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Institute of Teaching and Learning

**DR. LI-CHIA CHEN
DEVELOPING A
PEER-SUPPORT
SCHEME TO
SUPPORT
TRANSITION INTO
AN ARTICULATED
BSC PROGRAMME**

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2021/22

**PROJECT
REPORT**

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ITL Fellow 2021/22

LI-CHIA CHEN

Li-Chia (BSc (Pharm), MSc (ClinPharm), PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in Pharmacoepidemiology in the School of Health Sciences at The University of Manchester, Honorary Clinical Senior Lecturer in Pharmacy at Salford Royal Foundation Trust, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

A hospital pharmacist by background, Li-Chia balances professional and academic profiles and brings her insight from international teaching and research into pharmacy in higher education institutes to bear on this project.

Fellowship Student Partner Intern

JENNA BOYD

PEER SUPPORT TO SUPPORT STUDENT TRANSITION

ITL Fellowship project

This project aimed to support the inclusion and success of international students on a newly launched 2+2+1 articulated programme - the dual degree BSc Clinical Pharmacy (delivered by the China Pharmaceutical University (CPU) and the University of Manchester (UoM)), through a staff-assisted peer-mentoring scheme known as the BScCP "International Student Experience Programme" (ISEP).

Context

The dual BSc Clinical Pharmacy (BScCP) admitted its first intake in September 2021. After two years of study at CPU, a cohort of up to 64 Chinese students p.a. will spend two years at UoM before returning to China to undertake a one-year clinical placement at CPU-affiliated hospitals. In China students will be taught the CPU pharmacy curriculum in English, with some UoM MPharm units being delivered by staff from UoM. On arrival in Manchester (the first cohort will arrive in September 2023), they will join the pharmacy undergraduate (MPharm) students for Years 2 and 3 of the MPharm programme.

The CPU-UoM clinical pharmacy programme is the second of this kind to be approved by the China Ministry of Education. Research shows that students' sense of belonging and engagement with their programme is closely related to academic performance. My proposal argued that tackling isolation and integrating the two student cohorts will be essential to enhance the student experience and the quality of teaching.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

The project aimed to develop and pilot a staff-facilitated peer-support scheme for international students on the BSc Clinical Pharmacy. The objectives included:

- To engage BScCP students in friendly online peer-mentoring meetings.
 - To introduce BScCP students to concepts and knowledge that are beneficial to cope with their transitions to the UK.
 - To encourage BScCP students to practice their communication skills.
 - To build the link between BScCP students and their MPharm student mentors.
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Project activities

STAGE 1: Before the programme

Staff

- Initiate activity planning, organise team and resources
- Recruit and meet with student mentors
- Arrange and deliver training to student mentors
- Arrange co-design workshop
- Apply for WordPress blog site
- Organise peer-mentoring group

Student mentors

- Engage with online materials and in-person training
- Co-design activities through co-design workshop

STAGE 2: During the programme

Staff

- Organise groups, timetables and online meetings
- Prepare mentor and mentee guide
- Give briefing to mentors
- Monitor the meetings
- Provide feedback to mentors and mentees
- Chase up post-meeting tasks
- Survey students (e.g. Appendix A)

Student mentors

- Attend briefings
- Deliver peer-mentoring meetings
- Provide reflections
- Contact mentees to follow up post-meeting tasks

STAGE 3: After the programme

Staff

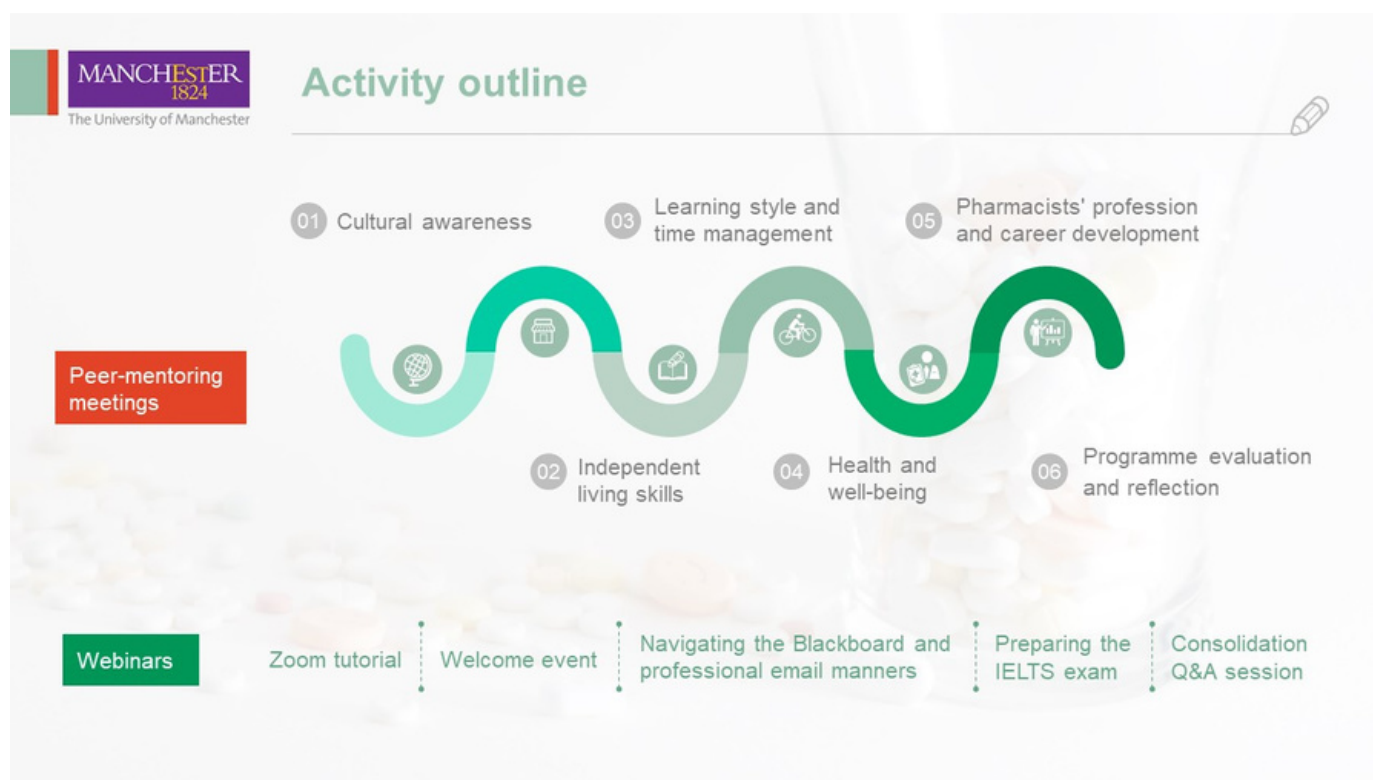
- Organise the end-of-programme celebration
- Evaluate the programme
- Write up the project report
- Organise the Blackboard space
- Complete the Blog site

Student mentors

- Participate in evaluations
- Participate in the end of programme celebration

Structure and content of the International Student Experience Programme (ISEP)

The ISEP involved six online meetings during term time and four webinars. Figure 2.



Each meeting was scheduled for 1 hour, but often needed 1.5 hours. Student mentors led the meetings, starting with ice-breaking activities and then working on a specific theme. Quizzes and short video clips helped to trigger discussions, and staff were on hand in the background monitoring the meeting in case any technical issues happen and mentors need additional support.

Mentees were also asked to complete pre- and post-meeting tasks, such as writing a short (150 words) biography with a personal photo or sharing photos illustrating the celebration of seasonal festivals; completing online surveys for learning styles and time management skills; preparing questions for interviewing British clinical pharmacists etc.

Each group also took turns writing a 350-word reflection on their learning points from each peer-mentoring meeting.

Challenges faced

1) Challenges in setting up the project

Time pressure and a shortage of staff were challenges. The first cohort of CPU students and the project started at the same time (September 2021), so there was minimal preparation time to set things up; hence the co-design workshop only ran in February 2022. I also found it impossible to allocate the anticipated one day a week to this project due to my teaching and research commitments. Hence I dropped most of my research activities. Luckily, the programme manager (Selena Tai) generously volunteered to manage some practical issues, while my Division Head (Professor Jayne Lawrence) funded 20 hours for a PhD student (Qian Cai) to help me organise the project work and edit the associated blog articles.

2) Practicalities

- Some practical challenges were a consequence of working across such different time zones, e.g. timetabling and communication.
- The CPU email system could be slow. Communication improved after students were enrolled on the UoM's student records system and Blackboard VLE unit space. However, the habit of using emails still needs to be established. It was also necessary to negotiate boundaries for using WeChat as the primary communication platform.
- Although this project recruited excellent mentors, mentor engagement was quite challenging. A contingency plan needed to be developed to manage the regular occasions that mentors did not reply to emails, WhatsApp messages, or to deal with final-minute cancellations.
- A detailed synopsis and evaluation of the ISEP presented to the School of Health Science can be found below (Output 5). That said, evaluation is an ongoing task. The attempt to adapt a "sense of belonging questionnaire" developed in a Biological Sciences Programme in an English-speaking country (Australia) was unsuccessful, so we still need to establish a valid and culturally-sensitive measure.

Student partnership

My Student Partner, **Jenna Boyd**, joined the project on 15 November 2021 and participated in and facilitated a range of activities, such as: reviewing the mentee/mentor guides; participating in the co-design workshop and mentors' focus group; giving advice on managing some peer mentors; and writing up an article for the ISEP blog - [Reflection from the student partner \(15 August 2022\)](#).

Collaborative work

- The UoM BScCP programme manager, **Selena Tai**, provided substantial administrative support to the project (organising mentor/mentee groups, arranging timetable and Zoom meetings, providing Zoom training, drafting materials and guides, managing the Blog site, organising training/celebration events) and was also heavily involved in supporting both student mentors and mentees.
- This project was supported by **Emma Sanders**, Teaching and Learning Officer (Academic Development) at the Institute of Teaching and Learning, who helped make links to the academic and administrative staff and advised on managing my SPI and my budget/resources to organise training and student mentors' celebration events.
- **Isabella Fairclough** from the student engagement team advised on managing student mentors, while **Matthew Oakley** helped provide online training, and **Matthew and Mila Paisley** delivered on-campus training workshops to student mentors.
- **Helen Robinson**, Web Officer in Communications, Marketing and Student Recruitment, provided support and advice on developing the WordPress blog.

- Previous Institute of Teaching and Learning Fellows (**John Owen, Nicholas Weise**) and **Samantha Aston** (as a 'critical friend' to this fellowship) also provided beneficial suggestions, networks and materials to help this project.
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Outputs

Guidance for Peer Mentors and Mentees

- This project provided materials related to the peer-mentoring meeting, including an **ISEP Mentees' Guide** (Output 1), an **ISEP Mentors' Guide** (Output 2), **ISEP Welcome Booklet** and associated visual aids to facilitate online discussion (Output 3). These materials are developing into a Unit's Blackboard space (PHAR10700).

International Pharmacy student experience blog

- The student mentor and mentee's experiences and reflections have been included on an **International Pharmacy Student Experience Blog** site (Output 4), which consists of four themes: i) ISEP experience; ii) transition and cultural awareness; iii) university life and study; iv) career development, and miscellaneous.

FAQs

- The project also collected a list of key questions from the BScCP students that can be used to develop further support for international students (Output 5): **ISEP FAQs**.

Evaluative presentation on the International Student Experience Programme

- An **evaluative ISEP presentation** made to the School of Health Science, TLSE workshop group (Student voice), including graphical representation of programme outline and data (Output 6).

Promotional video

- Student mentors supported the creation of a student experience video (Output 7) for promoting our BSc Clinical Pharmacy programme.
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Impact

1. Impact on students

Three crucial impacts derived from the rich qualitative and quantitative data collected in this project proved the project objectives were achieved:

- Student mentees had excellent engagement in the activities and made visible progress in communication skills during the programme and a meeting (see Evaluative Presentation (Output 6) for survey data).
- Developing student mentors' communication, leadership skills, and confidence (see Evaluative Presentation (Output 6) for survey data). This is an unexpected side benefit of ISEP.
- Student mentors and mentees also established a good bond and connection through the precious friendship built in the ISEP.

2. Impact on the institution

When the evaluative ISEP presentation of this project was made to the School of Health Science TLSE workshop group (Student voice), colleagues highly commented very favourably on the project and suggested that it is an excellent example of widening support to international students (See Output 6, above).

- Information about the ISEP work has also been published in the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health's Internationalisation Newsletter Issue 4 (27 May 2022) and Professor Keith Brennan, Faculty Associate Dean for Internationalisation, also commended it to the University's China Strategy Group as an example of excellent practice.
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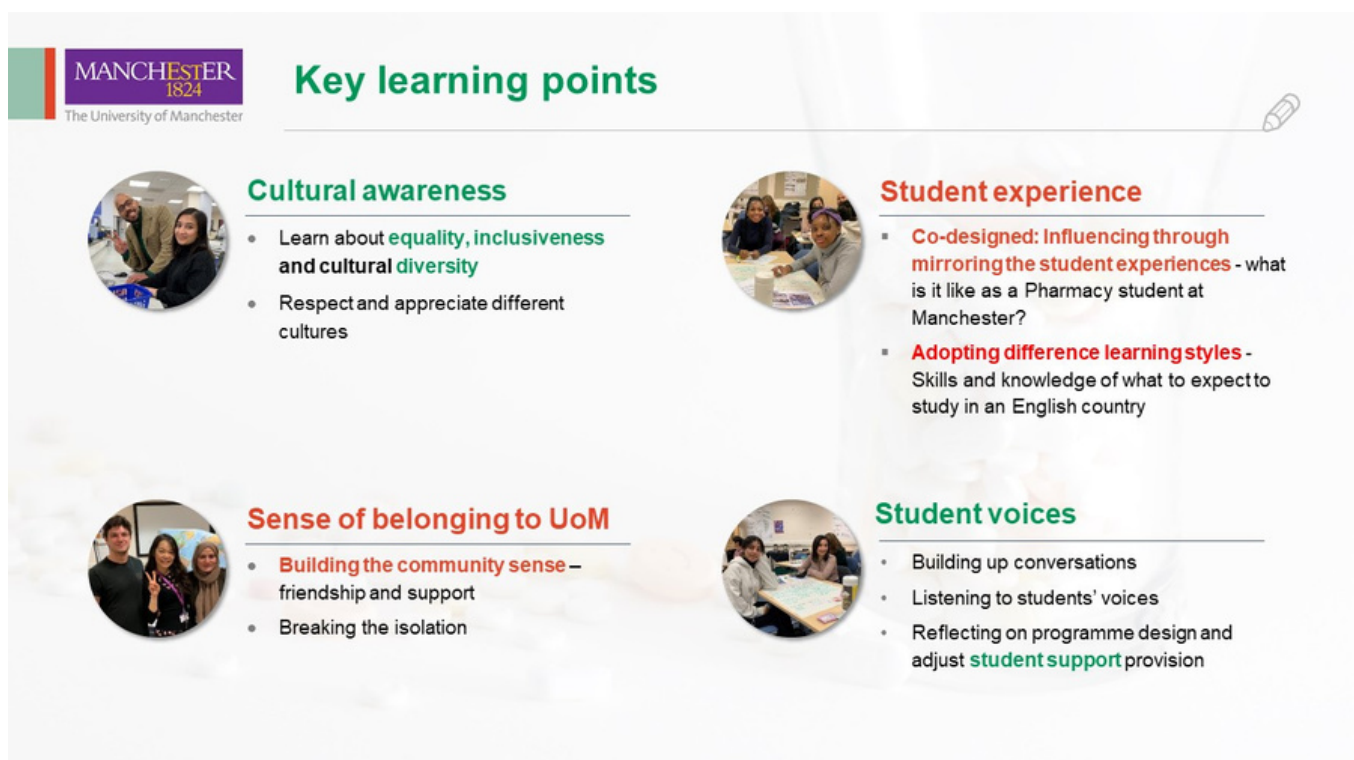
Reflection

Overall, this project has developed a unique and successful peer-mentoring scheme. The project is innovative due to following reasons:

- This programme is unique in supporting international students from the early stage of an articulated programme. It differs from conventional elective articulate programmes that provide pre-sessional orientations in the summertime.
- We organise student mentors to lead the meetings as they are considered more approachable and less intimidating; hence mentees are more relaxed and open to engaging in the activities and thus establish a connection and sense of belonging.
- The peer-mentoring meetings have to happen online, so the design and skills to support the engagement and learning differ from the conventional university in-person peer-mentoring scheme.
- We purposefully include various academic orientations and study skills in the themes and develop guidance for discussion, so that peer-mentoring is purposeful, instead of depending on mentees to bring up random topics for discussion.

- The impact of this project has been measured by student mentees' and mentors' self-assessments. Comparing student mentees' interim survey (including three themes about the transition, ISEP and sense of belonging) and end of programme survey (about ISEP) as well as the feedback they gave to mentors (the Dear Mentor letter) and the programme review (at the final presentation), we can determine the impact of this programme on students (as mentioned in the above section). We also surveyed all student mentors and conducted a focus group with four mentors participating, and found this programme impressively and positively impacted the student mentors, too.
- We feel the success of this programme can be attributed to embracing cultural awareness, including student experiences, enhancing the students' sense of belonging and responding to students' voices (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Characteristics of this programme design



Next steps

1.Sustainability

Within the BScCP programme team we are discussing how to sustain the current peer-mentoring scheme and whether it can maintain the mentorship connection and relationship.

(1) We hope to recruit some excellent student mentors who are progressing to higher year groups to our mentor liaisons as part of a continuous leadership development scheme for the mentors. Some mentors who are going to graduate proposed an alumni scheme to keep connecting with future international students and mentors.

(2) Although student mentors delivered the ISEP, it required much staff time and administrative support. Determining what are staff roles in this scheme and how to sustain the programme is a vital issue. Some colleagues suggested that we facilitate the scheme with online materials, which is still under discussion.

(3) We have created a Blackboard space to host all activities and relevant materials. The site is still under development, and we hope both student mentors and mentees can use it in the future. However, ISEP currently is neither timetabled nor credit-bearing. One proposal is to include it in the curriculum, which may help maintain the engagement and sustain staff's contributions.

(4) We are also developing an International Pharmacy Student Experience blog site that stores our ISEP experiences and other valuable articles written by student mentors or volunteers. We hope this site can be a good resource for international students.

2. Extending the support

(1) Regarding mentees progressing to Year 2, the BScCP programme team is working on supporting them in Year 2, such as arranging for them to join Academic Advisor groups with new MPharm students and assigning joint projects to encourage teamwork between UoM and CPU students. Dr Constantinos Demonacos leads this work and is supported by Dr Andrew Leach, Sarah Knighton and myself. I was also linked with Dr Alex Baratta, who is interested in providing his support and materials from the School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED) around "Chinese English".

(2) We are also considering whether to extend or develop an additional supporting scheme for the current (or newly recruited) MPharm international students. This needs further analysis to design a suitable programme for them and could be developed as another project.

3. Future collaborations

We are drafting an abstract for the Manchester Pharmacy Education Conference 2023. I am interested in exploring potential collaboration opportunities with Professor Gita Sedghi at the University of Liverpool, Nilushi Karunaratne, and Betty Exintaris at the University of Monash in supporting international students.

The aspiration of developing a global classroom to link international pharmacy students to discussions or conduct joint projects also interests me.

Dr. Li-Chia Chen
September 2022