A mixed methods evaluation of a peer mentoring programme (PASS) for international postgraduate students: Mentee and Mentor perspectives

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Abstract

Peer mentoring provides academic, social, and pastoral support to students. This enhances their educational experience and supports learning. However less is known about the value for international master's students studying in the UK. To address this gap, this study introduced and evaluated a peer assisted study session (PASS) model of peer mentoring. Mentee expectations were explored at baseline: these were high and varied considerably. The post intervention survey showed students were (78-82%) highly satisfied with the quality, range of topics, usefulness, and opportunities for peer interaction provided by the ten-week, in-person programme. Equally mentors valued the experience; they developed leadership and communication skills, deepened their subject knowledge, and gained transferable skills. Despite this, mentees and mentors alike called for additional, longer sessions, and smaller mentor to mentee ratios to meet the demands and challenges faced by international students. Recommendations and practical implications for programme teams are identified.

Keywords: PASS; peer mentoring; international students; postgraduate students; learning environment.

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Introduction

The prospect of enhanced employability is a key driver for studying abroad (Fakunle, 2021; Guan, 2023), however international students experience challenges and increased levels of stress (Baik and Larcombe, 2019). They often struggle to integrate into their new communities, to find and develop supportive networks and to gain a sense of community (Byrne, Brugha and McGarvey, 2019; Hale, Rivas and Burke, 2020) thus reducing opportunities for language development (Ramsey, Ramsey and Mason, 2007), while also negatively impacting mental health, wellbeing (Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer, 2011), and career development (Watson et al., 2020).

Therefore, enhancing student engagement and supporting international students throughout higher education (HE) is a critical concern for a range of stakeholders. For example, HE institutions wish to retain and progress international students (Pan, 2021; Atobatele, Kpodo and Eke, 2024), particularly as domestic (UK) student numbers reduce (HESA 2023). In a post Covid-19 era, fuelled by rapidly increasing living costs and diminished purchasing power due to frozen domestic fees (in the UK), retention of international students is financially critical for the continuing provision of HE. Equally, for academics and students, higher levels of student engagement can equate to a more positive learning environment, which fosters a sense of belonging and social connectedness (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017), enhances individual levels of wellbeing (Denovan and Macaskill, 2017), and generates positive experiences (Li and Xue, 2023).

However, international students often face challenges adapting to new education systems and can experience language and cultural barriers which inhibit learning opportunities, impact engagement in lectures, and increase social isolation (Can, Poyrazl and Pillay, 2021; Cena, Burns and Wilson, 2021). Programme level support can address these difficulties, specifically via peer mentoring programmes which have been widely used to support undergraduate students entering HE. The benefits are well established (Collier, 2017; Zhu, 2019; Hayman et al., 2022; Patel, Calhoun and Tolman, 2024) and include support of students' psychological adjustment and the development of meaningful peer relationships (Antoniadou and Homes, 2016), self-esteem and empowerment (Krisi and Nagar, 2023), and confidence and motivation (Fayram et al., 2018). All can lead to a positive and fulfilling university experience, particularly during transition phases (Menzies,

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Baron and Zutshi, 2015). This is true for mentors as well, who develop valuable cultural capital within their field of study, whilst supporting the development of such for mentees (Hayman et al., 2022).

Equally, peer mentoring supports postgraduate student populations (Oddone et al., 2021). A recent systematic review reported positive outcomes for doctoral students across academic, social, psychological, and career domains irrespective of academic discipline (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). However, authors identified the need to address inequitable access for international students, who are known to be reluctant to access support services (Zhu, 2019).

Peer mentoring and the international postgraduate student experience

International students can be supported through peer mentoring schemes which support international undergraduate retention (Igbo and Sile, 2019), provide help to navigate the complexities of university systems including rules and regulations (Vickers, McCarthy and Zammit, 2017), and enhance sociocultural experiences (Thomson and Esses, 2016). Yet despite these benefits, there remains a paucity of empirical research exploring the international postgraduate student experience (Hallett, 2010; Zaccagnini and Vernikina, 2013; Dawson et al., 2014), specifically those undertaking taught master's programmes. Doctoral students, while also postgraduates, have longer to immerse themselves in their studies, host country, and role. Further, expectations and requirements differ dramatically to that of a taught programme. In the UK, postgraduate programmes are often 12-15 months, while in the USA they are 24 months. A recent systematic review of non-cognitive support for postgraduate students included 11 studies, three of which reported outcomes associated with peer mentoring (Frantz et al., 2022). Of those, two focused on doctoral students and one explored the experiences of international master's students (Menzies, Baron and Zutshi, 2015). Only one additional study was identified which reported empirical outcomes from a Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) peer mentoring programme. Conducted in Australia, the authors reported positive benefits (Zaccagnini and Verenikina, 2013).

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Research objectives

Thus, to address the challenges experienced by international postgraduate students and to enhance their learning experiences whist in the UK, this study introduced and then evaluated a ten-week PASS peer mentor scheme into a taught master's programme at one UK University. The student cohort and demographics on the programme had recently changed, and the introduction of PASS was intended to provide an additional source of support to students. The scheme was introduced in September 2022 and facilitated again in January 2023. This study sought to evaluate the impact of PASS for postgraduate international students and consider acceptance and feasibility.

Method

A mixed methods evaluation was undertaken. International students were surveyed pre-and-post intervention, supplemented with interviews. The study objectives were:

1. To explore international students' expectations of peer mentoring.
2. To provide empirically derived data relating to international students' experiences of peer mentoring.
3. To explore the experiences of the peer mentors delivering the intervention.
4. To measure student attendance of PASS.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the School of Health and Social Care research ethics committee, Swansea University (reference #1 2024 9086 7868).

The PASS peer mentoring programme

PASS is an internationally recognised and validated approach to peer mentoring (Dawson et al., 2014) with positive outcomes (Coliñir et al., 2022). PASS at Swansea University is run by the Centre for Academic Success (CAS), a centralised department supporting skills development across the university. While there are other peer mentor schemes, PASS is the only one geared towards developing academic skills at programme/module level.

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Students are recruited and trained to become PASS Leaders (a volunteer role). Training is conducted over three days and includes face to face, remote, and asynchronous elements, totalling ~12 hours. It focuses on techniques for facilitating study sessions (versus teaching), creating a relaxed and inclusive space, setting boundaries (for mentors), and signposting for appropriate support (for both mentors and mentees). Observation and reflection are part of the role, and a final reflection process encourages them to consider how the skills and experience gained will aid them in the future.

Participants

Participants were students on the Public Health and Health Promotion MSc, at Swansea University (UK).

Recruitment and procedure

September 2022 cohort students were offered PASS, and informal feedback indicated positive experiences and programme feasibility. As such, the new January 2023 cohort students were invited to complete an online survey which asked them to provide demographic data before answering open and closed-ended questions using free-text boxes, ranking and Likert scales pertaining to their expectations, past experience, and current understanding of peer mentoring. After the survey closed, students were provided with weekly one-hour, timetabled PASS sessions held in university classrooms. After the ten-week scheme finished, both cohorts were invited to complete a follow-up online survey pertaining to their experiences of PASS including its usefulness, value, and the support provided. September cohort students were included as they had previously received the same PASS scheme.

Finally, peer mentors (PASS Leaders) were invited by email to attend an online (zoom) or in-person interview to talk about their experiences of delivering PASS, to consider what they enjoyed, what they gained and to reflect on the training received. Semi-structured Interviews offer opportunities for in-depth exploration of subjective experiences (Ruslin et al., 2022). Participants provided written consent, and interviews were conducted by student interns to ensure participants felt comfortable discussing their experiences.

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Interviews were audio or video recorded and professionally transcribed. Identifying data were removed prior to analysis.

Data analysis

Quantitative data was entered into SPSS and cleaned. Descriptive statistics were run for demographic data, ranking, and Likert scale answers. Frequencies, percentages, mean, and SD were calculated. Attendance was monitored via university student card 'swipes'. Qualitative data from free-text survey questions were grouped thematically. Qualitative interview data was analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). The researchers reviewed and re-read the transcripts independently before coding the raw data line by line. They then discussed and aligned their codes before triangulating meaning; codes were used to develop a thematic map which was used to discuss and organise the coded data into initial themes. Initial themes and associated codes were reviewed by returning to the raw data to check for alignment and outliner data. Finally, sub-themes were created before theme names and descriptions were produced. Mean duration of interview length was calculated using Excel.

Results

Survey 1: expectations of peer mentoring

Forty-three participants completed survey 1, a 57% (43/75) response rate; the majority were female (35/43, 81%), Nigerian (24/43, 56%), aged between 21-50 years old. Mean age was 30.17 (SD, 6.207) (see Table 1). Most (31/43, 72%) reported no prior experience of peer mentoring.

Table 1. Participant characteristics survey 1.

Participant characteristics	Number of responses (%)
Gender	
Total responses	43 /43
Female	35 (81)
Male	8 (19)
Nationality	
British	1 (2)
Nigerian	24 (56)
Indian	13 (30)
Sri Lankan	2 (5)
Filipino	1 (2)
Saudi Arabian	1 (2)
Pakistani	1 (2)
Age; Range years	21-50
Mean age (SD)	30.17 (6.207)
Have you had prior engagement with peer mentoring?	
Total responses	
Yes	9 (21)
No	34 (79)
Helpful in the past?	
Yes	9 / 9 (100)

Expectations of peer mentoring varied. Students were offered several statements to choose from; the most selected option suggested that students expected peer mentoring to be a student-led support session, covering academic topics (34/43, 79%). However, some expected sessions to be staff-led (4/43, 9%) or focused on assignments and study tips (2/43, 5%).

Participants also had the option to include their own description. Responses varied, one participant (2%) indicated they were unsure, three (7%) did not provide an answer, one (2%) felt it involved supporting scared students, two (5%) believed it meant the provisions of one-to-one support, three (7%) considered it teaching to bridge a gap between students and staff, seven (16%) responses did not relate to peer mentoring and the remaining respondents (33%) explained it as a role modelling relationship where one guides another through a situation they have prior experience of: 'Peer mentoring to me means getting support from someone who has more experience than me, in order to get more knowledge and skills from them'. Responses suggested support included advice to adjust to university life, with mentors acting as the first point of contact within the university for new students: 'Peers who are first line of approach to help us with the doubts'. Equally peer mentors

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might also work to encourage students in their studies and guide them to become independent learners:

> It's something that help us to keep going in right track [*sic*]. Mentors will be there to encourage as well as to help if there is any need. They will give an outline about what is going to happen in the class and campus. Peer mentors will be much approachable.

Survey 2: experience of PASS

55 students responded to survey 2, the majority were from the January 2023 cohort (46/55, 84%). The response rate was 39% from both cohorts (55/142) and 61% for the January cohort (46/75). 25 January cohort students responded to both surveys (25/46 54%). Like survey 1, most participants were female (42/55, 76%), Nigerian (38/55, 69%), aged between 22-56 years old; the mean age was 31.89 (SD, 6.551).

Satisfaction, usefulness, and peer interaction

56% of participants 'agreed' that the peer mentoring received had met their expectation (31/55). Free text data provided understanding as to how this was achieved: 'the peer mentoring gave me an opportunity to learn from those that have already done this program. I appreciate their advice and encouragement' (September cohort); 'it was helpful in guiding me by giving an overall idea about the subject' (January cohort).

The majority (43/54, 78%) were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the quality of PASS. And the majority (42/55, 76%) were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the range of topics covered. Similarly, the majority found the sessions 'useful' or 'very useful' (45/54, 82%). Free text data supported the statistical analysis: 'A lot of extra information was available at the peer mentoring. Tips on how to answer essays and exam questions. Also, learned experiences from our peers were available. This was useful' (January cohort).

Finally, the majority indicated they had sufficient opportunities to interact with peers during the sessions (44/55, 80%). However, the majority also indicated they wanted more opportunities to interact with peers (43/54, 78%) (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Participants responses for two survey questions. The first relating to satisfaction with the quality and the second satisfaction with topics covered.
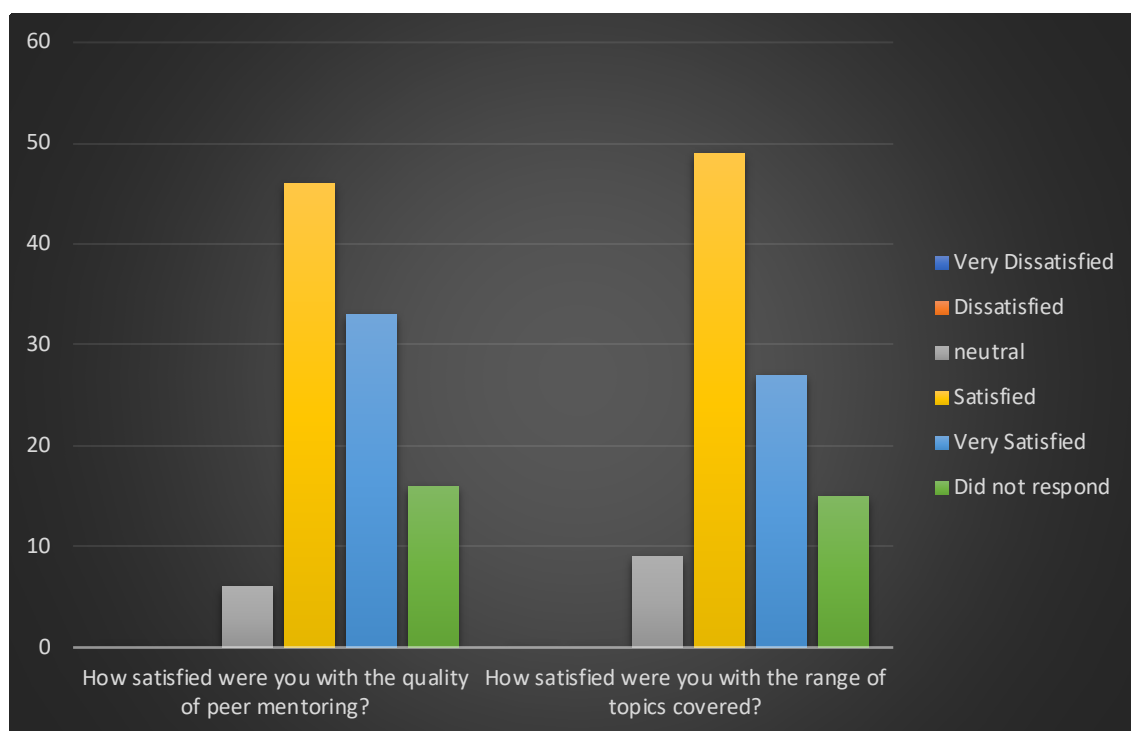

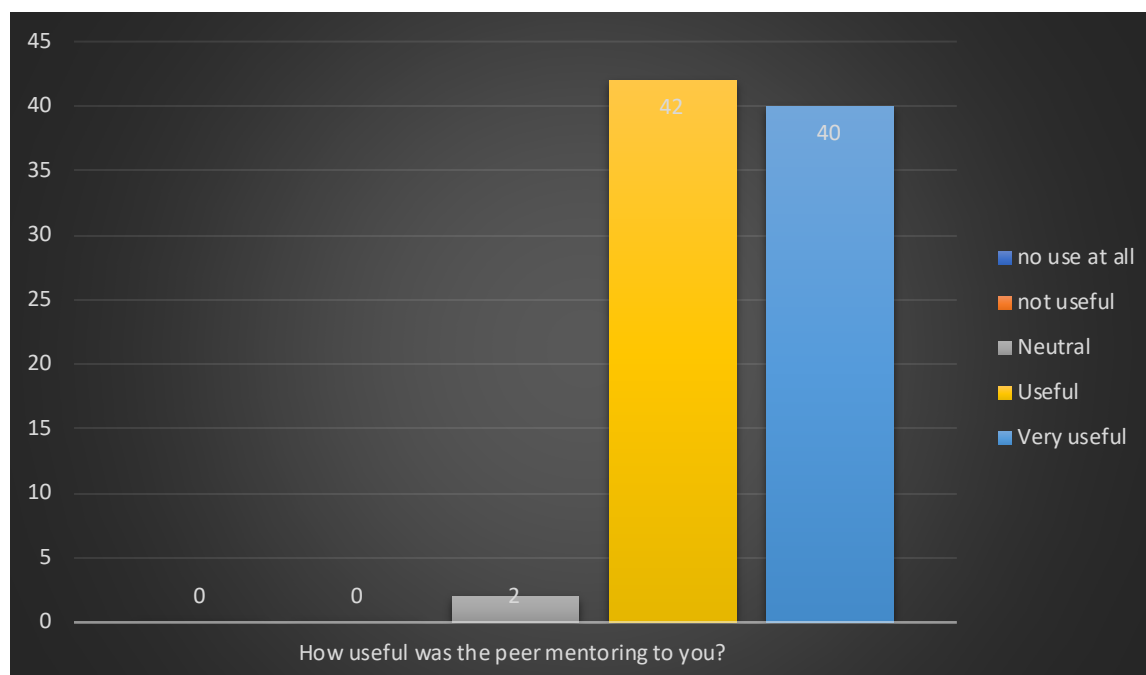**Figure 2. Participants responses relating to usefulness of peer mentoring.**
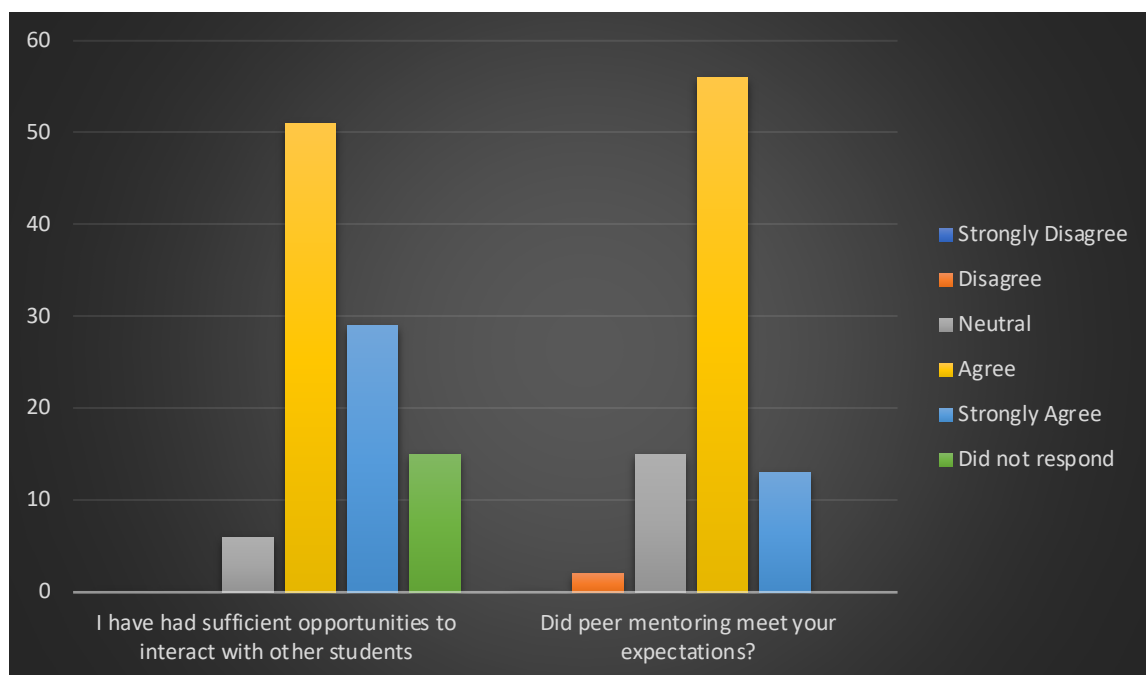
Figure 3. Participants responses for two survey questions. The first relating to opportunity to interact with peers, the second asking if peer mentoring met expectations.

Benefits

When asked to rank the benefits of peer mentoring, the provision of 'academic support' was most commonly ranked first (32/43, 74%), interacting with peers was second (20/43, 47%), social support, third (11/43, 26%), friendship, fourth (13/43, 30%), meeting others from my programme, fifth (13/43, 30%), and reducing loneliness, sixth (25/43, 58%). 12 respondents did not answer these questions.

Participants were also asked 'Where might they otherwise have gone for support?' and 'what else could be done to improve the peer mentoring programme?'. January 2023 cohort participants overall were unsure where they would have accessed other sources of support, whereas September 2022 cohort students were able to identify other reliable sources of support. For example: 'Honestly, it would have been difficult. But maybe I could have interacted with students in the other cohort' (January cohort); 'I would access this support from Centre of Academic Success or ask my mentor' (September cohort).

Only 15% of participants called for additional time for peer mentoring within the curriculum. Requesting an extended and timetabled programme which also included dissertation

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support, more peer mentors, and the option of virtual participation. In addition: 'there should be two peer mentoring session per week' (January cohort), 'sessions should be two hours' (January cohort), and 'increasing the number of mentors' (January cohort).

Participants (13%) also called for programme focused examples and research software: 'it will even be a bigger plus for the PHHP if students are taught how to use at least one statistical software e.g., R statistics' (January cohort), with more focus on career and employment opportunities for public health; 'I would like to request for more explanation on the future opportunities in various sectors of this degree for example – to discuss more on the teaching career in university after pg, or as a public health practitioner' (January cohort). Feedback also indicated a need to address pastoral support needs: 'to improve on the interaction with peers, I believe creating a supportive environment by tackling other life topics, such as housing issues, student union, etc., will reassure students to share academic challenges with their peers. Also, introducing group work that are mandatory will improve teamwork therefore, reducing loneliness' (January cohort).

Attendance data

Card swipe data collected from the January 2023 cohort indicated that 71 of 75 students attended at least one session (65%), none attended all ten sessions, but the majority (50/71, 70%) attended five sessions. Mean attendance was 4.23 sessions (n=71, SD= 2.499).

Peer mentor interviews

Five peer mentors were interviewed; two mentored the September cohort and three the January cohort. Three were female (3/5, 60%). The mean duration of interviews was 41:51 minutes with a range of 34-45 minutes. The following four themes were identified and are outlined below, highlighted by participant extracts: 'training is key', 'PASS is not teaching', 'student engagement', and 'mentor benefits'.

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Theme 1: training is key

PASS training informed mentors' approach to the planning and delivery of PASS sessions. They came to understand that sessions should be student led and engaging. To achieve this, they planned ahead, sought input and feedback from mentees to identify needs and wants, implemented practical strategies like ice breakers and group work and endeavoured to create a relaxed atmosphere. For example, 'I would be mindful, like, if some people are asking me questions and I know the answer but, at the same time, I have to take a pause and how I would create the ambiance, the environment so that people would discuss with each other, even if they wanted me and they expected me to answer them' (Mentor 4).

Mentors also discussed their appreciation of how the training was delivered, saying that role modelling was 'really, really helpful' (Mentor 5) for 'it showed them how to facilitate the PASS sessions' (Mentor 5). Equally it helped them to understand the boundaries of their role. Mentors explained that mentees often wanted and needed far more support than they could offer, however they knew from training where to signpost these students and who to contact if further intervention was needed. Finally knowing they 'were free to contact [PASS Supervisor]' (Mentor 1) was considered useful.

Theme 2: PASS is not teaching

Training helped the mentors understand the purpose of PASS; multiple mentees noted they thought they would be a 'teacher'. However, the training process enabled them to understand their role as a guide, a leader, a mentor 'the whole point of this PASS training was… to make us clear that it's not about spoon feeding, it's about enabling the students to do their assignments, to do this degree by themselves' (Mentor 5). Once they had gained this insight, they were then able to recognise the benefit to mentees; through PASS, they were learning to become independent learners. For mentees to be independent learners, they needed a mentor who facilitated rather than taught. By planning sessions where mentees worked with their peers, they were supported to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which mentors understood to be 'really beneficial for students' (Mentor 2).

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Theme 3: student engagement

This theme is comprised of two sub themes: 'student needs' and 'situational factors'. Mentors understood that how they planned their sessions mattered in terms of student engagement, but they also saw a myriad of other factors as being influential.

Subtheme 1: student needs

All mentors discussed the fact that students came to their sessions needing and wanting considerable support. One key challenge was their difficulty adjusting to a new education system. Mentees understood their unique position, as peers, and as international students themselves:

> I realised most of our colleagues, especially international students, most of them were struggling with the academics and the problem wasn't necessarily with what was being taught but it was trying to blend how they used to learn and how they went about things in their previous country with the curriculum here (Mentor 1).

Mentees also wanted support with issues beyond academic topics including: I.T. issues, mental health, housing, finances, and writing CVs.

Subtheme 2: situational factors

Student engagement was impacted by a variety of external factors. In terms of attendance, the timing of sessions was critical. If students were not already on campus for lectures, or if they had to wait for an extended period of time for the PASS session after their last lecture, they were far less likely to attend. Equally, mode of delivery (online or face-to-face) impacted attendance.

Theme 4: mentor benefits

The mentors took pride in being able to support their peers and highlighted multiple benefits gained despite finding it challenging at times: 'I knew I was making an impact in someone's life, it was a sacrifice that was worth it because at the end of the day, you know, it is making the impact for someone' (Mentor 2); 'there was a sacrifice on my part, it

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was hard for me to do it, but it paid off in the end' (Mentor 1). This included developing their own sense of self as a confident, independent learner and developing their awareness of leadership, and the skills required to lead well, including how to effectively engage others and deliver information. Additionally, they acquired practical and transferable skills relevant to current and future settings: 'it gave me different views on how to go about many things, be it leadership, be it how to manage a group, how to make an audience listen, like public speaking, all of it. So, it … boosted my confidence level' (Mentor 3); 'it improved my time management skills, and also the communication skills' (Mentor 2); 'it was a new experience. It gave me different views on how to go about many things, be it leadership, be it how to manage a group, how to make an audience listen, like public speaking, all of it' (Mentor 4).

Discussion

This study evaluated a ten-week peer mentoring programme which was embedded into a taught master's programme at one Welsh (UK) university during the 2022/23 academic year. The purpose was to identify international students' expectations, and understanding of peer mentoring, and to evaluate and explore the impact of taking part from the perspective of both mentees and mentors, to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences; and to identify recommendations for the programme team.

The baseline survey found that 72% had no prior experience of peer mentoring. However, participants had high and varied expectations of what a peer mentoring scheme could and would provide, covering academic and social domains, alongside guidance pertaining to general university life, such as transitioning and navigating the university. This diverse range of expectations proved problematic for mentors. Thus, it is critical that programme teams effectively address and mange expectations to ensure positive outcomes.

Survey data indicated students were highly satisfied with the quality and range of topics covered in PASS. They found the sessions useful, and indicated they had sufficient opportunities to interact with peers. Over half agreed that sessions had 'met their expectations'. The key benefits identified were access to academic support, peer input

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surrounding how to approach and navigate programme assessments and exams, a deeper understanding of programme requirements and social support.

Using one-to-one interviews, the experiences of the five peer mentors were explored. The role was unpaid however the training promised to develop transferable skills to support future employment. Mentors valued the opportunity but found it challenging. The training supported them in a variety of ways and was critical to the successful delivery of PASS and their positive experiences on reflection. They reported many benefits and transferable skills including leadership, time management, and communication skills, while also increasing their subject knowledge, which supported onward applications for public health associated employment opportunities. The use of simulated PASS sessions during training enabled them to develop a clear understanding of what mentoring was (for example, theme 2 'PASS is not teaching'), and to gain an appreciation of their role as a mentor who can facilitate others' journeys to independent learning. They believed that the experience helped them to develop their confidence and enhanced their CVs. Findings are comparable to a study by Menzies, Baron, and Zutshi (2015) which explored international postgraduate students transitioning to education in Australia. Here authors also reported that PASS benefitted mentees; it helped the to develop new friendships, which built social support and provided access to university and programme level information which supported their learning. Of note, most of their participants had already been studying in Australia for more than one year (in contrast to the current participants, where the vast majority were new arrivals to the UK). Equally findings are in alignment with those of Malm et al. (2022) who reported mentors PASS skills supported employability.

More recently, Cross et al. (2019) reported similar benefits of peer mentoring for public health MSc postgraduates in Ghana. While not directed at international students, the qualitative study reported that peer mentoring supported students' sense of inclusion by 'being part of a network' which built social support and improved students experiences. In addition, it provided practical benefits surrounding transition points and orientation to the university.

The interviews with the mentors also shed light on challenges and practical issues faced by international students; needs which PASS could not meet. This has been reported elsewhere. Faheem et al. (2024), in a qualitative exploration of BAME mentors completing a

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UK clinical psychology training scheme, highlighted that mentors found mentees' high expectations challenging. Mentees expected more support than could reasonably be provided, and some mentors struggled to set boundaries to navigate this successfully. This is important and has implications for programme teams and university systems.

Finally, the evaluation aimed to consider student attendance in relation to future feasibility. Card swipe data for the January cohort identified that attendance was not optimal with only half of the participants attending up to half of the ten-weekly sessions provided. What was interesting was the quantity of free text comments which indicated that they wanted both additional and longer sessions, more topics, more opportunities for peer interaction, and more peer mentors. The latter was reflected in mentor interviews as well. They felt that smaller group sessions may ease demands and provide more opportunity for the support required. This contrast between expectations, need and actual attendance is important. The qualitative data from the peer mentors goes some way to exploring how to improve attendance, for example mentors identified several structural issues which could be addressed to improve attendance including the timing and location of sessions. This should be carefully considered in future development and deployment of PASS.

Implications for practice

Alongside addressing the four specific study objectives, the aim of this study was to identify areas for improvement which would support other programme teams to embed PASS for large cohorts of international students studying at master's level:

1. Being aware of students' expectations of what a peer mentoring scheme will provide is critical to address, with implications for student satisfaction and PASS utilisation. In a resource deprived HE context, making the most of opportunities must be prioritised. Thus, programme teams should provide clear and explicit information on what peer mentoring *involves* and what the benefits will be. This must be communicated to students *before* they take part; this may help address unrealistic or inaccurate expectations. Equally addressing students' expectations may reduce the burden on peer mentors.

2. Providing guidance on *how best to engage* with the weekly PASS sessions may also ensure that students are able to make the most of the support provided.

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3. Students clearly valued the scheme, but often external factors like timetable alternations affected their attendance. This could be addressed at programme level through careful planning and timetable preparation.

4. A clear outline of the benefits for peer mentors including personal stories and case study examples may encourage more international students to volunteer and thus reduce the mentee, mentor ratio, further addressing the dual call for additional and longer sessions.

Study limitations

Several factors must be considered when reviewing the empirical data collected, which may limit the generalisability or transferability of study findings to the wider HE context. First the sample size was incomplete, while a satisfactory response rate was received for survey 1 and a good proportion of these students completed survey 2, the overall response rate for survey 2 was lower than desired. This may have been because the September cohort had completed their PASS sessions a semester earlier and given dissertation deadlines, had limited time.

Secondly the peer mentoring programme was facilitated over a ten-week period. Students were asked to consider the benefits at the end of this period, rather than on a weekly basis. However, a weekly feedback approach was considered too demanding of student's time.

Future research

Future research could explore the benefit of PASS for wider stakeholders, such as programme teams, and central student support teams; whose input is vital, and for whom the rapid changes in student numbers, demographics and learning and teaching needs, have been challenging.

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Conclusion

The findings of this study have implications for future practice at the institution where the evaluation was conducted but also more widely for those interested in embedding similar schemes for international postgraduate students, particularly on large cohorts with dual entry points. The introduction and evaluation of a ten-week peer mentor scheme (PASS), which recruited, trained, and supported five peer mentors and 142 international postgraduate students, over one academic year identified positive value for mentees and mentors alike. Mentees were supported as they began their master's programme; PASS offered a community of peers which provided opportunities for social interaction and helped them navigate university life, access available resources, and develop their academic skills. The training provided ensured mentors understood their role as mentors not teachers and this facilitated students to become independent learners. Mentors also valued the scheme. There are implications for programme teams looking to support international, taught master's students from arrival throughout their first semester; to enhance their potentially challenging educational journey.

Acknowledgements

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University's PASS Programme, as well as embedding and teaching academic skills across university programmes.

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