



Peer Partnerships in a First Year Transition Programme During Covid-19: Unmasking Student Voices

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Abstract. Student voices have the potential to increase student engagement; encourage collaboration and partnerships among students, academics and student support units. This paper focuses on students as mentors, mentees and transition officers who engage with each other as partners within an institution-wide First Year Transition Programme (FYTP). The FYTP is a peer partnership intervention that is founded on the idea that students connect with other students who can identify and understand their particular experiences in adjusting to university life. This model is a collaborative peer-mentoring partnership that provides a dual layer of support that is offered to first year mentees in the transition programme. The transition programme plays an important role in creating a sense of connectedness, partnerships and self-agency that could support students in their first year. This paper highlights the partnership of the First Year Transition Officers (FYTOs) and first year mentors in supporting mentees towards a successful virtual first year university transition. Qualitative data was collected and analysed from the FYTOs and mentors' reports and a world café activity during the pandemic. The study highlights the challenges and successes of the partnership during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper draws on Leach and Zepke's conceptual organiser on student engagement to analyse the data within a broader social context on student experience. It provided us with actionable focus on how challenges could be addressed and partnerships strengthened.

Keywords: Student Partnerships · Mentors · Mentees · First Year Experience · Transition

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown in South Africa, higher education institutions had to rethink their mode of delivery. Lockdown regulations insisted that students had to attend classes in online settings from their homes. Universities and colleges had to become innovative and reinvent methods of teaching and learning [13]. This abrupt change was felt by students and staff as they moved to remote online learning and teaching. The greatest impact was felt amongst the first-year students, who had

only a few weeks of in-contact university experience when the lockdown was announced by the President during the first wave of the pandemic. First year students were faced with a double challenge, firstly adjusting to the transition from school to university and secondly transitioning to online learning. Research indicates that the transition into the university setting is a crucial period for students to adjust to their new environment. This challenging transitions alongside the shift to online learning resulted in a double barrier for new first year students.

The First Year Transition Programme (FYTP) at the selected university played a key role in supporting first year students' transition during the pandemic. The FYTP is a peer partnership intervention that is founded on the idea that students connect with other students who can identify and understand their particular experiences in adjusting to university life. This model is a collaborative peer-mentoring partnership that provides a dual layer of support that is offered to first year mentees in the transition programme. This layered support of peer mentoring by post graduate students and senior undergraduate students contributes to a more holistic approach to the traditional dyad method of student mentoring and provides deeper insight into the unique needs of the first-year student. The FYTP developed the motto "For students, by students, continuing the chain of change", which saw students identifying with each other during this time of uncertainty, building trust and connections that assisted first year students with university transition. Generally, when a student transitions to university, it is intentional and planned, however, the pandemic resulted in an emergency transition, unplanned, involuntary and with no prior studies or knowledge to deal with the wide-spread Covid-19 pandemic or remote learning and teaching.

This paper highlights the partnership of the First Year Transition Officers (FYTOs) and the first year mentors in supporting first year students that joined the online transition programme as mentees. The methodology section highlights the data collection and analysis methods used in the study. The article draws on [14] conceptual organiser on student engagement to investigate the data within a broader social context on student experience, which provided us with actionable focus on how challenges could be addressed and partnerships strengthened. The findings highlight the importance of intentionally creating student partnerships as the peer relationships created during the Covid-19 pandemic enhanced student agency and connectedness to the institution. The study's findings add to the literature on first year student support in transitioning to university during a time of crisis. As highlighted by [21], student partnerships as social support structures in the emergency online transition have not been well researched. [5] agree and add that social support in the online academic setting amongst students has received little attention during the pandemic. They further note that there is a need for peer interaction during the pandemic so as to ensure that the usual peer support mechanisms are not lost in the online environment. The next section of the paper describes the design of the first-year transition programme.

2 Design of the First Year Transition Programme (FYTP)

The First Year Transition Program (FYTP) is a high impact practice that forms part of the institution's Operation Student Success project in the Deputy Vice Chancellor

Academic's office. The key objective of the FYTP is to equip students with the skills to ensure a smooth first year university transition, create a sense of connectedness to the institution and enhance student agency to ensure first year student retention and success beyond their first year of study. A critical component of the FYTP is the student partnerships that are created at different levels. Partnerships are formed between first-year students and first year mentors (FYMs); FYMs and FYTOs; and the FYTOs and lecturers. The foundation of the programme is based on students supporting students, which is underpinned by the principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. The layered support is provided by students within the faculties. Postgraduate students are appointed as First Year Transition Officers (FYTOs) that support the First Year Mentors (FYMs) who connect with first year students in their respective faculties. This programme is a voluntary and first year students sign up as mentees that request a mentor. The FYMs are under-graduate students that are matched with a mentee from the same faculty and department by the FYTO. The matching of mentor to mentee allows the mentor to be relatable to the mentee and assists in promoting a sense of connectedness to the faculty and department. In addition, the mentee will be able to gain accurate information and directed support from the FYTO and FYM. The student leaders (FYTOs and FYMs) from the faculties are also familiar with the modules, lecturers, programme offerings and support initiatives. Monthly reports from mentors and FYTOs are provided to the Deputy Dean Teaching and Learning in the seven faculties and the institutional academic student support office. This model of using students as partners and co-creators of the FYTP moves away from the deficit approach to one of creating an enabling environment for both the student leaders (FYTOs and FYMs) and mentees to seek help and nurture their abilities in a safe and caring environment [19]. The institutional academic support office has monthly meetings with all FYTOs to collaborate and reflect on the programme and how best to address first year students' concerns. The information gathered from the FYTOs and mentors' monthly reports also allows the institution to gain a holistic view of first year students' university experience, challenges and needs in the different faculties. FYTOs meet regularly with faculty mentors to get first-hand information about student needs. FYTOs also attend first year committee meetings with faculty members, meet with individual first year lecturers to address student concerns and engage with the university's student support services to ensure that first year students' academic, social and emotional needs are supported.

Mentoring of first year students takes on multiple approaches to ensure holistic support is provided, which equips students for a less stressful first year university transition. Besides the one-on-one mentoring that is provided to students that request this type of support, a more structured weekly mentoring circle takes place for students to share their experiences. These small group-mentoring circles assist to create friendships, communities of learning and connectedness. Students enjoy these sessions as they easily identify with issues raised by some of their first year peers. This multiple-method approach to mentoring contributes to a more holistic approach to the traditional dyad method and provides deeper insight into the unique needs of the student population [24]. During the pandemic all partnerships and engagement with FYTOs and mentors moved online. The appointments, weekly meetings and consultations with FYTOs and FYMs were conducted mainly via emails, Google meets and WhatsApp platforms. This paper reports

on the partnerships created with FYTOs and FYMs in supporting first year mentees during the pandemic in the online space and highlights the benefits and attributes gained from the partnership.

3 Literature Review

First year student transition to university can be regarded as the most critical period in which greater support is needed for the student to adjust to academic work and university life [10]. Many undergraduate students entering university for the first-time experience great stress and anxiety. However, entering university as a first-year student during the Covid-19 pandemic created increased stress. Nyar refers to this period as a 'double transition' for first year students [18]. She explains that the additional online transition coupled with that of the first-year university transition, with regard to the extraordinary situation of students navigating their entry into the unfamiliar terrain of academia while simultaneously navigating the Covid-19 pandemic created added stress with the double transition. Many of the transition theorists highlight the key responsibility that universities have to undertake in supporting student transition [2, 23].

Literature on the benefits of a peer-support service on university campuses is limited due to student partnerships in support services being relatively new. However, universities have used academic partnerships with peer mentors and peer tutors to support students in their academic university transition. Partnerships can be defined as the interaction of individuals with a similar interest working together to reach a unified goal. A student-lecturer partnership can be defined as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis" (8, p.7). Additionally, Healey suggest that partnerships should be considered as a way to get students more involved in their institution and their own learning [9]. This paper investigates a collaborative peer partnership in which senior students work with particular first year student groups to accomplish larger goals rather than an end goal to be aspired to. Soft outcomes, such as student motivation, mental wellbeing and connectedness become more important in this process that can lead to students achieving the hard outcomes of retention and academic success. Solomon defines peer support as the social and emotional support offered by a fellow student of equal standing [22], founded on respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful. The authenticity found in peer student-support relationships can lead to greater feelings of empathy and connectedness as compared to a lecturer-student relationship [4]. This study captures the peer student relationship and describes it more as a partnership to enhance student agency, engagement and well-being during the first year online transition.

The next section draws on the theoretical framework of [14] conceptual organizer to explore the partnership between the student FYTOs and FYMs and the factors that influenced their engagement with first year mentees. In addition, institutional support was also provided to enhance first year students' university transition during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4 Theoretical Framework

Student engagement can be defined broadly as a phenomenon which encompasses academic as well as non-academic and social aspects of the student experience [7]. However, researchers have viewed student engagement with different lenses, some highlighting single or multiple aspects within their research, such as a focus on learning activities, implications for policy, institutional structures and cultures and student access and engagement [1, 12, 14, 20] created a model for student engagement known as the Conceptual Organiser. They provide six key perspectives that could be used to enhance student engagement and they also suggest indicators of outcomes that may be reached by using the six perspectives. The conceptual organiser allows for flexibility and in this regard the perspectives and indicators identified can be used individually, randomly or diversely to suit one’s investigation or intervention. In this study we use five of the perspectives from the conceptual organizer to explore the partnerships between the mentees, FYTO and FYM and external and internal influences on the partnership and engagement. Using the organiser, we highlight the influence on the partnership to students’ intrinsic motivation and agency, their engagement with each other as partners, support provided by the institution, non-institutional support and lastly using the lenses of active citizenship to highlight the awareness of student diversity and social justice issues. The five perspectives and indicators for the study are summarised in Table 1.

The five perspectives are used to illustrate and compare partnerships and engagement amongst students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Leach and Zepke maintain that the perspectives and indicators are not necessarily placed in a hierarchical order and can be seen as open for interpretation and adaptation and are always changing as new literature is discovered [14]. The perspectives and indicators in the organizer provided a starting point to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of the student partnership and engagement in a more holistic manner, considering the “complex interaction between personal and contextual factors” during the Covid-19 pandemic (p.200).

Table 1. Five Perspectives of Student Engagement [14]

5 Perspectives of Engagement	Indicators for Perspectives
Motivation and Agency (<i>Intrinsic</i>)	Students can <u>work autonomously</u> ; feels <u>competent</u> to achieve success, has <u>good relationships</u> with others.
Transactional (<i>Engage with each other</i>)	Students <u>active & collaborative</u> , use <u>social skills</u> to engage with each other, support each other.
Institutional Support (<i>provides conducive environment</i>)	<u>Common focus</u> on student success; value <u>diversity</u> & <u>invest in various</u> student support initiatives.
Active Citizenship (<i>Work together to address social justice issues</i>)	Students have a <u>firm sense of self</u> , & self in <u>the world</u> , <u>active & critical</u> ; able to <u>engage with others</u>
Non- Institutional Support (<i>From family & friends</i>)	Family & friends <u>understand</u> demands of study; offer <u>child-care</u> ; create <u>space to study</u> ; assist with <u>time-management</u> .

5 Research Methodology

This study was framed within an interpretive paradigm with the assumption that meaning in the social world is constructed by individuals engaged in the world they are interpreting [25]. The interpretive view resonates with this study in order to adequately capture the subjective experiences of first year students as they engaged with other students as partners in the transition programme during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate how student partnerships such as the FYTOs and FYMs are able to support mentees towards a successful virtual first year university transition. Descriptive qualitative research is used to describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon [11]. This type of research is often used to describe the characteristics of a group of people, such as their behaviours, beliefs, and values. It is a type of qualitative research that is used to describe and understand a particular phenomenon, event, or experience [3]. This can be done through collecting data such as interviews, observations, or written texts, and then analyzing this data to look for patterns, themes, or meanings [16]. In this study qualitative data was collected from mentors' monthly narrative reports, FYTOs' monthly reports and mentee evaluation feedback surveys. The sample size in each of the cohorts were 7 FYTOs (located in the seven faculties), 50 mentors' reports and 98 mentee evaluation feedback surveys were used to analyse the qualitative data. Additional data was collected from 32 mentors through the world cafe methodology.

The World Café methodology can be defined as a user-friendly, effective and flexible format employed for creating a meaningful and cooperative dialogue around questions that count. This method is designed to create a safe, welcoming environment in which to intentionally connect multiple ideas and perspectives on a topic through engaging participants in several rounds of small group discussions [15]. The World Café method is particularly useful to explore a topic from multiple perspectives, to ensure that everyone in a room contributes to a conversation, and/or when you want to encourage participants to make new connections. The world café framework has a built-in evaluation process that can help to assess the effectiveness of the conversations. We used this methodology at as a face-to-face engagement with the mentors to gain in-depth knowledge on their engagement with mentees and FYTOs during their online participation in the transition programme.

Data from the discussion sheets and notes taken from each host together with the qualitative data collected from narrative reports and feedback surveys were analysed. A thematic analysis approach was used to examine the data. The thematic analysis approach is utilised to generate common themes from the qualitative data [6]. This type of analysis involves six steps: firstly, becoming familiar with the data, secondly, generating coding categories, thirdly, generating themes, fourthly, reviewing themes, fifthly, defining and naming themes, and lastly, locating exemplars. This type of analysis is beneficial as it identifies patterns within and across data in relation to the participants' lived experiences, views, perspectives, behaviours, and practices [6]. We followed the six steps to generate broad themes from the data. The thematic categories were then compiled into a narrative summary in order to explain the qualitative results generated from the world cafe activity, and the FYTO and mentor monthly reports.

The two main research questions that guided the study were:

How has the student peer-to-peer partnership contributed to supporting first year students in the online transition programme? and

What are the factors that influenced the partnership and delivery of the programme?

The following sections outlines the findings and discussion of the study.

6 Results and Discussion

The data were thematically analysed according to Zepke and Leach's conceptual organiser for student engagement [14]. The researchers engaged with the data through repetitive reading in order to accurately identify themes and gain a clear understanding Nowell et al., of the FYTOs, mentors and mentees' responses in relation to identifying partnerships. It was noted that the transactional engagement and active citizenship engagement were closely linked to the other three perspectives as indicated in Table 1. This section is be divided into three of the perspectives: motivation and agency, institutional support and non-institutional support. Within these three perspectives, the indicators identified allowed us to investigate student partnerships, its impact on FYTOs, mentors and mentees relationship and influence on the programme.

6.1 Motivation and Agency

Leach and Zepke describe student motivation as a student being intrinsically motivated where they act on what brings them personal reward as opposed to external reward [14]. Additionally, agency is described as being actively involved in the process of achieving academic goals.

Based on the responses from FYTOs, mentors and mentees, it is evident that the partnerships among them resulted in self-development, which positively influenced their belief in themselves within academic spaces. They highlighted their increase in self-esteem and confidence through navigating various spaces when needed. Similarly, FYTOs felt the programme provided them with holistic skills development opportunities thereby improving their confidence. The following quotes supports these findings:

Mentors response:

"I am able to navigate certain academic and student support spaces with confidence after receiving support from my FYTO".

"Their (FYTOs) assistance helps to boost my self-esteem and confidence as a mentor making it easier for me to work with mentees".

FYTO responses indicated that the FYTP serves as a dynamic space where the transfer of knowledge and enhancement of skills required to achieve success, assisted them in developing a sense of agency. Responses from FYTOs include:

"We were given the opportunity to present at conferences, the experience to participate has boosted by confidence and research skills, it has opened by eyes to consider a career in academia".

"The transition programme certainly enhanced our own academic skills, while also developing our own agency, communication skills and confidence to speak to staff and students".

Mentees' responses reflected a level of maturity that was reached, as they became aware of and understood the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning.

"I have learnt that the effort I place into my work impacts my work. I learnt that I need to take some time and ask for help where needed".

In this perspective students became less passive and more active in taking actions towards their own learning experiences.

6.2 Institutional Support

Leach and Zepke describe institutional support as the provision of an environment that is conducive to student learning, and is characterised by the institution's investment in student success and support initiatives, while appreciating diversity among students [14]. Mentors and mentees viewed the FYTP as institutional support that provided them a safe and inclusive space where their unique identities were valued and acknowledged, thereby creating a sense of community. This is highlighted in the quotes from the participants:

"FYTP gave me a sense of community and they (FYTO & Mentor) are very patient, supportive and they lead with kindness, I feel appreciated with them".

"I felt comfortable and I was not judged in the mentoring sessions, this gave me a relaxation feeling to open up when attending those mentoring session".

FYTOs and mentors' responses reflected the FYTP as a upskilling/developmental space as it provided them with necessary training and opportunities to refine and enhance their current skill set. They specifically referred to their interpersonal and leadership skills in successfully engaging with a diverse population of students, as well as engaging professionally with one another, as indicated below:

"Institutional training assisted us as FYTOs and also the mentors with skills to work with students and work with each other because we all have different realities".

"Training allowed us to enhance our communication skills, leadership skills and confidence as we had to communicate with support staff, lecturers and students".

Similarly, mentees felt that the FYTP was a developmental space where they received the necessary support to develop social skills by establishing relationships and building connections with peers. Mentors and mentees indicated that they were provided with the opportunity in the First Year Experience talks and mentoring circles to expand their university knowledge base through attaining extensive and superior knowledge relevant to them, as opposed to their peers who were not affiliated with the transition programme. Mentees felt that this assisted them in comprehending career choices, which could possibly influence the steps they take towards reaching their future goals. Additionally, mentees felt that the FYTP provided holistic support as it assisted them on an academic and personal level, and enhanced their transition to university. Below are a few responses from mentees:

“I got to learn a lot about university life. How one should carry themselves, making friends, seeking help, speaking to support staff and a lot about settling into university”.

“My learning experience helped me not just on an academic level but on a personal level too. The sessions were even like my therapy that’s how open and welcoming my mentor was”.

“The FYTP helps us in the mentoring circle to know more things than the average student, the programme helps us as mentees far beyond what the programme is supposed to do”.

In addition, mental and emotional well-being were highlighted as institutional support services by mentors who felt that the FYTP training initiatives were invested in their wellbeing:

“As part of our training the institution provided us with mental health workshop to cope with stress and working with students online”.

The mentors also indicated that technological and financial resources such as devices, data and monthly payments were seen as institutional support assisting them in supporting first year mentees, as noted by mentors below:

“The institution during the pandemic supported us by providing us with data and devices for virtual sessions with the mentees”.

“The institution has provided funding for the mentor programme, which means that they are acknowledging it’s value”.

FYTOs expressed a positive experience with support from the first year stakeholders within their faculties, especially, the Teaching and Learning department. Faculties’ acknowledged the role of the FYTP and were proactive in their approach to supporting the programme by referring students to the FYTO in the faculties. As indicated in the following quote:

“Faculty support was great from the Deputy Dean teaching and learning, teaching and learning specialist and first year lecturers, they would make referrals of first year students to the transition programme, this was really good that they respected us and was willing to work with us in the programme”.

“The institution places an important focus on the FYTP and allows the voice of the student to be heard through the FYTOs being invited to various meeting platforms to voice our opinion”.

6.3 Non-institutional Support

Leache and Zepke’s describe non-institutional support as support received by family members and friends who empathise with and extend themselves to support students during their academic journey [14]. In this study participants mentioned that they received more support from friends during the pandemic than from family members in their

online learning and teaching initiatives. It is evident that most respondents sought different types of support networks from their fellow peers within the FYTP. The data suggests that meaningful connections and the maintenance thereof were present, hence, mentees compared their FYTP experience to a second home.

“They (mentees) feel like I played a very good role as a brother and a mentor and friend. In our last zoom meeting they were very emotional and they still do contact me to just check on me and tell me how they are doing.”

“Some mentees have become friends within mentoring circles and have shown appreciation for the space provided”.

“My mentee group has been like a second home to me and feels like family rather than just a mentee group they have become my support system”.

“I get support from your family but having the extra support from a mentor means a lot and it is very encouraging and helpful”.

The findings of the study bring to the fore key indicators within the perspectives of motivation and agency, institutional support and non-institutional support that enhanced and build on the student partnerships, which allowed the FYTOs, mentors and mentees to connect with each other and to the institution. A study done by [20] reveal that first-year mentorship programmes can be regarded as a crucial vehicle for peer engagement, increased students’ sense of belonging and deepened students’ commitment to their own academic goals, aspirations and success. The findings from this study has certainly contributed to all students in the partnership enjoying a sense of connectedness to each other and the institution; motivation to work towards a common goal; and created agency to support their study goals. The findings revealed that the transactional relationships between the students in their varying roles diminished the power dynamics and they felt comfortable to work and support each other. As stated by [17], adopting a partnership working approach can be extremely impactful in gaining a deeper understanding of the peer mentoring experience as it deliberately disrupts existing power relations, and empowers students to negotiate ideas, co-create learning, and share responsibility and challenges with one another. The Covid-19 pandemic experiences of students gave them a relatable experience bringing into focus the human factor and using ethics of care to engage and support each other.

7 Conclusion

The partnership between the First Year Transition Officers (FYTOs) and the first-year mentors in supporting mentees towards a successful virtual first-year university transition was critical. The common thread between FYTOs, mentors and mentees were that they were all students, although at different levels of study, they were able to identify with each other during the Covid-19 crisis. The FYTOs and mentors perceived their involvement in supporting the mentees as altruistic as they felt more relatable to the first year mentees. The FYTOs provide the necessary support and guidance to the mentors, who in turn play a vital role in helping the mentees experience a successful transition to university life. The positive relationship and engagement with the FYTOs and mentors

could also be attributed to the FYTOs playing an important role in designing the transition programme, which resulted in them having clear expectations of the programme and transferring this knowledge to the mentors. The paper highlights the benefits of this partnership for both the FYTOs and the first-year mentors. For the FYTOs, this partnership provides an opportunity to build strong relationships with the first-year mentors, who provided valuable insights into the mentees' experiences. Simultaneously, the first-year mentors gained valuable skills and knowledge in supporting mentees through their transition to university. The strong partnership approach between the FYTOs and the first-year mentors also helped to foster a sense of community and belonging amongst the mentees, which was essential for their success. The study revealed that the student peer partnerships were recognised as a valuable resource, where students felt comfortable to engage effectively with each other in the online learning space. In addition, the study's findings also indicated that the mentees who had positive experiences with their first-year mentors were more inclined to take ownership of their own learning, seeking support and more importantly navigate a successful first year university transition. Finally, the study demonstrated the significance of student peer partnerships in supporting first year student transition, engagement, motivation and agency to encourage students to be resilient and succeed in their first year at university. The student partnership and engagement in the transition programme by FYTOs, mentors and mentees gave them the agency to take greater responsibility and ownership of their experiences of being a student at the university.

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