LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

Inspiring Student Engagement through a Student Engagement initiative: the PASS scheme at London Metropolitan University

Digby Warren &
Wilko Luebsen

REACT Conference
Winchester, 2 May 2017

CONTEXT

London Met highly diverse student body
- 61% (vs 21%*) from BME background
- 148 nationalities represented
- 48% (vs 32%*) aged 25 or older
- 21% with caring responsibilities

* national average

Most students many commitments to juggle = putatively "*hard to reach*" and only moderate involvement in "student engagement" opportunities
They share any combination of following characteristics:
- in paid employment
- mature and return-to-learn students
- parental or caring responsibilities
- first in family to go to university
- London-based commuter students
- only part-time on campus (but registered full-time)

The challenge of Student Engagement

Comment from a Success Coach:

"…being a student parent at the University has constituted a barrier to my involvement in social programmes and time spent on campus. I am often time-poor and it has been challenging for me to respond to the demands of my study effectively while taking care of my family at the same time. I also often feel very emotional when I see young students getting involved in groups, such as the Students' Union, as well as undertaking internships offered by the University, which can help improve career prospect[s] and the level of student engagement…"
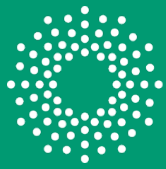
"STUDENT ENGAGEMENT"

- broad, variously defined (perhaps "nebulous") concept and collection of practices that are context-anchored

- can cover range of processes (Webb 2014; Harrington et al 2016)
  - learning and teaching
  - quality assurance and enhancement
  - curriculum development
  - peer-mentoring and collaborative learning
  - representational structures and institutional governance
  - extra-curricular and community programmes

- also understood as emotional, cognitive and behavioural participation that is affected by students' relationships and connections with others, and their autonomy, agency, identity, self-efficacy etc (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden 2013)

- critical perspectives highlight issues of control, surveillance and student-centredness associated with SE practices (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017; see *Higher Education Policy* vol. 30, 2017)

![London Metropolitan University logo]

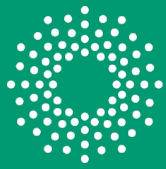**PASS (Peer-Assisted Student Success) Scheme**

Institutional partnership with trained peer mentors ("Success Coaches")

course-embedded model aimed at all first-year students (not a "remedial" scheme) that seeks to

- boost *academic success*

- promote *cohort bonding*

through access to peer-facilitated small-group sessions plus one-to-one support by "Success Coaches" (SCs) using a coaching approach

sessions focus on helping mentees with their *learning needs* to succeed on their course, deal with any *personal issues* and develop as *confident, independent learners*

FIRST-YEAR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Motivation stimulated

'my SC [is] helping me to aim higher, to go higher';

'they can motivate us… to move forward';

Overcoming uncertainty

'you are in a dark place, you don't know where to go. When SCs are coming, that is when you start to get to the brighter places';
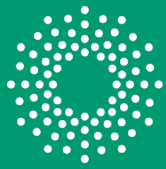
'I was struggling, and I found it hard to speak to the tutor or lecturer. When they said it was a SC available, it felt like a godsend, really helpful';

Increased confidence

'He [SC] gave me...more confidence to do my work';

'in the start, you are not sure what you are doing. And now, the SCs help you, but when they are not there...you know for sure.. what you are doing. That is a kind self-confidence I [now] have'.

Academic engagement and development

"The more I go, I meet them, the more my brain is, like, getting brighter';

'my knowledge is growing and I am succeeding'.

'In the first year, the second half was very difficult. I found a SC and we set up weekly meetings together. That improved my grades. Just having someone to talk to and explain things to… He didn't give me the information, but just general stuff that helped me to understand. It's not just about studying, you have to realise how different university is from school. … I got a boost in my grades by, like 15%.'

SC reflection on first-year journey: *'Going from not understanding the lecturer and being quiet about it, to then putting their hand up and asking, or going to the lecturer to ask, can I get more information. Its nice to see their different journeys and how they grow. Some of it is academic growth. Some of it is stress management growth.'*

"SUCCESS COACHES" ENGAGEMENT

Inspired by own experiences as students to become SCs

'… because my SC last year was very, very useful. I found their role very useful for my academic path… Having someone next to you, available to help you and to make you feel okay is very helpful.'

'I was involved with charity work, and …I was trying to be helpful... When I got to second year, one of my tutors recommended me. I thought it could help first-years get used to university life, warn them about stuff to look out for, and give the best advice from my own experience.'

'…you could share you experiences of your right doings with new students. You are transferring the lessons from your mistakes and successes to help someone else and better their education or future.'

'It was a classmate of mine who was doing SC. He wanted to introduced me to what it was about. He was always talking about SC enthusiastically. He told me about the benefits and that it benefits both ways. It was an inspiration.'

"SUCCESS COACHES" ENGAGEMENT

Enhanced own academic knowledge, skills and confidence

'For me [a benefit was], consolidation of my knowledge… Through coaching you are revising to make someone understand the material. It made me understand and apply it in a context, you become more wise.'

'Also [improved] my method of study. I am finding it very useful for my own studies.'

'… my writing style. It thought it was as good as it can be, but after I started as a SC people told me that my writing had improved.'

'I improved… my organisational skills. I am a student and I have another job. To manage everything was difficult in the beginning. Also my leadership skills. When we organise workshops or sessions with groups, you have to be emphatic, understand the needs of students.'

'[Being a] SC developed my communication skills, I gained confidence, talking to more students.'

'I was always confident, but you still gain a level of, you become more confident and more tactful in how you go out and address situations. You learn empathy, you learn to put yourself more in other's shoes and understand…'

"SUCCESS COACHES" ENGAGEMENT

PASS scheme a catalyst for further engagement e.g.

- supporting student induction programmes

- liaison with lecturers and advocates for first-years (see below)

- course representatives (StARs)

- Students Union (e.g. hub support worker)

- Student Societies (e.g. dance group)

- "Student Ambassadors" – schools outreach and HE orientation activities

- volunteering (e.g. lab assistant, massage therapy for sports teams, community project in Africa)

- input to enhance PASS scheme recruitment and training

- trainers for PASS scheme – next cohort of SCs

"SUCCESS COACHES" ENGAGEMENT

SC agency – staff liaison and student advocacy

SC role: *'Yes, like a mediator, pretty much. Some students weren't confident enough to ask questions, acting like a link between student and lecturer. Sometimes lecturers assume that you know what they are talking about. It also helps the lecturer out as well.'*

'You get treated seriously because you are a SC and you can have an impact.'

Following suggestions SCs made to tutor: *'we organised an IT support session. Also, we organised a workshop of critical thinking. We were working from the weakness of students and working on it.'*

'I was able to relate to my lecturers much more. You learn that through communication on behalf of students. It's like a new level of respect for lecturers. They do a lot more than you assume they do.'

'I noticed that a lot of students don't get their voice heard and there are a lot of complaints. I want to be that person that people come to when they have issues. I hope that more students feel stronger and empowered.'

"SUCCESS COACHES" ENGAGEMENT

SC experience transformational for some

- full embrace of university opportunities
- deeper understanding of others
- inspiration for future studies or career

'I put in more work to my studies now. I am more interactive at university than before. Before, I would go to University, go to lectures, and go home. Now I'm coming in five or four days a week, I'm enjoying it, I'm talking to everyone, I'm sharing ideas, get new ideas… '

'It's made me understand people a bit more. It's made me more tolerant to understand that everyone is not like me.'

'…the one thing that will stick with me [is] don't judge a book by it's cover.. This is the only scenario where I have dealt with so many people. It has prepared me for [that], if I have to do that in the future.'

'Now I actively seeing out jobs, masters and PhDs…'

'For my future I will consider teaching. I will definitely use my skills for my future career.'

'I work in an NGO now, they were very interested in the fact that I had been part of the project and been a trainer especially. Now I am a programme lead for a programme with 15-17 year olds. .. It was an advantage in my CV.'

BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY
PASS scheme helped to develop among SCs and first-years:

Co-learning
'Some students are really passionate... and ask me [SC] those advanced questions. I feel like it is, like, a challenge for me, because it is quite interesting. We do go those roads and we find things [together]'.
Some SCs encouraged first-years to form own study groups: *'The key for me is teamwork. If they have a question they can help each other…'*
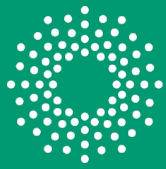
Friendship and connection
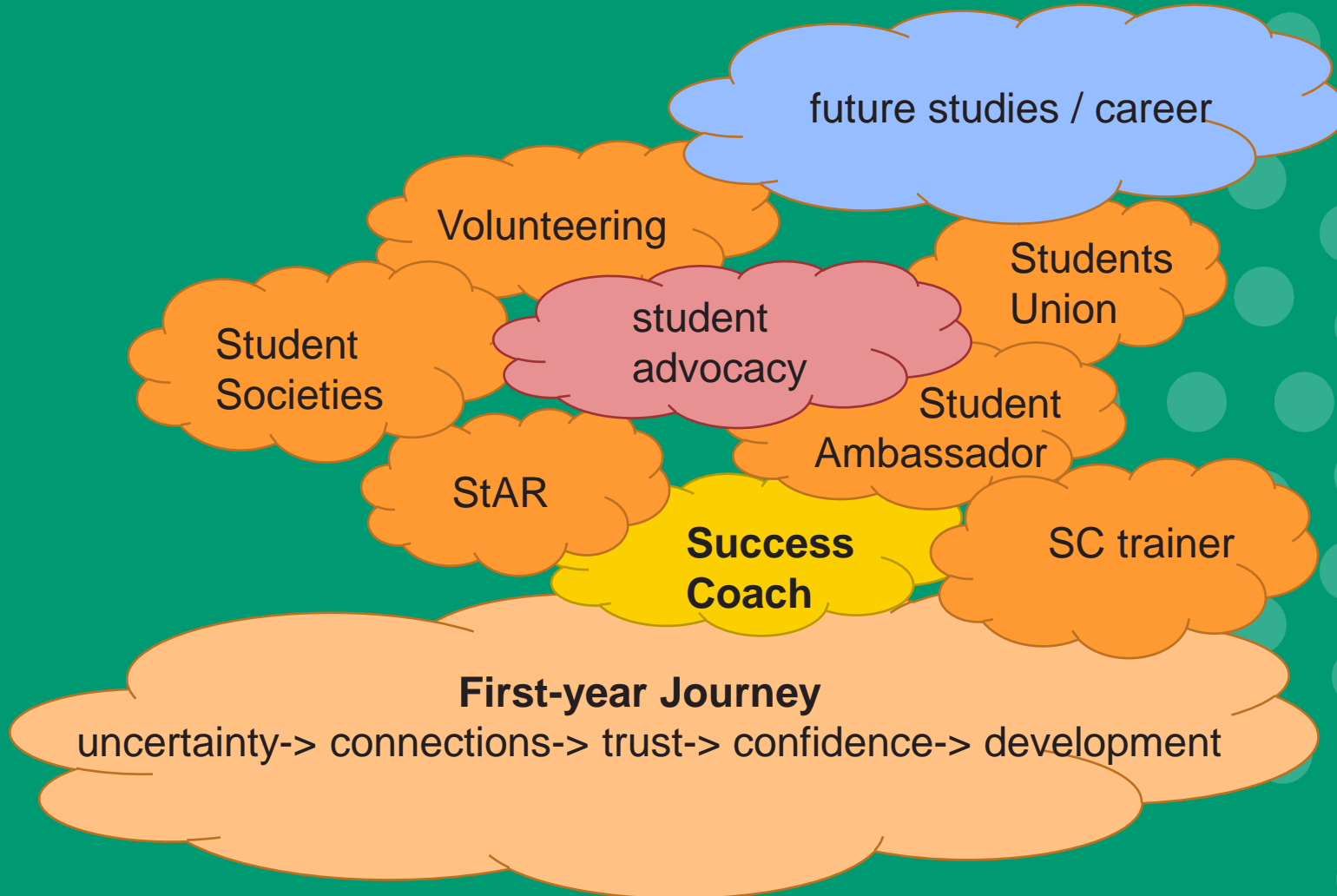*'I have spoken to my SC about… all the coursework, how we feel, building up friendships as well'.*
'we have a good working relationship as well as a good personal friendships among us SCs. That can help the students, as it can bring togetherness to the group'.

Sense of community and belonging
'We [SCs] not only facilitate, but we ourselves kind of get connected to different opportunities. You feel that you belong, that you are a part of university and you know each other'.

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

future studies / career

Volunteering

Students Union

student advocacy

Student Societies

Student Ambassador

StAR

SC trainer

Success Coach

First-year Journey
uncertainty-> connections-> trust-> confidence-> development

PASS scheme Student Engagement journey

References

Harrington, K. et al (2016) Student Engagement, in H. Pokorny & D.Warren (eds) *Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education*: London: Sage. Chapter 6 (pp.106-124)

Macfarlane, B. & Tomlinson, M. (2017) Editorial: Critical and Alternative Perspectives on Student Engagement, *Higher Education Policy*, 30: 1-4

Webb. T (2014) *The Principles of Student Engagement*. The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) www.tsep.org/TheConversation

Wimpenny, K. & Savin-Badin, M. (2013) Alienation, agency and authenticity: A synthesis of the literature on student engagement, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18 (3): 311-26