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Offering Online Peer Support to Students: The Case of the CCT Student Mentoring Academy

CCT College Dublin

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College Dublin

Computing • IT • Business

**'Offering Online Peer Support to
Students: The Case of the CCT Student
Mentoring Academy'**

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‘Offering Online Peer Support to Students: The Case of the CCT Student Mentoring Academy’

What was the nature of the project and when did it take place?

The CCT Student Mentoring Academy is a key institutional student success and student partnership initiative. In the Academy, students work in partnership with faculty to provide peer support opportunities across the college as well as structured support and guidance for peer mentors. The College’s [Student Success Strategy 2021-23](#) states: “CCT will continue to grow and expand its CCT Student Mentoring Academy through faculty supervised peer support. Programmes such as these will continue to prioritize working in partnership with students to optimise the learning environment.” (2021, p.8)

During the academic year 2020/21, the Student Mentoring Academy successfully migrated its activities from face-to face to an exclusively online format as remote teaching and learning continued due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. With the resumption of face-to-face teaching and learning in 2022, student mentoring activities will continue to avail of the virtual classroom and other technologies to augment its face-to face activities for enhanced inclusion and impact.

Student mentoring activities traditionally focus on first year transitions, student acculturation and creating a sense of belonging. Whilst CCT Student Mentors contribute to these activities, the predominant focus of the Academy is to provide peer support to students in the teaching and learning context.

Boud in an article entitled ‘[What is Peer Learning and Why is it important](#),’ describes peer learning as “moving students beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning” and as students having “the opportunity to learn from each other. It gives them considerably more practice than traditional teaching and learning methods in taking responsibility for their own learning and, more generally, learning how to learn. It is not a substitute for teaching and activities designed and conducted by staff members, but an important addition to the repertoire of teaching and learning activities that can enhance the quality of education,” (n.d. para 5). In a paper entitled ‘[Peer Support: A Theoretical Perspective](#),’ Mead, Hilton & Curtis (2001, p.6) describe peer support as “a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another situation empathically through shared experiences.”

[The CCT Institutional Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy 2021-2024](#) describes peer learning as a central priority in relation to “the creation of student identity and the ability to engage in the learning environment... for academic success, and research shows that peer interaction and social integration in higher education are closely linked to student retention, progression and performance” (2021, p.17)

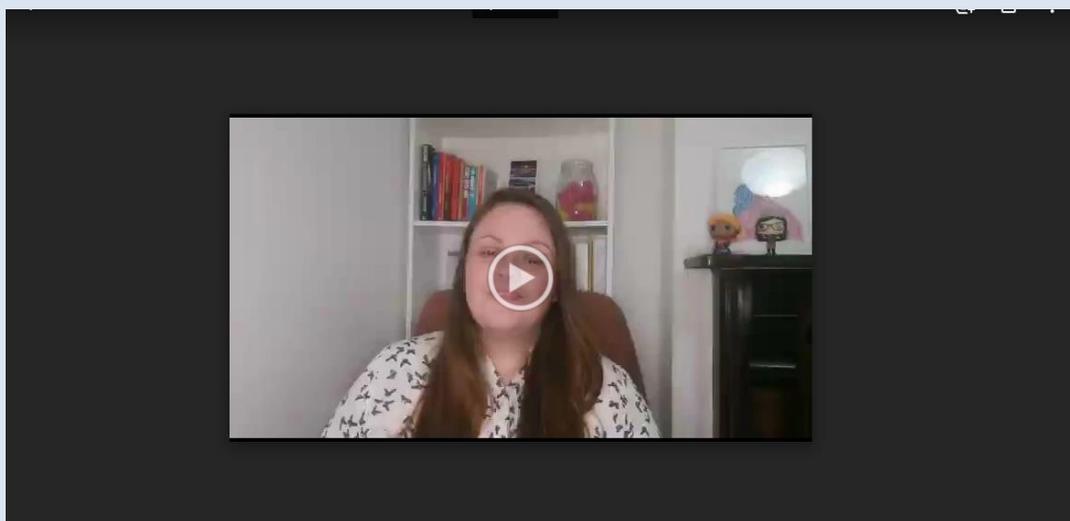
During the academic year 2020/21, many CCT student mentors also expanded their activities from providing peer learning/support within business or ICT disciplines to encompass a broader range of activities across disciplines pertaining to academic integrity and the CCT Centre for Teaching and Learning Forum where mentors’ experience of dealing with fellow students in a teaching and learning context provided particularly valuable insight to inform enhancement initiatives. The CCT Student

Mentoring Academy is a vital student success and partnership initiative in terms of promoting peer learning and support but also as a catalyst to student partnership and leadership initiatives.

Which department(s), committees and/or team(s) managed the project? Which others were involved in the project / initiative?

The project is led by faculty in partnership with students, as a Centre for Teaching and Learning initiative. Experienced student mentors also mentor other student mentors. Please see this welcome video on the Student Academy's Moodle page from an experienced CCT student mentor, Mariana Braga Vasconcellos which was produced for other student mentors in the Academy:

<https://bit.ly/3uawvB9>.



Describe the aim(s) of the project?

The migration of the CCT Student Mentoring Academy's activities to online format during the 2020/21 academic year empowered the Academy to continue the pursuit of its aims and goals despite the changes to teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These aims include:

- To support student success and academic support initiatives across all programmes in the College by providing peer support opportunities developed by faculty in partnership with students, particularly on programmes with complex subjects, in lab sessions and on programmes with poor retention /progression or academic outcomes
- Equip student peer mentors to provide effective peer support to students by providing a centralised forum for communication and training initiatives
- Provide a centralised forum for student mentors to interact and share knowledge amongst each other
- Support student partnership initiatives. CCT College is an institutional member of the National Student Partnership Engagement Programme. Student mentoring activities are organised by faculty in partnership with students

What were the intended learning outcomes or objectives of the project?

Offering student mentoring activities online during the academic year 2020/21 ensured that the following outcomes and objectives could still be pursued.

- To enhance the teaching and learning experience at CCT College through peer learning and support activities
- To contribute to institutional student success, academic support and integration/socialisation activities. This includes
 - First year's transition into higher education
 - Student engagement and satisfaction
 - Retention and progression
 - Academic integrity
 - Academic outcomes
- To contribute to student diversity and inclusion initiatives
- To support student partnership initiatives
- To provide opportunities for student mentors to develop team working, leadership and communication skills to enhance employability.

Describe the project / initiative

The Student Mentoring Academy is typically managed by two members of faculty. Students can apply to be a student mentor via the Student Mentoring Academy page on Moodle. Please see the Appendix for graphics.

Mentorship activities are carried out by a student mentor within or across programme cohorts. Student mentoring sessions are pre-emptively aligned to course activities/modules where student feedback, programme annual reports or faculty/student demand indicates a requirement. Modules or lab sessions in which student mentoring activities are typically requested include mathematics and lab sessions in which software is downloaded and configured such as Java JDK, NetBeans, Packet Tracer, and Virtual Box. The Student Mentoring Academy also offers peer support to students on business programmes. Mentoring sessions are offered on a weekly basis with additional sessions for specific topics or areas of complexity.

During the academic year 2020/21, training opportunities for student mentors were offered online using Zoom, augmented by the use of Moodle discussion forums. A short welcome presentation is also available on the Student Mentoring Academy's page on Moodle. See: <https://bit.ly/3s4tqQN>. Student mentoring sessions were also offered online. Students could Join Zoom sessions in which they could ask student mentors questions.

What data was collected during this project / initiative?

At present, formal feedback is not gathered in relation to the CCT Student Mentoring Academy specifically. Given the strong focus on peer learning/support and student partnership at CCT College, plans are in place to obtain feedback data in relation to the activities of the Academy going forward. A feedback form will be routinely disseminated to both student mentors and mentees after student mentoring sessions. Additionally, questions have been added to the annual student survey pertaining to the CCT Student Mentoring Academy.

What insights were gleaned from the project data?

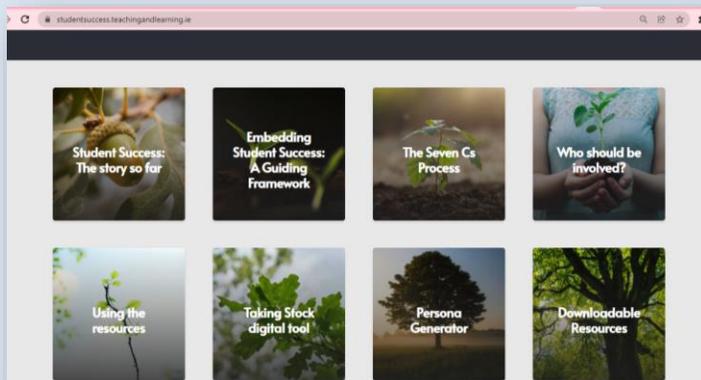
As mentioned previously, formal feedback in relation to the activities of the Student Mentoring Academy is not collected at present. Wrap up sessions are conducted by Faculty Project Leads with student mentors at the end of each semester. Anecdotal feedback in these sessions indicates the positive impact of the Student Mentoring Academy for both student mentors and mentees in terms of enhancing the leadership and communication skills of mentors and the learning experience for mentees. Feedback remained positive for both mentors and mentees after the transition by the Student Mentoring Academy to the online delivery of its activities.

Annual Programme reports have shown improvements in relation to progression and academic outcomes on programmes where students can struggle with complex programme content and in which student mentors have supported students. Without formal feedback mechanisms pertaining to the Student Mentoring Academy, it difficult to ascertain the specific impact of the Academy in this respect. Proposed data gathering mechanisms will provide insightful feedback in this regard, going forward.

How has practice changed on the ground at CCT as a result of the project?

The CCT Student Mentoring Academy effectively supports the development of peer support opportunities organised by faculty in partnership with students. Students are equal partners in this process with many assuming leadership roles in terms of supporting and/or training fellow mentors. This has shifted faculty away from a supervisory to a partnership role with students which has been further reinforced by the publication of the National Student Engagement Programme's framework for student engagement, [Steps to Partnership](#) (2021). Many CCT student mentors also sit on the CCT Centre for Teaching and Learning Forum where their knowledge of teaching and learning initiatives on the ground makes their contributions particularly insightful in terms of informing institutional enhancement activities. One student mentor now co-chairs the CCT Academic Integrity Committee with a member of staff as part of a student partnership initiative. The CCT Mentoring Academy builds student confidence which in turn empowers student partnership and leadership initiatives.

CCT College plans to engage with the [National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning's Student Success Toolkit](#), published in 2021. The CCT Student Mentoring Academy will be a key asset in terms of promoting engagement with the toolkit by students. Other areas where student peer support would be valuable, pertain to blended learning delivery, library led tours/orientations and well-being initiatives.



National Forum's Student Success Toolkit

Online delivery of mentoring sessions on Zoom by the CCT Student Mentoring Academy during the academic year ensured the continuity of the Academy's work. In a study on virtual peer mentoring: '[Adaptations to mentor and peer mentor training at the Medical Faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic](#),' Zibold et al (2021) describe the migration to online delivery of the faculty's student peer mentoring programme. Zibold et al. conclude: "The reorganization of our mentoring program by means of online platforms made it possible to keep mentoring running and to stay connected with all our stakeholders despite COVID-19...Online formats offer the option to plan mentoring conversations more flexible and thus exchange experiences more often." The authors indicate that going forward the programme will continue to incorporate virtual sessions to ensure the maximum inclusion of all learners. CCT will also bring forward the lessons and experience acquired during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the CCT Student Mentoring to further enhance and develop this vital initiative.

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Zibold, J et al. Adaptations to mentoring and peer mentor training at the medical faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. GMS journal for medical education vol. 38,1 Doc8. 28 Jan. 2021. [Online]. Available at: doi:[10.3205/zma001404](https://doi.org/10.3205/zma001404). Accessed 27/01/2021.

Images

CCT Student Mentoring Page on Moodle

The screenshot shows the Moodle interface for the CCT Student Mentoring page. On the left is a navigation menu with options like Home, Dashboard, Site pages, My courses, Courses, and Career Advice. The main content area features a forum post titled "Student Mentoring Academy Forum" with a list of guidelines for participation. Below the text are three images: a calendar titled "Timetables", a "WELCOME" sign with stick figures, and a video message titled "A message from a fellow Student Mentor" showing a woman speaking.

Discussion Forum Communication with Student Mentors from the Student Mentoring page on Moodle

The screenshot shows a forum post titled "New Semester and Student Mentoring Academy" by Amilcar Aponte, dated Tuesday, 15 September 2020, 1:23 PM. The post begins with "Hello, everyone!" and a welcome message to the new semester. It then expresses appreciation for student mentors and announces a meeting on Friday 18th September at 2:30 pm. A Google Meet link is provided: <https://meet.google.com/heh-wsik-vtp>. The post concludes with a note about adjustments for an online environment and a sign-off from Amilcar.

Introductory presentation available on the CCT Student Mentoring Academy at:
<https://bit.ly/3s4tqQN>.

What we do...

- **Platform for peer-to-peer support on academic contents**
- Academic reinforcement opportunity
 - Hard skills
 - Soft and communication skills
- Extra curricular experience opportunity
- Bringing faculty members and students together
- Collaborative environment

Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another situation empathically through shared experiences. (Mead, Hilton & Curtis, 2001)