A. Background, Aims and Objectives

The Academic Peer Mentoring scheme follows broadly the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model. It was adopted by the University of Kent and is a partnership between the Student Learning Advisory Service (SLAS) in UELT, participating Schools (Biosciences and Physics) and Kent Union. APM is considered an excellent way to promote and encourage student-centred learning → students helping and supporting other students: mentors and mentees. The aim is to support and help student improve their learning and thus effectively improve their performance and retention. The APM focus is on subjects rather than on high-risk students.

Students volunteers are identified as prospective Student Leaders/Mentors (SLM) by their respective Schools and their names are sent to the manager of SLAS who organised their training and follow up on their progress. The SLMs set up seminars once or twice a week with groups of students (5-10 or more) who have “opted into” the scheme. The groups were open to any Foundation or First Year student who wished to have additional help with their course. where course material is discussed and re-looked at in a different light by SLMs. It is important to point out that SLMs are not there to do the work for the students, neither are they there to replace lecturers. SLMs do not teach but instead, they facilitate the learning of their respective groups. SLMs are encouraged to meet regularly with the academics responsible for running the courses that they were mentoring a) to ensure that the curriculum is being followed, b) to provide regular feedback on students’ views and opinions, c) and to ensure that everyone was moving forward in the same direction.

At the end of the academic year, a survey was sent out to all students and staff who had been involved in the scheme and a review meeting was set out with the SLMs. The results of those surveys and meeting form the basis of this review.

B. Activities undertaken in establishing and delivering the Academic Peer Mentoring scheme

Training

The support and training were offered solely by the Student Learning Advisory Service in UELT and was structured as follows:

The training took place over one day.

The APM training Plan run as follows:

Session 1
- Understanding what APM is and the role of a leader
- Clarify the difference between SLAS in UELT / Kent Union roles and Departmental roles
- Handouts on APM and the role of a leader

Session 2
- Case Studies
- Working in small groups with scenarios
- ½ hour working on the scenarios, 20 minutes feedback
- Handouts on ideal solutions
- It is important to emphasise that one cannot ‘train’/be prepared for every eventuality
- Handouts with contacts and Departmental information

Session 3
- Question and Answer
- Open session

Feedback on the session was positive, and it appeared to have covered all elements needed for the effective running of the scheme from the students’ perspective.

Follow-up

• Students were given contact details and they were encouraged to keep in touch.
• A few students took advantage of this offer.
• Emails were sent out to students throughout the autumn and spring terms to check on progress and four meetings were arranged: one mid-term and another one at the end of both Autumn and Spring terms.

C. Evaluation of the scheme:

Departmental Survey Results

In 2008-2009, three departments: Physical Science, Bioscience and Computer Science took part in the Supplemental Instruction Scheme. As mentioned above, due to the move of the previous Volunteering co-ordinator, the scheme was monitored solely by SLAS in UELT, with financial support from Kent Union. The recruitment process for student volunteers for APM was a combined effort from all academic departments and SLAS in UELT. Training was provided by SLAS in UELT, and ‘on the job’ support provided by the host department.

Students and departments were surveyed and their responses form the basis of this review.

Out of the three departments, only two responded to the survey. The two departments indicated that it is difficult to have and give any precise information at this stage however both departments felt that, based on
anecdotal feedback, the additional support was beneficial to students and that it could/would help retention rates. Both departments felt positive about the scheme and added that they would recommend it to other departments.¹

Departments suggested some changes that they would make to the APM scheme in their own departments. As APM is perceived as a positive and good initiative, one department is considering extending it to Stage1. The recruitment of students does not cause any problems. It has been recommended that additional resources are made available to SLMs and that some funding for the purchase of textbooks for the mentors to use (and return) would be useful.²

It was generally agreed that due to the number of variables that could affect academic performance, no definite conclusion regarding the link of APM to improved academic performance could be gathered. However, it was recognised that APM has helped students overcome particularly difficult aspects of their course.

**Mentor Results**

We did not have a 100% return on the survey from all SLMs – only 4 students of the 13 registered SLMs completed the survey, 2 from Biosciences, 2 from Physical Sciences and none from Computer Science, so the analysis should reflect this.

Half of the SLM students stopped mentoring students after Term 1, the other half stopped after term 2. The Summer term being an ‘exam term’. Those who stopped the mentoring after term 1, run between 6 and 10 sessions. The other half run 25 to 30 sessions. Half the SLM worked on their own and the other half worked in pairs.

Attendance at the sessions appears to have been steady with 5-10 students attending the mentoring sessions throughout the academic year. Feedback regarding students’ attendance ranged from good to poor with one student having just the one student / mentee show up. However, others stated that the numbers in the group grew as the term progressed. The queries varied and related mainly to topics covered in the lectures. Generally, SLMs felt that the sessions were useful to the mentees and that the students were eager and willing to learn. SLMs regarded the experience as successful and enjoyable apart from the student who only had one student attend his/her sessions.

Additional comments included the fact that the mentors felt that the scheme helped to identify those students in need of extra support, but that that they felt that it was hard to provide the additional support that some students needed. SLMs pointed out that the sessions were used primarily as a tool to reinforce understanding rather than develop understanding. APM was used to

¹ Mentoring survey for staff – B. Newport
² Mentoring survey for staff – P. Phelan
help students time manage their workload by setting up ‘homework groups’ with other friends.

Most SLMs felt that this was a successful experience. It helped to make them “think about how to best present information & adapt different techniques in order to suit everyone’s understanding³. Numbers in the group grew, so evident that the atmosphere for both mentor & mentee was comfortable. All this hopefully leads to success for all students, which can only be a good reflection on the department⁴.

“The attendance was great and the students are generally willing to learn. They concerned most about their weekly chemistry and math tests/ online web CT tests. They were also interested in future career aspects and how the course is organised during their whole degree programme.”⁵

SLMs felt that it helped develop their ‘soft’ skills such as increasing their confidence: “I felt more comfortable talking in front of a group now.”⁶

“It was definitely successful and enjoyable for me. I gave them some of my own working experiences and we went through some questions/problems they had in tests and essays. I felt more comfortable talking in front of a group now”⁷.

“I think everything is great. Some group leaders didn’t get a positive turn up for the meetings and its quite disheartening. So if we could make sure this is something they really want before putting them into these “classes” it would be more beneficial for both sides.”⁸

“I do not feel that this was successful in any way and there was definitely no benefit to myself as a lot of my time was wasted waiting for students to turn up and they in fact didn’t bother which was not appreciated during my final year.”⁹

Other concerns include the fact that some SLMs appeared to not fully commit to the scheme. This is an area that clearly needs addressing.

**D. Lessons learned and Recommendations:**

Some of the following recommendations were made in the previous review. They still hold true.

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³ Student review from Physical Sciences
⁴ Student review from Physical Sciences
⁵ Student review from Biosciences
⁶ Student review from Biosciences
⁷ Student review from Biosciences
⁸ Student review from Biosciences
⁹ Student review from Biosciences
1) The continuation of the APM scheme for another year with the aim to track more systematically grade progression and retention.
2) To review whether the scheme is adding value to a department.
3) To review again in one year’s time.
4) Try to introduce the scheme to a Humanities or Social Sciences School to see whether the scheme can offer additional benefits there.
5) Encourage greater communication links between SLAS in UELT, Kent Union and SLMs, as the support structures were not utilised to their full advantage.
6) Include Kent Union and SLAS in UELT at introductions to the scheme to fully explore its benefits
7) Kent Union and SLAS in UELT need to address the Foundation and / or First year students as a way of managing their expectations
8) Kent Union and SLAS in UELT need to encourage SLMs to utilise Kent Union and SLAS with increased regularity in the early stages of the academic year
9) Introduce students’ ‘opt in’ to the scheme within departments rather than compulsory attendance: “I think that maybe some of the students felt that they had to participate when in fact they didn’t want to, and they were also not entirely sure of what the scheme comprised of, or what it entailed.”
10) Introduce more rigorous recruitment procedures for SLMs to ensure that levels of commitment remain high.
11) Staff to allocate groups to SLMs prior to the start of the scheme in order to use the SLM’s time on mentoring rather than dividing the groups! “Also I find it a little unfair for mentors to have to pick from a list of people that they do not know to form a group. Perhaps present mentors to foundation group & allocate groups then so they know whom to expect on their first session.”
12) Highlight the importance of attendance. Whilst attendance is not compulsory, mentees should be encouraged to notify their SLMs if they are unable to attend.
13) Following from above point 12, SLM and mentees to negotiate ground rules, at the start of the scheme!

E. Dissemination:

SLAS in UELT and Kent Union need to disseminate the scheme to other faculties/schools/areas. The scheme is beneficial to SLMs, mentees, Schools and ultimately the university as a whole and should therefore be extended beyond the original three departments.

F. Expenditure

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10 Student review from Biosciences
11 Student review from Physical Sciences
Kent Union had offered to fund the scheme and this is continuing although SLM’s have not made much use of this funding. One student requested a book but I am unaware of any other requests.

A.M. Wilson
26-10-09