



## How a buddy scheme created social and intercultural space for international and home students

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### ***Presentation abstract***

Buddy schemes are a form of learning intervention that create a space for students to support each other by 'sharing knowledge, ideas and experience between [...] participants' (Boud, 2001, p.3). The author set up and conducted research to evaluate a buddy scheme to support international Nursing students on a one-year programme by matching them with a home-student buddy studying at the same level. This small-scale, qualitative study sought to investigate international and home students' experiences of participating in the buddy scheme. An online survey asked students to evaluate their access to social and academic support before and during the scheme through textual and numerical questions. A self-selecting subgroup of participants subsequently took part in semi-structured interviews to reveal their experiences and insights. These were recorded and transcribed before the data were analysed using inductive textual analysis to identify key themes.

In line with wider literature, this study found peer support has a positive influence on international students' socio-cultural transition (McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017; Shu et al., 2020; WONKHE, 2022), yet it is also 'mutually beneficial' (Boud, 2001, p.3), having a positive impact on both groups of students. Home students valued the opportunity to build relationships with peers they would not have otherwise met (Bethel, Ward and Fetvadjev, 2020). This opportunity for intercultural exchange enriched their experience too. As such, this study adds weight to existing evidence that buddy schemes are a useful means by which UK universities can support international and home students.

**Keywords:** peer-led support; international students; transition; buddy; mentor.

## ***Community response***

The community response to this session identified a joyful, positive takeaway: it was evident that both home and international students gained from and grew through their involvement in the project. During the presentation, Brooks shared her delight in discovering that the buddy scheme had enabled not just the international-student mentees but also home-student peer mentors to identify benefits from their involvement. This included more practical elements of transition for the international students, but for both groups included socio-cultural development. The positivity felt by Brooks was echoed by conference delegates:

It was great to hear how both 'sides' of the buddying relationship felt that they benefited from the interactions, but in different ways—practical/logistical benefits for the mentees and intercultural and social experience for the mentors. I wish I had participated in something like this as a student!

It was wonderful to hear the differences and similarities of support for home and international students to help develop a cultural space in addition to their academic curriculum.

Brooks explained that responses from international students indicated that the scheme had helped them to navigate their cultural transition into UK higher education (UKHE). Home students reported that their confidence had increased through developing their cultural awareness and linked this to improving their professional skills. As one delegate remarked: 'the outcomes of Ebba's session add to the evidence of the value of buddy schemes and peer learning schemes more widely'.

Furthermore, Brooks' session inspired delegates, who found different aspects to take forward in their own contexts. One delegate found inspiration to conduct a similar project:

This was an interesting session that was practical, stimulating my own institutional community and research interest. I would be very interested in conducting a similar research project as Ebba and perhaps embedding it into my practices to see whether students have similar experiences.

Another delegate found the presentation itself to be inspiring. They commended it as an example of a clear and well-constructed online presentation:

The session was really well structured in terms of the balance between background/theory, methods, findings, and outcomes. I would highly recommend that colleagues go back and watch the recording if they want an

example of how to deliver an effective online presentation which does not get bogged down in too much detail on context, theory, or methods. Ebba's session gave a clear overview of the project and a motivating message on the value of such schemes across various educational contexts.

The session offered delegates a window into Brooks' experience of the project and the participants' experiences. It inspired delegates, both in terms of the project itself and the presentation style.

### ***Next steps and additional questions***

Conversations in the session covered the challenges of recruiting buddies for the scheme. Brooks spoke openly about her experiences, explaining that it was difficult to find the numbers of students needed to enable home students to each have a low number of international-student buddies. Brooks provided an overview of the recruitment strategies that were used in the project, including physical materials (such as posters), messaging via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and spoken explanations in lectures from both Brooks and faculty colleagues. Brooks emphasised the importance of repeating the message and taking all opportunities to reshare the opportunity.

There were also strategies identified as useful specifically for subsequent iterations of the scheme, such as asking existing peer mentors to speak with potential mentors. Additionally, Brooks suggested that had it been possible to timetable the sessions this approach may have increased the number of buddies. Future iterations of this kind of scheme could add to this bank of methods for recruitment. Brooks created the model shown in Figure 1, using principles derived from Keenan (2014), to identify how the scheme can be developed and refined.

**Figure 1. Brooks’ cycle of developing a peer mentoring scheme.**

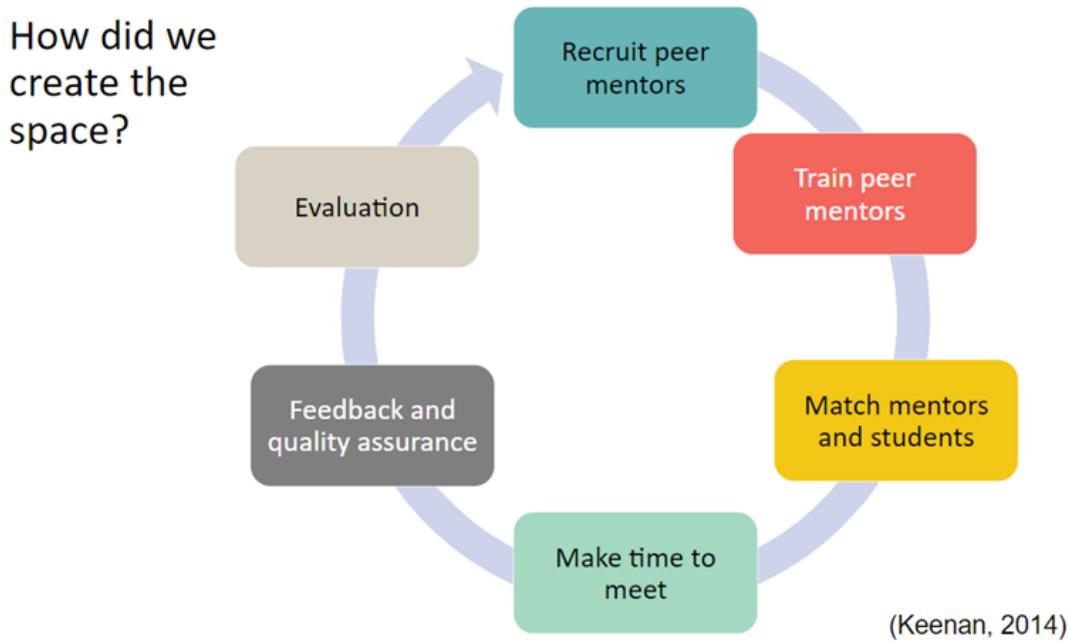


Figure 2 outlines Brooks’ reflections on the project. Completing the cycle has given rise to such valuable insights from the process. Could there perhaps be another iteration of the model that includes some of these key lessons? This could provide a second ‘layer’ to the cycle that may support other Learning Developers in embarking on the process of setting up a similar scheme.

**Figure 2. Summary slide outlining the key lessons learnt during the project.**

## Summary

- International students reported a positive impact on their socio-cultural transition to UKHE, particularly practical issues
- Home students also valued it highly in terms of their intercultural experience and professional competency
- Practical lessons learned in terms of repeating and maintaining the scheme

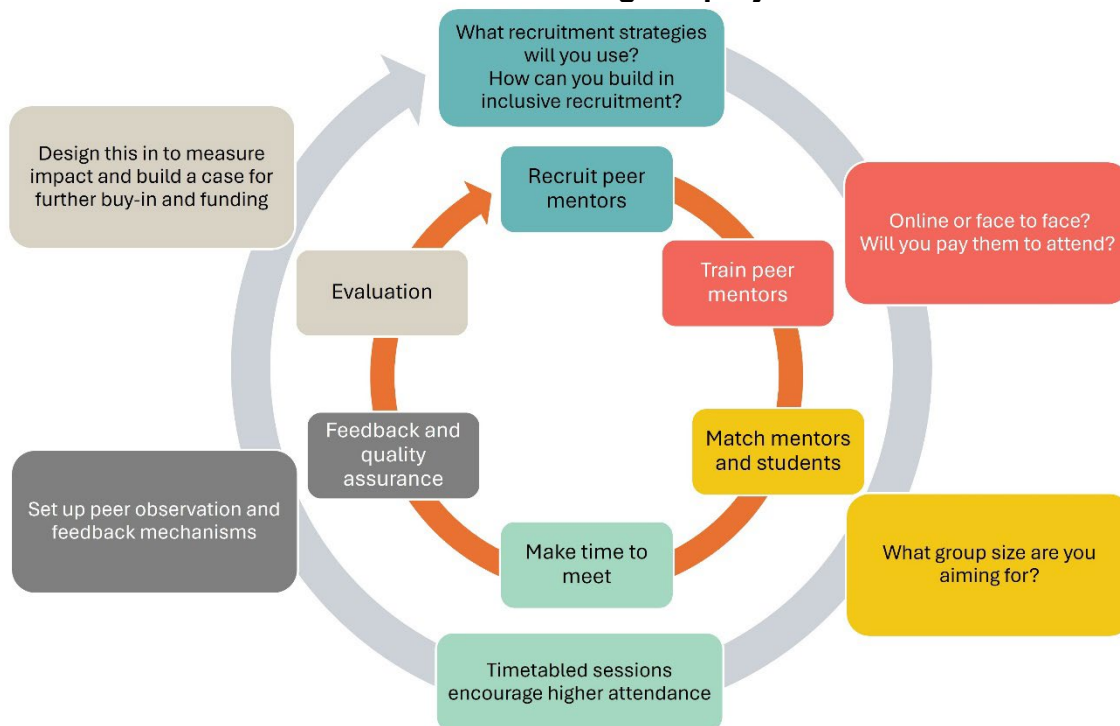
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### Author’s reflection

Recent research into peer learning and support across UKHE (Lochtie and McConnell, 2024) shows the increasing diversity of these schemes, from peer-mentoring schemes such as the buddy scheme that I have described above, to more traditional peer-assisted learning to address academic attainment. It is encouraging to read colleagues’ positive responses to this research, as there are opportunities for Learning Developers both to lead and collaborate with academic colleagues on peer mentoring and support initiatives. Connolly-Panagopoulos (2021) suggests that our expertise is especially valuable in training mentors to facilitate sessions. I would also argue that Learning Developers have a unique understanding of student experiences of assessment and learning, and they should use their perspectives in the design of peer mentoring and support schemes. Similarly, our Learning Development expertise is essential to help mentors identify, articulate, and share the academic skills they have developed.

The community asked about mapping the ‘lessons learned’ from the process onto the cycle of developing a peer mentoring scheme. I have made a first attempt to visualise how this may look in Figure 3. I hope this expanded model will be useful and provoke further conversations.

**Figure 3. Brooks’ cycle of developing a peer mentoring scheme, incorporating questions based on lessons learned during the project.**



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Ebba Brooks is a Peer Assisted Learning Manager at the University of Salford where she is currently setting up several peer-assisted learning pilots. She promotes inclusive pedagogical approaches that champion equity. Ebba became interested in supporting international students due to her own experiences as an international student. She has worked as a Learning Developer in the School of Health and Society at the University of Salford for six years, and she was previously a Digital Skills Trainer and a Creative Writing Lecturer in the Lifelong Learning Centre at the University of Leeds. Ebba is a member of ALDinHE's EDI working group.

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