

Reach Academic Mentoring Initiative at MTU

Creating and enhancing presence, connectedness and engagement in Teaching and Learning for students during COVID-19

‘Move Quickly, Speed Trumps Perfection.’

Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director, World Health Organisation



Introduction

When March 2020 brought us some real challenges as COVID 19 lockdowns were implemented, we, like many other HEIs globally, pivoted rapidly to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning. Given the chaos surrounding COVID 19 in Summer 2020, only one thing was certain that we as a university would have to be agile in our responses to the challenge.

We knew that First Years in September 2020 would not have the same opportunity to connect with their class groups, lecturers and college life and so we needed to provide some concrete alternative that allows for different and proactive student engagement, connectedness and mentoring. In the move to more online and remote learning students would really miss face-to-face contact with academics, learning professionals and student supports and their new peer groups at MTU.

Our continuing 2nd year students, in September 2020, had not benefited from many of the usual rites of passage normally afforded by a regular on campus student experience due to lockdown in March 2020 during their Semester 2 as First Year students and we felt they would need different levels of reorientation and reassurance as they had come through a very challenging 1st Year.

Moving decisively in Summer 2020 the Head of AnSEO - The Student Engagement Office worked with colleagues to imagine and develop a proposal for a proactive, resourced system of Academic Mentoring to be academic department based with formal connections and collaboration with other established student engagement programmes at MTU.

A key first step was to get the support of senior management team for a model that was largely going to emerge on the hoof, and once we had that, to quickly establish a skilled and experienced team of academic colleagues to lead and support the programme. The team would work with externally sourced expertise in coaching and mentoring as, given the timelines, we would be building the Reach Initiative as it was rolling.

The proposal was sent to the President's Office on August 12th, where it got strong backing and we were invited to present the idea to the Institute Executive Board for support and resourcing on August 14th. Within the week, the Reach Academic Mentoring Initiative was given the green light to proceed and placed for development and rollout under the

remit of AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office. Approval was immediately sought for a resourced coordinating function and it was agreed that we could part second (25%) four academic colleagues to form the Reach Co-ordinating Team. Expressions of interest were invited in early September and Reach Co-ordinating team in place within 3 weeks.

To action the Reach Initiative, we resourced an allocation of hours to academic staff, who were identified and nominated to the Reach Initiative by their Heads of Department, without delay, to take on the role of Academic Mentor (AM). Each AM was allocated a cohort of First Year and Second Year students as their mentees. Subsequently each AM in turn was placed under the support and care of a member of the Reach Co-ordinating Team.

First year students were starting on the 5th October and we were very clear that we needed the Reach Initiative in place for as many students as possible as quickly as possible.



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Reach Academic Mentors are members of teaching staff, given both time allowance and training, to provide an extra layer of positive learning support during these different and challenging times to an allotted cohort of students. Their role includes offering a human connection to students during emergency remote teaching. As MTU has such a diverse cohort of students across its many campuses, Academic Mentors, following training and with support from the Reach Initiative Co-ordinating Team are encouraged to adopt their own tailored approach in supporting their mentees. These diverse approaches are then shared with the wider community of AMs at weekly meet-ups and discussion points and through our online Reach Initiative discussion boards and resources.





“We don’t have time to build a runway to get this project off the ground. This must be a helicopter liftoff. We will be building this with you as partners, this inaugural Academic Mentoring Programme in CIT.”

Marese Bermingham

Reach Time: from zero to 3,500 students, 80 Academic Mentors, 2 Counties and 1 Merger





What Academic Mentors Do?

Reach Academic Mentors in COVID-19 times are ones who **‘improve the intellectual and academic ability, and nurtures the emotional well-being of learners through individualized, holistic support.’** (Stork and Walker, 2015)

An academic mentor, in the context of the Reach Initiative, as a direct response to COVID-19 challenges for 20/21, has elements of the following depending on student cohort, department need, etc.:



WORKING directly with a group of 50 students to very intentionally build relationship and connectedness, in this new virtual learning world, to enable some helpful conversations that both support and challenge.



FOCUSING on academic development and engagement e.g. supporting study skills, reassuring, referring to ALC, ASC, Academic Learning Centre, Academic Success Coaching Library, etc



PROVIDING appropriate personal welfare support by listening, reassuring, informing, providing insight and referring



KNOWING about MTU services and use coaching/mentoring skills to refer students as appropriate to additional supports and assistance.



HELPING students, in a time of deep uncertainty navigate their learning in a different environment.

Academic Mentors are working in collaboration with Heads of Department, teaching teams, AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office, Teaching and Learning Unit and other MTU services as needed.

Reach Academic Mentors are receiving ongoing support and training to develop coaching and mentoring skills and to stay updated on all other MTU student services and supports that they may need to refer students to.

The training and support interventions has the added value of enabling the Reach Academic Mentoring team to raise awareness of any themes that they see emerging for their cohorts of students. This type of communication loop enables academic departments and student services to respond quickly to issues as they are emerging.

Reach in Practice



The Reach Co-ordinating Team, Catherine Murphy, Geraldine Doyle, Dr Violeta Morari, Siobhán Creedon, William Carey and Marese Bermingham have built the Reach programme from the ground up starting in October 2020.

The Reach team draws its expertise from interdisciplinary and inter-function perspectives. By establishing a team of academic and professional services colleagues across MTU campuses, we have enabled Reach to take off in record time – just 8 days from our first team meeting to the first workshop with Academic Mentors! We have achieved this with our own expertise as practicing academics who understand the student lifecycle, trained coaches, enthusiastic facilitators, persuasive negotiators, a little burning of ‘midnight oil’, and good humour to make sure we moved together as a coordinating team and, importantly as a community of Academic Mentors. Given the level of chaos and uncertainty in students and staff lives, there wasn’t time to get everything perfect before it started. The guidance of Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director, World Health Organisation, **‘Move Quickly, Speed Trumps Perfection’** became a mantra.

Enabling Academic Mentors to thrive

Heads of Departments across the college quickly identified academic staff who were willing to come on board the Reach programme and who were attracted by the coaching/mentoring nature of the role.

Research points to the conclusion that undergraduates value most highly academic advisors that function as mentors or counsellors, and who are:

- ➔ (a) available/accessible
- ➔ (b) knowledgeable/helpful
- ➔ (c) personable/approachable

(Cuseo, 2002)

The focus was on empathy and on the Reach Academic Mentors building ‘purposeful and intentional connection’ with their allotted student cohorts.

There were three key elements to the enabling programme of training and supports put in place to ensure staff coming on board a new, fast-moving project in very different times, would feel themselves connected and supported.

Recognising that the project was being shaped as it evolved, we wanted to establish a living network of budding Academic Mentors to enable sharing of practices, challenges and helpful insights alongside skills training and useful resources:

Connecting with Each Other



Regular 'drop by' virtual coffees allow academic mentors the opportunity to drop in and talk. We share ideas, problems and solutions over the MS Teams Platform. Initiated and led by the Reach coordinating team, these meet ups are being replicated at different levels by the Reach AMs themselves for each other in smaller groups as relationship develops between the Reach AM community. The AM learning community is becoming a vibrant space where new AMs can support each other and even create a bit of online fun and motivation. At Christmas, we launched the 12 Days of Reach competition for a daily competition and winner. A virtual Christmas coffee was the highlight of our Coffee Mornings.

Professional Development



Ongoing skills training is made available on mentoring and coaching skills, communication and listening skills, referral processes and setting boundaries. Additional European Coaching and Mentoring Council accredited coaching skills programmes are available in MTU for any Reach Academic Mentor who might wish to pursue a formal recognition in coaching. Information Workshops cover topics like Overview of MTU Student Services, GDPR and Assessment Appeals, which give our AMs the type of information / roadmaps they need for appropriate referral.

Digital Resources



We use MS Teams for sharing resources and collaboration with our Reach AM team. For live get togethers, we use Google Jamboard, Zoom breakout rooms, Teams and Google Slides. We prepare and disseminate a fortnightly Reach Digest of resources, photos and inspirational ideas to all AMs. A specially designed Canvas module was put in place for the Reach Mentors to enable better communications with students and easier resource sharing.

Mirroring approaches from the Reach Team, Academic mentors reached out to their students in a variety of ways and were blown away with the responses that they got. Mentees who received personalised emails replied in significant numbers; their responses to this virtual 'tap on the shoulder' and to a virtual 'how are things?' were filled with genuine warmth and appreciation, which rippled into the more interactive Zoom sessions / group meeting between AMs and their mentees. Mentees were able to reach back to their mentors booking one to one time in Open Office hours through Canvas Calendars.

Academic Mentors and mentees alike were all missing the opportune 'what we could solve walking between classes' and 'corridor chats' that are such an important element of face-to-face teaching and learning. Students are missing the human interaction and the new friends that are part and parcel of university life. Lecturers are missing the students, the informal banter and opportunities that they have to reassure students quietly - opportunities that disappeared when physical meeting became impossible. And so new ways to 'test the temperature' were created by Reach Academic Mentors. These include virtual get togethers, quizzes, catch ups, speed friendship and connections in break out rooms using Google Jamboard, Teams and Zoom.

"I sent an email to them individually, I didn't know quite what to expect back but I had some students back very quickly seeking help. They just didn't know where to start" Academic Mentor, Business
"Thank you very much for your mail and to be honest it was received at a very opportune time. I am finding it difficult to cope with the course,I would appreciate any advice and an opportunity to talk one-to-one if that was possible."

Year 1 Mentee

"I was able to talk to one student for over an hour on Zoom. I don't think that would have been possible without this initiative. The talk meant so much to the student. He was putting himself under so much pressure"

Academic Mentor, Business

"Personally, I like knowing that you are there as a go to. I'm not finding any issues with the semester so far but if I do I will contact you. Thank you for what you're doing for us though. It's nice to know there's support there."

Year 1 Mentee

"You can't ensure that every student stays on track! But helping one student is fantastic"

Academic Mentor, Business

"I think Reach is not just about helping the students who are struggling academically but also making sure that the strong students know we are there for them and just because they achieve high marks that doesn't mean that they are not stressed at being away from family and friends during lockdown." Academic Mentor, Science and Engineering

"It was nice to know someone is there to help if the help is needed! REACH is an amazing initiative and ...just knowing that it's there gives me some reassurance that the college is looking out for my best interests!" Year 2 Mentee

"I did some analysis on my year's Semester 1 Results... Some of the findings are quite interesting I believe and the Semester 1 Results from the Semester just completed compare favorably to some of the previous Year 1 Semester 1 Results. REACH has certainly played a key part in this. Similarly, student retention levels compare very favorably with previous years, which is also testament to the far reaching value of REACH"

Academic Mentor, Business

"Reach was about bridging the gap between us and the skills we missed out on learning because of COVID-19. [they] would send out emails reassuring us that [they were] there for one to one sessions,

Looking Ahead: What we have learned and next steps...

We took a design thinking approach to build empathy with Academic Mentors and Mentees putting ourselves in the shoes of the students in the first instance and later in Semester 1 into the shoes of the new AMs that would join in Semester Two. We ran surveys and focus groups and redesigned Semester Two while rolling out Semester One.

We met with Dr. Emily McIntosh, University of Middlesex, and Chair, of UKAT Research Committee, Co-Author of Effective Personal Tutoring in Higher Education to look at possible linkages with exemplar mentoring programmes in UK. We were heartened when she told us that "The Reach team at MTU have created an advising/academic mentoring programme which has all the hallmarks of excellence in advising practice. They have moved swiftly to design an evidence-based programme which is responsive to both student and staff needs. Their programme is of extremely high quality, despite being piloted and scaled in extremely tricky circumstances, during a global pandemic. Their work has reached and impacted over 50% of students in their first and second years of study: to receive such strong engagement figures at a time of forced online working is to be especially commended. The programme's fusion of student engagement and advising principles, realised through a model of academic mentoring, makes it sustainable and scalable for the future."

Using our findings, we designed a more guided programme for Semester Two. Semester 2 is currently in flight with 80 Academic Mentors supporting 3500 first and second year undergraduate students across MTU campuses.

Many challenges have been overcome in the speed of getting the programme up and running, and we are beginning to see the benefits. The connection of students to a trusted, knowledgeable, and passionate Academic Mentor has impacted positively on many students.

What next? ...Building the runway for 21/22



We are now reviewing the pilot with all stakeholders, mentees, mentors, Heads of Department and MTU senior management. We continue to support and train our pilot programme mentors while we are also planning for the next iteration of Reach at MTU for academic year 2021/22.

The 2021/22 academic year will continue to challenge students. We will, very likely, be continuing to operate in uncertain and different times. Students will, most likely, be adjusting to a more blended approach to their HE experiences. Next year's First Years will have had a very disrupted second level/ FE experience, Second Years will have had a vastly different First Year experience and we will need to have a more honed version of Reach in place in readiness for student induction and reorientation in a much changed HE landscape.

We have started work on building a runway for Reach 2021/22, to be in place for June 2021:

- A refined Reach Programme descriptor based on current pilot experience
- A more developed role descriptor for Academic Mentors
- A Reach Academic Mentor Induction Programme
- A menu of additional training inputs (synchronous and asynchronous)
- Establish an Advisory Group for Reach Academic Mentoring Initiative to assist with embedding academic mentoring into our way of doing Higher Education in a volatile, unpredictable, changing world.

The challenge is about people first, not technology. Differentiated approaches are needed, to engage students better in different and uncertain times, along with continuous reassessment of actions taken. Balance is key – balancing the needs of students with the needs and responsibilities of the institution and the needs of staff is crucial when we are all missing human contact and the relationships that are important in any Teaching and Learning Environment.

Finally, there is no magical thinking, in the interests of students, institutions must act.