might be struggling academically and how to provide referrals before it is too late for Access Service staff to assist the new student.
- **Area for Growth:** Enhancing group cohesion—Addressing waning interest among first year students as the year progresses
  - o **Reasons**: The Peer Mentor groups form during the intense 5-Day Access Service Orientation Programme at the start of each academic year.  However, Peer Mentors report that while first year students are active on social media sites and email, they find it challenging to encourage the first year students to attend actual peer mentor meetings after a few months have passed.

In relation to Aim 2 – Leadership building for Upper Year Students:

- **Strength**: A focus on personal development
  - o **Benefits for upper year students**: The Peer Mentoring Programme gives Access Service staff an opportunity to develop closer working relationships with older students, observe their performance, and offer constructive feedback as they perform their roles.  Upper year students receive targeted leadership development programmes to assist them both with their duties as a Peer Mentor and with fulfilling their career ambitions.
- **Strength**: A strong sense of belonging within the educational institution
  - o **Benefits for upper year students**:  Upper year students who serve as Peer Mentors report a heightened connection both with the DIT Access Service and with DIT in general.  This deeper connection with a higher education institution correlates positively with student retention and graduation rates, as well as giving the student a sense of purpose outside of the classroom.
- **Area for Growth**: Embedding Peer Mentoring more closely within academic departments
  - o **Reasons**: Mentors report feeling strong links with the two Post-Entry Project Officers in the Access Service, but weak links with the lecturing staff in their own academic departments.  Mentors often feel ill prepared to respond to academic concerns when they are flagged by first year students.  They report feeling unfamiliar with policies and procedures relevant to their own department, often stating that lecturing staff seem quite distant.

In relation to Aim 3 – Enhancing delivery of student support by Access Service Staff:

- **Strength**: A greater insight into the day-to-day realities of socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education
  - o **Benefits for staff**: The close collaboration between Access Service Post Entry Project Officers and Access Service Peer Mentors is fruitful for both parties.  Having regular student insights, not just into the operations of the Peer Mentor Programme, but into all elements of the Access Service's work, ensures that the office maintains a student-centred focus in its approach to administration and student engagement. Since the launch of the DIT Access Service Peer

Mentoring Programme, Access Service staff members have come away from the experience with significant learning themselves – in particular: how to ensure that student Peer Mentors balance their volunteering duties with their academic workloads. Additionally, the staff's close working relationship with the Mentors often leads to a deepening of staff-student trust. This enhanced relationship encourages Access Service staff to better understand the perspectives of socio-economically disadvantaged students and enhances the delivery of targeted supports to this cohort.

- **Area for Growth**: Exploring how student hours could be credited and timetabled
  - o To ensure that adequate time and space is available for the programme to remain effective for student participants, it is important that student participation "be credit bearing rather than voluntary, since research suggests that voluntary support programmes most often attract developmentally higher-functioning, lower-risk participants rather than the developmentally fragile, higher-risk learners who are the main intended audience" (Schwitzer, 2005, p.33). To ensure that all students, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged students, feel part of the programme and do not come to view their participation in the programme as a luxury they cannot afford, it would be ideal to formalise the mentoring relationship in a way which ensures that all students can participate equally.

A well-run peer mentoring programme can yield benefits for new students, senior students and higher education professionals. The positive effects of participation in a peer mentoring programme are particularly evident among students from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. When delivered in conjunction with a course of study, good-quality peer mentoring programmes can ensure that higher education institutions are tapping into the full breadth of student talent available. Upon graduation, students who have participated in a best-practice mentoring scheme should feel more connected to the institution. Those who have served as mentors should feel more confident with their facilitation skills and knowledgeable about how to build consensus and lead a group. Staff leading on the development of a best-practice peer mentoring programme should find a heightened sense of awareness of the challenges students face and the supports which will best serve them as they progress through college and into employment. Overall, a high-quality peer mentoring programme can improve the profile of a higher education institution, serving to attract more applicants, support them through first year, equip them with leadership skills they can use upon graduation and enhance staff performance.

Capturing the impact of peer mentoring programmes on student mentees, student mentors and on relevant higher education staff via a longitudinal study would contribute to deepening the conversation on the efficacy of peer mentoring. Identifying and examining the impact of peer mentoring, specifically on socio-economically disadvantaged students, may yield telling evidence demonstrating a correlation between good-quality peer mentoring and student retention. An exploration leading to a report of practical next-steps in relation to the crediting of hours spent participating in peer mentor programmes may clarify the best way to move forward with timetabling hours for higher education students and staff. Finally, a compilation of peer mentoring programmes in operation at Irish institutions of higher education would assist student support practitioners develop national best-practice guidelines for the development of peer mentoring programmes.

**Conclusion**

This paper has outlined case studies of mentoring programmes operating within the context of higher education institutions. The above cases have detailed the purpose and structure of three mentoring relationships currently at work within the DIT ACE office, and have articulated the desired outcomes of said mentoring relationships, as determined by relevant practitioners. The process of documenting the structure of these mentoring relationships has provided an opportunity to learn from internal colleagues and identify areas in which respective mentoring relationships can be enhanced.

It is fruitful for practitioners involved in mentoring relationships to document the structures employed by their respective mentoring programme, formal or informal. Doing so provides a wider base of cases, the details of which can then be analysed in greater depth to develop inferences and causal relationships. The act of recording our practices allows for critical comparison of mentoring programmes within the DIT ACE office, as highlighted above. It also provides a record which can be used for critical comparison and analysis with other approaches to mentoring. The process of reflection on internal mentoring programmes brought respective strengths and weaknesses into focus. These strengths and weaknesses, as documented above, have revealed a number of tangible actions the DIT ACE office can take to enhance the effectiveness of relevant mentoring programmes and provides a compass for higher education staff entering into or improving upon a mentoring relationship. Further, the engagement of two internal offices on this collaborative project illustrates that seeking out opportunities to learn from internal colleagues can serve as a catalyst for self-review and can yield enhanced staff experiences.

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