



Turning challenges into change: Harnessing student voice to make change and increase engagement with our student mentoring scheme

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ABSTRACT

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU) our Student Mentoring scheme, which is included with the institution's Access and Participation plan, aims to support our first-year students to transition into university successfully, with support from a peer mentor. Several studies have explored and demonstrated the value of mentoring, or other peer support schemes, on the student experience including Le et al. (2024) who found that peer mentoring can benefit students' academic performance, retention rates, emotional and psychological wellbeing, and social integration. This Vignette aims to share both the successes and the challenges of the Student Mentoring scheme at NTU, exploring tangible ways to enhance support for your student staff members, and the impact that this can have on first-year engagement.

Keywords: First-year, mentoring, peer learning, belonging, engagement, student staff

Student Mentoring at Nottingham Trent University

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) established our institution-wide Student Mentoring scheme in 2017 as part of our Success for All strategy, which commits to participation, engagement and success for all students, no matter their background or experience (Nottingham Trent University, 2026b). The scheme is a collaborative project that is delivered by the Collaborative Engagement and Retention Team (CERT) and Mentoring Project Leads (one per academic school/site). We recruit and train up to 650 Student Mentors to support between 8000-10000 first-year students with their transition into university every year. Building a sense of belonging for our first-year students is an incredibly important part of our scheme. Blake et al. (2022) highlight that "the greatest impact that universities can have on students' sense of belonging is to improve the way they connect their students" and this is at the heart of our Mentors' work. Our Mentors work throughout the academic year to create opportunities for first-years to connect (Nottingham Trent University, 2026a), including:

- **Holding regular meetings for first-year mentees to attend:** an opportunity for first-year students to ask for any support and to provide any feedback on their experiences;
- **Working with academics to provide in-class support:** Mentors support in-class sessions to share their own experiences and support skills development for example, supporting in animal behaviour sessions or helping the first-years to learn course specific software;
- **Organising events for their mentees to attend:** From delivering academically aligned events, such as referencing workshops to events to help with building first-year connections;

Turning challenges into change: Harnessing student voice to make change and increase engagement with our student mentoring scheme

- **Sending regular communications:** Mentors sharing opportunities, providing support and signposting.

Since 2017 we have made several changes and developments to the scheme, in response to student feedback with the aim to enhance our offer, to build the confidence of our Mentors and to increase their engagement with their roles. This vignette will focus on the 2023-25 academic years, where we have made some real, tangible changes, the impact this has had on engagement from both Mentors and first-years with the scheme, some big wins and some challenges. We'll then look to the future to explore upcoming focuses of the scheme, facing sector wide reductions to the resources of Mentoring/peer learning schemes.

Developments and impact

In response to ongoing collection of student voice, we have made several changes to the Student Mentoring scheme, including:

- **The development of our Lead Mentor role:** setting clearer expectations and responsibilities, creating more structure and building their confidence. Lead Mentors, who can be anyone that wants to take a leadership role, regardless of experience, act as a bridge between Mentors and staff, offering Mentors support as well as ensuring the feedback loop is closed;
- **Adapting our training content:** including areas that Mentors have historically reported less confidence in, such as communication and dealing with low engagement from mentees;
- **Introducing more contact points for both Lead Mentors and Student Mentors:** enabling them to regularly provide feedback and ask for support;
- **Introducing reactive skills-based workshops each year:** to address any areas of low confidence/concern that Mentors report throughout each year;
- **Development of our Student Mentor Toolbox:** providing a suite of resources that our Mentors can refer to throughout the year.

As a result of these changes, we've seen a growth in engagement with the scheme despite sector wide concerns about participation in student engagement initiatives. In the 2022-23 academic year, we saw our mentors claiming 37% of the budgeted hours for the scheme, growing to 70% in 2023-24 and 96% claimed in 2024-25. We've also seen a significant increase in first-year engagement with the scheme, with 50% of our first-year cohort engaging with the scheme in 2024-25 compared to 37% in 2023-24 and 14% in 2022-23.

Challenges within the scheme

Despite our growth in engagement, we face some challenges within the scheme each year. Here, we focus on two of these issues; firstly, the high number of inactive Mentors each year and secondly, that we historically struggle to recruit and retain a representative number of male Mentors.

Turning challenges into change: Harnessing student voice to make change and increase engagement with our student mentoring scheme

Inactive Student Mentors

We define 'inactive' Mentors as those who have not submitted a timesheet after the 31st October each year. These Mentors are withdrawn, and their first-year mentees reassigned to active Mentors within their school. In 2024-25 we withdrew 30% of our Mentors, which is an increase from 28% in 2023/24 but an improvement from the 40% withdrawn for inactivity in 2022-23. Although we do not always know why our mentors are inactive within their role, those who withdraw often explain that it is due to capacity, having to juggle their studies and other commitments alongside their role. The University of Edinburgh Careers Service (2023) found that part-time work can reduce study time, while financial stress among non-working students may also negatively affect academic performance. Each year there are also several 'inactive' Mentors who ask to remain in their roles, explaining that they had not worked as they were unsure how to engage with their mentees, so we work with the academic schools and Lead Mentors to support them to re-engage with their roles.

Underrepresentation of male Student Mentors

Sims et al. (2017) highlight the importance of ensuring that any co-curricular or student engagement schemes are inclusive and accessible to provide the best opportunities to students. As NTU is a diverse university, we strive to ensure that we recruit a cohort of Mentors that is representative of our student body to ensure that their experience is relevant to the first-years that they are supporting. We also encourage our first-years to go on to become Student Mentors, so it is important that they can see themselves represented each year. The scheme is generally representative, and often over-representative (compared to the NTU population) in areas such as disability, ethnicity, mature and BTEC-qualified students. However, one group that is consistently underrepresented is male mentors. Each year we struggle to recruit a representative number of male mentors (Kyte, 2024) with 27% of our mentors being male in 2024-25 in comparison to the 47% of the NTU student body. In addition to this, the males that we do recruit are significantly more likely to have low engagement or withdraw from their roles. As a result of this, our male first-year students may feel that they are not represented in the scheme and be less inclined to engage with this support available. They may also be less likely to choose to become a Mentor themselves, as they may not feel like it is for them – continuing this cycle of underrepresentation.

Looking ahead and next steps

Along with the sector, we are learning how to support our Mentors with reduced resource. To get ahead of this, we're carrying out a review of the scheme to explore how we can make efficiencies while still providing quality experiences to both our Mentors and first-years. Using student voice collected from both Mentors and first-years based on their experiences and needs, this review will:

- Explore how we can strike a balance between our highly and lowly engaged Mentors
- Explore how we can introduce more structure to the role to proactively build Mentor confidence and increase engagement with their roles
- Understand our first-year engagement data better to enable us to support our mentors to deliver quality support to them

Turning challenges into change: Harnessing student voice to make change and increase engagement with our student mentoring scheme

In addition to the review of our Student Mentoring scheme, throughout the 2025-26 academic year, we are piloting Supplemental Instruction - Peer Assisted Study Sessions (SI-PASS) within our Economics course as an 'add on' to the Mentor role. This scheme provides structured, timetabled, opportunities for Student Mentors to facilitate study sessions for our first-year Economics students, which allows the first-years to set the agenda at the start of each session to enable them to focus on the specific areas that they are struggling with each week. Chilvers & McConnell (2025) highlight the wide variety of different approaches to peer-to-peer activities, which have a number of different aims and we chose to pilot the SI-PASS model as it is implemented globally (Lund University, 2025a) and known to support community building as well as supporting attainment and retention of its participants (Lund University, 2025b).

Conclusion

This article might spark more questions than it does provide answers to those reading, and even as I write it and reflect on the challenges that we face on the scheme, it prompts lots of different thoughts for me:

- We know that students who engage with extracurricular opportunities are more likely to achieve higher outcomes in their studies (Kerrigan & Manktelow, 2021), so how do we adapt and promote our peer-support opportunities to appeal to those groups who are not as engaged?
- How do we effectively support our student staff to be able to engage in our schemes when they have so many clashing priorities?
- How do we continuously improve our offer for our students and keep it relevant, while navigating a continuously changing student body and sector-wide budget and resource reductions on student engagement activities?

Although we do not necessarily have the answers to these questions, or the challenges that we face within the scheme yet, we can absolutely see through the work that we have done to adapt the scheme throughout the past few years that using student voice and student co-creation is key to ensuring that the scheme stays relevant and impactful for both Student Mentors and first-year students.

Biography

Cayleigh Morgan is a Student Mentoring Officer in the Collaborative Engagement and Retention Team (CERT), within the Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) since 2022. Before NTU she worked in Student Voice and Representation at both the University of West London Students' Union and Birkbeck Students' Union since 2016.

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Turning challenges into change: Harnessing student voice to make change and increase engagement with our student mentoring scheme

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