

JOINT MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Circle U. aims at becoming an inclusive European University, and to support of this ambition, three initiatives have been developed during the pilot phase. Mentoring and other activities bridging to secondary schools support potential and first year students in having equal opportunities for obtaining a university degree, regardless of their background. The partner universities have different programmes to enhance inclusion where current students either support first year students on campus or act as mentors for potential future students in secondary schools. The mentoring framework presented here builds on these experiences.

A task force lead by Aarhus University with professional services staff from King's College London, Humboldt University and University of Oslo worked together to map existing peer mentoring schemes and to define the objective and scope of the Circle U. mentorship programme. The conclusion was that there are many mentoring initiatives targeting different student groups at the universities. However, there is little or no overview, coordination or evaluation and sharing of best practice across initiatives. Recognizing that no one size fits all when it comes to mentoring, many programmes have commonalities in the type of peer support they offer. This means that the recommendations and centralised resources can support a large number of programmes without needing many adaptations, while helping schemes with less resources boost the level of guidance and rewards they give to their mentors. Building on this understanding, and using experience from a pilot project for a mentoring framework launched at King's College, the Circle U. mentoring framework was developed. The framework consists of a bank of resources including training and guidance for mentors, evaluation for mentees and mentors, and regular meetings for mentoring programme leads where they can share best practice. The mentoring concept is published on the Circle U. website.

Another important aspect and next step will be to set up a community of practice across the alliance and discuss with local practitioners how to best implement mentoring in their specific context and adopt and translate materials to local contexts and languages.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Improving incoming students' sense of wellbeing and belonging and easing the transition into university is a priority for Circle U. An important and increasingly popular tool in this regard is peer mentoring, where experienced students enter into binding and well-structured relationships with other students in order to pass on experiences, share insights and ease the way from being a pupil to being a student. The Circle U. partners thus share a common goal of strengthening mentoring activities across the alliance and ensuring that existing initiatives in this area are shared and further developed under the auspices of the alliance.

The task force is coordinated by Aarhus University and has been composed of the following employees from AU, King's College London, University of Oslo and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin :

- Jonas Kretschmar Fink (Special Consultant, Aarhus University)
- Birgitte Højland (Senior Consultant, Aarhus University)
- Julia Haas (PhD candidate and Student Wellbeing & Welfare Manager, King's College London)
- Ursula Hans (Deputy Head of Department, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin)
- Sigrid Bøe Elgsaas (International advisor, University of Oslo)

PROCESS AND METHODS

Work on the mentoring programme was initiated in May 2021 and started with discussions on the scope and timeline of the task. From the beginning it was discussed in what way a joint mentorship programme should be defined. It was clear that the focus would be peer mentoring, i.e. students mentoring other students, and that it was within mentoring schemes dealing with transitioning into university for potential or first year students. However, since the participating members of the task force all had existing mentoring schemes, it was unclear what the focus and added value of a Circle U. mentoring programme could be.

AU created a template for mapping existing peer mentorship activities and finished identification of activities in August 2021 with the help of local representatives and contact persons at the universities represented in the task force. Focus was on mentorship activities aimed at potential students supporting the transition into university and activities aimed at retaining first year students (see Annexe A).

At the time of completion, the task force was reinforced with Student Wellbeing Manager Julia Haas from King's College Students' Union (KCLSU). Julia Haas is also a PhD Candidate at King's College investigating university peer support for student mental health and wellbeing, and her participation helped guide the project according to the most recent literature. KCLSU was about to launch a project on peer support development focusing on peer mentoring, and the task force decided to build on the insights results from those initiatives for the development of the Circle U. mentorship Programme. Although the project would not be finished before May 2023, the task force decided there would still be sufficient data to build on.

At King's College London, previous mappings of peer mentoring had indicated that existing mentoring programmes lacked consistent training, rewards for participation and evaluations. The Peer Support Development Project funded a Peer Support Coordinator, Lottricia Millet, who led the project that had the following phases (see Annexe B for a full description of the project):

- Mapping and understanding the needs of the current peer mentoring programmes (conducted in Spring 2022)
- Development and co-creation of resources for peer mentoring programmes to be used across schemes (June – August 2022)
- Implementation of new peer mentoring schemes for different target groups, with first priority being mature students (2022-2023)

- Mid-project Evaluation (December 2022)
- Awards and recognition for mentors (Spring 2023)
- Final evaluation (May 2023)

INSIGHTS FROM THE PEER SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AT KCLSU

The project team at King's conducted an in-depth survey on 21 existing peer mentorship programmes at King's, interviews with key stakeholders coordinating programmes. Mentors and mentees were also surveyed to understand their experiences. The mapping process yielded the following main insights and observations that the initial mapping process across the three Circle U. universities had also indicated:

- Peer mentoring activities are embedded locally at either faculty, department or programme level with little or no central coordination or evaluation
- activities are shaped according to the specific target groups and their specific needs and behaviour
- there is often a lack of coordination and collaboration in recruitment and training mentors
- Most mentoring schemes have training for mentors
- Mentors typically mentor because they want to give back and promote wellbeing
- Some have an evaluation of their programme
- Fewer have developed a handbook for mentors, but may have other resources available
- Recognition of mentors vary, some are paid, some receive a certificate

Despite the differences in how peer mentoring programmes are set up, the mapping found that there were also commonalities, suggesting that recommendations and central resources would be applicable for a large number of programmes with few adaptations necessary. Boosting the quality of mentoring across the university would thus be feasible even for schemes with less resources. Based on these findings and feedback from mentors and mentees, the project team focused on building up resources within training of mentors, mentoring handbook, evaluation of programmes and recognition for mentors (Annexe C).

A mentoring scheme pilot for mature students was launched in November 2022 using materials developed in the project. With the help of the central resources developed, setting up the scheme was easy and this supports the decision to have a central bank of resources available and ready to use. The pilot project also faced challenges with low engagement after the initial expression of interest from mentors. This suggests that following up closely with mentors and mentees is important as well as understanding the target group of the mentoring scheme in question and the specific reasons for low retention (see Annexe D).

FROM JOINT MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME TO MENTORSHIP FRAMEWORK

Mentoring schemes are manifold and very different, which they should be as they are targeting different groups of students. The Circle U. task force therefore concluded that it would be challenging to create a joint mentorship programme that would fit all. As the experience at King's showed, mentoring schemes also have certain similarities. The approach taken by the task force was therefore to focus on the recommendation from KCLSU for a central resource bank for creating mentorship programmes. This will maximize impact, as it will work across different mentoring schemes, cultures and educational contexts. The framework can thus be a tool that adds value for partners, who will build up their own resource banks drawing from inspiration provided by the Circle U. framework. This will in turn help improve the quality and consistency of mentorship programmes making it easier to coordinate, collaborate and evaluate programmes.

THE CIRCLE U. JOINT MENTORSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Circle U. Mentoring Framework is a bank of resources developed after the model of the Peer Support Development Project at KCLSU. It contains building blocks with materials that will be helpful and realistic for the partners in Circle U. to use to develop across their own mentoring programmes. Examples from the alliance partners in different languages will be added as more staff working with mentoring is involved via the Circle U. Mentoring Community of Practice initiative, which is the second and very important part of the framework. The material and contact information for staff coordinating the Community will be available on the Circle U. website.

BANK OF RESOURCES

The first edition of the bank of resources will contain the following building blocks, and more may be added at a later stage:

- **Mapping and understanding** the needs of your community. It is recommended for partners to map their internal landscape of mentoring to create an overview of existing initiatives and the way they work. What are the differences and similarities? Which needs do they have? Are they covered, or could any of the resources offered here be helpful? (Annexe C for an example from King's)
- **Recruiting and training mentors:** A successful mentoring scheme is dependent on reaching the target audience. This building block offers communication strategies and examples of training of mentors. Mentors must understand the full scope of their role as well as expectations and purpose of the mentoring scheme. Topics to be included are e.g engagement and communication, mental health, safeguarding and signposting. See Annexe E for an example of training material from KCLSU
- **Mentor Handbook:** a handbook is a valuable tool for mentors as many questions will arise during the mentoring phase. Information on The Peer Mentor Handbook was developed by KCLSU providing guidelines and information aimed at mentors and coordinators (See Annexe F)
- **Mentor agreement:** To ensure that expectations and limitations of the mentor-mentee relationship are clear and understood by all parties, it is recommended that all mentoring schemes use a mentoring agreement. Examples of agreements will be provided (see Annexe G)
- **Evaluation:** Evaluating the impact of your mentoring scheme and receiving feedback for improvement is vital for well-functioning mentoring schemes. Examples of evaluations will be shared in this building block. (See Annexe H)
- **Rewards:** Most mentors become involved, because they want to give back to their community and help new students. Rewarding mentors for the work they do is an important incentive and can be done in different ways. This building block offers examples of how payments, certificates, awards, career development and social events can be used to reward and retain mentors

THE CIRCLE U. MENTORSHIP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The task force will work on establishing a Circle U. Mentorship Community of Practice. The joint mentoring framework with the shared resources will only be of real value when discussed, developed and expanded with more feedback and resources from the partners. We will therefore share information on the resources developed and test them for different mentoring schemes across the alliance in the next phase of the project.

The Circle U. Mentoring Community of Practice will be open to relevant employees across the alliance with experience or interest in working with peer mentoring. The purpose of this network is to ensure dissemination of knowledge, sharing of practice and inspiration and continued improvements and growth beyond the project. A call for members will be sent out in spring 2023, and the dissemination activities mentioned below will also

be an opportunity to communicate about this initiative. Resources for employees will be available on the Circle U. website and will be expanded during the final phase of the project. Content could be templates for mentoring contracts, training material and articles etc. Although the working language of the community will be English, material will be shared in all alliance languages.

DISSEMINATION AND COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

The following communication and dissemination activities are foreseen:

- **January 2023:** the Circle U. website will be updated with the description of the framework and the shared resources collected so far. The Circle U. newsletter will feature a news piece on the launch of the mentoring framework as well as an invitation to join the first joint discussion on the future community of practice during the National Conference in Aarhus in March.
- **March 2023:** at the **Circle U. National Conference on Diversity** in Aarhus on 1-2 March we will present the mentoring framework, and the team from King's College London Students' Union will share insights from their pilot project with mature students as well as general discussions on the mentoring framework and how to build up expertise inside an across Circle U. institutions. Representatives from the task forces on student driven bridging initiatives and learning analytics will also be present and joint discussions on findings and how to use insights from the three task forces will be organised.
- **May 2023:** AU will also host an **online event** in May for staff, who were not able to attend the conference on diversity. The purpose of the event will be to set up the community for practitioners and discuss the future of mentoring in Circle U.
- **May 2023:** a **formal call for members** to join the Circle U. Mentoring Community of practice will be launched.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As with other task forces, identifying the right people with relevant expertise was a challenge and this led to the delay of the deliverable. Ideally, all partner universities would have been represented in the task force. We hope that with the launch of the mentoring framework and the call for participation in the Circle U. Mentoring Community of Practice, all universities will be engaging in developing their mentoring schemes via the resources provided by the alliance.

Not all the participating universities have a central unit with expertise and resources for coordinating mentoring efforts across the university. It is recommended for partners to establish a contact point, and to consider creating a space for sharing materials and insights also internally.

A recommendation for a future project would be to look further into mentoring potential university students. This group is more diverse and harder to reach out to, but AU has an existing project, "SubUniversity" that could serve as a model the same way as the Peer Support Development Project at KCLSU. SubUniversity matches groups of selected secondary school students with two AU students, who act as mentors. The programme runs over 1½ years and includes three one-day seminars at AU. Between seminars, students stay in touch with their mentors via social media and can follow their life as students via the Instagram @subuniversity

ANNEXES A – H