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Institute of Teaching and Learning

DR. NICK WEISE
'ACADEMICS IN
RESIDENCE' AND
SUPPORT FOR
COMMUTER
STUDENTS

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2020/21
PROJECT
REPORT

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ITL Fellow 2020/21 **NICK WEISE**

Nick is a Lecturer in the School of Natural Sciences, a departmental Academic Lead for Teaching & Learning Enhancement and University Theme Lead for Student Success and Academic Development. He has been involved in a range of teaching, learning and student experience activities, including peer-assisted study sessions, undergraduate lecturing and tutorials, postgraduate researcher development, academic and staff training, professional accreditation assessment, pastoral care (residences) and welfare support (athletic union). Nick is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA).

Fellowship Student Partner Intern

MARIYAH ASERI

THE ACADEMIC IN RESIDENCE

ITL Fellowship project

This project explored ways in which the role of an 'Academic in Residence' living in student halls might be supported to function as a link between the student learning experience and the wider university experience. It also explored the impact of expanding both on-campus and residential provision for commuter/live-at-home students, as a means of fostering the inclusion of diverse communities of learners.

Context

Commuter students are the largest access group, institutionally and nationally, for which attainment and progression gaps exist. The group intersects with other priority groups, such as students from low participation neighbourhoods, white working class males and students of Pakistani or Bangladeshi descent. Provision for this group seems to be transient, reliant on ever-changing funding streams and/or outsourced to student unions.

At the start of the fellowship there was no commonly understood definition of a commuter student within the University, no coherent, bespoke or commuter-inclusive systems of student support, and no university lead or focal point to engage with commuter students, amplify their voices or address their needs.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

The objectives of the project were:

- To pilot a residential academic position in university-owned student halls (the 'Academic in Residence') as an innovative and efficient way to resource support for access groups
 - To develop and embed an integrated, multi-pronged approach to commuter student engagement
 - To champion and enable integration of diverse commuter student voices into university provision
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Project activities

A Commuter-student Peer Mentor Scheme

The UK's first commuter peer mentor scheme was set up to address thoroughly-documented issues around community, belonging and psychosocial transition among commuter students. This was achieved through partnership with the University's Division of Teaching, Learning & Student Development (TLSD).

Commuter Pre-sessional Events

Using residential spaces, commuter students were included in 'virtual' pre-sessional halls of residence events and initiatives to ease their transition to university, prevent feelings of being 'left out' of student life, and to build social/cultural capital (uniquely enabled by the residential nature of the Fellowship).

We also arranged for some socially-distanced 'in person', on-campus meetings for students who were willing and able to take up the opportunity (see photo on page 7)

Web presence and communications

Methods for identifying commuter students from our student records system were established so that we could send them regular e-mails. A newsletter was sent out by our central communications team to everyone registered as a commuter student, a bespoke webpage for Commuter students was created within our university's Student Support site, and a social media presence was developed (including the Living at Home Facebook Group and the Living at Home Discord Server). The details of relevant contacts were disseminated as 'friendly faces' who understand commuters. All of this shows commuter students that we 'see' them as a distinct constituency within the institution.

Expansion of Student Union "Living at Home" Project provision

The Fellow supported the 0.5 FTE UMSU-based project officer to expand the Student Union's 'Living at Home Project' provision across weekly term-time events, to address widely-recognised feelings of being left out and not feeling 'seen', 'appreciated' or 'listened to' by the university.

"At the University of Glasgow, the SRC are currently looking at how best we can improve the student experience for our commuter students. It has been so insightful and benefitting to have a look at the number of initiatives and support resources [the] University of Manchester currently have in place, particularly their commuter peer-mentoring scheme that I have not seen at any other institution whilst carrying out extensive research."

**Amy McKenzie Smith, Vice President of Student Activities
Student Representative Council (SRC), University of Glasgow**

Challenges faced

- Regrettably restrictions on travel and socialising as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented full use of (and inclusion of commuter students in) on-campus spaces and initiatives.
- There was also a lack of knowledge within the institution about what a commuter student is, where they live, how their experiences may differ from a student based in halls or shared accommodation, and how to find out who they are.

Student partnership

My Student Partner, Mariyah Aseri, was invaluable. She was involved in all aspects of the work described in this report, bringing to the table her lived experience of commuting and her previous expertise as a discipline-specific Peer Mentor to design, deliver and coordinate the innovative support system for commuters.

Collaborative work

Mariyah and I would like to thank the following people for their help with this project:

- **Accommodation Office:** Mandi Clark, Brendon Jones, Thomas Goodison, Atif Khan, Indigo Charles.
- **Peer Support/Teaching, Learning and Students Division:** Nasser Latif, Isabella Fairclough, Ben Bone, Jessica Hill, 37 commuter peer mentors
- **Student Support/Student Comms:** Kim Graakjaer, Michelle Munson, Ailsa Skelly, Jane Hardman, Katie Urnevitch
- **UMSU:** Neelam Rai, Raluca Padure, Laura Pike, Asif Omar, Whitworth Park RA, Hulme Hall JCR
- **Widening Participation team:** Stephanie Lee, Rachel Bailey, Alex Webb, Michaela Galvin, Matthew Jones

Outputs

- Student Support Commuter Hub web page
- Commuter student Peer Mentoring scheme
- Commuter student social media presence: the Living at Home Facebook Group; Living at Home Discord Server
- Socially-distanced commuter pre-sessional groups at Whitworth Park Halls



Further resources (available from Nick on request)

- Commuter Student Peer Mentoring | Meet Your Scheme training session
- Student Leaders' Conference | Differences in Student Outcomes officers' event
- New Academics Programme | Biology Medicine & Health | Factors Affecting Learning session
- New Academics Programme | Science & Engineering | Inclusion masterclass
- Residential Life | Reward & Recognition for Residential Life Advisors workshop
- Admissions | Chemistry UCAS Visit Day | Student Life Presentation | Commuting

Impact

“I was so excited to see more provisions for living at home/commuter students in the social responsibility action plan of the uni. I commuted from Oldham for the 4 years of my undergrad and plan on doing the same for the next 4 years of my PhD so it's definitely something which I'm well-experienced in! I think having ... living at home PASS/peer support-style pockets is an awesome idea.”

The peer mentoring scheme was well-received in regular debriefs with the student volunteers. Although low, attendance/engagement was comparable to that of discipline-specific peer support and with UMSU and halls events.

Reflection

The project transcended expectations, given that most of the original proposal was based around maximising the use of on-campus spaces / communities with a variety of face-to-face initiatives and that campus closure prevented all of these. The willingness of colleagues from various areas of the university to get involved and support the initiative was overwhelming, in particular those from Peer Support and Residential Life.

Next steps

Sustained provision for commuter student engagement needs to be put in place to end the cycle of short-term projects/pilots, intermittent funding and ever decreasing resource.

Once the piloted interventions and channels for the commuter student voice have been in place for a sufficient period of time (particularly encompassing post-pandemic campus life), meaningful evaluation can be carried out.

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