Exploring the benefits of implementing peer support principles into careers and employability delivery

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL CAREERS AND EMPLOYABILITY TEAM

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# Table of contents

Abstract 3

Acknowledgements 3

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background 4

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives 4

Chapter 2: Critical Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction 5

2.2 Defining Peer Support 5

2.3 Peer Mentoring 5

2.3.1 Peer-to-peer Models 6

2.3.2 Peer Mentoring and Stress and Anxiety 6

2.3.3 Peer Mentoring and Integration 6

2.3.4 Peer Mentoring and Networks 7

2.3.5 Peer Mentoring and the benefit to the Mentor 7

2.3.6 Peer Mentoring and Employability 8

2.4 Gaps and Limitations 8

2.5 Literature Review Conclusion 8

Chapter 3: Research Questions

3.1 The Need for Further Research and Formulating Research Questions 9

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction 10

4.2 Research Overview 10

4.3 Method Choice and Data Collection 10

4.4 Sample Selection 11

4.5 Research Timeline 11

4.6 Survey Questions 12

4.7 Data Analysis Methods and Techniques 12

4.8 Limitations and Contingency Plans 12

4.9 Ethical Issues 12
Chapter 5: Research Findings
5.1 Results Overview 13
5.2 Quantitative Results Findings 13
5.3 Qualitative Results Findings 17

Chapter 6: Results Analysis and Discussion
6.1 Introduction 18
6.2 Analysis and Discussion 18
   6.2.1 Understanding Roles 18
   6.2.2 Aiding University Integration 18
   6.2.3 Career Studio Operations 19
   6.2.4 Reducing Anxiety Levels 19
   6.2.5 Encouraging Action and Nudge Theory 19
6.3 Areas for Development 20

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations
7.1 Responses to the Research Questions 21
7.2 Recommendation and Additional Benefits 21
   7.2.1 Recommendation 21
   7.2.2 Additional Benefits 22
7.3 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research 22
7.4 Conclusion 22

Appendix 23
Bibliography 24
Abstract

In 2018, the University of Liverpool holistically redesigned its Careers and Employability Team to achieve scale in employability delivery and to increase student engagement. One element of this transformational project was the introduction of the UK’s first student led frontline service, known as the Career Studio.

There are known benefits to peer-led models, and given the increasing need for wellbeing support, it was affirming that Tremblay & Roger (2003) discovered that peer-led interactions can lead to lower anxiety in students. Glaser et al (2006) found that peer-to-peer interactions contributed to students making new social connections, and Collings et. al. (2014) saw that students who engaged in peer-models had higher levels of university integration. In amongst these benefits, Colvin & Ashman (2010) concluded that strong clarity is required on the role of each participant in a peer-to-peer scenario. Dennison’s (2010) study also notes that there are significant benefits to the peer-leader/mentor in such models.

In order to assess how existing peer models and frameworks translate into an employability context we conducted a study to research student and other key stakeholder perceptions of the Career Studio space and staff, the process of its creation, and areas for development. Overall the outcomes of the research were overwhelmingly positive, with the Career Studio seen as a friendly and useful place for students to visit, and a means by which they undertook key actions to develop their employability. The fact it is run by current students was seen as a positive aspect of the Careers and Employability offering. An added beneficial outcome from the research was also identifying key areas for further development.

Acknowledgements

This research has only been made possible due to the support and expertise of:

- HECSU for funding the project and for guidance on its development and publication
- The University of Liverpool Research Support Office
- The University of Liverpool Centre for Innovation in Education
- Colleagues across the Careers and Employability Team, including our Career Coaches

Covid-19 update

Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic we were unable to complete all the research we would have liked. The focus group element has been postponed to a later date. Therefore, findings of this report will focus on the outcomes of the student survey completed before the closure of the University campus during the pandemic.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

UK career services currently exist in a time where scaling their activities is necessary. This is within a sector demanding to see and attempting to assess the value for money of higher education (hereafter HE), often with a forensic look at graduate outcomes data. Our aim is to provide a detailed level of insight into how a UK careers service can change and scale its service by adopting the principles of peer mentoring and applying them to an employability setting.

At the University of Liverpool we are 18 months on from radically changing our employability delivery model. Careers and employability delivery has been transformed from a pure counselling/support service to a mixed careers education model bolstered by a frontline experiential employability delivery space led by students, for students, empowered by careers experts.

Conceptualising, implementing and monitoring this whole service change project, with a consequential institution wide impact, has been challenging but ultimately very rewarding. This research project will examine the guiding principles at the heart of introducing this peer-centric model – the first of its kind in the UK.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

Throughout this project, we seek to contribute to the existing research into peer mentoring by evidencing how the principles of such practices can be implemented in an employability context, for the benefit of both students and staff. Most UK HE careers teams are currently being challenged by senior leadership to scale their offer, but whilst the spotlight is now firmly on careers services to deliver on the metrics, this doesn’t always come with a significant uplift in resources to address these challenges. Given the effects of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of career services and supporting students and graduates is only increased in an uncertain economic time. Adopting a peer-to-peer model is one approach an institution may consider to enable scaled working. We also aim to provide a series of research-led recommendations to enable the development and implementation of a peer led employability model. A number of sources from across the sector will be represented in this data. The project will provide career professionals with the necessary data, information and tools to explore the viability of introducing peer-to-peer support as a model for scaling careers and employability engagement - nothing currently exists in this space.
Chapter 2: Critical Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This research aims to provide a detailed insight into how a UK careers service can change and scale its service by adopting the principles of peer mentoring and applying them to an employability setting. The University of Liverpool has recently changed its delivery model from a traditional model, delivering counselling and support, to a peer-centric model, led by students and supported by careers experts.

The research has been designed from the foundations of published literature and research which has also highlighted further areas of study. The literature reviewed includes academic publications on the themes of peer mentoring, specifically models, stress and anxiety, integration, networks, benefits to the mentor and employability. Areas not yet explored and gaps and limitations in existing research for addressing these will also be explored.

2.2 Defining ‘peer support’

The University of Liverpool restructured its Careers & Employability Service, with its new Career Studio launching in September 2018. The Career Studio, which employs around twenty current students as Career Coaches, epitomises ‘peer support’, if we are to take it as ‘support provided by and for people with similar experiences’ (Byrom, 2018). This paper will focus primarily on the peer mentoring aspect of peer support, as the Coaches offer support and guidance in a mentoring capacity, giving visiting students feedback on CVs, cover letters and applications, as well as directing students to further resources to explore their career options. The Careers & Employability Student Success Team also oversee the university’s Peer Mentoring scheme which supports students throughout their time at university.

2.3 Peer Mentoring

This research aims to evidence how peer mentoring can be implemented in an employability context and will contribute to the existing research. There is a solid research base relating to peer mentoring and its benefits and challenges but only a limited amount of research that looks to the principals and best practice of peer support in a specific employability context and how to implement and scale such an offer.

There are many proven benefits to peer mentoring in the published research. From the basics of students being able to find resources and information from their peers highlighted by Clarke and Crome (2004:5) to the wider benefits of improving student retention by Treston (1999:236-238) and finding academic success by Tremblay and Rodger (2003:7). The holistic benefits and the overall mental wellbeing to the student are highlighted by authors including Glaser et. al. (2006:4-5) and Jacobi (1991:524-525) who suggest that new students who are supported by mentors can also prevent the effects of stress, Pargetter et. al. (1999) and Pope and Van Dyke (1999) who feature increasing a sense of belonging and for new students, making social connections with others. Students can often benefit from the interactions with various age groups and older peers through peer mentoring and this can further provide a platform for skill development (Treston 1999:236-238). Some of these will be selected for further discussion below.
2.3.1 Peer Mentoring Models

Much of academic research into peer mentoring is broad with regards to the context that it relates, however, Jones et al. (2012:51-62) did look at the specific employability benefits of a peer mentoring model, creating a SOAR Centre and peer-to-peer support service for postgraduate students. The centre works alongside Careers Services and was concerned with assessment of graduate attributes, developing new skills and acted as a place for students to find information and training. Student ambassadors ‘serve as advocates and nurturers of their peers’ career and skills development’ (Jones et al. 2012:53). The ambassadors are selected based on the skills they can offer their peers and learn themselves through intensive training over a fifteen-week period. The benefits of peer-to-peer in this environment is to build a learning and knowledge community (Devenish et al. 2009:61), develop transferrable skills and promote student’s professional networks and for peers to learn from each other (Boud and Lee 2005:509) whilst ‘empowering ownership of the learning process’ (Jones et al. 2012:57, Packham and Miller 2000:64). The SOAR Centre sits within the Australian HE space and for postgraduate students rather than the undergraduate population which makes up the majority of UK HEI cohorts. As such, an analysis of the benefits at a UK level is required.

2.3.2 Peer Mentoring and Stress and Anxiety

We often hear students describing themselves as ‘stressed’ during exam time and the anxiety they feel has been extensively researched. Hembree (1988) commented on the causes, effects and treatment of test anxiety, however, his study group included those students who were most at risk of high levels of test anxiety. Since Hembree’s publication the focus on testing has become even more prevalent in education and with it a rise in test anxiety, especially for high-stakes exams, for which university exams could be included. Von der Embse et al. (2018:484) describe anxiety as being constructed by several variables including social influences and support and as with Hembree (1988) finds a negative association between test anxiety and test performance.

Stress and anxiety and its relationship with peer mentoring is explored by Tremblay and Rodger (2003). Their data found that students with high levels of anxiety in a peer mentoring group showed gains which are comparable to that of lower anxiety students in the same group. This was counter to the students in the control group with higher anxiety levels who scored significantly worse on gains than their lower anxiety counterparts (Tremblay and Rodger 2003:7). An explanation for this may be the ‘alleviation of anxiety’ through peer mentors sharing their experiences of their studies, academic results and examples of persistence. This approach could also be adapted to non-academic environments and settings to which students may feel levels of anxiety, such as employability.

2.3.3 Peer Mentoring and Integration

The results from a number of academic studies including those by Gardner et al. (1999), Borden et al. (1997), Carter (2000), Muckert (2002), Pike et al. (2000), Pope & Van Dyke (1999), Treston (1999) and Webb (1999) all discuss the value of student-mentoring in assisting students with their adjustment to university, academic performance, or persistence decisions (Fowler and Muckert 2004). Collings et al. (2014:927, 929) also found that peer mentored individuals showed higher levels of integration to university. Their study found that four times as many non-peer mentored students had seriously considered leaving university compared to peer mentored students (Collings et al. 2014:927, 932, 939). Individual students were asked the question of whether they had
thought of leaving based on a seven-point Linkert scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a lot’ (Collings et. al. 2014:932). Students often feel they are leaving their support system when they go to university and must start again (Earwaker 1992:27, Collings et. al. 2014:940). The research also demonstrated that non-peer mentored students had a ‘lower level of perceived support from their university friends than their peer mentored counterparts’ (Collings et. al. 2014:940). Creating and developing a network is a key ingredient to students enhancing their graduate prospects and so by developing peer mentoring in an employability context it provides an additional route for these networks to be cultivated. This is again alongside benefits for the whole institution in being able to scale the instances in which these new social connections can be made, contributing to improving student integration and therefore retention.

2.3.4 Peer Mentoring and Networks

Colvin and Ashman (2010:132) found that successful peer mentoring in a university setting is the direct result of a multitude of relationships among students, mentors, and instructors being formed. The research demonstrated how there could be challenges with understanding the mentee and mentor role and the challenges brought about through perceived hierarchical systems. Assumptions cannot be made about the understanding of each person’s role, risks, and benefits involved in the various relationships. Time must be spent managing expectations and developing, maintaining and managing relationships (Colvin and Ashman 2010:132). The outcomes of this study highlighted that students, instructors, and mentors all have different perspectives about a mentor’s role and how those roles should be delivered. This research provides insight into the need to establish and continue to discuss the role of each person in a peer mentoring context, and this relates to potential contracting issues should peer mentoring be delivered in an employability context. Therefore this research could be useful towards informing the recommendations about how to implement such a change project in the UK employability space.

Thomas’s (2000) research into student retention suggests that not only do students perform better academically through peer mentoring but also that students are less likely to drop out if they have broader, well-connected networks as they are able to “more easily make connections with others due to the multitude of paths reaching to many parts of the overall network” (Thomas 2000:601–602).

2.3.5 Peer Mentoring and the Benefit to the Mentor

Peer mentoring to address problems found in nursing courses in Canada provided benefits to both students and peer mentors (Dennison 2010:340-342). The mentoring operates from within a Clinical learning centre with peer mentors represented by senior nursing students. Students are recruited, and paid, to assist skills practice, develop new learning opportunities, clean and organise the centre, assist students with materials and support open and comfortable learning (Dennison 2010:340). Peer mentors are expected to have diverse skills sets (both clinical and academic), good organisation, communication and leadership potential. They are not expected to know all the answers but trained and learn to seek resources (Dennison 2010:341). This research demonstrates how peer mentors develop an increased sense of confidence in their skills as well as their leadership and teaching abilities.
Often the research and discussions around peer mentoring can focus on the benefits to the mentee, but what Dennison’s research demonstrates the benefits for the mentors. Whilst Dennison’s study was localised to a nursing programme, it does provide a potential model for analysing the employability benefits to a mentor, as well as a basis by which to see if a peer mentoring model of delivery of front line employability services receive similar or higher levels of positive feedback when compared to traditional models. This model for analysing the benefits to a mentor is important as sometimes there can be an over-emphasis on the benefits of new schemes for students, and in scaling an offer and implementing its change all stakeholders need to be considered.

2.3.6 Peer-to-peer Translating into Employability

Thom (2013) conducted a project which put international students in touch with a peer mentor and found there to be several benefits. Whilst there was a 25% increase in students achieving a 2:1 or 2:2 compared to the previous year, the programme also had the involvement of local companies and creative organisations and so students were able to access work placements such as interpreting roles at those companies involved in the programme. However, whilst this study does show there to be employability benefits from a peer mentoring programme, there was essentially an additional career element built into this programme, rather than the peer mentoring interaction itself providing the benefit. Given this research is aiming to show how to provide scale with a peer mentoring employability system, it ought to be examined outside of other schemes such as placement and internship versions as it does not show the true impact of the peer mentoring aspect itself.

2.4 Gaps and Limitations

The existing research and reviewed publications discussed above shows that there are benefits to a peer mentoring relationship for both the mentee, mentor and the wider university community. Whilst some of these studies have been within UK HEIs there are none that look at this issue in a specific employability context or methods to successful scale and implement such a scheme.

The research discussed above uses mixed methods approaches to peer mentoring, and so use qualitative and quantitative tools to acquire the data for analysis. As such there is a precedent for using both routes to understand this issue in more depth, and the proposed research offers a new and different examination of the successful peer mentoring schemes that run in UK HEIs.

2.5 Literature Review Conclusion

The academic research discussed within this review suggest peer mentoring is beneficial not only to the academic development and support of the student but also for their personal and social development. The idea of belonging being critical to student success, peer mentoring facilitating the experience. However, there are gaps in our understanding and more research certainly needs to take place within the context of employability.
Chapter 3: Research Questions

3.1 The Need for Further Research and Formulating Research Questions

Considering the gaps and limitations identified in the preceding literature review there is a need to further understand how the benefits of peer models can work in an employability context. The original aims of the research are two fold in that we are seeking to 1) review the peer model of the Career Studio and how aforementioned peer benefits evidence themselves in this context and 2) provide actionable insights for others in the sector seeking to scale their services. As such we have arrived at two research questions that will enable us to meet these aims:

1. How do the known benefits of peer-to-peer support translate into an employability context for the purposes of enabling a service to effectively scale its offer to its stakeholders?

2. What components are needed to successfully implement a service wide change process for the benefit of key stakeholders?

Covid-19 update

Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic we were unable to complete all the research we would have liked. The focus group element intended to support the second research question has been postponed to a later date. Therefore, findings of this report will focus on the outcomes of the student survey completed before the closure of the University campus during the pandemic. In Chapter 7, as part of the recommendations, there is a short commentary on the benefits that have been realised through the wider service redesign.
Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The successful capture of data via the processes outlined below are intended to provide the means by which to answer the research questions and also to establish a model for capturing further research data of this type. For the purposes of brevity the research questions have the following abbreviations in the methodology section below.

1. **RQ1**: How do the known benefits of peer-to-peer support translate into an employability context for the purposes of enabling a service to effectively scale its offer to its stakeholders?

2. **RQ2**: What other components are needed to successfully implement a service wide change process for the benefit of key stakeholders?

4.2 Research Overview

In order to understand what other components and resources are needed to implement a successful employability change process for all parties, (RQ2) several stakeholders who deliver, or have a vested interest in, employability peer mentoring will be questioned as part of a series of focus groups. These focus groups would cover groups such as the Career Coaches, academic and professional service of the University, graduate employers and Careers and Employability staff at the University of Liverpool and other institutions. These focus groups will deliver qualitative outputs but a thematic analysis would also be carried out in order to potentially provide a level of quantitative analysis. The research was designed with a consideration of Bartlett et al (2001), Carini et al (2003) and Porter & Whitcomb (2004) and is elaborated in the relevant sections below.

4.3 Method Choice and Data Collection

To fulfil the research aims a digital questionnaire will be used to collect the data from the sample group in RQ1. The questionnaire will be created using an online survey platform licensed by the University of Liverpool but also made available in paper format for students to complete in case of any technical difficulties.. Carini (2003) discovered that the mode used for student surveys did not severely impact the validity of the responses, and so it was permissible to use both the digital and paper-based methods as long as the questions and content would be the same on each. Focusing on gathering digitised responses will have the added benefit to this research of reducing the data processing time significantly. Access to the survey will be provided via an email communication to the student sent from Careers and Employability following their visit to the Careers Studio. All data collected via the digital surveying tool will be stored on a secure University of Liverpool server. From here any data will be downloaded to a secure file for analysis, with any paper survey responses being added to this file to create a repository of all responses. Paper surveys, once digitised will be securely destroyed.

Research to source data in order to answer RQ2 will come from the focus groups created for each of the stakeholder groups. This method has been chosen to add a qualitative and more detailed element to the research, as RQ1 will produce largely quantitative data and analysis.
4.4 Sample Selection

The sample for RQ1 are students who use the Career Studio at the University of Liverpool and so provides a representative group from across the university including Faculty, School, gender, WP, nationality etc. Every interaction that takes place within the Career Studio will be carefully recorded to create a rich data sample. In the academic year 2018/19 c.2,500 students had visited the Career Studio between September 2018 and April 2019. Assuming a similar number of around 2,500 students use the Career Studio between September 2019 and April 2020, for a 95% confidence level, with a confidence interval of 5 then we would need 333 responses from this group of around 2,500 students.

The internal samples for RQ2, as far as possible, would be representative of the University as a whole. For example the academic and professional service staff focus group would seek representation from across the different faculties and schools that form the University of Liverpool. Internal stakeholder groups would also seek to represent the broad range of groups who interact with Careers, for example an employer group would seek representation from different types of organisations across the graduate recruiter spectrum.

4.5 Research Timeline

The data collection for RQ1 will take place from 16th September 2019 to 3rd April 2020, allowing April 2020 to July 2020 for the analysis and reporting to take place. Students will be sent the survey 15 working days after their interaction in the Career Studio in order to allow enough time for them to have taken any action and to be able to reflect on their progress.

Whilst RQ1 is a systematic and ongoing data collection process the focus groups for RQ2 are not timed bound and would be staggered throughout the year, occurring at times that were suitable for the stakeholder groups, for example for academic staff it would make sense to hold the focus group outside of term time so as not to overlap with any teaching, thereby potentially reducing the engagement. All focus groups will be conducted by March 2020 to allow additional analysis time given the increased qualitative data captured via this method.

The survey will be digital to reduce data entry requirements and, alongside the ability to add free text, most questions will be designed to have a multiple choice response, most likely Likert scale, to enable data analysis and comparison across the sample but students will also have the ability to add free text.

For the RQ2 the focus groups of other stakeholders will focus on themes, for example recruitment, diversity or technology. This will mean the data is more qualitative but we can collate the variety of opinions and identify commonalities across them via a thematic analysis. This will form a key element to our findings that will inform recommendations for other institutions who may pursue a similar model in the future.

4.6 Survey Questions

The digital survey will ask students a number of questions many with Likert scales for answers, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This will assess the degree to which students agree with certain elements or sentiments. Students will be asked to respond to questions about the Career Coaches and the service and support they received, what actions they took as a result of visiting, their
Exploring the benefits of implementing peer support principles into careers and employability delivery

anxiety levels pre and post visiting as well as their general understanding of what the Career Studio was and how it operates. To augment the overall analysis net promoter score (Grisaffe 2007) questions will also be included and relate to the students’ overall impressions of the Career Studio using the traditional 0-10 scale. A copy of the survey questions can be found as Appendix 1.0.

4.7 Data Analysis Methods and Techniques

As the survey for RQ1 is digital it will be downloaded from the secure server and analysed using Excel or SPSS. In order to add in the demographics around WP, nationality etc. then the student ID number will be asked for in order to correlate their responses to information in the student record system. However, once this matching process is complete all records will be anonymised for further analysis. Any qualitative responses from RQ1 and RQ2 can be coded using a thematic analysis. Whilst there are advantages and disadvantages to this type of analysis, Braun & Clarke (2016) and Javadi & Zarea (2016) it does provide a useful way to group comments within a specific context, in this case a student’s employability.

4.8 Limitations and Contingency Plans

In order to ensure quality in the responses for RQ1, t-tests will be used in order to analyse the quality of the responses received from the students (de Winter 2012). Given a wide range of students will respond to numerous questions the t-test will check for quality in the responses, in terms of how consistently the questions are being answered. For RQ1 and RQ2 we will also consider student assessment deadlines and the natural peaks and troughs of the academic year so that this is taken into consideration when trying to gather responses from students and the diarising of the focus groups for the other stakeholder groups. Student engagement (overall) tends to decrease throughout the semester and so it remains important to keep to a strict protocol of sending the survey within 15 working days of the interaction taking place, ensuring a good response rate from those who engage early in the semester.

4.9 Ethical Issues

There are no anticipated ethical issues in relation to this research, beyond the aforementioned need to anonymise data, as the questions are not of a sensitive nor inappropriate nature, they are entirely related to their experience of that interaction with a peer mentor and the students’ employability. There are no GDPR issues to note for RQ1 as only current students will be contacted and so communicating with them in this manner is covered by the GDPR statement students subscribe to when enrolling each year at the institution. The only GDPR issue relates to any external stakeholders used as part of RQ2, as all other stakeholder groups intended to be used are internal to the University of Liverpool. To ensure quality and to avoid any oversights in the process we would also seek ethical approval for the research from the University of Liverpool’s ethics department.
Chapter 5: Research Findings

5.1 Results Overview

All student interactions within the Career Studio are recorded, and in the week following their Studio visit students were emailed a digital survey to complete. The survey was sent to unique visitors in each semester, with the incentive of a monthly prize draw to encourage completions. During the survey timeframe from September 30\textsuperscript{th} 2019 to March 13\textsuperscript{th} 2020 we received 267 viable responses from 2,590 unique visitors. This gives a confidence level of 90% and margin of error of 5% in the findings, leaving them statistically significant.

5.2 Quantitative Results Findings

Summarised below are the outcomes of the quantitative questions of the student survey.

Table 1.1: To what extent do you agree with the statements below in relation to the Career Coach you spoke to?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>They were friendly and welcoming</th>
<th>They were knowledgeable of what you were asking about</th>
<th>They were trustworthy and credible</th>
<th>They outlined what they could help me with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2: Strongly agree/agree combined from Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree/agree that the Coaches were:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1: To what extent did the Career Coach relate to your personal situation and the reason for your visit?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Strongly</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poorly</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poorly</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strongly agree/agree combined from Table 2.1 – 79%
Table 3.1: All of the Career Coaches are current University of Liverpool students. When you visited the Career Studio, how did you feel about discussing your query with another student?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very positive</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Negative</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn’t aware they were a student</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Very positive/positive combined from Table 3.1 – 77%

Table 4.1: Following your visit to the Career Studio, have you completed the actions that you were recommended to take?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Taken</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and I have taken additional career related actions as well</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not given any actions to take</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not given any actions to take, but I have taken other career related actions myself</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes/Yes and additional from Table 4.1 – 91%

Table 5.1: Now you have used the Career Studio, how likely are you to engage with other career enhancing opportunities at the university? E.g. being part of a society, attending hackathons, going to digital skills sessions, visiting careers fairs, entering enterprise competitions etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very likely</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unlikely</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Very likely/likely from Table 5.1 – 77%
Table 6.1: Thinking about your visit to the Career Studio, do you feel that you made a new connection with someone who could help you with your future career and grow your network?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.1: The University of Liverpool has adopted a drop-in model for the Career Studio. Students can visit any time during the working day Monday - Friday without the need for an appointment. To what extent do you agree with the statements below?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>The hours that the Career Studio is open suits my needs</th>
<th>The drop-in system gives me control over when I can access career support</th>
<th>I had something to do whilst I waited</th>
<th>I would prefer to arrange a specific time/date to visit</th>
<th>My query was answered quickly</th>
<th>I am less likely to go in the Career Studio if it is drop-in only</th>
<th>I felt able to ask non-career related questions</th>
<th>Having now visited the Career Studio I am more likely to return in future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2: Strongly agree/agree combined from Table 7.0

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open hours suit my needs</th>
<th>Drop-in gives me control</th>
<th>Had things to do whilst waited</th>
<th>Would prefer booked time</th>
<th>Had a quick answer</th>
<th>Less likely to go with drop in system</th>
<th>Could ask non-career related questions</th>
<th>Likely to visit in future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exploring the benefits of implementing peer support principles into careers and employability delivery

Table 8.1: Thinking about the day before and the day after you visited the Career Studio, how anxious did you feel about taking the next step on your career journey?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The day before you visited</th>
<th>The day after you visited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very comfortable</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very anxious</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.2: Summary of the percentage of respondents who shift up or down levels of anxiety, e.g. from Anxious to Comfortable (Up 2 Levels)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Same Level</th>
<th>Up 1 Level</th>
<th>Up 2 Level</th>
<th>Up 3 Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down 1 Level</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down 2 Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.3: Number of respondents moving between anxiety levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From ↓ To →</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Anxious</th>
<th>Very anxious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very comfortable</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very anxious</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers in bold italics show the numbers of students who remained at the same anxiety level. The left hand column shows the anxiety level they identified with before visiting, and the corresponding rows show the numbers who moved to a different level. For example 10 students were ‘Very anxious’ before, but felt ‘comfortable’ after visiting.

Table 9.1: To what extent do you agree with the statement that ‘employing students to work with other students on campus, creates a more vibrant, inclusive university community’?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strongly agree/agree combined from Table 9.1 – 82%
Exploring the benefits of implementing peer support principles into careers and employability delivery

Table 10.1: Having visited the Career Studio yourself, how likely are you to recommend visiting it to your friends, with 1 being not very likely, and 10 being very likely?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percentage Response</th>
<th>Net Promoter Score Category</th>
<th>307</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Detractors (0-6)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Passives (7-8)</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Promoters (9-10)</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Net Promoter Score*</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Net promoter score calculated by subtracting the number of Detractors (0-6 rating) from the number of promoters (9-10) score.

5.3 Qualitative Results Findings

Based on a thematic analysis of free text responses to a question asking students what action they took as a result of visiting the Career Studio.

Figure 1.1: Actions taken as a result of visiting the Career Studio
Chapter 6: Results Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 provided an overview of the main findings from the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the student survey and this chapter is an analysis of those results in the line with the literature review established earlier in this report.

6.2 Analysis and Discussion

6.2.1 Understanding Roles

When asking students about their perceptions of the Career Coaches and their interaction with them, it was very positive to see these percentages strongly agree/agree that the Coaches were:

- Friendly - 99%
- Knowledgeable - 89%
- Trustworthy - 93%
- They outlined how they can help - 91%

The Studio needs to be welcoming, and from Colvin & Ashman (2010) we know that it’s important that people understand their roles in peer situations, and 91% strongly agreed/agreed that the Coaches outlined how they could help the student.

6.2.2 Aiding University Integration:

Treston (1999), Pope and Van Dyke (1999), Pargetter et. al. (1999), Glaser et al (2006) and Collings et. al. (2014) established how peer models help make new connections and aid university integration and retention. When we asked students about this we saw that:

- 79% strongly agreed/agreed that the Career Coaches related to their personal situation
- 77% were very positive/positive about discussing their query with another student
- Only 5% were unaware that the Career Coaches are current students
- 81% strongly agreed/agreed that employing students to work with other students creates a vibrant, inclusive university community
- 77% were very likely/likely to engage with other areas of the University having visited the Studio
- A net promoter score of 43%

Whilst visiting the Studio enables wider University integration as indicated by the results above, only 36% of respondents felt that they had made a connection with someone who can ‘help you with your future career and grow your network’, with 31% unsure if this had occurred. Devenish et. al. (1999) found that peer situations can help build learning and knowledge communities, and the results indicate that we could perhaps do more to articulate the role of the Career Coach, but that students are appreciative of the role they do. However, it could also indicate that students are confident in taking control of their career themselves, and are not as reliant on others to help them grow/develop their career. Discussed later in this chapter are the high percentages of students taking action and attending events having visited the Studio, and so perhaps they are feeling in control and able to grow their network through their own means.
6.2.3 Career Studio Operations

One of the survey questions asked student users of the Career Studio to agree/disagree with certain statements about the operation of the Career Studio, given it is a new model for the University and indeed an outlier in the sector. There are no booked appointments, with the exception of mock interviews, and the whole space operates on a drop-in basis for set hours each day, normally 10am-6pm on weekdays.

Whilst 94% of respondents agreed that they had a quick answer to their query, only 48% agreed that they had something to do whilst waiting. This indicates that waiting times are not very long, but that there is still more to develop in terms of having something for students to do whilst they are waiting to speak to a Career Coach.

95% agreed that the opening hours suit their needs and 95% that the entirely drop-in nature gives them control over when to visit. 22% of responders agreed that they would prefer to book a time and 15% agreed that they were less likely to go due to the drop-in nature, but as these are not significant majorities there is a strong justification for the new operating model from these results. The University of Liverpool has a very diverse cohort, and a further development could be to investigate any particular similarities of those who would prefer the booked appointments to see if they are any shared characteristics amongst this group. A comparison between students who had experienced both delivery models was an intention of the focus groups as part of RQ2, however, for reasons already discussed those focus groups have been postponed.

6.2.4 Reducing Anxiety Levels

The Studio is there to help students to feel less anxious about their career and from Tremblay and Roger (2003), Jacobi (1991) and Glaser et. al. (2006) we know peer models can help this. Before visiting the Studio 40% of students were anxious/very anxious about their career and only 28% were very positive/positive. After visiting this changed significantly with 9% feeling anxious/very anxious and 68% very positive/positive, and such a shift in anxiety levels is very heartening to see. Whilst 43% of students reported the same level of anxiety before and after their visit, 55% made a positive shift towards being very comfortable, and just 2% had their anxiety level negatively impacted.

6.2.5 Encouraging Action and Nudge Theory

91% of students either completed the actions they agreed with the Career Coach or took additional career actions. Such levels of activity after visiting the Studio are what we aim to encourage as part of our nudge theory approach, and 90% are likely to return in the future for further help. This concept of taking action following a visit comes from the concept of Nudge Theory, defined by Thaler and Sunstein (2009: 6) as ‘a nudge, as we will use the term, is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be cheap and easy to avoid. Nudges are not mandates’.

The theory is widely used in a higher education context, but, due to the uniqueness of the employability offer at the University of Liverpool, has not been used in this context before. At the University of Liverpool we are seeing that short interactions with Career Coaches prompt a student to take a singular, or small number of actions, which stops them being overwhelmed, and encourages
them to undertake practical actions which will have an immediate impact, such as creating a CV in order to apply for jobs, or organising a mock interview for an upcoming real one. Figure 1.1 showed the actions students took, following a thematic analysis of free text responses. The majority being nudged to attend to career events (24%), update their CV (20%) or beginning to search for jobs (16%).

Whilst the level of survey response gives us a good picture of student actions undertaken following a visit to the Studio, the ‘silent majority’ cannot be underestimated here. It is likely that many students will only present as being impacted by the nudge in years to come, e.g. 20% of students took the action of editing or creating a CV after their visit, and this will likely translate to job applications in the future. Evaluation of nudge theory is still relatively new as Kosters and van der Heijden (2015: 287) highlight. As the Career Studio continues to go from strength to strength, and student actions become results, for example obtaining a graduate job, more data will become available.

6.3 Areas for Development

Areas that require further development include how students leave feeling that they made useful connections, and an investigation into why a minority would prefer a booked time slot. There is also a need to further understand why the anxiety levels of 43% of student visitors remain the same before and after their visit, and to learn how we could further help students move to a more comfortable position with regard their career anxiety levels.
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Responses to the Research Questions

**How do the known benefits of peer-to-peer support translate into an employability context for the purposes of enabling a service to effectively scale its offer to its stakeholders?**

The Career Studio is how we have translated the benefits of peer-to-peer support into an employability context. Of the benefits highlighted in this report we can see that the Studio is meeting many. Overall it is enabling increased engagement from students, with visits increasing 76% this academic year despite the early physical closure.

Scalability in the service’s overall offer is achieved as Faculty Teams now focus on curriculum work and not frontline delivery. The benefits of peer models are coming through in this context, with lower anxiety levels after visits, students understanding the role of the Coaches, taking actions and integrating more with the University.

**What components are needed to successfully implement a service wide change process for the benefit of key stakeholders?**

As previously discussed the proposed focus groups to answer this question have been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, it is still our intention to complete them this calendar year if possible. The methodology for this may alter to online interviews with key stakeholders, rather than a traditional focus group format. Either way, we are seeing a success in the Career Studio element and so we are still intending to speak with key stakeholders in order to provide more research for the sector and for those looking to implement similar aspects of part of any service redesign they are looking to undertake.

7.2 Recommendation and Additional Benefits

The recommendations below come from the research and analysis of the first research question, and additionally the Careers and Employability Management Team’s own reflections on what implementing the Career Studio offer has enabled. Once the research to support the second research question is formalised so too will be those recommendations for that aspect of service redesign.

**7.2.1 Recommendation**

Introducing a peer-to-peer service can enable increased student engagement with careers and employability and it is a mechanism by which to deliver the wider benefits of peer-to-peer models to your student population across all degree types.

Through student to student interactions you can nudge and encourage your students to take positive action with regards to their careers and provide a space they can visit and reduce their anxiety levels around their future career plans.

Having paid peer roles is also a means by which to develop the employability skills of your mentors so that they can progress in their own careers too.
7.2.2 Additional Benefits

Outlined below are the wider benefits that we have seen as a result of implementing the Career Studio. These benefits are the reflections of the Management Team of the Careers and Employability Team and we aim to study and elaborate these with future research in the coming months.

Creating a talent pipeline – Employing current students as Career Coaches has created a talent pipeline for full-time roles within the Careers and Employability Team and wider sector. Former Coaches have been hired to graduate internship and other graduate level roles within the University, as well as to HR roles in the wider sector.

Becoming influencers – The reach and influence of the Career Coaches is constantly extending, in particular via our social media channels. As our virtual service offer continues to evolve the Career Coaches have become the face of and producers of a variety of content. They have become ‘influencers’ of our student body in this sense.

Enabling stronger Faculty facing work – As the face-to-face element of the service is conducted by the Coaches our ability to embed employability across programmes is significantly enhanced. Deeper and more meaningful relationships with academic departments can now be forged, and Careers and Employability colleagues are present from curriculum design stages right through to final year and graduate work. Faculty teams are almost exclusively focussed on curriculum developments and operate without caseloads. They work together across the faculties enabling holistic rather than individually led approaches. This is achieving consistency in the student offer and is positioning the teams as experts and professionals in the employability space – within and outside of the University.

Broader teams and skillsets – Having the Career Studio to focus on general student footfall enabled a wider service redesign that introduced the aforementioned Faculty teams but also three other specialist teams that focus on Data Tech and Comms, Employer Engagement and Student Success. New skillsets have been enabled and a service with a wide range, reach and impact is now in operation.

7.3 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

We understand that so far only users of the Career Studio in its physical format have been surveyed. At present we have not spoken to non-users or those who only use our online systems in order to see if they have similar experiences and outcomes. Further research could also look at any differences between programme, gender, ethnicity and other common university categories for analysis.

7.4 Conclusion

In summary the findings of this research have given us heart in that the creation of the UK sector’s first peer-to-peer Career Studio was the right decision to take. Whilst it is not only a mentoring space, the benefits of peer-to-peer mentoring are being seen but we appreciate that we are at the start of the journey in creating and evolving this innovative space. There is more to do as this research has found, and indeed in light of ongoing Covid-19 disruption, however we are confident that the right foundations are in place.

‘Real magic in a mentoring programme comes in attention to details, in attentiveness and planning, in learning and practicing and reflecting’ (Reid 2008:71)
Appendix

1.0 Student survey question format:

1. What is your student ID number?

2. To what extent do you agree with the statements below in relation to the Career Coach you spoke to?
   2.1.a. They were friendly and welcoming
   2.2.a. They were knowledgeable of what you were asking about
   2.3.a. They were trustworthy and credible
   2.4.a. They outlined what they could help me with

3. To what extent did the Career Coach relate to your personal situation and the reason for your visit?

4. All of the Career Coaches are current University of Liverpool students. When you visited the Career Studio, how did you feel about discussing your query with another student?

5. Following your visit to the Career Studio, have you completed the actions that you were recommended to take?

6. Now you have used the Career Studio, how likely are you to engage with other career enhancing opportunities at the university? E.g. being part of a society, attending hackathons, going to digital skills sessions, visiting careers fairs, entering enterprise competitions etc.

7. Following on from the previous question, are there specific actions you have taken or opportunities that you have begun to engage with as a result of visiting the Career Studio? Please list them all in the box below.

8. One aim of the Career Studio model is that it provides a space for students to grow their network. Thinking about your visit to the Career Studio, do you feel that you made a new connection with someone who could help you with your future career and grow your network? For example a Career Coach, an employer, a graduate, a member of staff

9. The University of Liverpool has adopted a drop-in model for the Career Studio. Students can visit any time during the working day Monday - Friday without the need for an appointment. To what extent do you agree with the statements below?
   9.1.a. The hours that the Career Studio is open suits my needs
   9.2.a. The drop-in system gives me control over when I can access career support
   9.3.a. I had something to do whilst I waited
   9.4.a. I would prefer to arrange a specific time/date to visit
   9.5.a. My query was answered quickly
   9.6.a. I am less likely to go in the Career Studio if it is drop-in only
   9.7.a. I felt able to ask non-career related questions
   9.8.a. Having now visited the Career Studio I am more likely to return in future

10. Thinking about the day before and the day after you visited the Career Studio, how anxious did you feel about taking the next step on your career journey?
   10.1.a. The day before you visited
   10.2.a. The day after you visited

11. To what extent do you agree with the statement that ‘employing students to work with other students on campus, creates a more vibrant, inclusive university community’?

12. Having visited the Career Studio yourself, how likely are you to recommend visiting it to your friends, with 1 being not very likely, and 10 being very likely?
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