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# What Works 2? Graduates as Advisors for Transition and Students' Success

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Will there ever be a University that provides sufficient staffing resource to provide the perfect academic advising and tutoring service to all students? There may also be the small matter of a debate as to what that perfect service may offer. This article will discuss one University's approach that sought to makes effective use of staffing resource, offers significant development opportunities for those staff and ensure relevance and connectivity between students and their staff. The model that was designed, and is now embedded, focused on the creation of an integrated system of Student Success Advisers (SSA). These roles were filled by students who had just completed their degree in the faculty in which they are then employed. This new staffing resource targets a specific aspect of support and advising for students that focuses upon student transition and the first year experience. The SSAs are viewed by students as relevant and relatable providing an approachable interface between students and staff, and evidence suggests that it works. The roles were created through the University's participation in the Higher Education Academy's What Works Student Retention and Success program (2012–2016) and now sees 17 SSAs employed across the University. This article will consider the creation of the role and its fit to the university; offer clarity around role objectives and provide insights from GSSAs on impact of the role. It will then detail how the role grew and became embedded across the university, explaining the integration with the university's wider student support system to engage students through their transition and first year experience.

Keywords: retention, students, co-design, advising, community

## INTRODUCTION

For the past 6 years Birmingham City University (BCU) has been developing, evaluating and expanding the roles of recent graduates in supporting and advising new students through the transition into and through the University. The role was created through the *What Works?2,* Paul Hamlyn Foundation, national initiative which provided the opportunity for the University to explore student retention and success through a funded and focused approach. This saw the University build on its rich student engagement foundations and experience of employing student on campus to integrate this within a new focus on the first year experience and students in transition.

This article will draw together literature, consider the design process that led to the creation of a new Student Success Advisor (SSA) role, offer clarity around role objectives, and provide

insights from SSAs on impact of the role. The authors also reveal the institutional impact, how the role grew, and became embedded across the university, and explain the integration with the university's wider student support system as it complemented and added to the institutional personal tutoring and academic advising resource.

## A STARTING POINT THROUGH WHAT WORKS?2

In 2013 the University applied to become part of the What Works?2 national initiative. This was funded through the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and co-ordinated by the UK' Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Action on Access. It incorporated 13 institutions and 43 discipline areas and was informed by previous work undertaken between 2008 and 2012 that saw seven projects and 22 higher education providers identify, evaluate and disseminate effective practice to improve student retention. This was the *What Works? Student retention and success program (Thomas, 2012), or What Works?1.*

The principle behind the second iteration of What Works was to build on the findings of What Works?1 and examine how higher education providers could develop those models and improve student retention and success. In particular, this spoke of a need to recognize that "*It is the human side of higher education that comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution*" (Thomas and Jones, 2017). The institutional program required the creation of a cross-institutional team and the identification of three discipline areas in which to deliver interventions. Interventions had to fall into at least one of the three categories (active learning, co-curricular, and induction) and "*had to aim to improve engagement and belonging through: facilitating supportive peer relations; enabling meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing students' capacity, confidence, and identity to be successful higher education learners*" (Thomas and Jones, 2017). These had been identified as areas of significant impact during What Works?1 project.

This direction resonated strongly with BCU which was one of the pioneers of a new type of student engagement approach in the United Kingdom. Since 2008, the University had been employing students to act as academic partners and work alongside faculty and professional services staff to identify curriculum and university community issues and co-develop solutions (Nygaard et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2014; Curran and Millard, 2015). This had seen external recognition through the Times Higher Education award for outstanding support for students in 2010 and was firmly embedded within the University's mission. This approach, whereby students were seen as partners and were employed to assist in improving the quality of their learning experience through collaborative redesign and creation projects aligned well with the potential area of investigation offered by What Works?2. The Paul Hamlyn initiative offered a new focus for this approach and enabled the University to consider transition into and students' success through the first year experience.

Birmingham City University educates 24,500 students and is located in the center of England within a major conurbation of over a million people. It mainly recruits regionally with over two thirds of students being from the region. It has a richly diverse and ethnically mixed student population with over 50% of students originating from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. BCU is an institution that is proud of its widening participation mission and with such a perspective participation in What Works?2 and the pursuit of mechanisms and ideas to enable student success became a driver for institutional change.

Change normally starts small and in this case it started with three program teams, Radiography, Media and the Built Environment, who embraced the University's student engagement philosophy and formulated a shared proposition and specific ideas for impactful change. Through this process they were directed by the University's Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) and Birmingham City Students' Union (BCUSU) as the partners recognized the need to focus on the person, not the cohort, and to seek to make connections through a variety of means from academic to social to professional.

The aims of the BCU and BCUSU initiative were to:

- Interweave academic and social elements to better support students through the transition into and through university;
- Utilize this approach to provide students with a multiplicity of avenues for support and advice;
- Ensure a smoother and more successful transition that leads to greater student and organizational success.

Through these aims the University aimed to develop principles, processes and examples at course and school level of how to improve transition and retention practices that could be embedded across the university and shared with the sector through What Works?2.

## THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The interventions designed by the course teams through the initiative were founded upon the What Works model (Thomas and Jones, 2017). The BCU approach reflected this and saw a focus on striving to embed all interventions within the student academic journey, or academic sphere, rather than placing it on the fringes within separate social or service related activities.

This need to focus on the academic sphere of a student's life to generate a sense of belonging and community was a belief that had been a driver at the University since 2008 when it first invested in and initiated its student engagement approach to improving the student experience. This was reflected in Trowler (2010): (3) definition which considered the dual investment of institutions and students as:

> "*Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution.*"

For the University, the investment by both students and the institution was key as it focused upon a partnership approach to improvement and quality enhancement (Brand and Millard, 2018). Coates (2005): (26) spoke of learning as a joint endeavor *"which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved."* Both Coates (2005) and Trowler (2010) suggest the need for an institutional commitment to make change happen and participation in What Works?2 provided that institutional spur to action and validated the developments that were made for those course teams involved.

The University and its students wrote of this approach (Nygaard et al., 2013) and saw student engagement and partnership as an institutional "state of mind" that infects all aspects of academic and non-academic provision. This approach is echoed within the Higher Education Academy's (2014) Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership which highlights an institutional approach to working with students as partners. This requires institutions to embed this partnership approach within the processes and procedures of the institution in order to embed the culture of partnership.

Barr and Tagg (1995): (565) added the perspective that the university needs to move from the instruction paradigm that *"a college is an institution that exists to provide instruction"* to one that adopts a learning paradigm where the *"college is an institution that exists to produce learning"* and this is echoed in the student partnership approach adopted by the teams at BCU. Academic staff were often learning as much from engaging in the process with their student partners as the students (Nygaard et al., 2013: 114). Reasons for why things were done in certain ways were questioned by students who suggested more relevant alternatives that would better engage a new student of today and courses became more current and relevant. Huba and Freed (2000) suggested the need to move from a teacher centered learning environment to one that is learner centered. This sees a culture where the approach is co-operative, supportive and collaborative where the academics' role is to coach and facilitate learning together with students. This could translate as a personalized approach to learning and the need to treat students as individuals.

This could see the need for institutions and academic course teams to create the scaffolding for fostering peer to peer relationships that enable supporting structures to be created. Krause (2012): (459) reminds us that *"for some students, engagement with university studies is a battle and a challenge rather than a positive, fulfilling experience"* and that it may require some students to come *"to terms with new ways of learning and interacting that may prove uncomfortable."* One way in which this can be supported is through the ability of a student to generate relationships with peers and staff that may significantly improve their confidence. Holdsworth et al. (2017): (11) explained that *"encouraging the development of friendship networks assists in the development of resilience'* and this can be enabled through effective design that enables student interaction and collaboration."

Therefore, the development of new relationships between peers and staff was seen as key as the What Works?2 interventions were developed. The University saw the potential for such support and trust development and for a greater sense of community being generated that could enhance persistence at University. This broader, integrated approach is reflected in Lochtie et al. (2018): (11) who called for the *"need for a more holistic approach to student support"* that is able to engage and develop with the diversity of students who enter universities with a widening participation mission. Lochtie et al. (2018): (11) see that approach embracing *"student engagement, transition, advice, and student learning development,"* all elements that helped shape the developments at BCU.

Johnson et al. (2015): (880) identified that students wanted to engage with *"influential people who were perceived more as models of resilience."* These models of resilience may be available in many institutions in many different places, but they offered the distinction between those who talked about behaviors and character that enable resilience (messengers) and those who enacted it, such as the Student Success Advisers who are discussed later in this chapter.

However, a problem with a focus on resilience (Walker et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2015; Holdsworth et al., 2017) is that it tends to suggest it is the student's fault for not being able to cope with the impact of coming to university. This view was not encouraged by the What Works?2 process at the University and saw the leaders of the work explore institutional changes and other models to support student development. In particular, the first year experience literature provided a rich source of guidance. The work emanating from Australia, Lizzio (2006), around the five senses model enshrined what the course teams were seeking to create at the University.

Course teams sought to recognize and map the four senses of capability, purpose, resourcefulness, and connectedness within their curriculum and through that embed the culture and values to support the work over a longer period. Certainly from an institutional perspective this was the effect as a new academic staff development offer was made around the first year experience with a new highly popular module created in the MEd Learning and Teaching in HE (Millard et al., 2016). The further opportunity to host the European First Year Experience conference in 2017 was also taken as the symbolism and recognition of the importance of student transition and the first year experience was one that institutional leaders sought to grasp to raise the profile of this area of work.

The work around the first year experience was founded upon the student engagement ethos that had driven much of the work up to that point and engaging the unengaged student remained a key challenge. Hu and Kuh (2002) sought to identify measures that could tell institutions when a student becomes disengaged. They discovered that peers substantially influenced how students spent their time *"and the meaning they made of their experiences including their personal satisfaction with college."* They explained that satisfaction with the institution and persistence in studying on a course appeared to be directly linked to the expectation set by the institution prior to acceptance and a belief that this should be regularly communicated to students during their time at the institution. Read et al. (2003): (263) explained the way in which prospective students selected institutions was based

upon their need to belong. They point to their previous research that "*discusses the ways in which some 'non-traditional' students actively choose to apply to such institutions, in order to increase their chances of 'belonging.'*" Read et al. (2003) also pointed to the fact that students chose institutions that contained similar types of students, students "like them." However, the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (ACER, 2009:43) revealed that 33% of the students surveyed considered an early departure from their institution. This, as the report admits, is an underestimate as it will clearly not include those students who have already left the institution and did not complete the survey. Therefore, the notion of belonging and institutional identification and early additional support mechanisms are vital for those students reconsidering their decision to attend university.

Through What Works? 1, Thomas (2012) suggested belonging was a students feeling of connectedness to their institution and highlighted the work of Goodenow (1993) which described belonging in an educational environment as "*Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting.*" Thomas (2012) saw belonging and engagement as being implicitly interwoven and argued that for engagement to be most effective it had to be embedded within the academic sphere of student work. This echoed the perspective of Troxel (2010): (35) who in her synthesis of retention literature recommended that *student engagement and active learning should be at the heart of learning and teaching.* McMillan and Chavis (1986): (4) were one of the first authors to discuss issues around belonging and they saw five components:

"*The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second elements is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to the group and of the group mattering to its members.*"

The three other components include influence, reinforcement and shared emotional connections. The "sense of mattering" became one of the key phrases within the University and the course teams' developments to What Works?2 at BCU. A partnership approach to intervention design shows those students who participated that they mattered and that their voice had been embraced. However, the transference of that into the lived experience of students in subsequent years was the key challenge for the course teams and institution. The personal investment of time, effort and emotion by students was identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as being important as they sought shared emotional connections and the generation of that sense of membership.

Holdsworth et al. (2017): (2) suggested that "*Universities can nurture resilience in their learning community both formally and informally*" through facilitating learning experiences that "*support the development of skills and capabilities attributed to resilient individuals.*" However, this does not mean that students should not be challenged and stretched. Felten et al. (2016) remarked that:

"*Experienced advisers and mentors know how to scaffold experiences for students so that they encounter increasing levels of challenge, are encouraged to take greater intellectual risks, and emerge from the process with both higher levels of independence and a firm sense of being part of an academic community.*"

Creating the academic community remains a focus as Goodenow (1993) and Thomas (2012) explain that the reason why a student is at university is to study an academic program and therefore that has to be identified as the primary purpose. Therefore, anything outside of the program of study may be considered to be an add-on by students and therefore of less importance. This was reflected through the BCU What Works2? teams as students told one team that if the academics did not value an activity enough to warrant placing it in the curriculum and the timetable, then why should students value it? Therefore, the development of an integrated academic approach is vital whereby the classroom contact time and the personal support is interwoven and clearly communicated to the students. The role of personal tutors and academic advising services is key in this regard. A personalized approach to student development and support has to be maintained as we enable our students to achieve to their full potential whilst recognizing and supporting their individual differences.

Walker et al. (2006): (254) concluded that there was a need to "*examine the role of resilience by exploring the life experiences and personality traits that interact and build resistance to strong social and cultural pressures that influence people to take the decisions they do.*" This personalized approach that engages with an individual's ability to be resilient is one that institutional structures and approaches need to address. This requires those approaches to view the student through an intersectional lens that enables students to enhance their own resilience and guides universities in how to create more developmental and supportive approaches. The creation of the Student Success Advisor role, detailed later, enabled such a more personalized approach and ensured each student was contacted, engaged and progress monitored as a school based support framework was constructed.

## DESIGNING THE INTERVENTIONS

From the beginning of the initiative at BCU the philosophy was focused upon student as partners in design (Nygaard et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2014). This approach was welcomed and readily adopted by the discipline leads through the simple observation that they were significantly distant through role and age from having any real understanding of the attitudes and motivation of first year students. The question was posed one course leader as to why would a university design an initiative in isolation when it had such a knowledgeable resource, its own students, to draw upon?

During the planning phase of the What Works? 2 initiative, the discipline teams delayed identifying and designing interventions until the discipline leads had attended three guiding workshops run by the HEA. Those workshops on active learning, induction and co-curricular activities exposed teams to new ideas and offered evidence of impact elsewhere. These ideas were brought to three half day workshops delivered by CELT and the Students' Union. The partnership with the Students' Union was seen as key

as the project sought to integrate pastoral and social activities within the academic sphere in an attempt to seek opportunities for developing the sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012).

For the three half day events, held in the Students' Union, the institutional lead stated that there was a requirement that each project team bring staff and students (at least in equal numbers) to work up and share their ideas. As the workshops progressed and project teams became accustomed to this approach one event saw the radiography team bring 20 students and five academic staff as they fully embraced the vision for change. The collaborative approach to design was a standard throughout the What Works process at BCU and continued when additional programs, having heard of the approach and success, sought entry to the change program at a later date.

## THE INTERVENTION: ENABLING PEERS TO LEAD

What works?2 provided the opportunity for course teams to completely re-engineer the transition and support they provided for year one of the student experience. The most impressive of these activities saw the creation of an online pre-transition program for new students before they arrived. This was supported and moderated by senior students (peer mentors), who then liaised with those new students upon arrival having already becoming virtually acquainted. Roberts and Styron (2010) in describing social connectedness and the impact this can have on retention stated that students are "*more likely to accomplish difficult tasks when he/she is in the company of others who are like minded and facing similar challenges.*" The idea of creating an integrated student led supportive framework was seen as key as the security this offered could enable students to persist with their studies. Lochtie et al. (2018): (61) commented that students said they were best supported by their peers and Roberts and Styron (2010) suggested that the most important interactions with peers reinforced academic learning and if this took place it would permeate all the other areas of a student's university life. This mirrored the drive of What Works?2 around the value of student connections taking place within the academic sphere of student work.

The concept of peer support networks within universities is not a new concept, but what the University's School of Media did in addition was innovative and has been spread widely since its inception, within and outside of the University. The School identified that the demands of a growing student cohort and the need to co-ordinate and lead the peer mentor activities required the creation of a new role of Student Success Advisor (SSA). This role offered a bridge between student, peer mentors and staff of the university, in particular personal tutors. One key focus for this work was to track and monitor student attendance, a role that had been performed previously by personal tutors. Students value the academic and pastoral advice they gain from their tutors and the SSA role could enable more of that by removing the time spent engaging with routine administration. In addition, the SSAs provide a conduit for raising student concerns, can make early interventions to support students when they are able, but also flag those students who need assistance beyond the SSA's ability.

The SSA role continues to this day and is delivered through a recent graduate who normally stays in role for up to 2 years. Through this time limited approach they are able to maintain currency and credibility with the student cohort, but also advise course teams on the issues faced by current students. The role aims to enhance student progression and retention through collaborating with staff and students in the delivery of five key services: pre-induction, induction, extended induction, attendance monitoring and personal tutoring. It performs the vital role of tracking student progress and intervening when appropriate, for as Lochtie et al. (2018): (75) indicated research clearly shows that the "*close, regular, ongoing and systematic tracking and moderating of student progress and performance is widely considered as a necessity in any successful student intervention or support system.*"

The SSAs lead on the student transition process, co-ordinating student peer mentors and tracking engagements with students. This requires the development of a pre-induction, induction and post-induction plan to ensure each student is supported throughout their first year. However, this is not an isolated role as one SSA explained:

> "*All SSAs work together to ensure students are supported during their first week across the campus as well as co-ordinating their own student mentor teams, creating a dynamic partnership to ensure all students feel welcomed. Student mentors then develop a continuing role able to support students throughout their course academically as they are course specific and are trained to ensure the correct support (academic or pastoral) is given or signposted.*"

This co-ordinated approach is important in terms of messaging and approaches taken to engaging with new students. In particular, the need to set student expectations and prepare them for study at university is key. Felten et al. (2016): (76) identified that "*students' expectations of college are shaped either serendipitously or more purposefully long before students arrive on our campuse*s." Through pre-transition work led by SSAs these expectations can start to be set and managed.

However, as Felten et al. (2016) posited a key challenge arising out of this continuing role is the definition of boundaries and the setting of expectations with students. The nature of the SSA role means that such definition is even more crucial when they are exposed on a regular basis to a myriad of academic and pastoral issues.

Student Success Advisors offer a designated, full-time targeted role and therefore have the time built in to receive training from all relevant professional services and are instructed about when to sign post to more expert advice. The provision of time to be trained is a luxury that many academic staff engaged in a personal tutor role may not enjoy (Lochtie et al., 2018: 54). However, the SSA role does not come without its challenges. As one SSA pointed out:

> "*I feel we have an instrumental role in supporting students in the University, but transitioning from being a student to a member of staff can be quite a challenge. An SSA is normally employed in the School they graduated from so the staff and student relationship*

*starts to transform into a collegial one and that is easier for some academic staff and SSAs to adapt to than others."*

In part, the acceptance of the SSA and their role by academic and professional staff mirrors the acceptance process being encountered by new students entering the University.

One of the key things that has surfaced during the University's student engagement work was the realization that for some students their studies were just a component of their lives and not necessarily the most important one. This may see an individual student focus on caring responsibilities or employment both of which would see many more hours spent in their local communities rather than on the campus. Perna (2010) saw employment and working alongside their studies as being the norm for students. Her belief was that this presented a significant challenge to those institutions that that did not recognize this shift as they were *"failing to recognize that higher education is generally not the primary life environment of working students" (2010,i)*.

This complexity and intersectionality of related issues that make up a student life has been recognized by the SSAs who reported:

*"Students live complex lives, through regularly meeting and conversing with students we can create a picture of their day to day affairs. Students are balancing their personal life, work and studies all at the same time. Some being carers for people dependant on them at home including financially, they have financial issues, mental health and health concerns or may be feeling homesick resulting in them not attending university or having enough time for them to commit to their studies.*

*There have been occasions of supporting students who have said they have to go on the school run to collect and drop of siblings and support their home as their parents are always working or where a student doesn't wish to complete their program but they have to as it is their parents wish to do so. Our students show high levels of resilience and this is great to see but they do require support to help them through their circumstances."*

Carini et al. (2006) identified that "low ability groups" benefitted more from the sense of being within the nurturing environment of a supportive campus environment. The SSA role was designed to foster such a climate for those students in most need. The SSAs see themselves as the first port of call for students and use this opportunity to listen and sign post students to support.

*"We may be the first person they are talking to so we must be willing to listen to know how to support them best; the student may want some support in understanding the way the university works or it may be more specific such as an issue around time management and we may be able to go through a study plan drawing on our own recent experiences."*

The conversations that SSAs and their peer mentor have with students focus on what is possible and how those students can achieve success; instilling aspiration and confidence in a supportive environment, but also providing a readily available source of support that is accessible. Turner (2014): (593) asserts that the generation of confidence or self-belief is key as she found

that *"belief in one's ability to apply skills and knowledge is of paramount importance in influencing academic achievement and outweighs knowledge and skills in this respect."* Schlossberg (1989): (9) identified that students need to have the belief that they *"matter to someone else"* and found five components of mattering. Within *tho*se components are importance *(an impression of being cared about)*, dependence *(a sense of being needed)* and appreciation *(recognition efforts are valued by others)* all of which could be addressed through aspects of the SSA role and their co-ordinating activities. This is reinforced by Tinto (2000): (7) *"Leavers of this type express a sense of not having made any significant contacts or not feeling membership in the institution."* The SSA role and supporting mentoring frameworks were created to make such isolation and loneliness very difficult to achieve through a purpose of active student participation and connection.

## INSTITUTIONAL ADOPTION

The What Works2? initiative has had a major impact on the University. The School of Media's approach, outlined above, saw a 7% increase in retention in 1 year, which it has maintained in subsequent years. This equated to nineteen additional students and once reported to the University executive immediately saw adoption of the strategy across the remainder of the University. The SSA role was identified as a key element of this improvement and the role was immediately replicated. At present the University has 17 SSAs working across the University's four faculties. The numbers vary between faculties as they are now funded through faculty budgets and some senior managers see the opportunities afforded by the role and allocate a variety of responsibilities.

The fact that the role is now embedded within faculties and paid for by faculty budgets means that there has been a differentiation of roles to fit the local context. Within the Faculty of Business, Law and the Social Sciences (BLSS) the SSA role focused on student attendance and engagement. This sees SSAs interacting with disengaged students to ensure they are aware of the services available at the university and how they can get back on track with their studies. BLSS has a student population which is over 70% BAME and commuter based. Students explain that they have a variety of responsibilities such as, supporting their families both emotionally and financially, caring and working a part time job as they try to complete their studies, so it is imperative students are aware of where to get support.

The faculty focused the SSA role on key groups. One large course cohort, of 1180 students across 3 years, contained a significant number of non-attending students. The 142 students identified had attended for less than 20% of classes. All those students were phoned and emailed about their absence by the SSAs and told about what support they could access to continue with their course.

Out of the 142 students, 69% of the students were from a BAME background whilst the other 31% came from a white/white other background. Responses as to why students had disengaged stemmed from, bereavement, financial issues, work commitments, personal issues, motivation and mental health

issues. All students were referred to the key services at the university by the SSA as well as liaising with their personal tutor for continued support throughout their studies.

From this intervention, 85% of the 142 students remained on their course with the support from their department, 9% of students opted to resume their studies at a time more convenient to them whilst the other 6% decided to leave their course as it was not right for them at the current time in their life. Contacting these students and offering them the support that they needed allowed the majority of the students to resume with their studies and achieve a level of success that may have just slipped away from them without the positive and proactive intervention of the SSAs.

Academic staff at the university highly value the SSA role. One School of Law tutor commented that:

"*As an academic I can provide students with support on their subject knowledge but it is the role of the SSA's to help support and coach the students through the program of study during difficult times. This can be when students have low attendance or when they need to reach out to staff for help, support and motivation to get through the year. Students sometimes feel as if they can't approach academic members of staff and instead contact the SSA's for support and guidance to get through the assessment period.*"

As an institution, the move to student engaged curriculum design and student focused services that engage with existing students and recent alumni has shown thatthey can make an enormous contribution to student success. It has become clear that student related roles, such as SSAs, can offer a vitally important bridge between students and staff and between academic and non-academic departments. However, it also revealed that there needed to be flexibility in how the role was designed and implemented for different disciplines. This leads to the final element that the managers of SSAs need to be explicit around setting expectations as to what the role is there to deliver and how it integrates with and supports other university functions and roles, such as personal tutors and student services.

The partnership with Students, SSAs and the Students' Union continued through other elements of What Works2? initiative. In 2014, the partners created a new approach to the University's Welcome Week activities that sought to engage academic and social elements in a bid to ensure students started to see that they were part of a university community, started to consider their purpose for being there and delivered many opportunities for the creation of connections between students and staff.

The opportunity for significant impact on the first year experience was taken by the institutional lead who developed a module for the University MEd in Learning and Teaching Practice. The module "Transition and the First Year Experience" was first delivered as week-long block delivery for academic colleagues in June 2015. The program offered theoretical underpinning, case studies and the time to create an intervention for implementation in the coming years. SSAs were involved in the delivery of the module and created relationships with academic colleagues that went beyond the module. The creation of over 50 first year academic champions was a significant output, as were the interventions that were designed and implemented.

The generation of a movement for transitions and the first year experience at the University reached its culmination in 2017 when it hosted the European First Year Experience conference, a three-day conference that attracted over 250 participants from across the world.

As the authors reflect on these developments and the institutional importance in which transition and the first year experience is seen, it would appear that the university has started to develop a holistic transition pedagogy, as called for by Kift (2009), in which institutional silos are traversed to develop a well-designed, engaging and supportive transition into university life. There is still much to be done, but the institutional commitment remains to take on that challenge.

## CONCLUSION

Lochtie et al. (2018): (2) suggest that personal tutoring is "*experiencing a renewed focus, even renewed vigor,*" whilst also recognizing that the "*models to articulate this delivery can differ quite substantially.*" The interventions described in this article suggest an alternative model where trained and prepared recent graduates provide a new interface that supports students, offering a new conduit through which they can access higher level support from academic or wellbeing advisers. The SSA model does not seek to replace personal tutors or advising, rather support it at a time of increasing student numbers, and offer an alternative avenue for students to decide how they might wish to access the support and development needs they require. Through this approach high quality advising retains and enhances its vital role, as SSAs are able to identify and direct those most in need of that advice.

The approach adopted by the University is centered around a need to create roles, activities and people who can operate in a boundary spanning manner. This results in the development of solutions to issues not barriers and rules that prevent student success. One of the key elements of this approach sees the creation of formal and informal learning communities (Felten et al., 2016) that make relationships central to the learning process. This reminder returns us to the reason the University became involved in What Works2? and the principle that underpins all its activity in this area of students as partners in which student perspectives and ideas are incorporated into the design and delivery of their experience at the university. This remains an ongoing belief and as Healey et al. (2014) wisely concluded:

"*partnership is understood as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. Partnership is essentially a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself.*"

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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