

CHANGEMAKERS; CREATIVITY AND VALUE CREATION

CROSS-LEVEL MENTORSHIP SYSTEM

ELLA ROUTLEDGE

2100364

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CROSS-LEVEL MENTORSHIP SYSTEM

ABSTRACT IDEA

I wanted to investigate implementing a system that provided a more collaborative space across level 4, 5 and 6 at university, particularly for those studying BA Set Design & Production and BA Acting.

I know from personal experience that coming to university can be a daunting experience, and it is difficult to know how to prepare yourself adequately when it is a step you have never taken before. A pivotal transitional period like starting higher education can be stressful, particularly for students such as myself who do not have older siblings, or parents who went to study at university after school or college. Even in circumstances where a student did have family or friends' experiences to learn from, there will rarely be a case where this experience is course specific. For this reason, it is important for new students to be given the opportunity to establish a working relationship with existing students on the course who could be made available if they wish to seek advice or guidance on issues like moving into university halls, equipment needed for the course, workload, etcetera.

Not only would this be helpful in guiding new students through their journey to higher education, but it would also create a link across all levels of the same course; someone to communicate with without feeling daunted if you needed to ask for information from another class. I have found myself in a position many times in which a quick email to a student from the level above me would have helped me complete a task to a better standard or given me a better idea of how to go about doing something, but – particularly in my first year – felt too intimidated to ask.

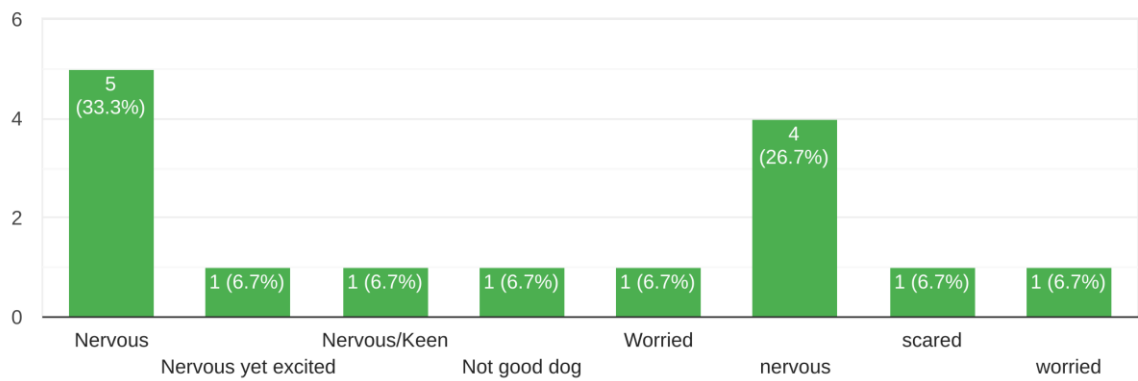
This brings me to my final primary reason for wishing to create this mentorship system. We are lucky to have incredible lecturers and staff who offer one-on-one discussions and leave themselves open to any questions you may have, but some find contacting staff (and students at a higher level) to be stressful and embarrassing. The mentorship system would provide every student with a designated peer specifically for asking questions, which would eliminate embarrassment *and* stress.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

To my interpretation, this solution to an ongoing problem was an adequate solution. However, I deemed it appropriate to seek evidence through surveys that this system would be an appropriate fix for most students, not just myself and those in my immediate circle. I wanted to find out if, primarily, other students struggled with the transition to university life in the same ways I did, and secondly, if a mentorship system would have made them feel more comfortable during this time. I conducted a survey to source the data that would allow me to answer these questions. Only students had access to this survey so that I could collate accurate and truthful data.

The first few questions were asked to help me understand if the issue I had identified was troublesome for a lot of students.

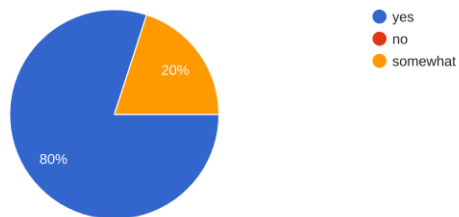
How did you feel when beginning university?
15 responses



The students who responded to this open question largely responded with synonymous adjectives, displaying a general sense of unease when reflecting on starting university. From these responses, I can gauge that most students were anxious about the transition, as I expected.

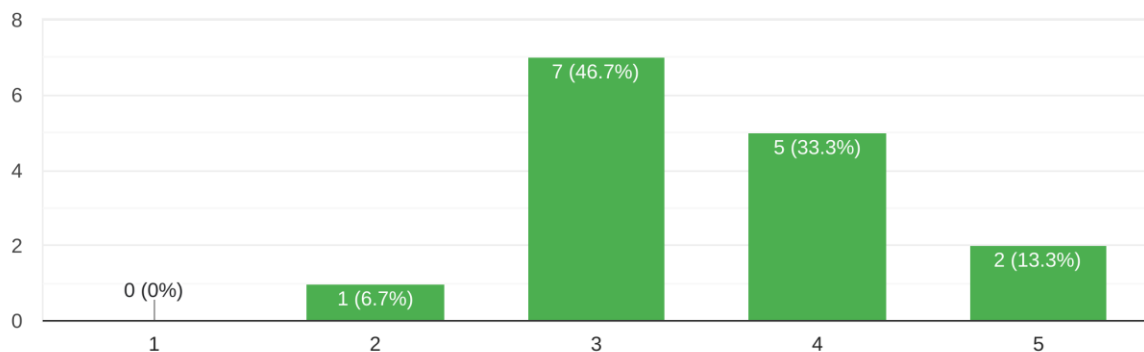
This pie chart suggests that the nerves came from or were contributed to by questions that students had but did not ask. Obviously, this data does not directly inform me that

Did you have unanswered questions about beginning university?
15 responses



students were afraid or unable to ask these questions, but it certainly implies that that was the case.

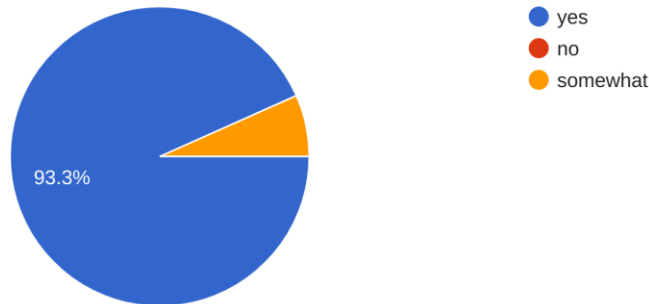
How difficult would you consider your transition to uni life?
15 responses



I asked students to rate the difficulty of their transition on a scale from 1 (being not difficult at all) to 5 (being extremely difficult). Every student who completed the survey experienced some level of difficulty when beginning university, with the majority settling on a middling to high difficulty rating for this period. From this graph I can definitively say that starting university was indeed a stressful experience for all students, and when collating the information provided in the data from all three questions so far, I can deduce that the stress experienced would have been at least partially due to students having queries that they didn't have the contacts nor the confidence to ask.

Do you feel that asking for advice from someone who'd been in your situation would have helped your transition to uni life?

15 responses

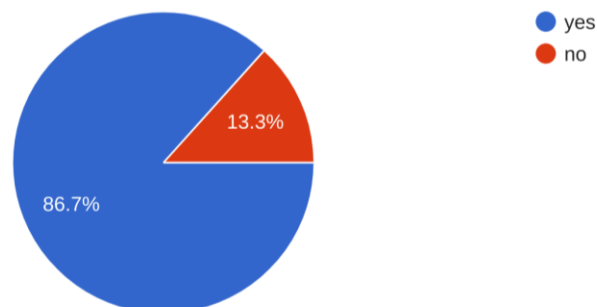


This section of data is helpful in correlating the two questions previous to it. Over 90% of responses tell me that having someone available as a point of contact to ask any questions about the course and transitioning to university would have helped the students who completed the survey to settle in and potentially ease their stress.

Given the results of the survey so far, I am glad to see that the mentorship system would be beneficial to new students. However, the point of contact has not been specified. There are, of course, alternatives, to assigning a point of contact in the level above, but I believe that this is the most suitable option given the appropriate balance between knowledge and intimidation; i.e. assigning a member of staff to a student defeats the aim of creating a more comfortable and friendly relationship between mentor and mentee, and a peer on the same level as them is significantly less likely to have the answers to their questions, plus will be going through the same transition as them and may not be able to assist. A mentor on the same course but a level above is a suitable middle ground, but I wanted to ensure that this would be a situation that students are comfortable with.

Would you feel comfortable talking to other year groups on your course in a group setting?

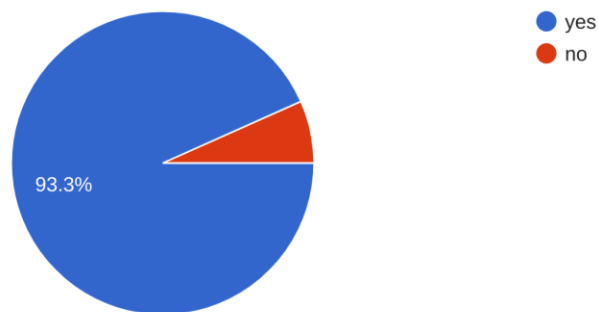
15 responses



I asked the students if they would feel comfortable speaking to students on other levels in a group setting as this is the ideal introduction to your mentor; a judgement-free environment in which everyone is there for the same reason. Many students would be happy to speak to their mentor in a group setting, which is an excellent outcome that could easily be arranged during induction week, for example.

Would you feel comfortable talking to other year groups on your course in a one-on-one setting following this?

15 responses



Beyond the initial introduction, mentors and mentees would be expected to communicate unprompted and independently. I asked this follow up question to determine whether students would be comfortable in doing so or not, to which most students responded the affirmative.

From my survey, I can say that not only is this issue prevalent, but my solution would be suitable in counteracting some of the negative feelings many students harbor towards getting started.

SECONDARY RESEARCH

The mentorship system (or “buddy system”) does exist in other universities, though sometimes the specifics can vary. For example, Lancaster University (2021) has a Buddy Programme in place, but it is optional. You can apply as an existing student to be a mentor, and as a new student to be a mentee, and the requirements for the former are listed on the university website, which I think is an excellent idea. Nobody is forced into a position they do not wish to be in; it is encouraged, but not compulsory. This Programme is advertised as a positive, connection-building system that promotes a friendly community within the university.

Edu Opinions (2022) provides reviews from verified students about their university’s buddy system. One of which is as follows:

“The university had a Buddy system that groups you with other international students ... My Buddies were awful hosts. The only interactions I saw from them were academic answers, there were no attempts at gathering people together.”

This reviewer does speak negatively about their university’s buddy system, but I choose to interpret it as a form of advice on how to adjust the UWTSD (University of Wales Trinity Saint David) buddy system to avoid these issues. As previously mentioned, making the system voluntary will keep new students clear of unwilling participants who will not be of any assistance to them.

Another review reads:

“Aalen university has a very efficient diversity and inclusion program. There is a program called “The buddy initiative” where new international students are matched with local buddies and there are given structured activities that facilitates collaboration and bonding this initiative is especially great for international students like myself that are trying to get familiar with a new culture, navigating through the culture shock and settling down in spite of the language barrier.”

This review suggests that mentor-mentee systems can also be helpful in making international students feel at ease when joining a university course; another benefit of the buddy system. The students who are attending universities with buddy systems already in place and are utilising them have had an enriched university experience due to the eradication of loneliness, confusion, and isolation. It is especially important to go the extra mile to make sure international students feel comfortable and a part of the university.

Furthermore, reviews from Swansea University students (no date) indicate that the mentorship systems in place helped them feel more a part of the university; more involved in the overall experience, both their own and others.’ A Law student named Oli says the system was “great for building interpersonal skills and overall, I feel, a now important part

of the Law School.” Being an active member of the university is important. UWTSD is a smaller university, and it is easy to mingle and associate with others if you have the confidence. However, there are few preexisting societies, so if you struggle introducing yourself to others then it can be hard to find a way to feel like you are engaging and making the most of your time at university. From the reviews, I know that the mentor-mentee systems aid students in feeling a sense of accomplishment through participating, socialising, and helping.

PROPOSAL

My primary and secondary research have given me further cause for concern about new students' emotional wellbeing when beginning university, and therefore more drive to implement this mentorship system. My research shows a clear link between providing students with connections to other students, and the ease with which they settle into university life. I will propose this mentorship system to the academic director, along with an explanation of the anticipated benefits of it; I hope that it will be put in place in time for next year's level 4 students to begin so I can see the outcome. The sources suggest that the buddy system will be enriching for all participants, and help reduce the stress levels of new students, thus positively changing the atmosphere in level 4 classes and amongst peers. It will also create a sense of security and comradery amongst students, according to students across the UK whose university have a mentorship system like this in place. I believe I have completed ample groundwork to prove the benefits of introducing this system to UWTSD; there is no cost, and it requires only a small amount of time and effort from busy staff. I cannot identify any risks to trialing a buddy system at the university, and I would do further investigation in this case as to whether students found it beneficial or not. I hope that the system sparks positive change in the university, making students operate more collaboratively and diminishing any fear or reservations about communicating issues or queries with those who have more experience and expertise.

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