“It’s Not Just Me!”
Student Testimonials and Peer-Support for Retention and Attainment

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YOUR PRESENTER

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Research fields
• Higher Education policy and practice (widen. access, satisfaction)
• Technology Enhanced Learning
• Academic Self-Efficacy

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BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Problem
→ most university students experience difficulties during their studies
→ if left unsolved, some problems can affect attainment and retention.

Partial Solution
→ development of pastoral support, and student services
→ some students are reluctant to seek help because of perceived stigma and fear of peer-comparison.

People like to normalise it a lot and I think if you’re struggling, you’re struggling and that’s not something that’s really debatable.
BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

**Alternative Solution**

→ facilitate informal student networks to foster sense of belonging and prevent feeling of isolation
→ partnership with the student body.

**In practice**

→ peer-led project: UEA + SU + DOS + students
→ students identify with problems of other students
→ find solutions and build resilience, fight stigma signpost University’s sources of help.

*We’re coming to uni and we’re kind of lost, it’s a huge world and it’s so different from what we know before ...*
THE PROJECT

Stage 1 – interviews
→ interview students, identify problems and copying strategies.

Stage 2 – video filming
→ UEA MAKE: student-led film maker company
→ students volunteer video-interviews.

Stage 3 – outputs
→ Research output = thematic analysis on interviews
→ Practical output = student platform fostering belonging, informal networking, and signposting help.
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

2x undergraduate ambassadors
- Information distribution
- Recruitment

2x postgraduate research associates
- Facilitated interviews
- Recruited participants for follow-up filming
- Coding, analysis and write-up
- Presentation

4x undergraduate video producers
- Short videos for peer support platform

Union of UEA Students Representatives
- Consulted for interview design
- Recruitment strategy
METHODOLOGY

- Flyers
- 39 recruited
- 19 cancelled appointment
- 20 face-to-face interviews
- Audio-recorded & transcribed
- Thematic analysis
PARTICIPANTS

20 students interviewed

- 19-40 years old
- 6 male, 14 female
- International & home students
- 2 postgrad, 18 undergrad
- Broad range of schools
RESUL TS

Barriers faced by students
• Uncertainty in a new environment
• Social isolation
• Practical and personal issues

Dealing with adversity
• Self-management strategies
• Existing support networks
• Support from the university

Advice from experience
• Students shared wisdom

I thought I was the only person in the world and I felt like I couldn’t tell anybody because I was too embarrassed.

When I just arrived in Norwich I was like quite, I feel quite alone and confused and everything... it’s a new city, everything is new for you.

It’s really important to have that solid group of friends.

The first thing is not to be shy, do as whatever you are adapting or whatever like teachers are there for helping you and even to other students like you can.

I thought I was the only person in the world and I felt like I couldn’t tell anybody because I was too embarrassed.
I thought I was the only one ... this is why I wanted to do this interview.

I’ve learned that it’s not embarrassing to seek support and they’re not embarrassed either.

We’re coming to uni and we’re kind of lost, it’s a huge world and it’s so different from what we know before ... but they’re here for that as well ... thank you to the staff...
PROJECT OUTPUTS

Online peer-support platform
• expected to grow over time

Student testimonials
• short-videos

Information material
• for staff training purposes

Research
• insights on student experience

Don’t be scared to engage with all the aspects of university. [...] Don’t be scared to engage with staff because more often than not they’re really open and really helpful. They’ve seen many students in your position before.
REFLECTIONS

• Interviews conducted by two researchers – some inconsistencies observed

• Large drop-out of recruited participants

• Delay in setting up online resources – process management

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REFERENCES


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