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A Student-Centred Approach to Support, Reward and Recognition of Student Peer ‘Learnership’.

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Abstract

The benefits for university graduates in growing skills and capabilities through volunteering experiences are gaining increased attention. Building leadership self-efficacy supports students develop their capacity for understanding, articulating and evidencing their learning. Reward and recognition is fundamental in the student’s journey to build self-efficacy. Through this research, concepts of reward and recognition have been explored and articulated through the experiences and perceptions of actively engaged student peer leaders. The research methodology has enabled a collaborative, student-centred approach in shaping an innovative Rewards Framework, which supports, recognises and rewards the learning journey from beginning peer leader to competent and confident graduate.

Introduction.

The reciprocal benefit of peer programs to program participants and peer leaders is well documented (Weiler, Zarich, Haddock, Krafchick, & Zimmerman, 2014; Newton & Ender, 2010; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Recorded through evaluative processes at QUT in 2014, in the findings from this research, student peer leaders report positive experiences and identify personal benefits and opportunities for learning and skill development. In line with research identified by Newton and Ender (2010) peer leaders within QUT value the importance of their experience in developing their skills to communicate and facilitate learning and solve problems. They recognize the worth and benefits to their own academic achievement and feel more confident in their knowledge and understanding of key concepts within their own studies. Peer leaders identify a greater sense of connection to faculty and find purpose in their university experience.

Reward and recognition is integral in ensuring students harness and grow the deep learning and benefits they gain through their peer learning experiences. The value of appropriate and timely recognition as reward for volunteering contributions is generally acknowledged. However, the role of individualised and purposeful rewards in contributing to leader self-efficacy and mastery of skills and capabilities warrants further exploration. In response, this paper documents a collaborative process of inquiry through which QUT has attempted to clearly articulate a framework for reward and recognition for its peer leaders. It aims to utilise the unique and varied functions of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to build peer leader capacity by responding to the motivations that inspire and support students through their journey from beginning peer leaders to competent and capable graduates.

Literature

Within the literature, terminology associated with reward is varied and generally undefined. Reward, recognition, incentives and compensation are often used interchangeably. (Esplin, Seabold & Pinnegar, 2012; Latino and Unite, 2012; Zevallos and Washburn, 2014) They are perceived both narrowly and broadly in varied contexts and applications. A 2009 National Survey of Peer Leaders (Esplin 'et al,' 2012) explored students' perceptions of reward. Students typically identified compensation and incentive as being their reward for paid positions. Latino and Unite (2012) also marry recognition and compensation. They cite course credit as well as "scholarship funds, textbook stipends, leadership certificates and incentives such as priority registration" (p. 39) within their suggested reward strategies. Zevallos and Washburn (2014) document the payment of a 'small stipend for contributions'

In their Self-Determination Theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) defined these strategies as external or extrinsic motivations and in doing so, contrasted the value of personal growth and mastery as intrinsic reward. Pierce, Cameron, Banko and Sylvia (2003) in investigating the impact of reward on intrinsic motivation, revealed interesting insights into how an individual's perception of reward influences their motivation to participate. Applying Attribution Theory, they distinguish the importance of implementing reward strategies, which recognise achievements (e.g. student communicated well) rather than performance (e.g. number of students seen). In doing so, they believe students 'attribute' success to their own behaviour and competence rather than to external incentives or performance directives imposed or controlled by others. Pierce 'et al.' (2003) further advocate reward strategies that focus positive feedback on the accomplishments and competencies of the individual. The reward serves to enhance intrinsic motivation leading to sustained peer leader service, benefitting programs, their participants and the institution. A further dimension of their study identified in its closing remarks, the possible value of scaffolded rewards in motivating its participants to achieve progressively demanding challenges and increased standards (2003, p. 577). Weiler, 'et al.' (2014) in undertaking research of the perceptions of their mentors, found that through evaluation and reflection, mentors developed personal and individual strategies to improve and enrich the mentoring experience for themselves and participants; enhancing and rewarding their contribution to the mentoring program.

Literature from outside the higher education sector, warns the overemphasis on extrinsic reward can negatively impact intrinsic motivation. (Georgellis, Iossa and Tabvuma, 2011) Resulting from their study within the public service, Georgellis, 'et al.' (2011) found employees were 'drawn' to the public sector because of deep intrinsic motivation, rewarded by a satisfaction with the role itself. Georgellis, 'et al.' (2011) articulate their findings by highlighting that "person effects are more important than workplace effects in determining the level of intrinsic motivation" (2011, p. 487). In the context of peer programs, this thinking indicates a definitive shift in focus from programs and groups, and even from the collective 'peer leaders', to the individual peer leader in considering appropriate and meaningful strategies for reward that grow leader self-efficacy through skills and capability development. This is further supported by Yahui Su (2014) who advocates a 'person-based approach' in considering strategies and activities that assist students in developing graduate attributes.

In drawing together the ideas and concepts in this extant literature, we are again drawn to the research of Ryan and Deci (2000), who explicitly link motivation and the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic reward. They attribute the acceptance and selection of intrinsic rewards

as enabling the individual, through self-determination and heightened self-efficacy, to find meaningful and authentic value in the extrinsic rewards awarded to them.

Peer Leader Capacity Building Model

In conceptualising its Peer Programs Strategy in 2012, QUT drafted a faculty-based Peer Leader Capacity Building Model that was underpinned by social justice principles (Menzies, Weatherill, Nelson & Creagh, 2012). The model sort to embed reward and recognition into the iterative and progressive journey it anticipated for its student peer leaders. In 2014 and as an initial stage in this research, the model was refined through observation, evaluation, critical thinking and collaboration with key stakeholders (peer leaders, program coordinators and training providers).

The QUT Peer Leader Capacity Building Model (Figure 1) embraces a ‘person-centred’ approach that encourages students to shape their individual ‘learnscape’. It aims to build peer leader self-efficacy by responding to intrinsic motivations for volunteering and peer-to-peer service. The model articulates a fundamental interplay of learning (training) and leading (service) through reflective and evaluative practices. These integral features define a student’s ‘Peer Learnership’. As observed and articulated through the implementation of the strategy, the student journey transitions through three key phases: Aspiring, Enabling and Mastering. The journey begins with the ‘aspiration’ phase where students come to understand the opportunities provided to them to help and support others. Providing a foundation for leadership, this phase is immersed within a culture that promotes help seeking as a ‘normal’ part of the university experience. The ‘enabling’ phase makes possible student engagement as peer leaders through appropriate induction, competency training and skill development within supportive peer program environments, while the ‘mastering’ phase grows competent and confident leaders who are able to relate, articulate and evidence their learning and curate their individual journey to emerge as capable graduates, contributing as leaders in their communities and workplaces.

The Peer Leader Journey through the Capacity Building Model (Figure 2) offers an implementation strategy that empowers and develops peer leaders’ capacity and capabilities. Characterised by timely and scaffolded training, moments of critical reflection, decision-making and goal setting; this implementation model aims to provide a fertile environment that empowers leadership self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the belief one has in one’s capacity to undertake a chosen task or challenge competently in order to take control of their personal learning pathway (Bandura, 1986) and the model aims to support this through “autonomy, mastery and purpose” (Espin ‘et al,’ 2012 p. 89). In achieving autonomy students are encouraged to be creative! To build confidence as competent leaders who can make decisions and find solutions; reflect on their learning and set goals to help grow and develop though their journey. Mastery urges students to embrace their experience as an opportunity to develop skills, graduate capabilities and competencies through theory, practice and experience. Understanding the purpose and value of their role as a peer leader assists students to recognise their learning and the value of their service to themselves and others through relating and connecting their experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gupta, McEniery & Creyton, 2013). Influencing and directing this process of learning encourages students to relate their learning in both their curricular and co-curricular experiences and create tangible evidence of their efficacy.

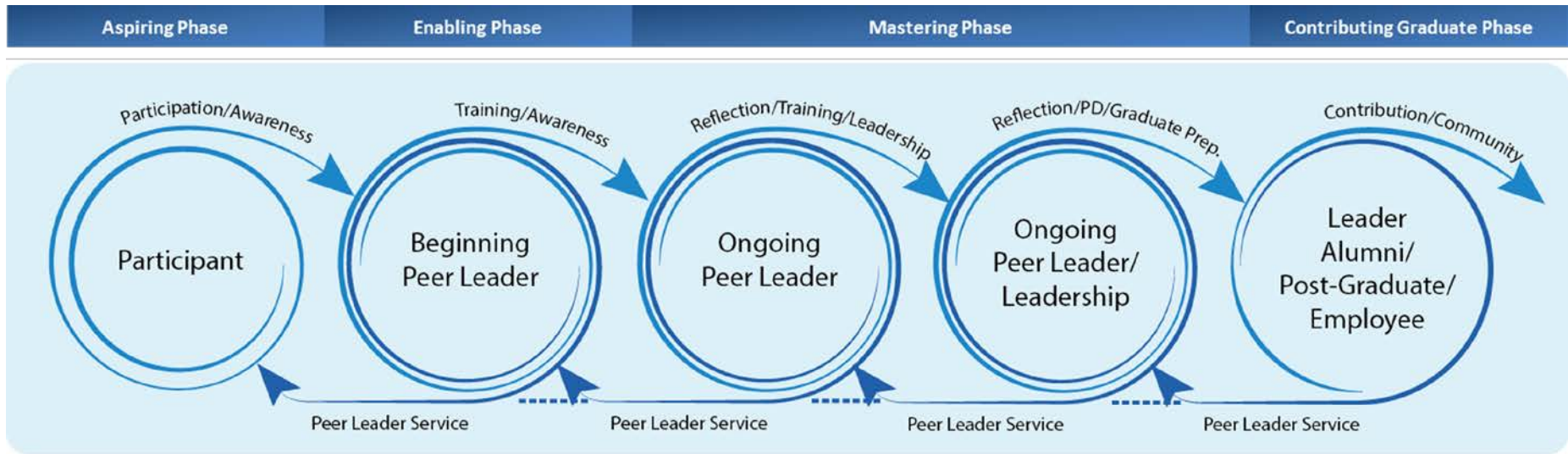


Figure 1: The Peer Leader Capacity Building Model

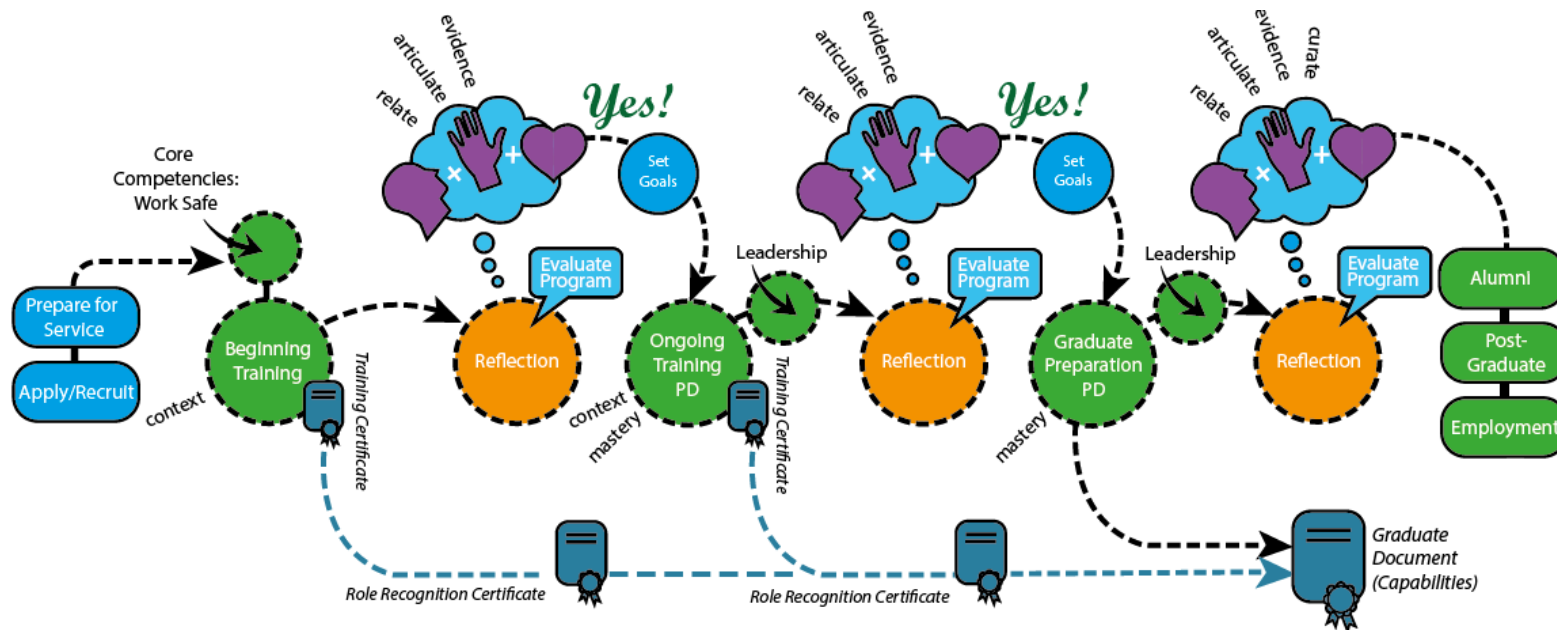


Figure 2: The Peer Leader Journey through Capacity Building Model

A student-devised framework for Reward and Recognition

Background

In 2014, QUT identified the need to implement systems to effectively support, reward and recognise peer leaders engaged in delivering peer to peer learning initiatives. (Menzies, Tredinnick & Van Ryt, 2015). In doing so, it sought to move beyond traditional evaluative methods of consultation to recognise and involve students as collaborators in decision – making and design processes that would result in meaningful, relevant and appropriate strategies for support, reward and recognition. Further, it recognised the need to achieve a greater understanding of students’ experiences as peer leaders across a number of programs and volunteering roles.

Method

This research embraced process-oriented research within the Grounded Theory methodology (Creswell 2014). The methodology encouraged interaction among different program teams and individuals allowing experience and perception as important drivers in determining effective responses to the issue in focus. In doing so, the research uses process-oriented design principles in initiating students as observers, collaborators and self-regulators (Vrieling, Bastiaens & Stijnen, 2010, para 1.1) in the design process.

Integral to ensuring contextually appropriate responses, the research initiated dialogue with beginning and experienced student peer leaders. Staff facilitated 5 focus groups with 67 student peer leaders and observed a further 3 training and reflection sessions attended by 130 beginning and ongoing peer leaders from a range of peer programs across the university. In recognising existing knowledge and understanding gathered through previous evaluative practices, focus groups were designed to encourage students to think beyond incentive and compensation as reward for their service in order to progress its objective for change. In doing so, participants groups, Beginner Peer Leaders and Ongoing Peer Leaders, were asked four key questions.

- (1) What has motivated you to become a peer leader? or What has motivated you to continue as a peer leader?
- (2) What do you want to learn from your service? or What have you learnt from your service?
- (3) What do you want to gain from your experience? or What have you gained from your experience?

In considering their responses to the above questions, students were encouraged to consider one further and significant question;

- (4) In considering your peer leader experience, how can QUT reward and recognise your peer leader service?

Findings

In all sessions, students provided significant responses to questions 1 to 3. They were able to thoughtfully articulate their motivations for undertaking volunteer and peer leader roles and were clear in what they wanted to learn and to gain from their experience. Ongoing peer

leaders were careful, thoughtful and specific in what they learnt and gained from their experiences and the impact on this in motivating them to continue their service.

In responding to question 4, students were asked to extend their thinking beyond the traditional notions of incentive and compensation to consider a concept of reward and recognition that would make meaning of their individual experiences and achievements and motivate them to grow their skills and capabilities through further volunteering and leadership. In doing so, the project achieved a plethora of ideas and suggestions from which eight key themes emerged. (See Figure 3)

- Pathways to further volunteering, leadership and employment opportunities.
- Resources to enhance and enable service, learning and community
- Professional recommendations and reference/
- Personal recognition
- Certificates (Individualised)
- Training and Professional development opportunities
- Opportunities to ‘stay connected’ to peers
- Celebration events (group and program recognition)

In achieving these themes, the recording and organising of ideas became known as the Reward and Recognition ‘How’ toolbox from which further consultation, iterative discussion and ideas emerged to inform the development of the Rewards Framework.



Figure 3: The Reward and Recognition “How” Toolbox

Peer Programs Student Advisory Team

In order to explore and progress these findings, a representative student advisory team was established in 2014. In undertaking this task, the team created a vision statement; “A synergy of peer leader experiences to bring about positive change”, which guided the function of the group. Ensuring inclusivity of all diverse student stakeholder groups, the team included 19 experienced and active peer leaders from all three QUT campuses; representing 11 peer programs including university-wide programs, faculty initiatives and student engagement; paid and unpaid and positional leadership positions within student clubs and societies.

Through a series of 6 facilitated discussions, the team was able to undertake validation of the research process (Creswell, 2014) limiting bias, and in doing so, were instrumental in developing and progressing a QUT Peer Leader Rewards Framework (Table 1).

A Peer Leader Rewards Framework

Reward and Recognition are terms routinely used interchangeably. Exploring the individual meaning of these terms and their often-problematic co-dependency has required exploration and clarification to achieve a framework of understanding at QUT. Application of this understanding through this research has influenced the design of the Rewards Framework (Table 1) into two distinct categories; Evidencing Efficacy (intrinsic reward) and Recognition (extrinsic reward).

The intrinsic rewards that categorise ‘evidencing efficacy’ are intangible and depend on the perceptions and understanding of the peer leader. Cultivating self-efficacy in students to achieve this understanding in the early stages of their service, significantly impacts the benefits of intrinsic rewards. Therefore, ‘evidencing efficacy’ encompasses training and professional development; reflection, evaluation and goal-setting and community, culture and identity offering scaffolded tools and strategies.

Recognition becomes an important component of reward rather than its partner, in this framework. It encompasses extrinsic systems that are both quantifiable and visible. Components of recognition include documentation and acknowledgement of peer leader service by the program or institution, and celebration of individual and program achievements. These elements can be realised through certification, awards systems, celebration events and incentives such as T-shirts, lunches and resources. Recognition occurs at points in time through the peer leader journey in acknowledging the accomplishments of both the individual and the program team.

Collaborations with key stakeholders in populating this scaffolded framework contribute to the quality, consistency and flexibility of its design and function. The Peer Programs Strategy Team in partnership with Training Providers enact quality-assured and consistent training and certification (Van Ryt, Menzies & Tredinnick, 2015) while allowing program coordinators, peer leaders and program participants flexibility in meeting the needs of individual and specific needs of their program and its peer leaders.

		Beginning Peer Leader	Ongoing Peer Leader	Leaving Peer Leader service
Evidencing efficacy (intrinsic reward)	Training and professional development	<i>Core competency training- Work safe. Contextual Peer leader training. Program-specific training and support. Raising awareness of professional development opportunities.</i>	<i>Contextual Peer leader training- Reflecting on practice. Promote and encourage professional development opportunities-Leadership Development Innovation promote and encourage leadership responsibilities within program.</i>	<i>Opportunity and access to specialist career training and advice. Opportunities for international exchange, internships and tutoring.</i>
	Reflection, evaluation and goal-setting	<i>Shared reflection timetabled/individual reflection session and goal setting timetabled. Use of 4Rs model of Reflective Practice. Encourage evidencing eg. e-portfolio. Schedule evaluation and feedback to student team. Involve students in design and program delivery.</i>	<i>Shared/individual reflection schedules-particularly highlighting graduate capability and skill development. Use 4Rs model. Goal setting for future participation and growth. Encourage evidencing of learning eg.e-portfolio. Scheduled evaluation and feedback results. Design and program delivery.</i>	<i>Support articulation and evidencing of skill and graduate capacities. Individual achievements Life-time support for e-portfolio.</i>
	Community, culture and Identity	<i>Group social events. Shared professional development events. T Shirts, resources and opportunities for sharing food. Communication plan for social interaction and information sharing</i>	<i>Group social events. Shared professional development events. T Shirts, resources and opportunities for sharing food. Communication plan for social interaction and information sharing. Encourage sharing of stories.</i>	<i>Extend invitation for professional development and celebration events. Invite graduates to participate and share stories</i>
Recognition (extrinsic reward)	Documenting and Acknowledging Service	<i>Maintain attendance records on student interface for recording service and gathering evidence. Give feedback from participants. Provide timely and appropriate certification.</i>	<i>Maintain attendance records on student interface for recording service and gathering evidence. Give feedback from participants Certification</i>	<i>Witness Statements (Program Coordinators/peer leaders/participants in acknowledgement of service and individual achievements.</i>
	Celebration and Visibility	<i>Promotion of program to participants Program celebration events/Awards Establish communication to externally promote program and its achievements.</i>	<i>Promotion of program to participants Program and university-wide celebration events/Awards Establish communication to externally promote program and its achievements.</i>	<i>Invitation to celebration events/Awards invites graduates to participate and share stories.</i>

Table 1: Peer Leader Reward Framework- Peer Programs. Recommended/suggested activity

Discussion

It is apparent that students who undertake peer leader roles are intrinsically motivated. In order to harness and sustain this motivation, students need the tools to control and direct their own learning journey, and in doing so, embrace appropriate and timely rewards presented to them. When we prioritise evidencing efficacy over recognition as reward, we open up the possibility of service to peers as an intrinsically rewarding experience that builds capacity and capabilities through their individual learning journey. It is taking control of this learning journey and being empowered to deeply understand that contextual and authentic learning is occurring that provides genuine, meaningful and long term value for the peer leader. Assuming that students are able to make learning connections and that institutions have the skills to enable and guide this process leaves to chance the value and benefits of intrinsic rewards.

What has emerged through this research is that students need to understand, from the outset, how their peer leader journey, their ‘learnership,’ is integral to their discipline professional pathway. As learning is individualised, so are rewards; and, the rewards students choose to embrace become fundamental components of their own ‘learnscape’.

Institutions have an opportunity to build these co-curricular learning experiences which enable our learners to reach their full potential as graduates. Clearly, processes which encourage students to make purposeful decisions about both their discipline and co-curricular pathways are a responsibility of every institution. Through the Peer Leader Capacity Building Model QUT has responded to this challenge in creating a Reward Framework that engages iterative dialogue between program co-ordinators and student peer leaders. It promotes systems which support and encourage scaffolded strategies for reward and recognition which respond to the motivations that determine an individual’s learning journey. Assisting students to engage in this process, the Peer Leader Capacity Building Implementation Model provides guidance for program coordinators and peer leaders as they journey through cycles of learning and service. The process involves ‘points in time’ in their ‘learnership’ when training, reflection and goal setting needs to occur in order for the journey to progress. The process supports students to emerge as confident and capable graduates.

Future Direction

Now in its pilot phase in 2015, the framework is being trialled and tested across a breadth of Peer Programs and scaffolded through the ‘Enabling’ and ‘Mastering’ phases of the peer leader journey. In collaboration with student peer leaders and program co-ordinators, tools and resources are being developed to assist programs in implementing and resourcing the framework.

Further consideration of student motivation and inclination to volunteer as they progress their peer leader journey is also required. Typically, students as beginning volunteers discounted the need for reward. However, ongoing peer leaders who had contributed over an extended period of time indicated a greater interest in reward as a means of justifying their time spent in volunteering activities. This justification included being able to report their service on a CV or being able to rationalise their time in comparison to paid work. Understanding how needs and motivations change through the learning journey, warrants further investigation.

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