

SLUTTRAPPORT: PEER

Name of the project: PEER

Contributors: SV / IT og informasjonssystemer, UiA

Project leader: Maria Ranta

Date of reporting: 24.9.2020

Background and description of the project preparation, incl. deviations from proposal

PEER is a student mentoring initiative directed at first-year students at BA level (bachelor studies + årsstudium) at the faculty of social sciences (SV). The focus of the project falls between the academic and social: PEER project eases the transformation from a pupil to a student by strengthening the students' study skills. Simultaneously, mentoring activities strive to tackle the known challenges of loneliness and anxiety experienced by students through creating an inclusive study environment. Every new student is invited to a mentor group consisting of fellow students in the same study programme. The meetings address a variety of study-related topic, such as building a personal study strategy, group work skills, note-taking techniques, time planning, preparing for exams, stress management – and so on. The meetings are intended as a safe space for raising all kinds of study-related discussions and concerns, even the “stupid questions” one wouldn't dare to raise in class. Thus, it can be summarized that the project seeks for academic benefits through social inclusion and facilitated group activities.

Student mentoring is a relatively new initiative in the Norwegian higher education sector. UiA is currently one of the frontrunners in Norway in this specific area alongside Nord University. As of 2020, UiA employs roughly 100 trained student mentors offering support to over 1000 first-year students. However, student mentoring is not an entirely novel concept neither globally or in the Nordic countries. Peer-to-peer student mentoring has been proved as an effective way to prevent drop-outs, increase study results qualitatively and quantitatively, and improve the study milieu in a number of countries. Similar effects can also be observed at UiA's TekReal, where UiA's first student mentoring project titled FYSE (First Year Study Environment) was introduced in 2018. For example, the drop-out rate during the first year of studies has reduced to half within the programmes using FYSE. First-year students that regularly took part in FYSE meetings received more study points and higher grades during their first year than students that did not attend. Furthermore, the study programmes that introduced FYSE received higher evaluations in student feedback in areas regarding the social milieu amongst students than programmes that did not.

The positive early experiences from FYSE motivated SV to introduce mentoring as a faculty-wide service to its first-year students as well. Planning an SV-specific mentoring concept was initially kicked off in February 2019, when the faculty submitted an application to UiA's PRUK programme. The proposal received a positive decision in June 2019. After the summer holiday period, SV's faculty leadership and department heads took some time to further discuss the commitment and need for mentoring activities. In late October 2019, faculty's leadership gave green light for kicking off the PEER project, and nominated a project leader and an advisory group. The nominations were delivered to PRUK/PULS mid-October, and the group started its work on 28.10. The participants of the group were presented in the project's mid-term report delivered in November 2019.

As the project work started nearly two months later than anticipated in the PRUK proposal, the planning and implementation of the project needed to be redesigned according to the more intense schedule. Setting up the aforementioned advisory group was another deviation from the proposal, in which the project leader was originally described to be solely responsible for data collection, planning and communication towards departments independently. However, with the increased time-pressure, the advisory group's support for completion of the expected tasks was absolutely necessary. The needs analysis and planning of the mentoring

concept were completed in four weeks instead of the planned eight weeks' time. An overall timeline of PEER project development with respective outputs is provided in attachment 1.

As further deviation to the submitted PRUK application, collecting feedback about the mentoring concept during the development phase could not be done in face-to-face encounters with respective department heads, advisors, programme coordinators and responsible teachers in the same extent that was presented in the proposal. This was also due to the intensified schedule of preparation. Instead, the communication between internal shareholders and project leader took place primarily through the advisory group's representatives.

Despite the changes regarding scheduling and organization of the planning process, the working method was in line with the original plans. The project relied on four-phased feedback loop; (1) measuring, (2) reviewing, (3) choosing and (4) acting. The project leader handed the advisory group's members a weekly task for collecting relevant data and feedback of their programmes (1). This data/feedback was reviewed by the project leader (2), and based on observations regarding "sore spots" of different programmes, a proposal was made for the group's weekly meeting (3), to be discussed and concluded before moving to the next topic and tasks (4).

The weekly tasks for the advisory group included requests for collecting programme-specific data in areas such as student numbers, throughput, drop-out rate, bottleneck courses and student feedback. It was essential to draw a map of the existing state of programmes and first year of studies, and to identify their strengths and weaknesses, so that the mentoring activities would not overlap with areas that are already doing well and/or have existing support structures in place. Instead, the mentoring activities were planned to focus on areas in need of improvement. Tableau, Studiebarometeret results, study programme reports and interviews with key actors were utilized as main information sources.

As a result of this mapping, the following project objectives were concluded:

1. Strengthening the student's transition from pupils to students: "learn to learn"
2. Enhancing the social inclusion of students studying in the same programme
3. Better awareness and use of tools and services offered by the university
4. Preventing drop-outs

Following the course of action described above, the group agreed upon an overall model of peer-to-peer mentoring at SV. This included the objectives/focus described above, but also the organization and administration, finances and resourcing, integration to studies/curriculum, relation to assistant teaching, meeting frequency and mentor-student ratio (more information about these in the "output" section). This model was sent to all departments for final feedback, with a request for confirming involvement in the project.

After the Christmas holidays, the faculty leadership agreed with department heads that only one department would take the developed mentoring concept in use. The primary explanation provided for the drawback of most departments at that stage was that the project was deemed as too demanding. The delay in kicking off the project, and the added time pressure that followed, could have had an impact on the department's perceptions on what mentoring is, what the workload required by implementing mentoring activities is, and the departments' ability to tailor the model to suit their local needs. Furthermore, it was also discovered that details regarding financing raised concerns amongst the departments. It can be speculated that some of the concerns might have been eased with stronger communication with the departments involved – however, the original plans regarding discussions with all shareholders would have required more time than the project group eventually ended up having.

The department willing to take the model in use from the year 2020 onwards is IT and information systems. It was agreed that both degree-seeking students and årsstudium-students are included in piloting the developed mentoring model, and the department merges the recruitment of mentors and assistant teachers. Each recruited student mentor is given 10 hours per month for mentoring activities and 30 hours per month for assistant teaching sessions. The group of first-year students remains the same in both mentoring and assistant teaching sessions. However, there is a distinction between the focus, organization and finances of mentoring sessions vs assistant teaching. The coordination and finances of the mentoring activities is covered by the faculty, whereas activities and costs related to assistant teaching fall on the responsibility of the department. In terms of focus, the graph below highlights the difference.



Outputs

As the main output, the project developed a mentoring concept for SV following the description above. However, as only one department decided to take the mentoring concept in use, the number of mentors and students involved are significantly lower than what was presented in our PRUK application. During autumn 2020, the mentoring activities at SV cover approximately 170 first-year students. There are 12 recruited mentors, of which everyone hosts a group of approx. 15 students. The faculty plans to re-discuss during autumn 2020 about the future of the project (discontinuing/expanding/maintaining the existing activities).

In addition to developing the overall concept, incl. the focus, methods, coordination and finances, a significant amount of time was spent on designing and delivering the training of mentors. Hence, **the training programme for mentors should be listed as a separate concrete output**. The mentors set an expectation for the first-year students of what it's like to study at UiA. Thus, making the mentor's role and responsibility clear through training was seen as a critical success factor, ensuring the mentors contribute with a positive, collaborative and inclusive approach. The training programme was designed in close collaboration with FYSE (TekReal) and God Start (HumPed).

When defining the skills mentors should have, the project's overall objectives set the starting point. The mentors need to be able to assist the students in developing their own study skills, and thus they need to be aware of the topic itself, as well as available resources at UiA and external sources in this particular area. Furthermore, they need to be skilled in leading a group, incl. working methods, activation tools and communication in the context of working in small groups. Last, but definitely not least, the mentors need to have the ability to make every group member feel welcomed, safe and accepted in the group meeting setting – in other words, to have strong interpersonal skills. On this basis, the following core skills were defined as critical for ensuring success of mentoring activities:

1. Communication and interpersonal skills
2. Facilitation skills
3. Knowledge of study strategy and study techniques
4. Knowledge about services, tests and support materials in topics such as academic writing, referencing, digital services, effective group work, stress management, preparing for exams, note-taking techniques etc.

For communication and interpersonal skills, PEER project decided to use the same training module offered for God Start mentors: Connect-training led by Eva Dønnestad. Eva also offers this training at SV as a part of the five-year master's programme in child protection (master i barnevern). The Connect training offered in PEER consisted of 15 hours in total. The training focuses on interpersonal skills and creating a safe and inclusive environment for questions and discussions.

For facilitation skills, the project uses a method called SI-PASS. SI-PASS stands for Supplemental Instruction - Peer Assisted Study Sessions. It's an educational model based on collaborative learning, developed in the 1970s by Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). In SI-PASS, students meet regularly in groups with 5 to 15 participants under the leadership of an older student who has previously taken the same studies. The senior student acts as a role model, discussant and guide, but *not* as a teacher. The PEER mentors get the training of a "SI Leader", whose task is to help the students to sort out, shed light on, and find answers to given topics together, and to work effectively and purposefully in the group by using SI-PASS facilitation tools. They are also equipped with an app that assists them in locating the suitable collaborative method to the topic at hand, may it be about note-taking (Cornell method), marking textbook, reviewing notes, preparing for exams and so on. The app also provides tips for handling challenging situations, such as too talkative or too silent students, low attendance, checking for understanding and course frustration. PEER mentors were given 14h of training in SI strategies, tools and leadership. The training was offered by project staff in God Start and PEER (Sara Sørstrand and Anne-Lene Semb), based on a SI-PASS supervisor training to which staff from PEER, God Start, FYSE and MatRIC took part in February 2020 at Lund, Sweden.

For the development of study strategy and study skills, the mentors were given a short introductory lecture on PER studiestrategi, developed by Halvard Øysæd in collaboration with Andreas Prinz, and used in FYSE. A lecture on the topic and online self-study materials counted up to 2-3 hours in the training programme. Furthermore, the SI-PASS handbook and training provided several practical tools and tips for effective study techniques.

Lastly, the project built a resource bank and self-study package for the mentors, so that they could study independently about topics they will use in the mentoring meetings. This included knowledge about services, tests and support materials in topics such as academic writing, referencing, digital services, effective group work, stress management, preparing for exams and note-taking techniques – to mention some. Both services and support structures at UiA and some external sources were included. The online training combined with face-to-face training in August added up to roughly 30 hours of training.

In addition to the outputs regarding the concept and training, the project produced a variety of materials. These included a mentoring handbook, a modified SI-PASS handbook translated into Norwegian and marketing/branding materials (t-shirts, brochures). As the project was not initiated at the faculty level, it was decided that the project would not build an independent website. Instead, the project was marketed to new students in IT and information systems through welcoming e-mails and during the events during semester start. The mentors also reached out to their students independently.

In terms of administrative outputs, the following was agreed:

- The faculty covers the workload and costs related to mentoring activities: recruitment and training of the mentors, planning/hosting/reporting of the mentoring meetings
 - o For keeping the costs in control, PEER project covers only the first semester (not the full first year as with the other mentoring projects at UiA)
 - o There should be at least two mentoring sessions every month, and mentors receive 10hrs for the planning, hosting and reporting of the sessions, and for monthly meetings with staff
 - o Each mentor gets a group of 10-15 students
 - o Each mentor works in pairs, with close collaboration with another mentor, sharing ideas and experiences from their meetings
- Faculty ensures required human resource for the tasks mentioned above
 - o The human resource assigned for the project are also responsible for gathering and monitoring weekly feedback from students and mentors. This includes the students rating the usefulness of each mentor meeting, as well as rating their overall motivation in their studies → at the end of autumn semester, the students' participation to mentoring meetings is compared to their overall motivation rating and study success
- The departments involved are responsible for integrating the mentoring to their study programmes
 - o The respective teachers are kept informed of mentoring
 - o The teachers can feed information about topics they wish to be highlighted in the mentoring meetings (however, this is not a must)
 - o Coordination between assistant teaching and mentoring is addressed and agreed
 - o There is a possibility to make the mentoring mandatory as an integration to first-semester courses (the case of God Start – not actualized at SV)
- The departments assist in the recruitment of mentors, having knowledge and ideas of good candidates

Finances

Financially, the project was realized as described in the application: the grant was fully spent on compensating the workload put into planning and implementation of the mentoring concept and training. Between the period of late October 2019 and July 2020, the project leader spent 607 hours for PEER project, resulting to overall cost of 274 701,72 kr.

In addition to the workload put in by the project manager, the intensified schedule required the input from the advisory group members, as explained above. This element was not included in the original project budget. Particularly the members from IT and information systems (Anne-Lene Semb, also Hallgeir Nilsen) invested their hours into adjusting the mentoring to fit their existing routines regarding assistant teaching. As it was often difficult to schedule the advisory group's meetings, the meetings took mostly place during lunch hours. Hence, some costs were also dedicated to compensate for these "working lunches", motivating the participants to join the weekly planning sessions.

Furthermore, the project manager and Anne-Lene Semb, the advisory group member from IT and information system,s travelled to SI-PASS supervisor training in Lund (Sweden), alongside with staff from FYSE, God Start and MatRIC. Costs from participating to this training were also included in the project. Later in spring 2020, Anne-Lene Semb collaborated with God Start's project leader Sara Werling Sørstrand to prepare a SI-PASS training at UiA. This training was offered to all PEER mentors and a pilot group of God Start mentors in August 2020.

To summarize, not nearly all hours spent on the planning and implementation of the project are covered by the received PRUK support, and the faculty covers the costs exceeding the project support as self-financing.

Experiences and dissemination

The overall experience of preparing the project has been positive, particularly due to the inspirational and collaborative team spirit amongst the three existing mentoring projects at UiA. The challenges related to the project implementation have mostly actualized within the faculty; first, the delay with kicking off the project, and later the uncertainties regarding interest in implementing mentoring made managing the project challenging at times. For the academic year of 2020/2021, focus will be paid on information-sharing. The information on what the mentoring is about, what it costs, and what it aims to achieve were created already during the preparatory year, but the feedback received from departments suggested that there might be misconceptions regarding what the project is about and how it differs from existing support structures.

As explained above, SV plans to discuss about internal dissemination during autumn 2020. At the time of writing this report, it is not defined if any of the departments will continue with mentoring in the year 2021. The feedback received from mentors and participating first-year students, though, is very encouraging. The participation rate to mentoring meetings has been higher than expected, and in the feedback collected during the first weeks of mentoring, students rate the usefulness of the meetings as 4,4 out of 5. In the written feedback, the students highlight the usefulness of Belbin test (tool for group work), getting to know to various online support services at UiA and building a personal study strategy. In the next week's meetings, the groups will address topics such as kildekompass and referencing in general,

Despite the future of the project at SV, the experiences from PEER are actively used in a collaborative project between FYSE, God Start and PEER, aiming to develop a UiA-wide training concept that covers all existing and new mentoring projects at the university. The mentoring projects also plan to continue collaborating closely with PULS, fadderordning, MatRIC project and student organizations.

The PRUK application process itself was clear and delightfully light, with no unnecessary formalities. Albeit the pre-submission seminar where proposals were presented took some time, it was inspiring to hear first-hand what kind of applications are to be submitted, and with what initiatives our application was competing with. It would have been nice to see such an event taking place also during this year's PRUK application round.

Attachments

1. Timeline of the preparatory year of PEER project
2. [Online study package](#)
3. Introductory handbook
4. SI-PASS handbook
5. Flyer about PEER to new students