

International Postgraduate Students and Peer Learning

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Abstract

Programmes such as peer learning and peer assisted study sessions are increasingly used to support undergraduate students in many academic institutions. These programmes are regularly evaluated, monitored and proven to have academic and social benefits for learners. However, postgraduate students, especially international students are not the main target of these programmes. This study targeted international postgraduate students. The action research method was used to investigate how peer learning could support international postgraduate students in their learning journey and enhance their learning experience. Two former/experienced postgraduate students were invited to share their learning experience with thirty four new international postgraduate students in two sessions. After the two presentations, participants completed a self-administrated open-ended feedback questionnaire to evaluate the two sessions. An open-ended feedback questionnaire was used as the main research tool to gather the primary data and thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected qualitative data. The findings revealed that students enjoyed this learning opportunity; majority of participants thought that the two peer learning sessions were useful, insightful, thoughtful, inspirational and beneficial. In conclusion, peer learning is an important tool to enhance the learning experience of international postgraduate students and enrich their educational journey. Therefore, the outcomes of this action research contribute to the growing body of knowledge on peer learning and international postgraduate students.

Keywords: Teaching/learning, peer learning, action research, international postgraduate students, constructive theory and cognitive theory

Introduction

Learning is a continuing process and part of resolving a problem/issue (Restivo and Rijt, 2012). Whatever our circumstances are, most of us draw on the experience, knowledge and skills of our friends, family, colleagues and even strangers. Peer learning is an emerging approach to teaching and learning and has a growing interest in higher education. Andrews and Clark (2011) show that a total of 340 peer mentoring programmes in 159 British academic institutions are designed to target undergraduate students.

Within the education context, peer learning forms an important part of the teaching and learning environment; and it happens when people discuss issues to resolve problems within their groups in either formal or informal settings. Boud *et al* (2001) refer to formal peer learning as self-learning within a structured setting, where students learnt from discussing ideas and participating in peer group activities. Furthermore, Blanc and DeBuhr (1993) argue that in formal educational settings, a peer learning approach is generally based on using skilful experienced students to guide new students in a structured way. However, the concept of using former experienced students as a resource to enhance student learning and development is not new. Vygotsky (1978) has used the concept of More Knowing Other (MKO) to help learners to move through the Zone of Proximal Development.

Informal peer learning occurs mostly in informal settings; where peers refer to students who are in the same situation without a formal role of teachers (Bruner, 2003); and students' interaction and participation in peer learning is voluntary (O'Donnell and King, 1999). The experience and expertise of these individuals who are taking part in learning together can be diverse, but in this informal setting they are fellow learners and they do not have power over each other due to their positions or responsibilities. The flexible nature of the informal learning may reduce the

hierarchical status in learning, encourages more open communication and may produce better learning (Bruner, 2003).

Many studies on peer learning (Collier, 1983; Micari, *et al*, 2005; Hall and Jaugietis, 2010; Bruffee, 1999; Topping and Ehly, 1998; Fernández *et al*, 2015; Beaumont *et al*, 2012) highlight the educational and social benefits students can gain when they share knowledge, work collectively and use self-directed learning. However, Boud (2001) argues that learning together is not straightforward as not all students respond positively to feedback from fellow students; some accept instructions from teachers rather than fellow learners, some are passive and others are competitive. Despite this, the majority of students are active and peer learning can be effective. Therefore, creating a safe learning environment where students can express their opinions without fear may encourage peer learners to share their thoughts and attract students who are reluctant to participate in collective learning (Boud, 2001).

In educational settings, learners tend to engage in peer learning in order to understand the academic requirements of their courses, explore ideas and share fears, hopes and inspirations. In effective peer learning sessions students explore ideas and concepts in cooperation with other learners to build new knowledge and reconstruct their understanding of subject knowledge (McGuire, 2006).

This paper presents the findings of an action research study on international postgraduates and peer learning. The overall aim of this study is to evaluate the views of international postgraduate students on the impact of two peer-learning sessions.

Peer learning and postgraduate students

Peer learning is a well-known initiative for undergraduate students and not much attention is given to implementing such an initiative for postgraduate students (Deakin *et al*, 2012). The lack of peer learning programmes for postgraduate students is connected to the ideas that often postgraduates have undergraduate degrees, so they are familiar with the university culture; therefore, they do not need such support to be integrated into the university life (Carver & Cuffe, 2012; Malm *et al*, 2012; Van der Meer & Scott, 2009). This argument may apply for some postgraduate home students but it might be different for international students. Moreover, this ignores the idea that many postgraduates may not have been part of formal education for many years or maybe they have not gone through an undergraduate education process, which may result in some of them having forgotten the culture of higher education.

The limited studies (Deakin *et al*, 2012; Field *et al*, 2007; Halett, 2010) on the postgraduate students' experiences with peer learning show that postgraduates need academic and social support as much as undergraduate students. Although the level and kind of support for postgraduates is debatable (Halett, 2010), the cognitive and social benefits of peer support are essential for all students including postgraduates. This view is supported by Deakin *et al* (2012) who show that peer learning can create a relaxing and informative learning environment through knowledge sharing. This is where postgraduate students learn new skills such as communication and learning techniques and meet other students in multidisciplinary settings, which can contribute to the culture of knowledge sharing and learning.

International postgraduates and peer learning

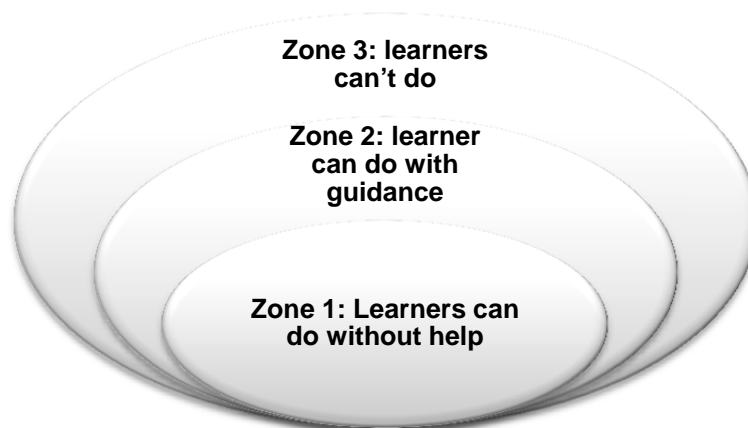
Some international students including postgraduates, who study in Britain, have experienced difficulties in adapting to the new learning environment (Campbell, 2012; Guilfoyle, 2006; Sawir, *et al*, 2008). Students coping with their new learning environment is intensified by stressful cultural adaptation; homesickness, isolation and loneliness (Mathew and Sapsed, 2012; Papadopoulos and Ali, 2013; Sawir *et al*, 2008). These serious obstacles may demotivate international students and affect their engagement with the learning process, which may result negatively on their academic competence and learning experiences (Guilfoyle, 2006).

Usually, international students tend to communicate with students who are from the same country or background (Neri and Ville, 2008) which sometimes makes forming friendships with domestic students difficult. Although, these social networks are important for students to settle into the new learning environment, the educational institutions have a duty to engage these students with the local education culture and promote activities that foster and encourage interaction amongst all students regardless of their education, race, gender, culture and nationality. Sawir *et al* (2008) argue that educational institutions should support programmes which strengthen the connection between international and domestic students to enhance the students' experience and the integration of international students. Burdett and Crossman (2012) show that peer learning programmes can provide social learning spaces to maintain academic standard and encourage social interaction amongst the whole body of students. Furthermore, the social space may create better student co-operation on academic work and provides the opportunity for students to make friends and socialise outside a classroom setting.

Theoretical underpinning

Peer learning model is based on the concept of collaborative learning as it has been illustrated in behavioural, cognitive and constructive theories (Blanc, and DeBuhr, 1993; McGuire, 2006; Jacobs *et al*, 2008). The Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1997) approach is used to understand how participants in peer learning improve their knowledge, understanding and ability to learn while working collaboratively and moving between the different learning zones as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Vygotsky's (1997) Zone of Proximal Development



The above model divides learning into three zones; and at each zone the learners are in need of different support. However, these three learning zones are not fixed and moving between the zones depends on the learners' prior experiences, knowledge, environmental/social factors (e.g. supporting family, good schooling and peer group influence). Furthermore, the process of learning in these zones is flexible and interactive as participants in peer learning can take the lead and responsibility for what they learn. Nevertheless, the role of the experienced and skilful individuals is important in peer learning as they can provide a much needed support for their fellow students (Vygotsky, 1997).

The constructivist theory mirrors the above zones and has three distinguishing features: first learning is part of what is learned and occurs within and context; second you cannot separate knowing from doing, and third learning is a process which can be extended over time (Akhras and Self, 2000). This theory views knowledge as socially constructed and resulted from dialogic and interactions between facilitators and learners and amongst learners themselves. In this approach, students leave their marks in the learning process (Jacobs *et al* 2008). Furthermore, constructivism articulates mechanisms in which learners internalise knowledge through the

accommodation and assimilation processes; whereby learners construct new knowledge from their experiences. In this approach, individuals are responsible for their learning, and have to collaborate in tasks and discussions to arrive at a shared understanding in a specific area (Duffy and Jonassen, 1992). Generally, peer learning may rely on constructivist or discovery learning methods for the peer-to-peer context.

Peer learning is also associated with critical pedagogy which encourages students and teachers to analyse and critique the power structures. Freire (2007) described the traditional teaching framework as a 'banking system' where students are seen as empty vessels which should be filled with knowledge and ideas. He endorsed a fairer relationship between educators and learners, and in this interaction information is questioned, knowledge is situated within political and social context, and all participants in learning work collaboratively to create new knowledge (Freire, 2007). In this collaborative work postgraduates are expected to develop problem solving skills, critical analysis, show creativity and originality in modifying existing knowledge and creating new perspectives. This leads to the argument that when students do master a task, they become active, alert and motivated to be better learners.

Study context

This study was conducted at a University in the UK where peer assisted learning (PAL) and peer assisted student sessions (PASS) programmes are used to support peer learning strategy for students. The PAL scheme within this university has been established mainly to support students; and it emphasises on socialising, developing and integrating new students into the university life. The scheme has been making an impact on the experience of new undergraduate students and won the Vice Chancellor Students Experience Award for enhancing students' learning experience. However, despite the success of these programmes, they focus mainly on undergraduate students and limited support is provided for international postgraduates.

The number of international postgraduates is increasing. For instance, a recent report on British universities (UK universities, 2014) shows that non-EU students form 13% of the UK student population. This evidence reflects itself on the student cohort, for example in the MSc programme where I lecture, over 90% of the students are international.

Aims and rationale

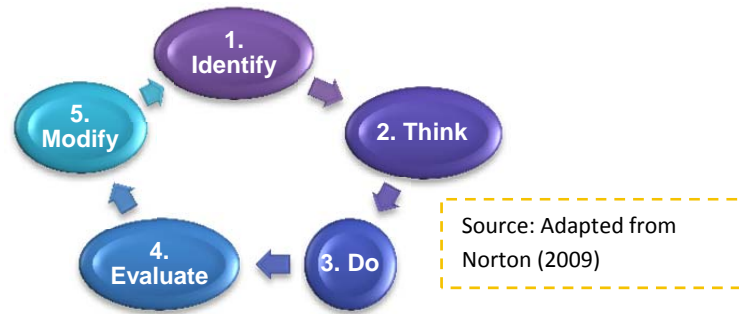
This project intended to enhance the learning experience of international postgraduate students through formal peer learning sessions. This study investigates how helpful international postgraduate students find the peer learning sessions. The study was intended to gain feedback on how useful postgraduate students have found the discussion and sharing of experiences during the peer learning sessions; what have they learned and what will they intend to do with this learning.

At the start of each academic term, many postgraduates highlighted concerns and fears about their academic writing abilities, referencing style, assignment submission procedures, and time management. To ease their tension and overcome these significant issues, I invited two former MSc Public Health students, to share their learning experience with a new student cohort in peer group session format.

Method

This study has used the action research approach, which involves collecting evidence on knowledge and practice to provide practical outcomes and to improve the quality of learning (Kember 2000; McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). This research followed the Norton (2009) five steps process (Identify, Think, Do, Evaluate and Modify) as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Action research Process (ITDEM)



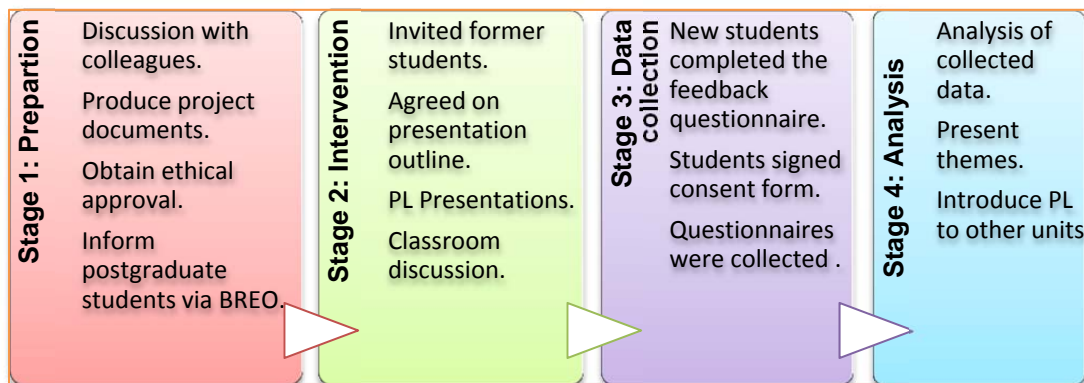
This project was conducted in April 2014 with a student cohort that had a total of 34 students with diverse academic, professional backgrounds and competencies.

At the start of this project, the problem of lack of regular peer learning support to help international postgraduate students is identified and discussed with colleagues and postgraduates. As a result of these discussions, two former students were invited to share their learning experiences with a new student cohort. A self-administrated open-ended questionnaire was used to collect feedback on these sessions. Participants were asked to individually complete the feedback self-administrated questionnaire on the usefulness of peer learning sessions, what did they learn and how will they use their learning. The collected data was analysed using a thematic analyses tool.

Design

The design of this project has four stages as shows in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Study design



Preparation: In addition to informal discussions with colleagues and students, the project related documents were produced; this includes the feedback open-ended questionnaire, consent form and participant information sheet. All students were informed about the peer learning sessions and the nature of the project verbally in the classroom and in writing via a learning management system announcement.

Intervention: Two former students were invited to share their learning experience with a new international postgraduate’s cohort. Both students are female; one is a health professional from an Asian background; the other is a scientist from African heritage. They were both international students, approachable and successfully completed their MSc degrees. Both presenters were willing to be contacted by the students for further assistance. The two sessions were interactive and lively, each presentation lasted for 25 minutes; and each presenter focused on time management, study techniques, referencing style, assignment preparation, academic writing,

classroom participation, group work activity, reaction to feedback, and advice on how to seek help and improve your independent learning.

Data collection: After the two peer learning sessions, students asked challenging questions and shared their concerns. The discussion lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Then the participants were asked to complete a short self-administrated open-ended questionnaire to evaluate the usefulness of these peer learning sessions and how they would use this learning in the future.

Analysis: The gathered information was analysed using a thematic analysis tool as it enables the researcher to capture the thoughts of students on peer learning and its effectiveness.

Ethical considerations

In action research, the researcher is often working within practice, and the aim is to improve it. This approach is tricky as it may identify the participants and/or the institution. Therefore, acting ethically requires careful considerations throughout the study. According to Norton (2009) informed consent form, privacy/confidentiality and not causing harm are the three main ethical principles to follow when conducting action research. In this project, the participant information sheet is given to each student, the project is fully explained; participants were informed that they have the right to decline at any stage without giving reasons; participation is voluntary, the project is not part of their assessment and not taking part will not affect their grades. Each student signed a consent form before completing the self-administrated feedback questionnaire. The identity of participants is protected at every stage of this project; the researcher is the only person who has access to the data. The information is treated confidentially, stored in a password protected workplace computer and is used for research purposes only. Equally important, this project is about enhancing students learning experience; therefore, it has no potential or actual physical and/or psychological harm for participants. The project followed the university ethics code and gained ethics approval from the Institute for Health Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Following the structure of the self-administrated evaluation questionnaire, the main outcomes of this research are divided into five sections: Demographic information, knowledge on peer learning, usefulness of peer learning sessions, potential learning and usage of peer learning skills.

(1) Demographic information

A total of 34 postgraduate students in a new student cohort participated in the two peer learning sessions and completed the feedback questionnaire. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants (22) are women. Almost, two thirds (23) are relatively young (under 30 years of age); the youngest participant is 23 years old, the oldest participant is 48 and the age average is 30 years. Participants come from 8 countries including the UK and more than one third (14) of the participants are from Nigeria.

Table 1: Demographic characteristic of the 34 participants

Characteristics	Specification	Number of students	Percentage
Gender	Male	12	35%
	Female	22	65%
Age groups in years	20-30	23	67%
	31-40	5	15%
	41-50	5	15%
	Missing	1	3%
Country of origin	Bangladesh	3	9%
	India	3	9%
	Nepal	4	12%
	Nigeria	14	40%
	Pakistan	5	15%
	Uganda	1	3%
	UK ¹	3	9%
	Zimbabwe	1	3%

(2) Peer learning

Peer learning as a concept was not discussed with students before or during the two peer learning sessions to minimise any influences on students perception of peer learning. To illustrate their understanding of peer learning, in the feedback questionnaire, the first question students were asked was what do they know about peer learning. More than two third of participants (26) viewed peer learning as an interaction and cooperation with others, learning from each other, sharing ideas/experiences, participating in activities and being part of peer learning enhances their learning abilities. Below are a few quotations from participants:

It basically refers to student's learning in groups whereby there is constant and mutual learning from each other by sharing of knowledge, experiences and indulging in activities mostly in the absence of lecturers or staff members' (F, Case 4)

Peer group learning is a teaching-learning methodology where persons/peers in a learning environment are placed in clusters to discuss key themes or the learning objective for the day. This could even be done in the general large classroom setting, but is perhaps more beneficial in small groups. The aim is that student-peers will 'bounce' ideas off each other and share experiences related to the topic area in order to encourage understanding and grasp of the topic. (M, Case 2)

An avenue to get to share ideas, beliefs and opinions into new information on issues discussed that may add value to what I have already know or heard about. (M, Case 9)

(3) Usefulness of the peer learning sessions

Students were asked how useful they found the peer learning sessions and why. The results show that the vast majority (32) of the participants said the peer learning sessions were useful, well-organised, thoughtful and inspirational. Here are few quotations:

Really helpful. Good to know how international students have made their way through all the obstacles, which I will be able to follow their advices and can make use of their experiences. (F, Case12)

¹ These three students are British citizens, but originally one is from Africa and two are from Asia.

Very helpful it has improved my way of managing my time and my passion for public health. It has made me keen to gain more knowledge and coming out successfully'. (F,Q18)
'Very helpful because the people that talked to us have been in our exact situation and could relate to all the questions are hard. (F, Case23)

'Very helpful because it provides guidelines as to how I am to go about my study here in Bedfordshire and build up successful career. (M, Case 30)

Only one participant thinks the sessions are not helpful:

Not very helpful information not relevant to me. Probably good for younger people. (F, Case17)

This particular passive outcome could be due to the lack of interest in peer learning, not fully understanding the value of sharing experience, or peer learning is not a priority for this specific student.

(4) Learning from the sessions

Participants were asked what they learnt from the two peer learning sessions. The majority (29) said they learnt how to improve their organisational skills, study skills, reaction to feedback, time management and academic writing. Some of their ideas are presented in the following quotations:

I learnt how to have a disciplined study through effective time management with regard to right way of referencing and importance of giving time to studying and exploring knowledge through available learning materials. (F, Case 14)

I have learnt that the time I put into studying is what I get back (having a great score). And I also learnt that experience is the best teacher. (M, Case20)

Learned to be independent and also how to manage my time, how to write an assignment. How to react when given a feedback from my lecturers. (F, Case 24)

(5) Usage of peer learning

Students were asked how they would use peer learning in the future. Vast majority of students (32) were keen to use peer learning with other students in group work and share learning with colleagues. Here are few examples:

I am extremely enthusiastic about group learning as I found it very crucial for active learning. Since, currently I work in a research environment I will try to share my peer learning experience of UoB with my colleagues and also will try to build an environment where peer learning process would flourish. (M, Q1)

In the future I will be more engaged in group discussions because as a naturally shy person I believe it will help me come out of my shell and be able to learn more. (F, Q23)

In the future, I really want to implement what I have learnt while in the university. Why I want to do it is that I want to contribute my own quota in the development of my country by educating and creating an awareness of disease outbreak. (M, Q16)

In summary, the findings illustrate that students are aware of peer learning and its importance, the peer learning sessions are useful for their academic progress as they help in developing skills and enhancing their learning experience. Also, they are willing to use peer with their fellow students and future work colleagues.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that using former students to share their learning experiences with new students has been appreciated by the participants regardless of their gender or nationality; as a majority of students (32) believed that peer learning sessions could help them to understand the academic jargon, contribute to group discussion and learn how to seek help when needed. This finding agreed with Deakin, Wakefield and Gregorius (2012) study on students' attitudes towards peer learning; their study was based on a sample of 250 students and revealed that students have positive attitudes towards cooperative learning and there were no significant gender differences in students' attitudes.

The potential benefits of peer learning have long been recognised and are especially relevant today. Peer/co-operative learning programmes (e.g. small group activities) have been increasingly implemented in many university courses to help students meeting the course learning outcomes. Such programmes encourage collaboration in the sense of working with others, taking learning responsibility; deepening students understanding of specific course content; promoting the learning community and enhancing the sense of belonging. Much of the peer learning occurs when students acknowledge the experience and knowledge of the participants. This involves students working together which improve their skills in team work and learning community. It also encouraged critical inquiries and reflection where students discuss and debate ideas and concepts. Furthermore, this provides opportunities for deep engagement in learning; communication, articulation of knowledge and skills when students explore ideas with their peers that encourage them to develop their opinions and express their ideas without fear.

Regardless of the debates on the usefulness of collective learning for postgraduate students (Rogerson, 1994), the role of peer learning has still not been fully explored. This project has aimed to fill this gap by exploring the value of peer learning at postgraduate level and argues that we should not underestimate the importance of the peer learning experience which is facilitated by experienced students who successfully completed the same study programme. The peer interactions that occurred over the two peer learning sessions were not one-way experiences; as through the interactive discussion the presenters learnt from the participants just as much as the participants learnt from them. The idea of being asked to present your learning experience to a student cohort gives the presenter a reason to work harder, shows greater responsibility for your presentation and leads to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy (Assinder, 1991). The understanding of how useful postgraduate peer learning sessions can be is a valuable insight into students and staff development opportunities offered by some higher education institutions.

The lessons learned and experiences gained from running these two sessions have helped to formulate best practice for future peer learning sessions. Rogerson (1994) shows that an informal student-led approach can offer the opportunity to focus on issues which are considered as relevant and valuable to the postgraduate students. This paper has expanded this argument as it believes that the peer learning approach in the two peer learning sessions has created a relaxed and informative atmosphere for both students and presenters. The sessions have allowed the presenters to share their knowledge and experience in successfully completing the course, also for the attendees to create discussion about their previous experience and fears of starting the MSc course. Furthermore, the attendees were fully engaged during the peer learning sessions, through involvement in discussions, openness in asking questions and creating active debates.

The shared experience of being a participant in these peer learning sessions and shared narratives about similar or different experiences in being a postgraduate international student could positively enhance the academic culture. Hortsmanshof and Conrad (2003) argued that

enhancing academic culture amongst students can contribute to becoming a successful postgraduate student. In addition, the peer learning sessions offered the opportunity for postgraduates to learn about each other's academic interests, and to get to know other international postgraduates in an informal, relaxing and interdisciplinary setting. This could counteract the idea of 'academic isolation' amongst postgraduate students as highlighted by Hockey (1994). As the two presenters shared the importance of team work, collective learning and willingly provided their contact details, therefore the peer learning sessions encourage further communication with the presenters as well as amongst the attendees.

Supporting learners through their educational journey is essential as it maximises the potential of learners as individuals and as groups. The students' experiences are an important element in the agenda of each educational institution, regardless of its ranking or location.

Implications

This action research project has implications on teaching practice, students' learning and future development of learning experience of postgraduate international students. In this project the use of former/experienced students to share their learning experience through peer learning sessions was successful. The sharing of information in these peer learning sessions was used to expand students' knowledge and enhance their learning experience. This had a direct, positive impact on how international postgraduates perceive higher education and their role in it. Furthermore, students, including international postgraduates, are a long-term investment, therefore, it is important to explore the best ways to use peer learning sessions to support them, so that their positive experience and interaction would encourage other students to join the academic course within a particular university. Therefore, formulating realistic strategies for peer learning to grow amongst postgraduates is important, especially with the continuing increase in the number of international students. Such strategies will influence how academic institutions create welcoming academic cultures and learning communities.

Moreover, as educators, we should invest more in collaborative and serious efforts to capture the experiences of international postgraduate students. Running successful peer learning sessions to enhance the learning experience of international postgraduates provides us with needed information, which helps us to learn from our experiences and build on our successes. Many students agreed on the importance of peer learning in improving their social and cognitive abilities. Therefore, the integration of peer learning into our academic programme may create a new learning strategy, where peer learning scheduled sessions can be improved so that students gain more experiences, skills and knowledge to maximise their chances of success.

Conclusion

International postgraduates who participated in this study appreciated the opportunity to take part in the peer learning sessions, where two students shared their knowledge and experience in successfully completing the MSc course. Peer learning contributes towards enabling students to develop their learning skills, exchange of knowledge and learning experience which may contribute to their independent learning. However, it is the responsibility of educators to understand the learning abilities of students and to create an active and safe learning environment in which students can make mistakes, learn without fear and flourish. Furthermore, creating a safe and collaborative learning atmosphere encourage postgraduates to accumulate the needed knowledge, skills and strategies to complete their academic tasks successfully.

This peer learning initiative is a starting point to support international postgraduates in their learning journey. There is definitely more work to be done in this area, particularly to understand the dynamics in peer learning sessions and how to actively involve international students in a collective learning environment. Therefore, there is a need to develop practical strategies to involve international students in peer learning to improve their skills and enhance

their learning experience. More research is needed to explore the benefits of using PAL/PASS programmes as a strategy to establish discipline based learning communities. This will help educators to address few academic challenges in some teaching units/models where international postgraduates form a high percentage of the student cohort.

The use of an action research method is helpful in exploring the effectiveness and usefulness of peer learning amongst a cohort of international postgraduate students. It has highlighted the importance of peer interactions, the level of academic and social support and the value of the peer learning sessions. All these areas can be explored further and using former students as a model could encourage the sharing of knowledge, stimulate discussion, exchange information and facilitate learning amongst international postgraduates to enhance their learning experience.

Finally, supporting international postgraduates in their educational journey should be amongst our priorities as educators. This study has a small contribution towards enhancing students' learning experience. Let us make peer learning a tradition where university staff and students can work together to flourish and build a brighter future.

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