



Reverse mentoring for belonging: Embedding student voice into inclusive PAT practice

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What were we trying to achieve?

To illuminate barriers to academic success for students from marginalised and minoritised groups through a structured reverse mentoring scheme.

The project aimed to:

- Build a fair, inclusive, and socially responsible university community.
- Enhance our understanding of student profiles through data.
- Foster a culture of inclusivity by equipping staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to support a diverse student body effectively.
- Amplify the student voice, enhancing understanding of systemic and personal barriers within higher education.
- Influence institutional strategies: Use evidence from lived experiences to inform policies and practices, particularly in personal academic tutoring (PAT) and curriculum design.

What Reverse Mentoring is & why it matters in HE



Definition & power shift: Students, particularly from marginalised backgrounds, mentor staff, reversing traditional roles to place student voices at the centre. This elevates lived experience as expert knowledge.



Why it matters: Empathy-building, unconscious bias awareness, and agency for students are critical outcomes

Project Overview

- 12-month scheme at the University of Sunderland (Sept 2023–24).
- 10 mentoring pairs
- Focus groups to highlight key areas
- Minoritised/marginalised students paired with staff mentee to meet regularly for mentorship
- Meetings recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed

Meeting themes		
Mentoring session	Theme	Areas for consideration
Week 1.	Life beyond University	• Who am I beyond academia? • My identity • External pressures & responsibilities
Week 2.	Cultural adaptations	• Impact of being or feeling of being perceived as a 'non-typical' student
Week 3.	Initial belonging	• Issues impacting upon 'belonging' to the University community • Inductions, non-September starts, Freshers
Week 4.	Help and support	• Personal tutors, academic support and guidance, University systems & support
Week 5.	Negotiated topic.	• Anything else you would like to discuss not already identified • What barriers impact you the most?

Impact for Students & Staff



Students: Gained validation, confidence, and a sense of agency.



Staff: Developed a deeper understanding of structural barriers and began reshaping support strategies

Student Voice: Themes Highlighted



Health & Wellbeing



Social & Institutional
Barriers



Belonging & Inclusion

Health and Wellbeing

Students reported significant challenges related to both **physical and mental health**, often exacerbated by **stigma, bureaucratic processes, and limited support**.

Disclosure of disabilities was **often met with a lack of understanding** or mistrust, and **adjustments were inconsistent**.

Mentees (staff) were prompted to reflect on how **institutional systems may inadvertently create or reinforce stressors** for students.

Social and Institutional Barriers

Students described **financial strain** (e.g., rising living costs, parking charges, and the need to work) as a major barrier to engagement and success.

Frustrations were raised about **administrative inefficiencies**, including delays in timetables, complex systems, and fragmented communication.

While external support networks (e.g., family, community groups) were valued, **institutional support was seen as reactive** rather than proactive.

Belonging and Inclusion

Students emphasised the importance of **inclusive environments** but often felt disconnected, particularly mature students who struggled to engage with traditional social activities.

Some students felt welcomed and supported; others experienced a **disconnect between the institution's inclusive values and their lived experiences**.

A strong sense of belonging was tied to **feeling heard, supported, and represented** within the curriculum and teaching community.

Important lessons from the project

Empowerment and Dialogue: Reverse mentoring provided a unique platform for **authentic dialogue**, where power dynamics were intentionally disrupted to value student experiences. Both mentors and mentees found the process deeply reflective and transformational.

Institutional Insight: Staff gained **first-hand understanding** of systemic challenges, highlighting gaps in cultural competence, the need for flexible learning, and inconsistencies in support services.

Intersectionality of Barriers: Students facing multiple layers of disadvantage (e.g., disability + low income + mature status) reported **compounded challenges**, reflecting the need for **holistic, intersectional approaches** to support.

Belonging as a Priority: Belonging emerged as **foundational to retention and success**, resonating with Tinto's theory of engagement. There is a need to **move beyond surface-level inclusivity** to embed belonging throughout the student experience.

Implications for Practice



Enhance support for diverse needs: Offer flexible study options, increase representation in the curriculum, and improve reasonable adjustments processes.



Streamline support services: Consider a one-stop-shop model to reduce complexity and improve access to vital services.



Improve staff cultural competence: Provide training and embed cultural awareness in teaching practices.



Foster belonging and engagement: Expand peer mentoring and cultural exchange, and tailor orientation for students with non-traditional backgrounds.



Review financial support: Enhance scholarships, emergency funds, and subsidised housing options to alleviate financial pressures.

Core Takeaways for Personal Academic Tutors

Elevate

Elevate student agency: Make student experiences and voices central to practice and policy.

Create

Create authentic listening spaces: Scheduled, safe conversations are vital.

Incorporate

Incorporate lived-experience learning: Let tutors learn from students about real challenges.

Drive

Drive small-scale change quickly: Use student feedback to pilot and iterate small improvements.

Broader Implications & Applications for Reverse Mentoring

Social justice frame: Reverse mentoring is reframed as an *emancipatory* tool, systemically empowering and redistributing influence.

Extending beyond HE: Similar schemes could inform services in homelessness, housing, and employment, situations where marginalised insights should drive service design



Questions

Happy to answer in the chat or at the end of the session

