Supporting the 1st Year Undergraduate Experience with Mentoring

Dr John Barrow

University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

1495 UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

Introduction

Students 4 Students (S4S) was born out of the retention and progression agenda at the University of Aberdeen. This agenda pressed for change and the inception of novel mechanisms by which we cold support and nurture students throughout their studies. From evidence gathered across the UK university sector (Harvey, Drew et al. 2006) and internationally (James, Krause et al. 2010) as well as our own institutional retention data, first year students have higher non-continuation rates compared to all other years of undergraduate study. One possible approach to alleviating this issue of non-continuation is through peer mentoring schemes, with many excellent reviews being published on the subject in recent years (Christie 2014; Collings, Swanson et al. 2014). The literature is frequently neutral when it comes to recommending peer mentoring as a transformational approach to student retention, but it is often mentioned alongside a diverse mix of student support and pastoral care that can give students a successful outcome and a smooth transition through their chosen degree programme.

From the first reviews in the undergraduate mentoring literature (Jacobi 1991) there has been large discrepancies in what constitutes a defined mentoring programme within higher education. Indeed, Jacobi presents four main themes that mentoring could align with: involvement in learning; academic and social integration; social support; and developmental support. With these four themes in mind our mentoring scheme was created as another mechanism to enhance an already strong range of student support. The first iteration of the peer mentoring programme was introduced as a trial within one section of our institution in 2011-12 and has since progressed to an institution-wide programme for all new undergraduates (see Fig.1).
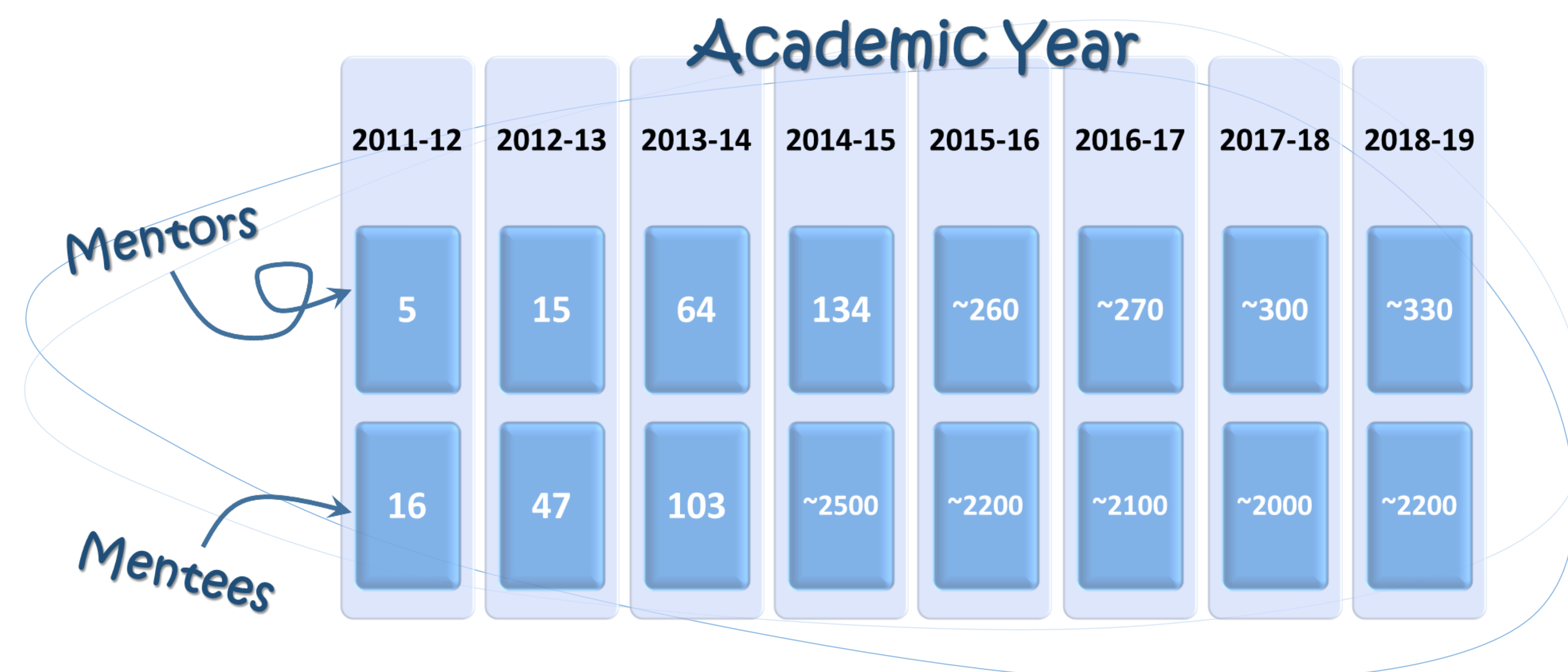

Figure 1: Growth of Students 4 Students
Students 4 Students started as a voluntary scheme for both Mentors and Mentees in academic year 2011-12 as a pilot in one School within the University. 2012-2014 saw the scheme expand under the same terms into other Schools, but still on a voluntary basis for those involved. From 2014-15 onwards the scheme expanded to most areas of the University with all first years being allocated a Mentor.

The main objective of the S4S scheme is to offer an extra layer of support to incoming students in parallel to that delivered by academic staff through support from a fellow student. Thus, S4S has one simple aim: to smooth the transition into higher education as much as possible in order for students to successfully build a foundation on which they can construct a successful degree outcome.

Feedback

A summary of some key data collected from recent feedback questionnaires is presented here (see Fig. 2). From the pilot stages of the mentoring scheme to S4S as it is today, student responses have been consistently positive from both Mentors and Mentees. For the sake of brevity results from Mentees have not been shown, but largely mirror those of the Mentors, with satisfaction levels being high (70% say they were happy with the advice provided by Mentors) and 33% wish to become a Mentor in the following year, which has been seen as a real positive because they often cite their Mentee experience as the reason for wanting to become an S4S Mentor.
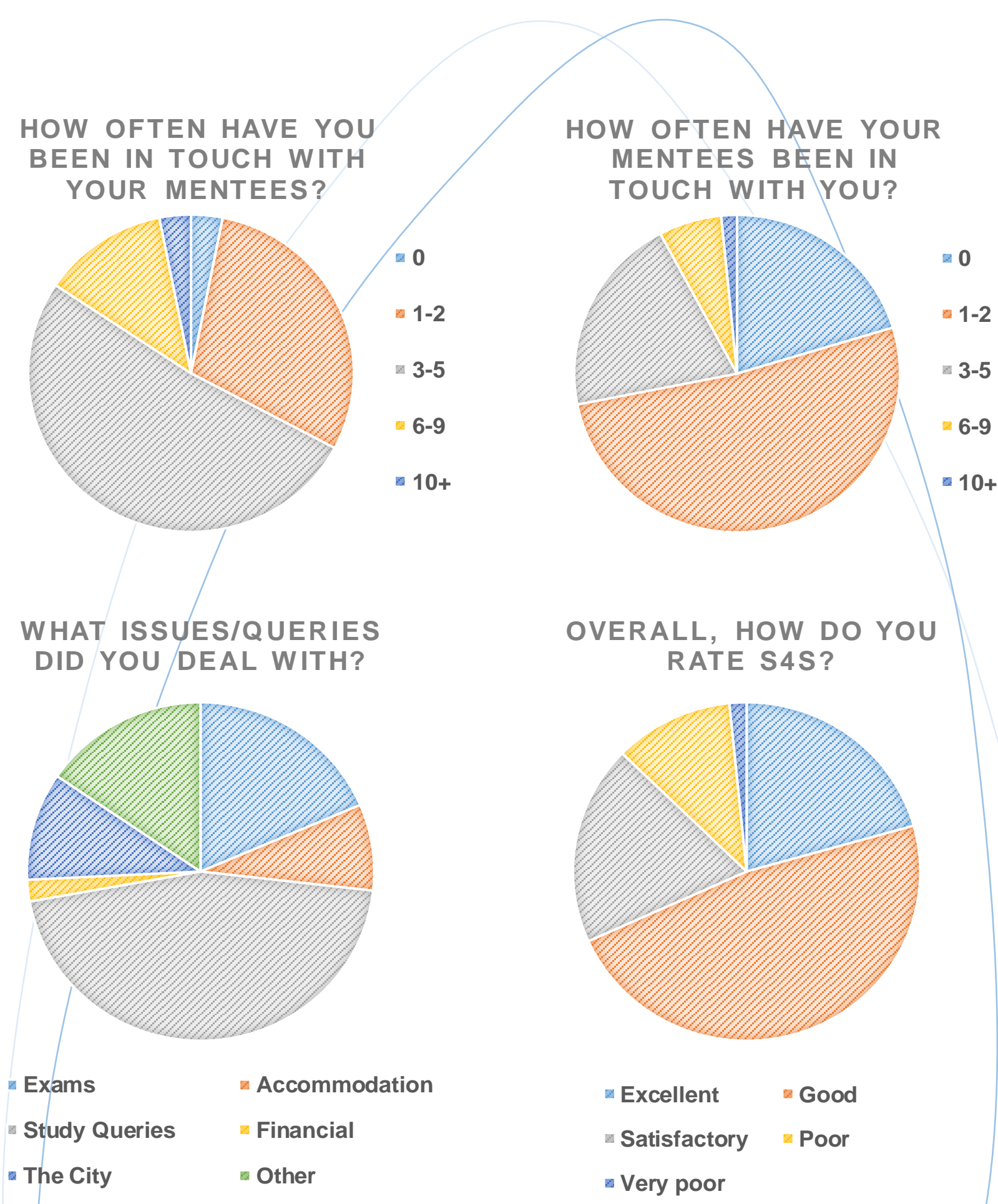

Mentor... "Enhanced my social skills, made me more confident as a mentor, actually made me evaluate student life more."

Mentee... "Students get many questions about University systems (IT), courses, etc. which they don't want to ask lecturers about so it is very convenient to know that there is someone who answers and is trained and caring."

Figure 2: Mentor Feedback
Students 4 Students Mentors are surveyed at the end of each academic year since the scheme began. Data presented here is averaged from 2015-2018. Data shows how many times Mentees have contacted Mentees (top left), how many times Mentees have been in touch with Mentors (top right), plus the types of queries and issues that Mentors deal with (bottom left) and feedback on overall student satisfaction (bottom right).
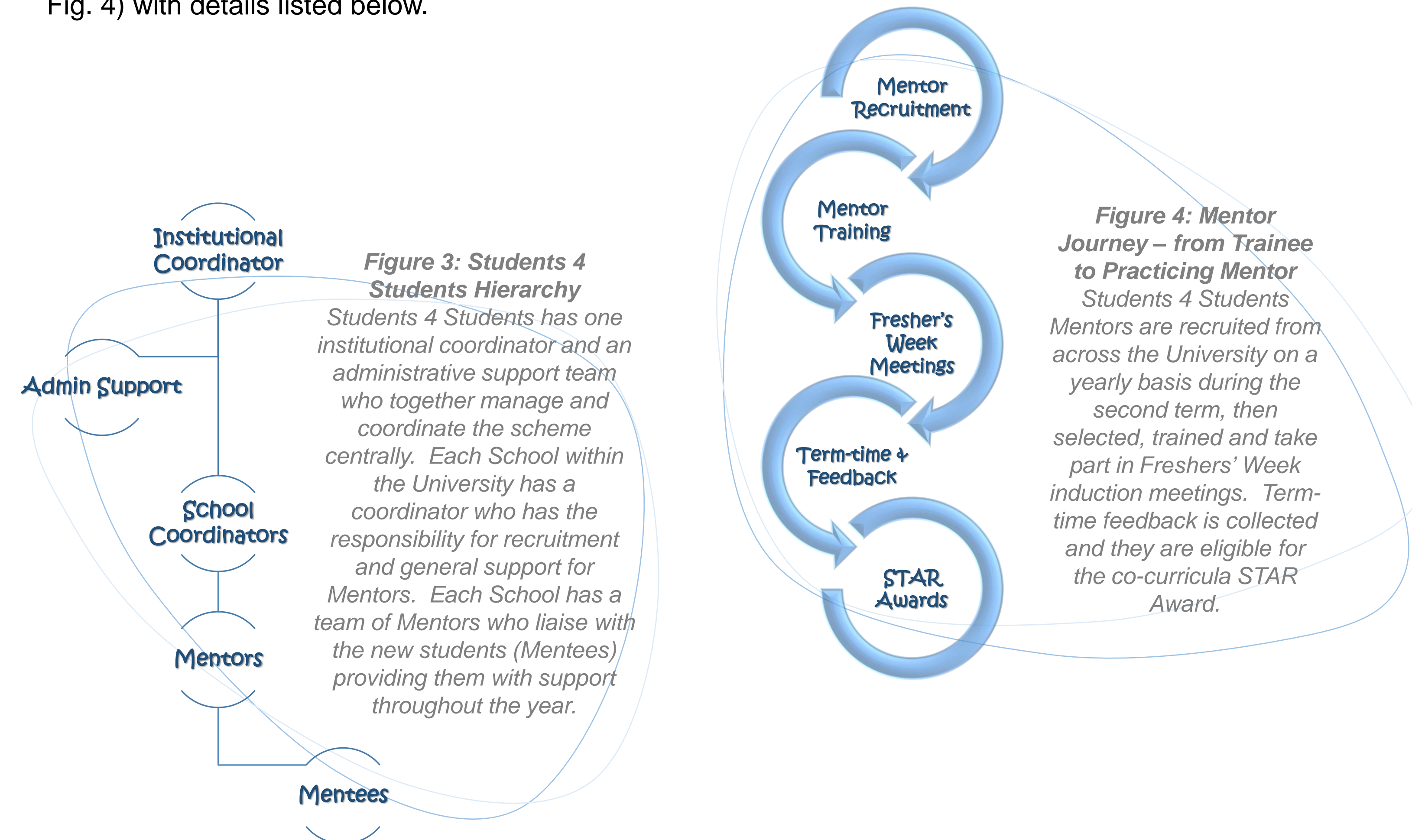
How does it work?

S4S has several tiered layers to its structure that allow a degree of flexibility dependent on the discipline areas within the University (see Fig. 3). There is an overall **S4S Coordinator** who oversees the institutional management and administration of the scheme; an **S4S Admin Team** from the central University administration responsible for day to day activities and responding to student queries; **S4S School Coordinators** within each section of the University who act as the "go to" person for any issues raised by Mentors; **S4S Mentors** who are recruited annually from within the subject disciplines; and finally **Mentees** who are assigned a Mentor prior to arrival at the University.

The key yearly milestones in the scheme are Mentor recruitment, Mentor training, initial meetings during Freshers' Week, term-time management and feedback, plus Mentor recognition through STAR Awards (see Fig. 4) with details listed below.

Figure 3: Students 4 Students Hierarchy
Students 4 Students has one institutional coordinator and an administrative support team who together manage and coordinate the scheme centrally. Each School within the University has a coordinator who has the responsibility for recruitment and general support for Mentors. Each School has a team of Mentors who liaise with the new students (Mentees) providing them with support throughout the year.

Figure 4: Mentor Journey – from Trainee to Practicing Mentor
Students 4 Students Mentors are recruited from across the University on a yearly basis during the second term, then selected, trained and take part in Freshers' Week induction meetings. Term-time feedback is collected and they are eligible for the co-curricula STAR Award.

1. Mentor Recruitment
Students complete a short application form which asks for their personal information, a brief justification of their reasons for wanting to be a Mentor and two references who may be contacted if required.

2. Mentor Training
Mentors are fully trained through access to online training materials delivered through the University virtual learning environment (MyAberdeen) which uses the Blackboard platform. Training sessions covering University Student Support Services, University Counselling Service and Role Play Scenarios are presented as tests, so this allows very simple tracking of student progress as well as providing the S4S Admin Team with an ability to check completion of each training component.

3. Initial Freshers' Week Meetings
Each section of the University has an organised event at which new students and Mentors can come together and meet one another. These large scale events also promote the scheme widely within the student population by making S4S highly visible during this initial transition period into higher education.

4. Term-time and Feedback
During each term the Mentors and Mentees are largely left to contact each other freely with little to no intervention from S4S School Coordinators or the central S4S Admin Team. We request feedback for each term during the year.

5. Recognition through STAR Awards
S4S Mentors are eligible to apply for a Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award, which recognises the co-curricular activities and achievements of specific roles within the University. STAR Awards aim to enhance student learning experiences and also student employability, so any student taking on the role of S4S Mentor is able to demonstrate many skills and graduate attributes and have then formally recognised through STAR.

Summary

Overall the S4S initiative at the University of Aberdeen has had a positive influence on any student who has fully engaged with the scheme either as a Mentor or Mentee. Based on many years of feedback Mentors highlight a real sense of belonging to the University as well as having periods of self-reflection alongside them outwardly helping others. The initial aim of S4S was to offer support at an early stage to all students, thereby identifying and possibly helping some individuals overcome problems quickly so they persisted with their university education. Our view of S4S aligns with other published studies in the mentoring literature that state schemes often work best when Mentees are fully engaged and aware of the benefits of taking part in the scheme (Gannon, Maher 2012). S4S has definite benefits for Mentors in terms of building a strong CV, taking part in co-curricular activities and generally being an active part of the student experience in Aberdeen.

S4S is not without its issues, with one major issue being Mentee engagement. There is a real dichotomy between positive survey responses on the benefits of peer mentoring when students are asked, compared with actual engagement levels. Moving forward it is hoped many of these issues will be remedied as we increase our numbers of Mentors year on year, have more large scale events at an institutional level and subject-specific level, as well as investing in stronger promotion and publicity of the scheme across the institution.

Integration of S4S as part of the University of Aberdeen's first year experience aids the transition into the University, thereby providing an opportunity for all students to make a confident transition into university and ultimately achieve a positive outcome at graduation.

References:

CHRISTIE, H., 2014. Peer mentoring in higher education: issues of power and control. *Teaching in Higher Education,* **19**(8), pp. 955-965.

COLLINGS, R., SWANSON, V. and WATKINS, R., 2014. The impact of peer mentoring on levels of student wellbeing, integration and retention: a controlled comparative evaluation of residential students in UK higher education. *Higher Education,* **68**(6), pp. 927-942.

GANNON, J.M. and MAHER, A., 2012. Developing tomorrow's talent: the case of an undergraduate mentoring programme. *Education + Training,* **54**(6), pp. 440-455.

HARVEY, L., DREW, S. and SMITH, M., 2006-last update, The First-Year Experience [Homepage of Higher Education Academy], [Online]. Available: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/first_year_experience_exec_summary.pdf [05/27, 2015].

JACOBI, M., 1991. Mentoring and Undergraduate Academic Success: A Literature Review. *Review of Educational Research,* **61**(4), pp. 505-532.

JAMES, R., KRAUSE, K. and JENNINGS, C., 2010. *The first year experience in Australian universities: findings from 1994 to 2009.* Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.