REACH – A Mentoring Initiative in an Irish University.

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Abstract.

Munster Technological University (MTU) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic's educational challenges with the creation of the Reach Initiative. This initiative, a comprehensive academic mentoring and coaching programme, was developed at MTU in response to the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily targeting first and second year students, this initiative was designed to support their academic and non-academic needs during the transition to online Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The programme involved the recruitment and training of Academic Mentors (members of academic staff) from various disciplines who provided tailored individual support to the students.

A key component of this study is a survey conducted to evaluate the initiative's impact. The survey aimed to understand students' challenges during the pandemic and assess the effectiveness of the Reach Initiative as a support mechanism. The findings revealed significant engagement with the programme, indicating its importance in providing both academic guidance and emotional support. Students reported benefiting from the initiative in various ways, including improved understanding of academic content, better access to university resources, and enhanced emotional well-being.

The conclusion highlights the critical role of academic mentoring in supporting students during unprecedented times. It underscores the need for such initiatives in higher education, particularly during crises that disrupt traditional learning environments. The Reach Initiative not only facilitated academic success but also contributed positively to the students' overall university experience during the pandemic.

Keywords: Academic mentoring; Multi-disciplinary; Pandemic response; Student focused; University supports; Reach.

1.   Introduction and Background.

Munster Technological University (MTU) offers more than 100 programmes and has its footprint in Cork and Kerry, with six campuses that accommodate over 18,000 learners. As an example, in the 2021-2022 academic year, MTU had 3230 first year students and 2678 second year students. Most programmes in MTU have two semesters per year and six 5-credit modules taken in each semester. Typically, students are assessed in each of the six modules and so the assessment workload is very demanding. Students often find themselves under a lot of pressure, which can impact their performance and retention, especially in their first year of study.

Academic staff in MTU also have a very challenging workload - typically any member of academic staff will have a high teaching load, which ranges from 16 to 18 contact hours per week. Although duties like supervising student projects and doctoral supervision can result in some reduction of teaching hours, this reduction tends to be quite small in most cases. This results in academic staff dedicating most of their time to teaching duties.

In addition to teaching duties, academic staff may have a number of administrative and research tasks to perform. For example, there is a system of course co-ordinators in Cork and class tutors in Kerry. The course co-ordinators and class tutors are academic staff assigned to a class grouping as a contact point. There is no formal role descriptor for course co-ordinators or class tutors, but their duties may include (among many others): setting up students in class groups, processing and presenting students' results for Progression Award Boards, helping organise elective modules for students, assisting students with RPL, advising repeat students, chairing course boards, dealing with deferrals etc. Each coordinator or tutor could be allocated a class grouping of up to 100 students.

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 pandemic brought about many challenges to education. As labs closed and lectures were pivoted online, students across the world were faced with various uncertainties regarding their studies, exams and assessments. The normal opportunity for students to interact with lecturers and their peers on and off campus was also dramatically curtailed. In response to these challenges, MTU created a new initiative to provide an additional layer of support to first year and second year students. This initiative, which was called the Reach Initiative, began in September 2020. The objective of Reach was to connect all first year and second year students to an Academic Mentor. The Reach Initiative run over two academic years, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 and was awarded the Irish Education COVID-19 Crisis

Response Award in 2021.

This paper will describe the implementation of the Reach Initiative in Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and later MTU, its impact on first and second year students as well as the analysis and findings of a survey conducted in March 2022 regarding the impact of Reach on the student experience.

2.   Literature Review.

2.1 Mentoring.

Mentoring, academic advising and personal tutoring are some of the terms used to describe a range of student /advisor interactions which take place in Higher Education. Frameworks and standards for personal tutoring and academic advising have been drawn up in the UK and in the US, respectively, but there is still considerable individual interpretation and varying implementation on an institution-by-institution basis (CAS Academic Advising Standards, 2023; UKAT - Higher Education Academic Advising and Personal Tutoring | Professional Framework for Advising and Tutoring, 2023) . This literature review focuses on Academic Mentoring, designed to provide individualised academic and holistic support and retention to students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the significant body of work compiled in (Thomas, 2012b), it was found that students' sense of belonging was an important factor in student retention. Engaging with an academic adviser provides a student with '*someone who cares'*. (Drake et al., 2013) and (Light, 2004, p81) stated that '*good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience'*. Stork and Walker define a student mentor as '*one who improves the intellectual and academic ability, and nurtures the emotional well-being of learners through individualized, holistic support*' (Stork & Walker, 2015, p3). However, Cuseo reports that students '*value most highly academic advisors who serve as mentors—who are accessible, approachable, and helpful in providing guidance that connects their present academic experience with their future life plans*' (Cuseo, 2003, p13).

2.2 Mentoring models.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were two main categories of academic mentoring. The first focused on enhancing student grades, aiming primarily at academic improvement. The second, a psychosocial model of mentoring, had a broader scope, extending beyond just

academic success to encompass a pastoral role, offering more comprehensive support for students. The specific support provided varied based on the mentoring model employed (Law et al. 2020).

In the UK, before the pandemic, personal tutors who were part of an academic team were found to be the preferred mentoring model and shown to support the develop of belonging (Thomas, 2012a). While during the pandemic, some colleges implemented a peer mentoring system, it involved inviting students that are further in their academic journey to provide support to newer students (Hardt et al., 2022; Krause & Moore, 2022). This model has some causes for concern in a pandemic scenario where many students are already under unknown pressures. A key debate around models is about using peers or academic staff. Other models implemented during the pandemic included academic staff volunteering to support students (Guse et al., 2020; Simok et al., 2021). This model is reliant on the goodwill of staff who were also under additional pressures with the delivery of online lecturing and personal commitments. Any new mentoring programme should be '*carefully planned, structured and assessed*' (Law et al., 2020).

2.3 Supports for Mentees.

In a systematic review of support systems for students in medical faculties during the pandemic, the supports implemented covered academic supports and mental health supports (Ardekani et al., 2021). A number of the studies considered were explicit about addressing emotional and mental support. However, it must be acknowledged that in some cases, the universities, through limited provision of services, could have been contributing to mental health stresses during the pandemic (Ardekani et al., 2021).

2.4 Research Contribution.

This paper discusses the impact on students of an academic mentoring initiative delivered by academic staff in MTU. The role of academic mentoring was part of the responsibilities of academic staff. This initiative was distinctive and new for MTU, as it was not a conversion from an existing system. Instead, it was specifically designed to deliver both academic and pastoral support during the COVID-19 pandemic with an emphasis on the pastoral role. Reach was rolled out the whole of MTU with mentors and mentees from all disciplines. The impact of Reach described by students makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of student experience of academic staff mentorship during the pandemic.

3.   The Reach Initiative: Description.

The Reach Initiative was created as a university-wide response to the COVID-19 pandemic and ran for two academic years between September 2020 and June 2022. A call was initially put out by AnSEO (the Student Engagement Office in MTU) to academic members of staff to form the Reach Coordinating Team. This team, with help from the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU), Technology Enhancement Learning Unit (TEL) and other services, developed and ran the Reach Initiative.

The Reach Coordinating Team initially set about outlining the process for recruiting Academic Mentors (AM). It was decided that an Academic Mentor would be an academic member of staff who would reach out to first and second year students and provide an extra layer of positive learning support during the difficult and challenging time of COVID-19 pandemic.

Expressions of interest were sought by the respective Heads of Department and each Academic Mentor, once appointed, received a timetable alleviation of up to two teaching hours off their timetable. Each Academic Mentor was subsequently assigned between 25 and 50 students. It is important to note that prior to this there was no formal mentoring system in place in MTU, in either Cork or Kerry campuses.

In the beginning, there were 57 Academic Mentors in CIT that supported around 2,500 mentees. In January 2021, after MTU was formed, the Reach Initiative was implemented on the Kerry Campuses also with an additional six Academic Mentors supporting 200 mentees. Overall, in the second year of the initiative, Reach counted 87 Academic Mentors that provided support to over 3,500 students across MTU.

This Reach coordinating team then focused on building a community of Academic Mentors and offering help and advice to the Academic Mentors. The key supports initially offered by the coordinating team were:

•   Academic Mentor Workshops.

Three to four workshops were held each semester during both academic years. The workshops were facilitated by the Reach Coordinating Team and included updates, invited speakers from student services, counselling, Academic Learning Centre and other relevant services. Workshops also facilitated contributions from Academic Mentors.

•   Mentoring and Coaching Skills Training.

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Foundation Level Course in Coaching was offered to Academic Mentors. Focused mentoring training was also provided to support Academic Mentors in their role.

•   Reach Teams Site.

A dedicated site was established in Microsoft Teams as a shared space for Academic Mentors. The Reach site became a space for sharing information, resources and ideas for the Academic Mentor Community.

•   Reach Module.

A Reach Module was set up in the Virtual Learning Environment, Canvas each Academic Mentor. It provided the platform for Academic Mentors to share information, resources and arrange group or individual meetings with their mentees.

•   Reach Newsletter.

A bi-monthly Reach Digest was sent to Academic Mentors and other stakeholders with news, links to resources and updates on Reach events happening in MTU.

•   Weekly online coffee drop-in sessions.

These informal one-hour sessions provided a safe space where the Academic Mentors got the chance to meet the team and each other, share their experiences, and ask for advice and suggestions.

The Reach Coordinating Team drew from international expertise such as the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT) and the National Academic Advisory Association (NACADA) to implement best practice in coaching and mentoring in the MTU Academic Mentoring Learning Community. They helped to shape and provided supports that are critical for the success of a student mentoring programme (Pollard & Kumar, 2021).

Academic Mentors in turn rolled out a series of supports for their mentees including:

•   Introduction to Reach - the role of the Academic Mentor and supports offered.

•   Introductory ice breakers.

•   Individual online zoom sessions.

•   Group Zoom sessions with break-out rooms.

- Information on student services.

- Signposting to students' supports.

- Virtual office time-tabled hours.

- Purposeful and proactive reaching out to mentees.

- Coaching Approach.

The Reach programme was implemented across multiple disciplines from Business, Engineering, Art, Music and Agriculture. As MTU has a diverse cohort of students, Academic Mentors created their own tailored approach in supporting their mentees. This academic approach could be informative, collaborative or a coaching approach, depending on the student and on the situation.

Reach focused on first and second year students, as they were the cohorts most impacted by the pandemic. In particular, the team considered the different effects of COVID-19 PANDEMIC on first and second year students (see Table 1).

Table 1: Students and Pandemic Impactable.

	September 2020	September 2021
First Year Students	No previous relationship with peers or lecturing team or college supports. Had not sat the Irish Leaving Certificate school state exam.	No previous relationship with peers or lecturing team or college supports. Had not sat the Irish Leaving Certificate school state exam.
Second Year Students	Face-to-face experience ended in March 2020. Had experience of in-person assessments or formal exams in Higher Education.	No face-to-face experience with peers or lecturing team and uncertainty about what face-to-face elements might happen. No experience of in-person assessments or formal exams in Higher Education.

4.   Methodology.

During the second year of the Reach Initiative, the Reach coordinating team, drawing on the

experiences of the Reach Academic Mentors, designed and conducted a student survey.

The main purpose of this survey was to gather information regarding the students' engagement with the Reach Initiative and to get an insight into the challenges that the students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey was distributed by the academic mentors to all the mentees in MTU. The survey required all participants to be 18 years of age and over and all participants had to give consent prior to participating in the survey. The participation in the survey was voluntary and participants could choose to withdraw at any time. The survey stayed open for two weeks and a subsequent reminder was issued two days before closing. The survey was anonymous, and it was explained to students that all data is anonymised so no participant could be individually identified. The survey had two mandatory questions regarding the consent and age. All the other questions were voluntary. The project received ethical approval to carry out the study from the MTU-Cork Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number MTU22008A).

The survey consisted of a combination of closed-ended questions ('*tick box*' responses with '*choose one*' or '*select as many as apply*' options) as well as open ended questions.

The survey had 14 questions in total and was delivered online using Microsoft Forms. Out of a total number of 3160 students surveyed, 307 students responded to the survey. This maps to a margin of error of less than 5% at a 95% level of confidence. Out of those, 206 students indicated that they are first year students and 95 indicated that they are second year students, with the rest choosing not to answer this question.

A detailed breakdown of students who completed the survey from both Cork and Kerry Campuses in MTU is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Student cohorts that completed the survey.

	Faculty of Business and Humanities (Cork)	Faculty of Engineering and Science (Cork)	School of Business, Computing and Humanities (Kerry)	School of Health and Social Science (Kerry)	School of Science and Engineering (Kerry)	Other	**Total**
1st Year	60	87	11	39	2	7	**206**
2nd Year	30	29	19	14	0	3	**95**
Other	4	1	0	0	0	1	**6**
	94	**117**	**30**	**53**	**2**	**11**	**307**

4.1 Results and Discussion.

How many students contacted their Reach Academic Mentor?

The survey reveals that 131 students (43%) did choose to contact their Reach Academic Mentor.

Even though at first glance it might seem that first year students availed more of Reach than second year students, as a proportion (total of 206 first year students and 95 second year students) exactly 43% of both first and second year students choose to contact their Academic Mentor (see Table 3). This interesting fact suggests that second year students needed as much help as first year students, though possibly for different reasons.

Table 3: Contact with Academic Mentor.

YES		NO	
130		171	
1st Year	2nd Year	1st Year	2nd Year
89 (68.5%)	41 (31.5%)	117 (68.4%)	54 (31.6%)

Planning meetings for the team took place in both of the virtual platforms used in the school - Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and Microsoft Teams, while briefing documents and programmes were shared in both Google Drive and OneDrive. The programme timings were rearranged to minimise screen fatigue while maximising exposure of the research students' work (PGRC A total of 171 students made no contact with their Academic Mentor. 74% of those students indicated that they did not have any issues. While they did not contact their mentor, there was

a safety net for students in knowing whom they could contact if they needed support. As seen in other institutions, it is clear that knowing whom to go to gives students a sense of belonging and a reassurance that the university cares about them (Thomas, 2012a). A smaller proportion of students said that they did not have time to contact a mentor (10%) or did not feel comfortable doing so (10%). In the '*other*' category which made up the balance, 6% of students said that they were not aware they had a mentor.
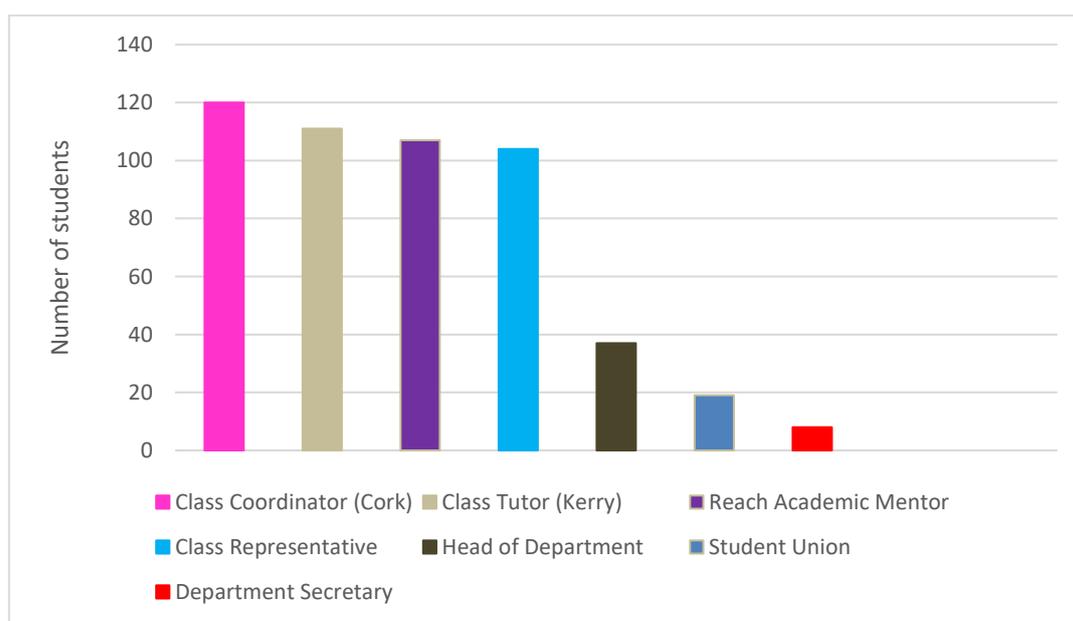
Who do students go to for help?

Students were asked whom they would contact in the event of a question or a problem. As seen in Figure 1, the two most common '*go to*' people for students were course coordinators and class tutors.

Peer support was also very valuable to students with 1 in 3 students saying they would seek advice from their class representative. In contrast, only 6% of students would go for advice to their Head of Department.

The findings in Figure 1 show that Reach Academic Mentors were an important resource to students with over 38% of students stating that they would seek advice from their Academic Mentor (though not exclusively in many cases). This is particularly striking given that the Reach Academic Mentor was a new role that did not exist prior to 2020.

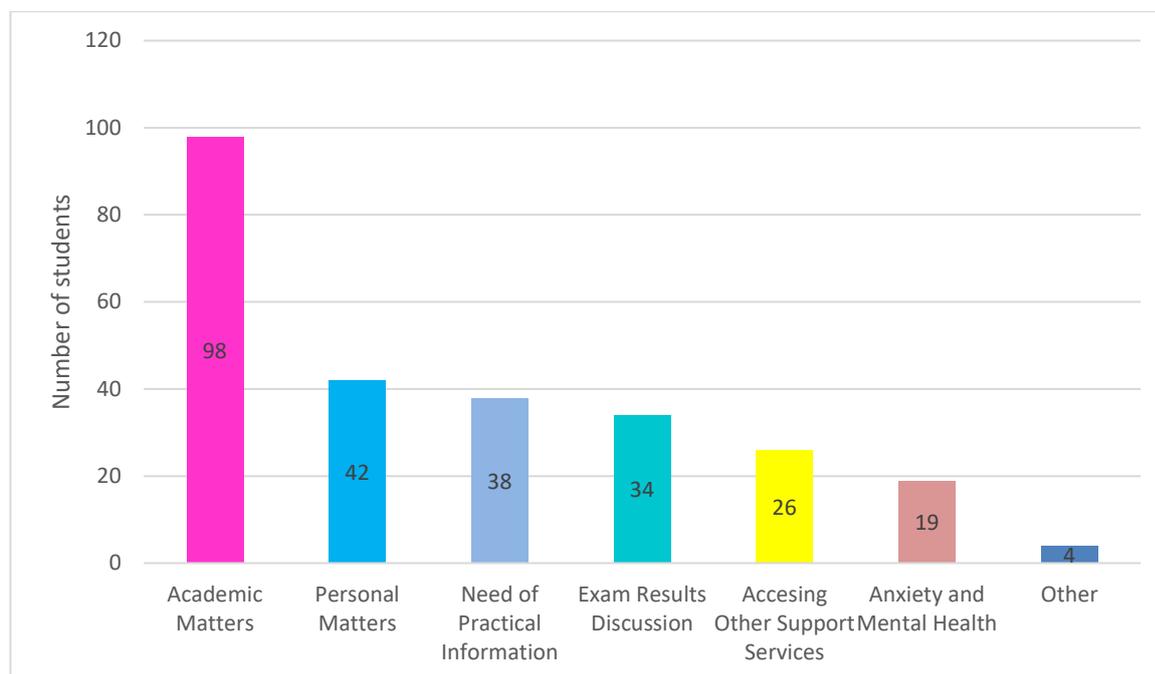**Figure 1: Students' 'go – to' person when seeking advice.**

A number of students (n=24) provided further detail on whom they would contact for help in the

'*other*' category. Ten students said they would go to friends/peers for help. Six students said they would contact their lecturer or a lecturer they feel comfortable with. Three students said they would contact Disability Support Services. Various other responses included the year coordinator or someone outside the college.

Why did students contact their Academic Mentor?

Out of a total number of 131 students, 41 students (31%) selected academic matters only and 57 students (44%) selected a mixture of academic and non-academic matters. The balance of the students i.e., 33 students (25%), gave reasons other than academic matters as a reason for making contact with their academic mentor such as: personal matters, practical information, exam results discussion, other support services and anxiety and mental health. Other studies have identified academic matters and mental health issues as being the dominant themes for of supports offered (Ardekani et al., 2021) but in this research in MTU anxiety and mental health reasons (as reason for contacting an Academic Mentor) were given only by a small proportion of students (8 students). The findings indicate that while academic matters were the single most frequent reason for contacting an Academic Mentor (with 75% indicating academic matters plus at least one other reason for making contact), it was not the only reason, and Academic Mentors and played a broader, more holistic role in supporting students.

In the Figure 2 below we can see the reasons why students contacted their Academic Mentor. In the survey, students could tick more than one reason for making contact. Analysing the data, it can be seen that academic matters is the reason that received most ticks. However, students had multiple reasons for contacting their mentors. In particular, students were contacting their mentors seeking practical information, an opportunity to discuss exams results and to talk about accessing other services. These three categories together accounted for approximately one third of all the ticks from students. The graph highlights the more holistic role played by academic mentors in guiding and signposting students to other services in the college. The remaining third of ticks were accounted for the personal reasons and anxiety and mental health.

Figure 2: Main reasons for contacting Academic Mentors.

The open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emergent themes were identified, and their frequency was taken as an indication of importance of this theme for the participants. The analysis reflected the need for enhanced support services, the need for better communications around them as well as the desire for personalised support strategies. We also identified some mixed responses, identifying varying degrees of helpfulness of some mentors as well as an occasional lack of awareness about a mentor's role, suggesting a potential gap in communications.

Some quotes below from the students show the range of reasons for contacting their Reach Academic Mentor:

'I was helped understand an assignment title and was also given resources to look at that she recommended which made my studying easier.'

'She informed me on things I was struggling to find online.'

'She directed me and provided me with e-mails of who to contact and also answered questions I had.'

'Questions relating to timetables, exams, classrooms.'

'I felt more relaxed about the pressures I had been feeling over my anxiety. I was given reassurance that there was support if I needed it and they gave me some support options.'

'I have found having a Reach mentor hugely beneficial & it is excellent for a student like me who doesn't have any family supports to know that someone will be able to give some guidance and reassurance.'

Was the Reach Academic Mentor helpful and how?

According to the survey, 99% of students found that contacting their Reach mentor was helpful or somewhat helpful. In particular, 83% found it very helpful and 16% found it somewhat helpful. Upon analysis, we found that the most important things delivered by Reach were: providing information, academic support and reassurance, followed by problem solving, listening and organisation. 70 students elaborated on how they found their Academic mentor helpful. The help that was provided is clear in the student comments indicating a holistic support for the students, as expected in the outline of the role (Stork & Walker, 2015):

'Helped me come up with a clear plan in order to help me break down what needed to be done and how I can work towards achieving my goal.'

'Any issues or queries I had regarding practical or academic or personal issues were dealt with and supported by the reach mentor. He was helpful in integrating direct entry students.'

'My problems were discussed thoroughly, and a plan was put in place to help. So far it has succeeded in helping me during my studies.'

Reassurance, listening and support were helpful for 33% of students:

'Very helpful in helping out with issues I've had during the year, going above and beyond to figure out and solve any issues I'm having with college or personal life.'

'Reach really felt like it was a safe environment to speak freely about any concerns we had and I felt it helped built relationships with our mentor but also with the students involved!'
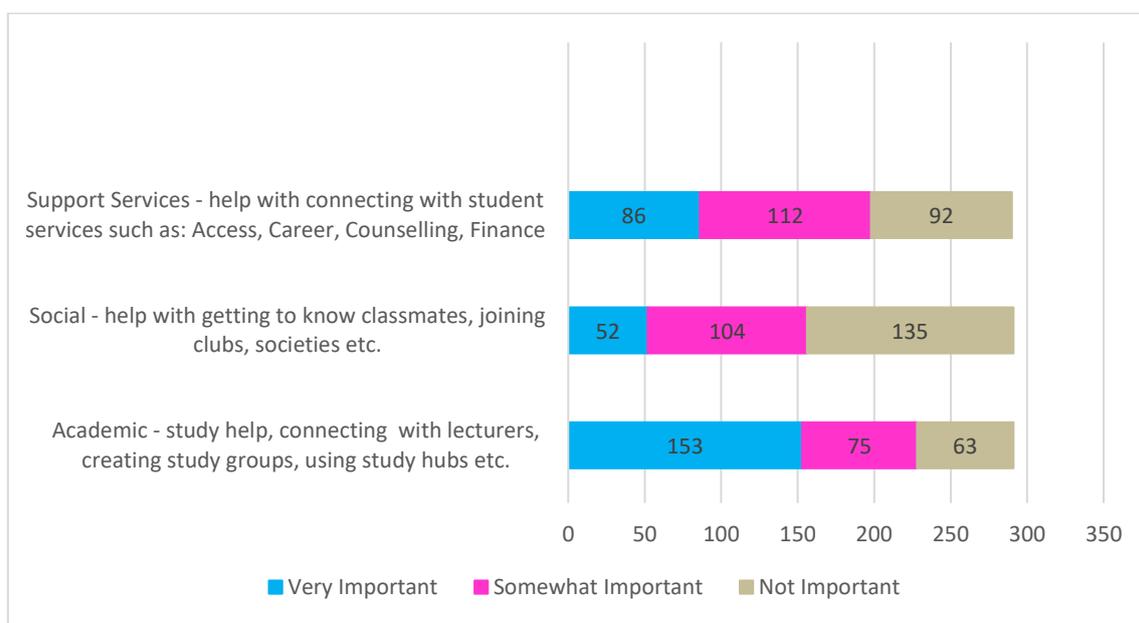
'XXXXX was my mentor and she created such a safe, educational and fun environment for all of us to speak freely!'

Student comments suggest that they sought the Reach service for academic matters, but in fact found that they got benefits on a personal level above and beyond the academic support.

What Reach supports would be most useful going forward?

As we can see from Figure 3, out of a total of 291 students, 228 students (78%) indicated that Academic Supports in the future would be '*Very*' or '*Somewhat Important'*; 198 students (68%) indicated that help connecting with Support Services would be '*Very*' or '*Somewhat Important*' going forward; 156 students (54%), indicated that Social Supports would be '*Very*' or '*Somewhat Important'* for the future. While academic support is the dominant area indicated, there is clearly value placed on support services and social supports. Each of these areas are valued by the students. Students are indicating that multi-faceted supports will be the most useful kind of support for them. This can be seen to reflect the complexity and interdependence of these areas in higher education.

Figure 3: Reach supports most useful going forward.

Would you like Reach to continue?

Out of 305 students, 222 students (72.8%) answered '*Yes*' to the question on the continuation of Reach. Only a very small fraction (2%) of students that saw no value in it going forward. It is worth mentioning that students who did not avail of the Reach Initiative also indicated that they would like to see the programme continuing into the future. This suggests that students felt supported during the pandemic period even though they did not avail of the service directly.

5. Conclusion.

The Reach Initiative was developed, and a comprehensive service put in place in an extremely short time period, in response to the emergency presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. While there was no precedent for this at MTU, this demonstrated that it was possible to move from a '*standing start*' to an operational service, which the students could access, within a relatively short timeframe. This research shows that the model developed, based on academic staff working with the Student Engagement Office and connecting directly with students using established channels, was successful in delivering an agile response. There is potential for a longer-term mentoring programme to be introduced based on this model.

The level of engagement by the students with the Reach Initiative and the reported satisfaction with the support provided allow us to conclude that the Reach Initiative had a positive impact on the students and contributed to their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The holistic nature of the support sought was reflected in the range of areas for which students sought help. While academic support was a key reason for a student to contact their mentor, practical information, discussion of exam results and information on accessing other support service were also high on students' list for contacting their Reach Academic Mentor. In effect the Academic Mentors played a significant role in signposting students to other support services across the university.

Almost all students indicated that they would like the Reach Initiative to continue. This included those students who did not avail of the service which suggests that the students valued the feeling of support being available if they should need it. Recommendations for a future initiative would be to recognise the holistic nature of the service offered where academic support, social engagement and signposting to services are offered to students.

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