

Research

Peer Mentoring and International Students' Transition to University: A Thematic Analysis of First-Year Perspectives

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Abstract

With rising university dropout rates and increasing transition challenges for first-year students, peer mentoring has become an important support mechanism. This need is intensified by the growing population of international students, who often face additional academic, social, and cultural adjustments. While prior research has mainly focused on quantifying the outcomes of peer mentoring, limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences, particularly during the early stages of enrolment. Addressing this gap, the present qualitative study explores how peer mentoring influences the academic and social adaptation of first-year international (non-UK) students. By focusing on participants' accounts, the study provides in-depth insight into the processes through which peer mentoring supports transition, rather than solely its measurable outcomes. Thematic Analysis of the interview data identified three superordinate themes: *Academic Preparedness and Learning Adaptation*, *Social Integration*, and *Interplay of Adaptability*. Findings suggest that peer mentoring is experienced positively, supporting academic readiness, fostering social connections, and enhancing adaptability. Overall, the study extends existing quantitative work by offering a nuanced, process-oriented understanding of peer mentoring. It highlights not only that peer mentoring is beneficial, but how it contributes to easing transition, particularly for underrepresented international student populations.

Keywords

Peer mentoring; Transition; International; Higher Education; University.

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Introduction

University dropout rates have emerged as a significant concern in many countries worldwide, with far-reaching implications for both students and Higher Education (HE) institutions (Mayra & Mauricio, 2018). According to the OECD (2019), approximately 20% of students who commence tertiary education do not complete their studies. In the UK, recent data indicate a 28% increase over the past five years in the number of full-time undergraduate students who began their first year but did not progress to the second year (Crothall, 2024). One key factor contributing to this rising attrition rate is the difficulty many students face in successfully transitioning from pre-tertiary education to university (Duche-Perez et al., 2019). This is concerning, as first-year students often face multiple simultaneous changes (e.g., forming new social networks, changing accommodation, and increased independence) when transitioning from high school to university (Ajani & Gamede, 2020). Such transitions can be particularly difficult to manage when students lack resilience and coping skills or when adequate support networks are not in place.

As higher education continues to diversify, universities are enrolling an increasingly heterogeneous student population, including a growing number of international students whose transition experiences may involve additional academic, social, and cultural challenges. These students often navigate unfamiliar educational systems, language demands, and separation from established support structures, which may heighten their risk of disengagement during the first year (Holliman et al., 2024). Despite this diversification, there remains limited research examining how support mechanisms address the specific needs of international students, whose experiences are frequently subsumed within broader student cohorts. Peer mentoring, that is, where more experienced students support first-year students in navigating the academic, social, and emotional demands of university life (Leidenfrost et al., 2014), has been identified as one effective strategy for supporting students' transition. However, existing research has largely been quantitative and focused on outcomes, with scant attention given to the nuanced lived experience of receiving peer support, the barriers and facilitators of engagement, and how such support may operate for diverse student groups, including international students. The present study aims to address these gaps by exploring how first-year international (non-UK) students describe their experiences of receiving support via a peer mentoring scheme as well as the perceived benefits and challenges of such schemes in supporting students' transition into university life. While the discussion is rooted in a UK setting, examples from other countries are drawn upon to illustrate that widening participation and supporting the transition of underrepresented and international student groups is an international concern (see Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016).

The Transition to University

The transition to university represents a critical developmental phase for young adults, requiring significant adaptation across a range of domains, including academic, social, personal, financial, and cultural spheres (Hughes, 2016). Jindal-Snape's Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) Theory (2016, 2021) offers a valuable framework for understanding this process as a complex, ongoing series of interconnected transitions that evolve over time and therefore necessitate sustained support. This perspective emphasizes that HE transitions are influenced by the dynamic and interdependent nature of the broader ecological systems in which they occur (Jindal-Snape, 2016). In essence, university transitions unfold across multiple contexts (e.g., the academic setting, home

environment) and are inherently multi-dimensional. Moreover, these transitions are not experienced in isolation. For instance, students' parents may need to adapt to new roles, such as parenting from a distance, while peers, particularly in the context of peer mentoring, also undergo parallel or divergent transitions across various domains (Jindal-Snape, 2023).

In terms of transition to HE, students face changes in how they are taught (e.g., larger classes, greater learning autonomy) and in the level of difficulty and independence expected in their assessments (Mulaudzi, 2023). Another major challenge is social adjustment, with many students transitioning to university alone and under pressure to form meaningful social connections quickly. Universities frequently bring together diverse groups of students from varied backgrounds, which can lead to feelings of isolation, homesickness, and difficulties in forming new social circles (Mulaudzi, 2023). Such challenges may place some students at heightened risk during the transition period, including those with special educational needs (Davies & Bagnall, 2025), students in receipt of contextual offers (Bagnall et al., 2024), and international students, who may face additional barriers related to language, cultural norms, and separation from established support networks (Holliman et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the transition to university can be a profoundly stressful experience, with potential implications for students' psychological and socio-emotional well-being (Hughes, 2016). Tinto (1993) highlights the importance of both academic and social integration in reducing dropout rates, emphasizing that first-year students must develop meaningful relationships and a sense of community to foster institutional commitment. When combined with individual aspirations for graduation, these factors play a significant role in shaping students' capacity to adapt to university and persist with their studies (Tinto, 1993). Given the increasingly internationalised nature of HE, understanding how these integrative processes operate for international students is particularly important. Therefore, targeted efforts are needed to support students' transitions, with explicit attention to the experiences of international students within an increasingly diverse university population.

Conservation of Resources Theory

The Conservation of Resources model (COR; Hobfoll, 2001) provides a valuable perspective for understanding the challenges students encounter when transitioning to university. According to the COR model, individuals can reduce stress by utilizing two types of resources: internal and external. Holliman et al. (2022) further clarify that adaptability serves as an internal resource, while social support acts as an external resource, varying according to the specific situational needs during the university transition.

Personal Resources

Under the COR model, adaptability, which refers to cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adjustments made in response to change, new situations, and uncertainty (Martin et al., 2012), is perceived as a personal resource. During the transition period, students' adaptability positively impacts their academic performance (Holliman et al., 2019), and psychological well-being, as they navigate numerous changes and adapt to new life at university (Holliman et al., 2021): this was also found among a sample of international (Chinese) students at a UK university (Holliman et al., 2022). It is based on a self-regulation framework, where students actively monitor, manage, and guide their own thoughts, behaviours, and emotions, modifying them to suit the requirements of different

situations (Zimmerman, 2002). Students who have better adaptability often display positive engagement behaviours such as persistence, strategic planning, and effective task management. They also demonstrate fewer negative behaviours like disengagement or self-sabotage. Their skill in regulating their thoughts, emotions, and actions empowers them to navigate academic challenges, organize their schedules, and handle tasks proficiently (Holliman et al., 2020).

Situational Resources

In the COR model, social support is identified as a situational resource, which represents the degree of support available to an individual through their relationships with others, groups, and the wider community (Lin et al., 1979). The study conducted by Holliman et al. (2022) further supported the importance of social support, showing that international (Chinese) students with greater adaptability and social support resources tended to have lower levels of distress and higher levels of positive psychological well-being. Similar findings were shown in Bagnall et al.'s (2025) research from a qualitative perspective, with students in receipt of contextual offers shown to discuss the value of creating support networks with other students in receipt of contextual offers (through informal peer mentoring) to help counteract feelings of imposter syndrome, difference and low self-efficacy.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring has emerged as a prominent and enduring form of social support within higher education in response to increasing transition challenges faced by first-year students (Livingstone & Naismith, 2018). Research suggests that peer mentoring is widely accepted across global HE contexts and can play an effective role in facilitating students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment during the transition to university (Patel et al., 2017). Typically, peer mentoring involves more experienced students supporting first-year students in navigating the demands of university life (Leidenfrost et al., 2014), offering guidance during a transition that begins prior to enrolment and extends beyond the early stages of study (Sanagavarapu et al., 2019).

Mentoring within HE is commonly conceptualised as a collaborative, goal-oriented relationship in which mentors support mentees' integration into the academic and social environment (Kay & Hinds, 2009; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Peer mentoring can take formal or informal forms. Formal programmes, which are increasingly prevalent in HE, typically involve structured mentor–mentee pairings facilitated by an intermediary, with clearly defined objectives and roles (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Ragins et al., 2000). Informal mentoring, by contrast, develops organically and is voluntary in nature (Ragins et al., 2000).

A substantial body of quantitative research has evaluated the effectiveness of peer mentoring programmes, particularly in relation to academic outcomes and well-being. Studies indicate that mentees often demonstrate higher academic performance and course completion rates than non-mentored peers (Leidenfrost et al., 2014; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Peer mentoring has also been shown to mitigate anxiety-related performance disparities and reduce symptoms of depression, highlighting its potential contribution to students' mental health and adjustment (Harra & Vargas, 2022). However, findings are not uniformly positive. A recent systematic review by Pointon-Haas et al. (2024) reported inconsistent outcomes across peer support interventions, suggesting that the effectiveness of peer mentoring is context-dependent and warrants further investigation.

Importantly, the predominance of quantitative methodologies within this literature limits insight into the nuanced and subjective experiences of mentees. While a small number of studies have adopted qualitative approaches, these remain limited in scope. For example, Yomtov et al. (2017) used open-ended survey responses to show that mentored students felt more supported and integrated, while Hill and Reddy (2007), using audio diaries, highlighted mentors' role in transmitting implicit academic values and supporting reflective development. However, these studies did not employ in-depth interviews and did not focus on international students, despite the increasing diversification of HE and the distinctive transition challenges faced by this group.

The study by Flores and Estudillo (2018) is most closely aligned with the present research, as it used interviews and other methods to explore peer mentoring among first-year, first-generation undergraduate students at a U.S. university. Their findings highlighted the important role of mentoring in fostering students' sense of belonging and academic confidence. Building on this work, the present study focuses exclusively on mentee perspectives of international students at a U.K. university (who were not necessarily first-generation) and uses in-depth interviews to provide rich insights into their experiences of peer mentoring during the early transition to higher education. In doing so, it extends existing qualitative research by foregrounding underrepresented perspectives, particularly those of international students.

Beyond academic outcomes, peer mentoring has been shown to support social integration by providing immediate peer contact, reducing loneliness, and fostering a sense of belonging among first-year students (Hogan et al., 2017; Raymond & Sheppard, 2017). Nevertheless, programme effectiveness is influenced by mentor characteristics and relationship quality. Effective mentors are typically described as approachable, motivated, supportive, and respected by peers (Berk et al., 2005), while mentees' perceptions of mentor quality strongly shape reported benefits (Pavlovic & Jenö, 2024). Additionally, students vary in their support needs, with some prioritising academic independence over social engagement (Pavlovic & Jenö, 2024). These findings further underscore the importance of understanding how peer mentoring is experienced by different student groups.

Study Context

The "Transition Mentor Programme" at the participating HE institution, is designed to support first-year students in settling into university life. Transition Mentors provide guidance on academic expectations, available support services, and key administrative tasks required during the first year of undergraduate study. Participation in the programme is voluntary, with mentoring delivered through small-group sessions comprising approximately 10 mentees, led by a second- or third-year student mentor usually from the same academic department. The programme begins during induction/orientation week and continues throughout the first academic term. Mentors receive structured training over the summer to prepare them for their role and are financially compensated for their time spent in training and mentoring.

Summary, Rationale and Research Questions

Recent research indicates that the transition to university can be challenging for students, with implications for both academic success and psychological well-being. Peer mentoring has been widely recognized as an effective mechanism for supporting students during this period, with studies

such as Leidenfrost et al. (2014) demonstrating its potential to enhance academic performance and social integration. In parallel, adaptability, conceptualized as students' capacity to adjust their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions in response to new or uncertain situations, has been identified as a critical resource for student success and well-being (Martin et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2002). However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding how peer mentoring may support the development or expression of adaptability, and how these two resources interact to shape students' overall transition experiences, particularly from a qualitative perspective. Even fewer studies have examined these processes among international students, for whom experiences of adjustment and change may be intensified.

The present study aims to address these gaps by exploring how adaptability and the social support provided through peer mentoring influence the transition experiences of first-year university students. This focus is particularly pertinent given that much of the existing literature relies on quantitative methodologies, which may not fully capture the complexity and nuance of students' lived experiences. Moreover, in the context of rising university dropout rates and the increasing diversification of higher education, gaining a deeper understanding of how peer mentoring supports students' adaptation and success is both timely and necessary. Taken together, the current study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do first-year international (non-UK) university students describe their experiences of receiving support via a peer mentoring scheme?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of a peer mentoring scheme for students transitioning into university life?

Methodology

Design

The present study adopts a social constructionist epistemological stance (Gergen, 1985), viewing lived experience and reality as socially constructed and shaped by contextual factors and individual differences. This perspective aligns with our theoretical framing of transition through the lens of Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016, 2023) and supports our use of an inductive Thematic Analysis methodology.

Sample and Procedures

The population of the study involved eight international (non-UK) Year 1 students who have enrolled in the transition mentoring programme at a single HE institution in London, United Kingdom. Participants were recruited through self-selective sampling. The flyer and an invitation letter were sent to all Year 1 students via email, explaining the purpose of the study, and the types of questions that will be asked in the interview. Overall, eight international (non-UK) students accepted the invitation and agreed to participate in the study. The characteristics of participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participants	Age	Sex	Nationality
P1	19	Female	Greek
P2	19	Female	Chinese
P3	19	Female	Chinese
P4	19	Female	Chinese
P5	20	Female	Chinese
P6	19	Female	Chinese
P7	19	Female	Korean
P8	20	Female	Chinese

Characteristics of Participants

Before the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted. The purpose of this pilot study was twofold: to test the effectiveness of the interview questions and to refine any logistical aspects of the data collection process. This involved conducting interviews with two participants who mirrored the characteristics of the target population but were not included in the main study. Feedback from these participants was used to refine the interview questions. Additionally, the pilot study provided an opportunity to assess the estimated duration of the interviews, ensuring the main study's smooth execution.

Interviews were conducted in a quiet setting to promote open communication and typically lasted 30-45 minutes to thoroughly explore topics without participant fatigue. Before each session, participants were briefed on the study's objectives, their rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation as outlined in the BPS (2018) guidelines and required to consent to the terms. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent, using a digital voice recorder (built-in microphone) on a MacBook Pro laptop. This ensured the accurate capture of the information for subsequent transcription and analysis. The study was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics

Committee (REC) and adheres with the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (Project code: PHDE0058_23-24; date of approval 5 January 2024). Appropriate safeguarding procedures were implemented throughout the study, including informing participants of available university wellbeing and support services, monitoring for signs of distress during interviews, and reminding participants of their right to pause or withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty.

Measures

The primary tool used for data collection was in-depth, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, a method widely recognized for its effectiveness and rigour in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The use of a schedule ensured key questions were asked consistently but afforded flexibility to probe for more information based on participant responses, in keeping with the study's inductive approach (Yardley, 2015). The interview questions were guided by the two research questions (see Appendix 1).

It consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the students' experiences with the peer mentoring programme and their adaptation to university life. The questions were crafted to explore various dimensions of their experiences, including emotional, social, academic, and adaptability aspects. Questions related to academic and social integration were inspired by Pavlovic and Jeno's (2024) interview schedule. Questions on adaptability are grounded in the concepts presented in Holliman's (2021) study.

Data Analysis

After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo version 14) was used. The data analysis in this study was conducted using inductive Thematic Analysis, a widely recognized method in qualitative research for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is particularly suited for examining the experiences, meanings, and realities of participants, making it an ideal choice for the analysis of interview data in this study.

The first step in the analysis involved a thorough familiarization with the data. This entailed reading the interview transcripts multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. During this process, initial ideas and potential themes were noted and prepared for more detailed analysis. Coding was done systematically across the entire data set, with interesting features of the data being noted and systematically classified into relevant codes. After coding, the analysis progressed to searching for themes. Codes were collated into potential themes and subthemes, gathering all data relevant to each possible theme. This stage was not just about summarizing the data but about interpreting and making sense of the patterns that emerged. Themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they accurately reflected the dataset's complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were then reviewed on two levels: firstly, by checking them against the coded extracts to ensure they formed a coherent pattern, and secondly, by evaluating them in relation to the entire data set. This dual-level review helped in refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story they narrate about the data, ensuring the themes were valid within the dataset (Patton, 2014). The last phase involved defining and naming the themes. This phase was about further refining the specifics of each theme and developing a detailed analysis of each. Throughout the iterative process of coding and theme development, thematic saturation was monitored and was deemed to have been achieved

when subsequent interviews failed to generate new codes or substantially extend existing themes, suggesting sufficient depth and breadth of the data.

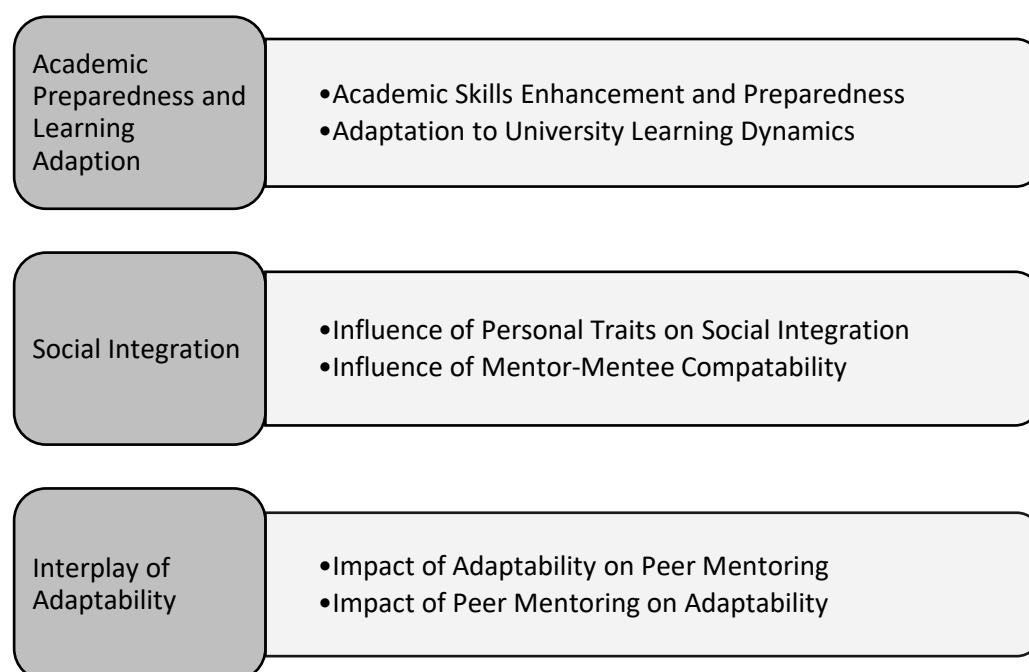
Reflexivity

To enhance transparency, it is important to note the positionality of the research team: Authors 2, 3, 4, and 5 are members of staff in a Higher Education institution (HEI), Authors 2 and 5 are well-published in the area of educational transitions, and Author 1 is both an international student and served as a Transition Mentor at the HEI. This composition brought valuable insider knowledge, authenticity, and trust, which may have positively influenced participants' openness during interviews. To mitigate potential researcher bias and uphold the integrity of the analysis, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. This audit trail was reviewed by Author 5 to support dependability, and findings were further triangulated through ongoing discussions between Authors 1 and 5 to ensure interpretive congruence.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis identified three primary themes: (1) Academic Preparedness and Learning Adaptation, (2) Social Integration, and (3) Interplay of Adaptability (see Figure 1). Each of these themes will be discussed in turn, with their corresponding sub-themes, providing a detailed examination of how peer mentoring impacts various aspects of the student transition experience.

Figure



Thematic map of the students' experiences (themes left; sub-themes right)

Theme 1: Academic Preparedness and Learning Adaption

This theme explores the essential aspects of academic transition through peer mentoring, focusing on enhancing students' academic skills and facilitating their adaptation to university learning dynamics. It probes how mentoring helps students develop crucial academic abilities and adjust to the new educational environment, reflecting on their prior preparation and ongoing academic challenges.

Academic Skills Enhancement and Preparedness

This sub-theme encapsulates the degree to which peer mentoring addresses academic preparedness and the enhancement of study techniques. Mentees expressed varying degrees of preparedness, with some finding the academic guidance is not necessary, due to their prior high school training, as outlined by P4:

I learned how to find academic articles and papers and how to do academic writing before I enter into university because I did it in my high school. So, I thought I don't actually need a transition mentor telling me how to do it at that time.

In comparison, other students noted that the learning specific skills such as finding resources and academic writing delivered by peer mentors are quite useful, as P2 shared:

I think there were one or two sessions that my mentor taught us how to write essays. Like, how to structure it, how to write down notes while reading, and how to search for resources to support the arguments. All of these are very useful because I didn't know how to do academic writing before, and I would like to see more relevant sessions scheduled.

These findings suggest that the diverse academic backgrounds and skills students bring to university may lead to different impacts of peer mentoring on students' academic competencies.

During the first term, assignments have gradually become a great concern for many students. P3 and P5 mentioned that assignments made them feel very stressed. P3 expressed her worries about not getting good grades, and then the mentor put her at ease:

My mentor told me that she felt anxious too when she was on her first essay assignment, so that's a normal thing. Just try my best and ask teacher's advice, the result won't be bad. Also, she compared the module handbook for us, the course content and assignments haven't changed, so I think if she can do it, I can do it too.

This highlights the mentor's role in releasing stress through reassurance and shared experiences, demonstrating how peer mentoring can enhance students' confidence in handling academic challenges. Furthermore, peer mentoring was not only shown to relieve

Students' mental stress in the study but also provide explanations to understand difficulties in knowledge points. P8 shared:

Our first assignment came very soon, it was an interview report. I was so confused about it since I had never written a report before, and the teacher's explanation did not make me very clear. Thanks to my mentor, she explained how to do coding in

detail and gave me some examples and exercises to make me understand. I finally got a good grade on that report.

Moreover, P1 noted that she attended only several sessions and knew the sessions were useful but admitted she was too lazy to attend as many as possible. She suggested:

I think if the sessions were compulsory, maybe I would have benefited more. I need a little push.

The varied responses indicate a significant disparity in the levels of academic preparedness among students entering university. For the students who had relatively few prior study skills, peer mentoring was useful in bridging the gap to complete their university assignments. For instance, P8 found great value in the academic guidance provided through mentoring, which assisted her in achieving good grades. This finding is supported by studies such as Leidenfrost et al. (2014), which show that peer mentoring can enhance students' academic performance. Moreover, the qualitative nature of the current study provides deeper insights into how specific academic competencies, such as essay writing and searching for sources, are improved through mentoring. However, students like P4, who feel their prior educational experiences sufficiently prepared them, may find peer mentoring less impactful. This suggests that the effectiveness of peer mentoring in enhancing academic preparedness is affected by students' backgrounds and previous educational experiences.

Adaptation to University Learning Dynamics

This sub-theme explores the challenges students face in transitioning from a structured high school environment to a more autonomous university setting. Difficulties in implementing new learning patterns and pace meant some students felt anxious and overwhelmed. P3 noted:

The study pattern at university is so different, when I was in high school, the teacher would always tell us what to do and how to do it, but the learning in the university is more under self-regulation.

The peer mentoring played a role at this stage in helping students to manage and prioritize their time when faced with multiple tasks, as P3 continued:

A session regarding time management gives me a clear idea of how to prioritize tasks and meet every deadline effectively.

Quantitative research by Park and Kim (2022) have shown similar findings with self-regulation shown to significantly affect students' behavioural engagement and academic performance. Peer mentors, by sharing effective time management techniques, help students develop these critical skills, thereby enhancing their overall academic engagement and success.

Additionally, the study found the effectiveness of mentor's guidance through aiding in utilising university resources like study spaces and campus facilities to enhance students' academic engagement, which has not been mentioned in previous research. P6 indicated:

There was one time when we finished the session, our mentor took us to the Student Centre to study together and told us that we can not only book single study space, but can also book group study spaces, where we could have discussions, and there is

a café for food and drinks. After that, me and my friends usually go to the Student Centre for study and have also explored other libraries at [HEI]. Those are all great places to study.

This theme indicates that mentoring aids in adapting to independent learning styles and effectively utilising university resources like study spaces and campus facilities, thus enhancing students' academic engagement. However, the effectiveness of peer mentoring varies, due to the different characteristics of the mentor. This aligns with previous literature by Berk et al. (2005), which highlights that key characteristic of effective mentors—such as expertise, approachability, and a supportive demeanour—are essential for successful mentoring relationships.

Taken together, Theme 1 partly answers the first research question by highlighting the specific benefits of peer mentoring, such as stress reduction through reassurance and practical academic guidance, as well as the challenges due to varying impacts based on different levels of prior academic preparation. Additionally, the findings demonstrate the interplay between peer mentoring and adaptability, showing that mentoring supports students in adapting to the less structured university learning environment.

Theme 2: Social Integration

This theme is characterized by exploring how the dynamics between mentors and mentees, shaped by individual differences and personal backgrounds, directly influence the social integration of new university students. It examines the interplay between personal compatibility and the effectiveness of social support provided through mentoring, addressing how these elements contribute to building a sense of community and belonging among first-year students.

Influence of Personal Traits on Social Integration

This sub-theme focuses on the role of different personality traits and their impact on students' ability to engage and form connections through peer mentoring programmes, highlighting the variable effectiveness of such sessions in facilitating social integration among diverse student personalities.

Many students pointed out that peer mentoring sessions offered them the opportunity to communicate with others and form friendships in a more relaxed environment. Compared with lectures and seminars, students in transition mentoring sessions were more willing to talk about their lives and social activities, especially under mentors' guidance. P6 shared that:

I'm active in socialising, and the sessions provided me with great opportunities. Our mentor showed us around campus at our second meeting and organised a coffee chat at Starbucks afterwards. We talked a lot that time and the relationship got much closer. Me and another girl found that we have very similar taste in movies, and we have now become good friends! I like this arrangement. It would be great if we could have more casual meet-ups like this instead of classroom sessions, it feels more relaxing.

Besides, P2 emphasised the mentor's importance in enriching her social activities:

My mentor introduced us to many clubs and societies. For example, she recommended the hiking club since she has participated for two years, and feels the vibe there is very relaxing. I then joined it and really enjoyed the activity every week. We explored several amazing places in (location) and often had dinner together after hiking. I made some good friends there who share similar habits with me.

Nevertheless, the effect of peer mentoring is not obvious to introverted students in terms of socialising, since they would consider social gatherings and large group activities to be overwhelming. P3 expressed:

I don't find mentoring very important for my social life, but that's for my own reasons. I actually like to be by myself most of the time. I know people in the group are nice, but if I'm going to attend any events, I would prefer the events to be more structured and have a clear purpose rather than casual meet-ups. I'm not very good at starting conversations and sometimes get embarrassed. Structure sessions make me feel more comfortable than open-ended socialising.

The theme shows that compared to introverted students; extroverted students benefit more from peer mentoring sessions because they are more engaged in activities. In this case, introverted students who prefer to be alone could be perceived as having a low need for social interaction. It aligns with findings by Pavlovic and Jeno (2024) that students who tend to have a reduced need for social interaction with other students, find peer mentoring less important.

Influence of Mentor-Mentee Compatibility on Social Integration

This sub-theme considers that success of peer mentoring in social integration is also influenced by the compatibility of the mentor-mentee pairing. When mentors and mentees share similar backgrounds or identities, mentees are more likely to feel understood and supported, which can lead to higher engagement levels. For instance, P1 illustrated:

Since my mentor is also an international student, she knows what might be difficult for us to adjust in the new environment. Tips about eating, commuting, and so on were very helpful.

Furthermore, P5, P6 and P8 all mentioned that they share the same cultural and gender identity with their mentors, which has brought them many benefits. For example, P6 said:

My mentor is also a Chinese girl, we had a lot of interactions even outside the mentoring sessions. She introduced me to the Chinese Students and Scholars Association where I could meet many other Chinese students with similar interests. That gave me a sense of belonging. Also, as we are both girls, I feel comfortable talking (about) personal stuff to her.

These findings highlight the critical role of mentor-mentee compatibility in enhancing the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs. When mentors and mentees share common experiences or identities, it fosters a sense of relatability and trust, which is essential for effective mentorship. These findings are supported by the Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in relevant social groups (Tajfel & Turner,

2004). In the context of mentoring, sharing an identity or background with a mentor can reinforce the mentee's group identity, enhancing their integration into the university community.

Overall, Theme 2 illustrates that peer mentoring can significantly enhance social integration among extroverted students while highlighting the challenges faced by introverted students in benefiting from such programs, thereby emphasising the need for adaptable mentoring approaches to meet diverse social interaction needs. This nuance might extend prior findings by Yomtov et al. (2017) and Flores and Estudillo (2018) which signified more generally the benefits of peer mentoring for social integration and belonging. Additionally, these findings underline how well-matched mentor-mentee pairs can significantly enhance social integration by developing deeper relationships and a stronger sense of community, which helps students adjust more easily to university life.

Theme 3: Interplay of Adaptability

The theme underscores the vital role of adaptability in the transition to university life. Mentees described their adaptability in terms of adjusting to new norms and the length of time it took to feel a sense of belonging.

Impact of Adaptability on Peer Mentoring

This sub-theme focuses on the influence of adaptability on the peer-mentoring process. The data indicates that students who exhibit higher levels of adaptability tend to leverage peer mentoring more effectively. For example, P5 said:

I could always adapt to something new relatively quickly, and I am excited when attending such peer-based sessions. I am so willing to talk to my mentors and classmates, sometimes I feel like I could also share my thoughts and give others some advice and help.

This perspective is supported by the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 2001), which posits that individuals with greater adaptability can better utilise available resources. Conversely, less adaptable students often rely more on their existing social circles and may not seek out new connections. P4 mentioned:

I would not take the action to actively make new friends. I very much rely on my old friends. Since they were there, I feel less motivated to meet someone new.

Interestingly, even students who consider themselves adaptable might not always find peer mentoring significantly beneficial. For example, P4 shared:

I think I am the type of person who doesn't have a strong preference for any kind of thing. So, the good thing about that is I can easily adapt to a new environment. But it takes me a long time to actually mentally believe that I am part of it. I mean I can easily follow all the rules or guidelines that I am supposed to follow, but it takes a long time for me to really have a sense of belonging. It's hard for me to have personal attachment in one place.

This nuance reveals that while external adaptability (e.g., following new rules) can be straightforward, internal integration (e.g., feeling a sense of belonging) is more complex and may

require different types of support from mentoring programs. This distinction could be understood through Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which points out that fulfilling the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is crucial for well-being. While external adaptability might address competence, internal integration is connected with relatedness, emphasising the need for mentoring programs to support social and emotional connections. This difference highlights the need for mentoring programs to better align with the personal adaptability levels of students to facilitate a smoother transition.

Impact of Peer Mentoring on Adaptability

Indicative of a bi-directional relationship, this sub-theme explores how peer mentoring might enhance adaptability. Mentees shared that mentors would give them advice on how to better adapt based on their past experience. P2 noted that:

My mentor would give me very specific advice on how to adjust emotions and release pressure, such as trying to stick to some kind of schedule. It gives you a sense of control. Also, the gym could be a good place to go, physical exercise could relieve stress. It gives you happy hormones.

Additionally, P3 and P5 mentioned the benefits of the time management session:

After the session, I realised the importance of prioritizing and organizing. Our mentor recommended using digital calendars or writing a 'To Do List' to help schedule and set small goals to keep our workload manageable. This has helped me meet each deadline.

These examples demonstrate that peer mentoring can enhance students' adaptability by helping them recognise and respond effectively to change and uncertainty, reinforcing the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adjustments that build resilience, engagement, and longer-term academic success (Martin et al., 2013). Peer mentoring might also equip students with practical strategies for managing stress, organising their time, maintaining healthy routines, and navigating academic and social demands. In doing so, it strengthens students' capacity to adapt to university life, illustrating how adaptability is both fostered through and reinforced by engagement with mentoring, ultimately shaping the transition experience. This aligns with Crosling et al. (2009), who argue that successful transition requires opportunities for dialogue and support that enable students to adapt cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally to the higher education environment. Peer mentoring may provide a practical mechanism for this support by enabling experienced students to share knowledge, normalise transition challenges, and model effective coping strategies.

General Discussion

This study examined the impact of peer mentoring on first-year international (non-UK) university students, focusing on its influence on academic preparedness, social integration, and adaptability. The findings reveal that peer mentoring significantly enhances both academic preparedness and social integration, facilitating a smoother transition for new students. Adaptability emerged as a central theme, indicating that students with higher adaptability levels benefit more from peer mentoring. The dynamics between mentors and mentees, including compatibility and shared

experiences, play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. Theoretically, these findings align with Jindal-Snape's Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) Theory (2016, 2021), which acknowledges the simultaneous, interconnected transitions first-year international students negotiate across multiple domains, positioning adaptability, academic preparedness and social integration not as isolated outcomes, but interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Providing a further theoretical contribution, the nested nature of educational transitions for significant others within the individuals' wider ecosystem (Bagnall et al., 2025), such as the peer mentors themselves, is acknowledged through the reciprocal nature of peer mentoring.

The results align with prior research, such as Leidenfrost et al. (2014), who demonstrated that peer mentoring enhances academic performance. This study advances the field by providing nuanced insights into how peer mentoring specifically addresses various aspects of academic preparedness, such as assignment handling and adapting to new study patterns. The findings support Tinto's (1993) claim regarding the role of social integration in educational persistence and provide a detailed examination of how specific mentoring activities facilitate deeper social connections. The findings further contribute to the field by lending some support to the processes outlined in the COR model (Hobfoll, 2001). For instance, we found that students who exhibit higher levels of adaptability manage transitions with less stress and more success. This extends findings by Martin et al. (2012), who focus on adaptability as a general benefit in educational settings by linking it specifically to the context of peer mentoring.

Implications and Applications of the Findings

The study offers several practical contributions to the design and implementation of university peer mentoring programs. Firstly, the findings highlight the need for mentoring programs to be designed to cater to the diverse academic backgrounds of students. Tailoring the sessions to address specific academic needs, such as academic writing, time management, and resource finding, may help bridge the gap for students who lack certain skills.

Secondly, the study advances understanding of how social integration can be more effectively supported, recommending that peer mentoring programs incorporate a variety of social activities that cater to both extroverted and introverted students. Organising casual meetups in informal settings, as well as structured social events, may accommodate different personality traits and preferences. Matching mentors and mentees based on shared backgrounds or interests can further enhance the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship.

Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of developing adaptability among students. Peer mentoring programs can incorporate strategies to help students manage stress, develop time management skills, and build resilience. Mentors can provide personalised advice and support to help mentees adjust to the new university environment. Importantly, the study also adds to the field by foregrounding students' own voices, as a valuable and underutilised source of insight for program development and improvement. Recommendations include making engagement with such sessions compulsory, varying the settings of meetings to create a more relaxed atmosphere, and extending support for two terms. These suggestions offer practical insights for developing a more robust and effective mentoring framework.

Limitations, and Future Directions

It should be noted that this study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and lacked demographic diversity, with participants comprising all-female and predominantly Chinese students (although, greater in size the other relevant work and international, at least, which was the focus of the present work). As such, the experiences expressed may not necessarily extend to a broader student population. Secondly, the voluntary nature of the study may have introduced self-selection bias, as those who chose to take part might be more motivated or have a more positive outlook towards peer mentoring. Thirdly, the study focused exclusively on the short-term effects of peer mentoring, not considering long-term impacts on students' academic and social outcomes.

Future research should aim to include larger and more diverse samples, incorporating students from various ethnic, cultural, and gender backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, exploring the long-term impacts of peer mentoring beyond the first year of university could provide deeper insights into its lasting benefits and would be in line with recommendations from transitions research, which outlines the need for longitudinal designs, with at least three time points, to reflect the dynamic and ongoing nature of transitions experiences (Bagnall et al., 2025). Incorporating quantitative and mixed method approaches alongside qualitative insights will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of peer mentoring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explores the multifaceted benefits of peer mentoring in facilitating a successful transition to university life. For international (non-UK) students, peer mentoring enhances academic preparedness by helping students develop essential academic skills and adapt to the university's learning environment. Social integration is significantly boosted through mentor-led activities, introduction to diverse university clubs and societies, fostering a sense of belonging and community among first-year students. The compatibility between mentors and mentees, including shared experiences and backgrounds, enhances the mentoring relationship's effectiveness, leading to better academic and social outcomes.

While peer mentoring is largely beneficial, it is not without its challenges. This study has identified areas where peer mentoring struggles to meet the needs of all participants, especially in achieving thorough social integration and consistently improving academic preparedness among students with different needs and backgrounds.

Adaptability plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of peer mentoring. Students with higher levels of adaptability engage more effectively with peer mentoring, utilizing the resources and support provided to navigate the complex university life more easily. Moreover, peer mentoring helps students develop adaptability by providing support, guidance, and practical strategies that prepare them to face new challenges and changes. This suggests that peer mentoring programs should not only continue but also expand their focus on cultivating adaptability skills among students, ensuring that these programs meet the diverse needs of the students.

These findings contribute to the understanding of peer mentoring's role in HE, offering insights for developing more effective and inclusive mentoring programs, with a specific focus here on

international (non-UK) students. By addressing the limitations and exploring future research directions, peer mentoring can be expanded to better serve diverse student populations, promoting a more inclusive and supportive university experience.

Ethics and Consent

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the participating university in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society. All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study and consented to the publication of their data in the form of anonymised, aggregated findings in academic journals.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author Contributions

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Spencer Hayes: Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing.

Andrew J. Holliman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing, Project administration.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

1. Can you describe your initial feelings or expectations about university life before you started the peer mentoring programme?
2. What were your main concerns or challenges about transitioning to university life?"
3. How did the peer mentoring programme address your initial concerns or expectations about university life?
4. Can you share a specific experience or moment during the mentoring that had a significant impact on your transition to university?"
5. In what ways do you think the peer mentoring helped you adapt to changes and uncertainties in university life?
6. Can you give examples of how you've adjusted your behaviour, thoughts, or emotions as a result of the mentoring?
7. How has the peer mentoring influenced your social interactions and academic involvement at the university?
8. Can you describe any changes in your learning approach or study habits since participating in the peer mentoring program?
9. What qualities or actions of your peer mentor do you find most helpful or effective?
10. How would you describe the dynamics of your relationship with your peer mentor?
11. How do you think your first year at university would have been different without the peer mentoring programme?
12. In your opinion, what are the most significant benefits of having a peer mentor during this transition?
13. Are there any aspects of the peer mentoring programme that you think could be improved or changed?
14. What additional support or resources do you think would enhance the effectiveness of the programme?
15. How do you think your background (such as age, sex, or being a home/international student) influenced your experience with the peer mentoring programme?
16. Can you discuss how frequently you engaged with your mentor and how this affected your transition experience?