Supporting the transition of autistic students into university life: reflections on a specialist peer mentoring scheme

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Editorial comment

Moving from school to university is a big step for all students and for autistic students, the challenge can be even greater. Some autistic students choose a university close to home as changing two major aspects of their life (where they live and where they study) and leaving the support of their family is too great a challenge. Nevertheless, an increasing number of autistic students do attend university and succeed in getting their degrees and some live away from home. Having the offer of support at university can make the difference between success and failure.

Universities employ staff in Disability Support Services and Student Support departments where students can go for advice and support. A smaller number of universities have peer mentoring schemes where current students support students just starting at the university. Some of these operate for any student and others are specific to students who have disclosed a disability. The advantage of peer mentoring schemes is that students are supported by those close in age and there is potential to customise the support to the particular preferences and needs of the student.

This paper reports on a pilot study which set up a peer mentoring scheme for autistic students. It poses questions in terms of initial training and the support of the mentors as well as how autistic students are supported to engage with the mentor. The eight mentors in this study did not have a great deal of contact with their mentee which could be a sign of success or a failure to 'support' the interaction of the two. Ways to support the mentor and methods of establishing and sustaining the relationship require careful thought. The Editor welcomes other papers on how effective peer-to-peer systems have been set up and implemented elsewhere.

Introduction

My interest in supporting autistic students is two-fold. First, my eighteen year old son has Asperger syndrome (his choice of terminology). Secondly, my former position within the library and student support at a higher education institution included involvement in transition and retention activities. I started to realise that more could be done in these two areas to support students, particularly those with specific learning difficulties, including autism. This paper explores the implementation of a specialist peer mentoring scheme at the

University of Cumbria, a multi-campus university. The peer mentors are current undergraduate and postgraduate students who are unpaid volunteers. The scheme was introduced as a pilot in the 2017–2018 academic year and its purpose is to support the transition of autistic students into the university.

Literature review

Recent studies have actively sought the input of autistic individuals, the 'native experts' (Bogdashina, 2004), who are best placed to explain why they respond and engage as they do. For those working in the sector, it is essential that this approach is followed, using an 'autism lens' rather than a neurotypical one. From designing curriculum and assessment, planning learning and social spaces, through to individual student support it is important that staff do not second guess what is best for students or try to reconstruct their world using their own perceptions (Morris, 1999 cited Bogdashina, 2004).

Going to university can be challenging for any student: moving away from home to a new town or city, settling in to student accommodation, making friends and navigating the new learning environment. Research has shown that the first year experience is fundamental to student success at university (Box et al, 2012; Cohen et al, 2012; Nelson, Duncan and Clarke, 2009). For autistic students, these anxieties are often intensified (Rydzewska, 2012; Baron-Cohen, 2008) and these students often struggle more with the social aspects of university than with their academic study (Cai and Richdale, 2016; Gelbar, Shefcyk and Reichow, 2015; Hansen, 2011; Fleischer, 2010). This can result in a student dropping out of university, and autistic students are seen to have the highest attrition rates of any disability group (Gebar, Shefcyk and Reichow, 2015).

So, an effective transition plan needs to be put into place to help students integrate into the new environment. Martin (2006) asserts that a student is more likely to succeed if systems are put into place prior to the student arriving at university, for example, having access to the timetable, meeting student support staff and viewing their accommodation and departmental buildings. One initiative that is becoming more widespread across UK higher education institutions is

specialist peer mentoring, with its success supported by a small number of studies (Siew et al, 2017; Ames et al, 2016; Hamilton, Stevens and Girder, 2016; Adreon and Durocher, 2007).

Such a scheme offers the student support with social, academic and daily living skills and age-appropriate role models to offer support in 'negotiating age centric environments' (Siew et al, 2017). These studies demonstrate that students who access such schemes are less likely to drop out of university and more likely to achieve academic success (Cai and Richdale, 2016). These schemes can be enhanced if the student makes contact with their peer mentor in the weeks leading up to arriving. To have a friend before going to university or college, to not be alone, is very important (Casement, Carpio de los Pinos and Forrester-Jones, 2017).

Peer mentor schemes are often indirectly supported by funding from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which seeks to enable students to claim their entitlement to study and ensure equity across the student lifecycle. UK legislation in general has gradually placed a pre-emptive duty on universities to make reasonable adjustments to prevent students with disabilities being placed at a substantial disadvantage, (Equality Challenge Unit, 2010), and thus moving towards an 'inclusive education for all' (Redpath et al, 2013). In addition the Children and Families Act (2014) states that young people with special educational needs should be given assistance during their transition to adulthood, including accessing Higher Education.

Implementing the peer mentoring scheme
Recruitment of the mentors
At the University of Cumbria 13 students showed an interest in becoming a peer mentor. They were recruited from targeted programmes of study, including learning disability nursing, working with children and families and primary education. All but one of the students were undergraduates.

Training of the mentors
Over the summer vacation the mentors were sent a weekly blog post exploring what autism is (and is not), how to support autistic students and the importance

of developing a person centred approach. The blog included links to library resources, online videos and other useful web resources. This is available at https://asmentor.blogspot.co.uk. The purpose of the blog was to keep in touch with the students and develop their understanding of autism before the face-to-face training day. Writing the blog was challenging but rewarding. The blog has since been adapted for front line library staff.

A full day of face-to-face peer mentor training was scheduled in welcome week, when the first year undergraduate students arrive on campus. Seven students attended the training and, on the day, one of the students who was invited to talk about his personal experience of being autistic also signed up to become a mentor, so there were eight trained mentors in total. The six students who were unable to attend asked to be kept on a waiting list for e-training. Additionally, the students were required to attend a half day generic peer mentor training session.

Initially, some members of support staff felt that a full day's training for the mentors was too much. However, it was decided that this was the minimum time needed for students to begin to gain an understanding of autism. The morning session included information and discussion about the key areas of difference, sensory difficulties, empathy, the language used to describe autism, causes and prevalence. The afternoon session included input from an autistic postgraduate student, who shared his experiences, as well as from a previous mentor for an autistic student. A talking head video of one of the disability officers was shown explaining the support available through the disability team. The final hour of the day covered the paper work involved and discussions on how to provide a support network for the mentors. All training material was made available to students and staff through Blackboard, the university's virtual learning environment.

Evaluation of the training

At the end of the peer mentor training day the students completed a five question paper survey. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with students commenting how useful it was to listen to first hand experiences. They found the information on communication invaluable,

and many said that they came away with a deeper understanding of the autism spectrum. Comments on how the training might be improved included, 'to be able to meet their mentee on the day' and one would have liked more examples of why a mentee might contact them.

Matching mentors and mentees

The disability officers at the university decided which students should be referred to the peer mentor scheme. Students who disclose a disability prior to arriving at the university are asked to complete a disability questionnaire before starting their course. One of the questions asked is, 'do you need help settling in to university?'. Those students who answered 'yes' were referred to the scheme. These students were paired with a mentor following the training in welcome week, and the mentor used a set of standard emails to make contact with their mentee. Some students were referred to the scheme later in the semester by disability officers. In addition, students can self refer using the peer mentor request form on the university website. In total, seven students were assigned a mentee, one of whom was a postgraduate student.

Co-ordination and maintenance of the scheme

The scheme was implemented and co-ordinated solely by the author. As peer mentoring already existed at the university and had been expanded to include life mentors, learning mentors and wellbeing mentors, procedures and processes were already in place. In addition, some limited funding was made available to promote the scheme and to provide material for the training day. Current procedures were adapted to meet the needs of the autism peer mentor scheme. Regular contact needed to be maintained with the mentors to 'check in'. This involved email correspondence, sharing of resources through a Facebook page and face-to-face meetings at the end of semester one.

Logging interactions between mentor and mentee

The mentors were asked to log interactions using a contact log on the Blackboard site. Four of the eight mentors recorded interactions (both via email and face-to-face) with their mentees. Two mentors recorded one

interaction each (the introductory email). One mentor recorded two interactions (an introductory email and a face-to-face meeting). A fourth mentee recorded five email interactions and a face-to-face meeting. Within this face-to-face meeting, the conversation included:

- signposting the mentee to the mental health team at the university

- signposting the mentee to the academic skills online booking system

- discussing frustration about people speaking over her in lectures and not letting her finish the point

- mentee discussing relationship problems within the university accommodation

Mid point evaluation of the scheme

At the beginning of December, two surveys were created using the SurveyMonkey online survey tool. One was emailed out to the mentors and the other to the mentees. Unfortunately, only three out of eight mentors and just one out of seven mentees completed the survey. The mentors were asked, knowing what they know now, what should have been included in the autism mentor training day. One mentor suggested there should be more on relationships with flat mates, neighbours, lecturers and course peers.

Mentee survey overview

The mentee who responded had four or more interactions with their mentor. He said he felt secure knowing that his mentor was available, even though he had chosen not to respond to the introductory email. He said his preferred method of communication was face-to-face meetings. His mentor had supported him by telling him about the support available at the university, and had helped him to reduce his stress and to develop better coping skills. He rated his satisfaction with the scheme at 5, where 5 is extremely satisfied.

Concluding comments

The number of mentors recruited to the scheme was thought to be adequate for the number of students disclosing an autism spectrum diagnosis at the university in the academic year 2017–2018 (15 students disclosed, with the total number of entrants standing at 5,026). While some students did not reply to their mentor when sent an introductory email, they might well have felt supported just knowing that they could contact their mentor, if necessary.

Funding was obtained for two of the mentors to study on the autism module at the university. The commitment and enthusiasm from the mentors was exceptional, especially as they were unpaid and many were studying on professional programmes which included extensive periods on placement. The scheme was supported by the university's senior management team who were keen to include the mentors in further activities to raise awareness of autism across the university and the wider community, working towards an 'autism-friendly university'.

A number of recommendations arose following this pilot mentoring scheme, as follows:

It would be advantageous if the mentor could be matched with the mentee before welcome week. This could provide a means of peer contact in the transition period when the mentee may have questions about starting university.

The scheme should sit within the disability team. It could then be better promoted to prospective students and parents at open days. It might also be more visible to academic and support staff which could result in a higher take-up.

The mentors recommended that both mentors and mentees fill out an 'about me' form. This could be a way of matching common interests, and may allow the mentee to share their preferences (eg gender of mentor, means of communication).

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