My Experience with the ‘STARS as Mentors’ Scheme

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When I began my final year of university, I decided to put myself forward for more opportunities than I had in previous years to make the most of my last year at Surrey. In the welcome lecture for STARS, volunteers were requested for a new mentoring scheme and true to my earlier decision, I decided to put myself forward. Originally, I put myself forward for the role of a mentor for members of STARS from lower years, but I was then contacted asking if I would like to be involved in the set-up of the scheme and represent the views of the students. I gladly accepted, already aware that this would be an amazing opportunity not just to boost my CV, but to see how the University worked ‘from the other side’. For the next six months, I worked together with Alexander Jackson (a final year student from FASS), and SPLASH staff Julia Anthony and Adam Scales to develop a framework for the new scheme.

To begin with, we researched existing mentoring schemes from other universities around the world. Unsurprisingly, mentoring schemes are common; however, I was surprised at the wide scale and comprehensive nature of some schemes. At some universities mentors are allocated to every undergraduate student, providing pastoral support throughout their time at the university. However, what we were aiming to achieve at Surrey was slightly different - a more academic based role but focused on the common study skills between all subjects rather than the teaching of content. This was a relatively uncommon focus for mentoring schemes so we had to create our own framework from scratch.

In order to ascertain both what the students would want and what we would be able to offer as mentors/mentees, we held a focus group. Initially, we discussed the requirements of the mentees and mentors with a group of second and final year students from a variety of different courses spread amongst all faculties. It was very interesting to see a variety of common themes coming up, and also to hear of the vastly different needs of students from different courses and faculties. For example, engineering students seem to receive much more contact time with their tutors and lecturers compared with arts students; as a result, arts students felt

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1 STARS stands for Surrey Top Achievers Recognised and Supported. This is an initiative designed to support students achieving an average of 68% or higher in their studies.
2 Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
3 SPLASH is a learning development team who support students with their studies by offering a variety of workshops and one-to-one sessions on skills such as referencing, essay writing and essay planning.
they could benefit from support on managing their time whilst studying and engineering students felt this less necessary. The structure of assessment also varies hugely between degree subjects, with subjects such as music and biological science involving more essay writing than subjects like mathematics and physics. This impressed upon us the necessity of pairing mentees with mentors from the same faculty. This was not something that had been immediately obvious to us and proved the value of learning from the experiences of the wider student population. The students in the focus group also highlighted that approachable mentors are a huge advantage to the scheme, and so is the prior knowledge the final year students had of university life and their ability to pass on useful hints and tips.

We also met with staff members from Student Life Mentoring, a service run by the University to support new students living in university accommodation. This service is provided by students from later years who have lived in university accommodation themselves and understand the pastoral needs of the students. From the Student Life Mentoring team, we learnt what they look for when selecting their mentors and this made us realise that we should develop strong criteria for selecting mentors for our scheme. It also opened our eyes to the huge amount of work involved in setting up a mentoring scheme, which I personally had not been aware of: protocols must be developed for every possible eventuality arising from the scheme. It also made us think about the sort of training we should offer to the mentors before beginning the scheme.

Partway into developing the scheme, a new opportunity became available to us. It was suggested by Adam, who is involved with Widening Participation, that we pilot the scheme with students who are part of the In2Surrey scheme. The In2Surrey scheme is designed to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with equal opportunities, partly through the provision of altered entry offers and grants and also through pastoral support with an e-mentoring scheme preparing the students for the transition from school to university. This scheme covers students who meet at least two widening participation criteria and have completed the various academic and reflective assignments involved with the application to the scheme. In order to better assess the needs of this group of students as mentees, we undertook an interview with a current student of the In2Surrey scheme. She highlighted the importance of signposting students to facilities and workshops that may be of use to them, in particular the set of workshops offered by SPLASH.

Sadly, this was where my participation in the scheme ended. As I have now left Surrey after finishing my degree, I will not be able to see the direction the new mentoring scheme takes or the difference it will make to future students. For students who engage well with the scheme, I hope it will enrich their experience at university. Taking part in the development of this new
STARS scheme has allowed me to see the huge amount of work involved in a scheme that would appear relatively simple to organise from an outside perspective. There are many things to consider that I would not have even thought about before my involvement in this project, such as the training of volunteers and development of the overall framework. It has really made me appreciate the amount of work put in by the staff involved in STARS in order to further the development of the students. Although I will not be able to see the final outcome of my work on the ‘STARS as Mentors’ scheme, I hope that it will be a great success.

This experience has made me realise the value of engaging with new opportunities, as well as the benefits of a new mentoring scheme. It will rely on engagement from both the mentors and the mentees, but I hope the students will realise the benefits they will gain from it – as the saying goes, ‘you get out what you put in’. Having someone to ask, who you feel is easily approachable, may make all the difference to some students and make their transition into university life much easier.

Personally, I have gained a lot from my involvement in the project. It has increased my confidence when discussing issues with members of staff I am not familiar with and this is a hugely useful skill to have in life. It has also made me look back at my time at university reflectively, which I would not have naturally done. It is important to take time to reflect as there is a lot that can be learnt from past experiences and this can help to improve your future experiences. This project has taught me that if you would like help, you often have to ask for it yourself rather than wait for other people to offer you help. Although this may sound negative, it is astonishing how generous people often are with their help if only you ask. As I mentioned previously, I believe the mentors and mentees could both gain a lot from being part of the scheme and learn from each other in the process.

The new STARS mentoring scheme will be launching in the 2016/17 academic year and I strongly encourage all STARS members to apply for the scheme. It is hugely rewarding to be involved in the development of fellow students, it will look great on your CV and it is a chance to make a difference to the experience of fellow students at Surrey.