

‘We’re kind of outsiders’: MA student-interns as peer mentors on a pre-sessional internship programme

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Abstract

This paper describes and analyses the role of peer mentoring in a pilot internship programme that took place in summer 2023. A team of five international MA student-interns participated in a summer pre-sessional programme, acting as communication partners and facilitators. The aim of the study was to investigate the benefits of being peer mentors for international postgraduate (PG) students, and it was conducted during a pre-sessional course. Feedback collected through a questionnaire, reflective diaries and a focus group revealed that the student-interns adopted the role of peer mentor to these new students, using their own experiences and knowledge to help the pre-sessional students prepare for their degrees. They also supported the students with non-academic aspects of studying and living abroad. The study concludes that introducing a mentoring aspect to the taught PG experience merits further research as a possible way to develop the mentors’ academic knowledge, awareness and skills.

Keywords: internship; pre-sessional programmes; peer mentoring; international students.

Introduction

International students make up an increasingly large share of the PGT cohort at many UK universities, comprising more than half of the total postgraduate cohort in 2021/2 (HESA, 2023) as well as being an important source of revenue for those universities. While many of these students flourish during their study year and go on to achieve their goals, the challenges faced by international students are well-documented. These include difficulties

with language (Wu and Hammond, 2011), academic skills (Gu et al., 2010), and cultural and academic adjustment to the UK university environment (Quan et al., 2016).

One way that many UK universities address these issues is by providing pre-sessional (PS) English courses to new students whose language skills (assessed via an accepted English language test such as IELTS) do not meet the level required for their degree programmes. Pre-sessional courses aim to develop incoming students' academic English, academic skills, and awareness of the procedures and expectations of UK university life (Bradshaw, 2004). Most focus on language and academic literacies for specific disciplines, such as Business or Sciences, to provide the best support for students preparing to study in that field (Mallia, 2017).

Alongside preparing students for the language and discourse requirements of their degree, PS courses also provide a university experience to the incoming students. However, there are several important differences between them and degree programmes. PS courses usually take place in the summer, outside of the standard academic teaching periods. This allows students to take the course immediately prior to commencing their degree. A disadvantage of this approach is that it reduces potential contact time between PS students and current PGT students, which could be a valuable chance for interactions and mentorship between experienced and less-experienced students (Jarvis and Stakounis, 2010; Copland and Garton, 2011). As Copland and Garton (2011) point out, this lack of interaction with other, non-PS students limits the potential to communicate and participate with current students, potentially limiting interaction opportunities with home students or other, more experienced, students, who could provide language and academic literacies advice and open the PS students to other perspectives. Greater interaction with current students, particularly other international students who are working towards completing their degrees, could be one way to address this.

Studies have shown that PS courses offer students good opportunities to develop useful academic skills and feel more comfortable in university life (Dooey, 2010; Terraschke and Wahid, 2011). However, concerns have been raised about how well graduates of pre-sessional courses do in their degrees. Thorpe et al. (2017) analysed student grades at a university in England, comparing students who had completed a pre-sessional course before commencing their degree with those who did not. They found that students who

completed their pre-sessional studies often still struggled when compared with native-English speaking home students and also other English as a Second Language international students who had appropriate IELTS scores for direct entry to their degree programme. They argue that in-sessional provision is one way to address this, and another way is to develop stronger connections between universities and students. Similarly, Pearson's (2020) literature review found that pre-sessional students often completed the pre-sessional course successfully but struggled on their degree programme, and a recent Financial Times investigation found a large award gap between non-EU international students and their UK and EU colleagues (Borrett and Foster, 2023). These findings suggest that there is room for new approaches and development in the delivery of pre-sessional English courses.

This project took place in the summer of 2023 at a university in the north of England. This university has recently created a new team of in-sessional academic communication and skills lecturers. This provision was established to help develop the language and communication skills of taught postgraduate students in the Faculty of Social Sciences, a large number of whom are international students. It is concerned, not just with teaching academic writing and skills, but also with providing support and guidance to students throughout their academic journey. PGT students in the Faculty of Social Sciences have a regular weekly session with a skills lecturer on their timetable. This creates a stronger bond between teacher and student, with the skills lecturer able to act as a mentor, supervisor and guide to academic success. While the academic skills provision was evaluated through student feedback, academic staff feedback and student grades, the mentoring aspect of the provision was not as well measured. In order to allow MA students to act as mentors to other, less-experienced students, an internship programme was created to bring experienced PGT students into the PS classroom. This internship was a pilot project aimed at bridging the gap between pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP at the same university. MA students, who were completing their postgraduate studies, were invited to observe and participate in a limited number of pre-sessional (PS) classes. This gave them a unique opportunity to gain insight into the challenges faced by international students in developing their academic skills and to contribute to the improvement of academic skills support within the university.

This paper reports on a study to investigate the benefits for the MA students of acting as peer mentors to the PS students. There is strong recognition of the benefits that peer mentoring can offer in terms of academic success and personal development (Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Collier, 2017). Frith et al. (2017) describe peer mentoring as walking 'a fine line between being a friend/confidante and a tutor, taking on neither role in its full form but assuming some aspects of each' (p.12). The peer mentor provides an alternative source of information and experience but is not a member of academic staff.

Mentorship has been shown to have a positive effect on international students' academic adjustment and overall grades (Ragavan, 2014; Thomson and Esses, 2016). There are a few studies of peer mentoring for international students from Canada (Thomson and Esses, 2016) and Australia (Outhred and Chester, 2013), but the UK context remains underexplored. In a 2014 study, Ragavan created a mentorship programme for international students studying Law. Seventeen first-year international students were paired with eight international students in their final year, who acted as mentors. The study found that the mentoring scheme helped the new students adjust to the UK academic environment and led to an improvement in the pass rate among international students. However, this study was undertaken with undergraduate students, rather than master's and PS students. This could lead to differing results, as the mentors may well be older and bring different life experiences to those of final year undergraduates. These experiences could shape their mentoring and expectations. Additionally, a study by Collings et al., (2014) compared two student cohorts: one with a peer-mentoring scheme, and one without. While this study did not focus on international students, it was found that new students with a mentor felt better integrated into their university and were much less likely to consider leaving. These studies show that peer mentoring can help students to feel prepared for and integrated into university, an issue with which international students often struggle. In both of these cases, the focus was on the benefits for the mentored students, not the mentors themselves. Mentorship should be beneficial for both parties, so there is room for research concerning the benefits of being a mentor for international students. Therefore, in this paper, the internship project will be used to investigate the benefits of peer mentoring for international MA students, focusing on the mentors themselves. The effects of being a peer mentor will be discussed and analysed.

Summer internship objectives

The internship aimed to better connect current PGT and pre-sessional students, so that the experienced PGT student-interns could provide the PS students with valuable experiences, knowledge and skills. In short, this project aimed to investigate the viability of a peer-mentoring programme between PS students and current MA students. Additionally, the internship aimed to provide MA students with a valuable opportunity to observe and participate in pre-sessional English classes.

Recruitment process for MA students

Recruitment took place over several months. An initial application was circulated among MA and MSc students in the Department of Education, where the researcher teaches in-session courses. Applicants were assessed on their awareness of the needs of pre-sessional students, experience of learning English and potential to benefit from the internship. This was followed by interviews with selected students. Following the interviews, five student-interns were accepted, all studying MAs in Education or TESOL.

The interview process revealed some shortcomings: some students did not demonstrate a strong understanding of the pre-sessional English programme and how their internship experience would contribute to their own studies. Additionally, there were some issues with spoken English – clarity, pronunciation and understanding questions – that hindered candidates' performance. As the student-interns would be communicating with less experienced students, some of whom may have limited experience of communicating in English, an emphasis was placed on the communicative abilities of the student-interns so that they would contribute to, rather than hinder, classroom communication. As the student-interns were guests in an English-only PS course, it was decided that they should not use their home language but only English. This required a high level of spoken English.

Roles and responsibilities of interns

Two challenges emerged when planning the internship. Firstly, funding was a challenge. It was decided that the student-interns should be paid, in accordance with university policy regarding internships. Funding was found internally, but this limited the size and scope of the internship. The allocated funding allowed for five interns, each working three contact hours. Additionally, timing was a concern. The pre-sessional courses take place over the summer, which is a busy time for MA students as they are completing their dissertations, the culmination of a year's work. This would potentially impact recruitment, as a large commitment in the summer could hinder students from focusing on their dissertations. Because of these three factors, an approach based on flexibility and collaboration was adopted. The five interns would deliver a joint 'guest lecture' as part of the induction session for one of the pre-sessional programmes, before acting as facilitators in individual PS classrooms.

The guest lecture was delivered as a panel discussion between the interns, students and academic staff. The student-interns had time to prepare answers in groups, so that they felt more comfortable and supported. They were able to share their own experiences, insights and expertise in an interactive and engaging manner, highlighting to the PS students their role as potential mentors. Topics covered both academic and non-academic aspects of the international master's experience. For example, one intern spoke about the importance of using the online course handbook and accessing resources that they were initially unaware of, while another intern talked about the importance of getting a railcard. This discussion lasted about 45 minutes. Afterwards, the attending PS students were placed in groups with an intern and had twenty minutes to ask their own questions. The rationale for this approach was firstly to answer common questions to the whole group, before facilitating discussion in small groups to allow students to ask the questions they were concerned about. This approach could enable social connections between the PS students and the student-interns, in order to facilitate a possible peer-mentoring relationship.

The goal of the guest lecture was to provide a platform for interns to share their knowledge and experiences with incoming students, helping them navigate the challenges and opportunities of the international master's experience. It was successful in this regard as it

allowed the interns to provide valuable insights and guidance to the pre-sessional students. PS Students and student-interns all reported strong satisfaction with this session. The small-group section of the lecture was particularly successful, with PS students asking a wide variety of questions, extending the session's allocated time.

The second part of the internship involved interns breaking into groups to act as discussion facilitators during the pre-sessional classes, acting under the supervision of pre-sessional tutors. During this phase, the interns were responsible for supporting pre-sessional students in discussions, encouraging them to participate and helping the pre-sessional students to develop their ideas more fully. They were also available to answer questions. An example of how this worked was given by a pre-sessional tutor. The topic for the session was etiquette and culture. The interns were able to share their experiences of British culture and etiquette and talked about the mistakes they had made. A long discussion took place about the etiquette of toilet usage in the UK – an example of the kind of questions international students have that might not have been anticipated. This shows the benefits of having an experienced peer in the classroom, someone who has experienced the subject and made mistakes, and can share their experiences with pre-sessional students in a friendly and more available way (Yomtov et al., 2017).

Data collection and analysis

A mixed methods approach was taken for data collection. Participating student-interns were required to keep reflective journal logs before and after each contact hour. The template for the diaries was derived from Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. This approach asks participants to consider a task, such as a teaching session or incident, and reflect on their feelings, actions and how they could improve in future sessions. For each session, student-interns were asked to reflect on the questions in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Reflective journal template (for one session)

How did you feel before the session?
What did you do in the session?

How did you feel during the session?
What interesting or notable things happened during the session?
How do you feel about the session now?
If you could do it again, what would you do differently?
What did you learn from the session?

This approach was not a great success. Student-interns' responses varied greatly in terms of reflection, depth and detail. A likely explanation is that the student-interns had differing levels of experience and awareness of reflective practice, and they did not receive training in reflective journaling as part of the internship. A greater focus on training students in reflective practice should be adopted in future projects involving reflective journals.

While the data gathered was not extensive, after analysis, several themes emerged to plan a focus group with the five interns. These themes included the student-interns' support for PS students' academic skills compared to life experiences in the UK, the student-centred classroom of the PS course, and how the student-interns could communicate with the PS students in a different way to academic staff. The focus group format was chosen to allow for discussions between participants and to enable them to freely interact and bounce off each others' ideas. Ideas shared by one participant could be developed and explored by others (Jarrell, 2000).

In order to obtain ethical approval for this project, applicants were asked to sign an informed consent form confirming that they consented to complete reflective diaries and participate in a focus group, and that the findings could be disseminated through a journal article.

Finally, as the project involved not only the student-interns but also the PS students themselves, a quantitative feedback form was created to assess how valuable the students had found the project, with a single qualitative question at the end of the form about any additional comments or questions they might have. Ethical approval was sought and successfully obtained for this form. While this approach did not provide the detailed feedback that would have been available through qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, it was quick and easy for the PS students to complete and did not impinge too much on the PS teachers' classroom time. However, the results from this lacked detail or significant value, and so had limited use for this study. In particular, the qualitative question at the end of the form was largely ignored. It is clear that future projects will need to reconsider feedback mechanisms in order to gain more useful feedback.

The focus group was successful in that it yielded valuable information about the student-interns' experiences, what they gained from the internship, and how they had interacted with the PS students. Overall, the interns expressed their appreciation for the internship experience and acknowledged its value in enhancing their understanding of the challenges faced by international students in language learning. The questions chosen were based on the issues indicated through the reflective diaries. The interns expressed that their participation in the internship program allowed them to further develop their language and communication skills, both in academic and non-academic contexts.

For the PS students, the interns provided an experienced source of information. This allowed them to ask questions about the course to someone who could answer them, but who was also not a teacher or lecturer. The interns commented that they felt strong satisfaction from helping the PS students and sharing their experiences. They were able to act as peer mentors, an area which should be explored further.

Following the final session with the interns, the pre-sessional students were given a quantitative questionnaire to complete. 25 pre-sessional students participated, and 21 completed the questionnaire. This gave a picture of the overall satisfaction of the students with the internship program. Students displayed a general satisfaction with the internship programme and indicated that it had provided them with valuable insights and support in improving their language and skills within the university. Of the 21 students who completed

the questionnaire, 19 agreed that it had helped them to learn more about university life, and 17 agreed that they had learned more about life in the UK. The objectives of the internship were partially met, as an effective working relationship was created between the student-interns and the PS students, leading to the potential for future cooperation.

Impacts on and benefits for student-interns

The internship allowed the student-interns to apply the knowledge they had gained from their MA programmes to a real-life situation at a UK university. The student-interns were able to gain a better understanding of the UK higher education system and the expectations placed upon them as international students. They also gained knowledge of the specific challenges and needs of pre-sessional students, as well as the pedagogical approaches used in pre-sessional English programmes:

the teachers and the students, they created the environment together. And so basically, what I feel about is that the teachers try to make the class... student-centred and the students, they are also [working] really hard, trying to enjoy this principle (Intern 1).

[the internship made me] rethink about my experience as an international student as well as a teacher. So it kind of gives me a lot of different perceptions (Intern 3).

As Education students, one of the benefits for the student-interns was exposure to the classroom and being able to observe the PS lecturer. The student-interns could see examples of a student-centred classroom and how the teacher and students co-created it. This allowed them to reflect on their own teaching practices and consider how they could potentially create a more student-centred classroom in the future, demonstrating the value of the classroom experience.

Moreover, they were able to use their own experiences to provide support to the PS students. One way to do this was to make students better aware of the expectations and approaches of UK higher education, and how it differs to those of other countries and cultures:

I have tried to show the differences and similarities between the education system that they have already experienced and what they are going to experience in this

new university.... [I]f there would be any problems, they knew it already in advance, so they knew how to search for support or search for any sort of help that would be available at the university. So yeah, I think that that was great. And this kind of familiarisation process was sort of a satisfying process for me (Intern 4).

This leads to a second benefit: the interns' position. They were not teachers, and they were not pre-sessional students, but were more experienced students and potential role models for the PS students. This meant that they were able to act as mentors and guides to the pre-sessional students, creating a new level in the hierarchy of the pre-sessional classroom.

[W]hen I went into those classes they were all really engaged, and they just seemed really relaxed, even though we're students here. But we're kind of outsiders, but they are really at ease and just talk to us about what they were doing (Intern 3).

The presence of the international student interns in the pre-sessional classrooms created a sense of familiarity and comfort for the pre-sessional students, allowing them to feel more at ease and engage more freely with their tasks. As Intern 3 stated, the interns were a new element in the classroom, hence the 'outsiders' moniker. As outsiders, the interns played a different role to that of the pre-sessional course tutor:

Basically, I think we were also kind of informing them about the same things that the tutors were telling them. But I feel like, even for me personally, when a tutor or an instructor, or someone in an authoritative kind of position, when they tell us something we just like, you know, listen, but then completely forget about it. But then, if someone that's actually in your position and a fellow student or a fellow colleague tells you that same information kind of sticks with you (Intern 3).

This intern's comments highlight the importance of communication between students, especially between those with greater experience and those with less. This is similar to the results of Lillyman and Bennett (2014), who conducted a study on how UK universities can improve the experiences of international students. They found that facilitating contact with representatives, such as former international students, could prove beneficial. They also stress the importance of a buddy system and regular social contact – in short, creating more opportunities for new students to seek out friends, collaborators and colleagues to better deal with the challenges of studying abroad. The student-interns occupied a unique position in the pre-sessional classroom, as they were able to provide information and guidance to the students from the perspective of an experienced, knowledgeable peer.

This was a new element in the course and provided a new source of information and experience for the pre-sessional students. As PS courses take place in the summer vacation period, there are fewer opportunities for interaction with non-PS students. Having interns like these, who are peers to the pre-sessional students but also have more knowledge and experience, enables them to be easy and available sources of information. In particular, they can share how they overcame challenges:

I know that the teachers are presenting some sort of support, but the point is that when we, as the student, have already experienced how to access the support and how to get and use these sorts of supports. So this process couldn't be explained by the teachers in the class or by someone as an advisor or officer, but it could be presented in the class by the students who were already experienced. So I think that this sort of discussion between the students, the newcomers, and the old students would definitely help in this case (Intern 4).

This quotation effectively describes the role taken on by the interns, and the feedback suggests that it was beneficial for both PS and PGT students. The interns themselves were international students; it was their experiences and knowledge of being international students that enabled them to act as mentors. Moreover, as peer mentors, they gained valuable employability skills. Frith et al. (2017) describe these skills as including communication, planning and organisation; in this case, experience of classroom facilitation and support must be included in that list.

Challenges encountered during the internship

The student-interns encountered several challenges during the programme. One issue was a mismatch between PS students' expectations and the student-interns' own experiences. Secondly, the expectation that the student interns would be a source of academic knowledge was not entirely correct, as the PS students often wanted to find out more about life in the UK rather than academic matters.

The student-interns sometimes found themselves confronted with questions they could not answer. The PS students were mainly studying Management, but this was not something which the PGT interns (studying Education-based subjects) had experience in. In the future, more emphasis on matching the expertise of MA interns with the needs of PS

students would be beneficial. Additionally, the university was going through a number of changes owing to the replacement of the annual three-term structure with one based on semesters. Because of this, the interns reported being unable to answer specific questions about semesterisation. This resulted in frustration among the student-interns, although this situation was likely unique to that academic year. Both examples show that, in future internships, appropriate selection and placement of student interns is important in order to help the students benefit from the interns' knowledge and experiences, and to provide a satisfying and productive internship for the interns themselves.

One surprising outcome was that many student questions and discussion topics were more related to life and recreational situations than academic or course-specific issues. For example, interns were asked specific questions about fun activities to do in the city, or more practical life-knowledge like the location of supermarkets or how to register at a doctor's surgery.

I found that they [the PS students] really want to know more about [the city]. They prefer to know more about things other than study, like playing here, travelling and other life issues, even for register GP. And then we can share more in this area (Intern 2).

And I can give them some suggestions due to my own experience last year. I teach them ...which supermarket you can buy the cheapest food and recommend to them my favourite restaurant, and I feel very happy that I can help them. And when I say, Oh, I saw what they said, my suggestion is helpful. So I feel happy about this (Intern 5).

The interns reported feeling satisfied at being able to help the students in this regard, and these questions stress the role of pre-sessional courses as not just academic courses but also, in the students' eyes, often their first experience of living in the UK and a valuable opportunity to make friends and prepare for an exciting year. The challenges of life in the UK for international students must also not be overlooked, with tasks such as registering for a GP and using the public transportation system being unfamiliar and potentially daunting. In their interviews with Chinese students, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) described new Chinese students as facing challenges with living independently and dealing with the demands of UK life. One of their conclusions is that universities should provide help to students to support their adjustment to UK life. A strong majority of the PS

students involved were Chinese, and the interns were able to support them in this aspect of university life.

However, by focusing on the non-academic aspects of the university experience, some of the PS students may have missed out on valuable knowledge and discussions with the student-interns. In future internships, this could be mitigated through greater preparation, lesson design and planning with the pre-sessional tutors, to ensure that students and interns stay on topic. Specific sessions could be arranged to focus on the non-academic aspects of university life, such as medical services and saving money. On the other hand, the students were able to ask the questions they wanted to ask, and the interns were able to answer those questions, providing an insight into the student experience.

Conclusion and recommendations

This internship has indicated the value of bringing experienced PGT students into the PS classroom as peer mentors who share their experiences and knowledge. They provide an alternative perspective to those normally available to PS students, whose previous on-campus community consisted mainly of other PS students and academics. The presence of other students with PGT experience allows for questioning, discovery and knowledge-construction through alternative sources, and allows for information from the perspective of a student rather than a tutor. The PGT students gained valuable classroom experience and employability skills from the internship.

When planning the internship, it was anticipated that the interns would focus on more academic matters, such as how to do well in their degree. While many PS students enjoyed meeting and working with the PGT students, in some cases there was a focus on local knowledge, such as supermarkets, restaurants and how to register with a doctor. This indicates that these matters were a priority for the PS students. A future internship could provide multiple Q&A sessions, with different topics (e.g. academic skills, life in the UK skills) stated clearly so that there is a space for all kinds of topics. It should also match students carefully based on their upcoming subject choice. Greater participation from Business students could prove useful here, given their large numbers in the PS cohort.

However, the experience of being in a PS classroom was very beneficial for the Education students, given their subject knowledge and interest.

This pilot internship programme provided valuable insight into the potential for collaboration between PS and PGT students. A greater focus on peer mentoring between experienced and less experienced international students could enable PS students to learn more about both the academic and 'life-skills' requirements of being a PGT, while providing valuable opportunities for PGT students to develop key employability skills as they come to the end of their MA programmes and prepare to enter or return to the job market. Moreover, this study has suggested possible directions for a peer-mentoring scheme on a PS course and has demonstrated the challenges of such a programme.

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