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Practices to enhance peer program implementation integrity to safeguard peer leaders and learners

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Abstract

The powerful influence of peers on fellow students' learning engagement and their ability to foster self-efficacy is well recognised. A positive learner mindset can be fostered through establishment of guided meaningful relationships formed between peers. Recognising the value of peer connections in shaping the student learning experience, peer programs have been widely adopted by universities as a mechanism to facilitate these connections. While potentially beneficial, a lack of knowledge and inexperience by program implementers can lead to program outcomes being compromised. To mitigate this risk, QUT has established university wide systems and benchmarks for enacting peer programs. These measures aim to promote program implementation integrity by supporting and developing the knowledge and capabilities of peer leaders and program coordinators. This paper describes a range of measures that have been instigated to optimise the quality of programs and ensure outcomes are mutually constructive and beneficial for all stakeholders.

Introduction

Propensity to succeed at university is strongly influenced by a student's attitudes and beliefs about themselves as a learner (Macari & Drane, 2011; Zephke, 2013). Students enter university bringing differing values, experiences and constructions of self that influence their individual learner identity. These constructs impact on a learner's in-group identity and their perceptions of the extent to which they feel they belong as a member of their learning community; hence, their level of engagement, motivation and perceptions of their capacity to succeed. For students to flourish academically they need to recognise in themselves they hold the necessary skills and capabilities required to participate and contribute (Dweck, 2006). If a learner has a mindset that their attributes do not align with that of the dominant institutional habitus, this can result in negative and destructive self-perceptions with associated feelings of isolation, alienation and disengagement (Dweck, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Zephke, 2013). For students to succeed they need to believe they bring the necessary 'cultural, age-related, educational and personality-related strengths...to their learning' (Zephke, 2013:6). Zephke cautions that self-belief as a learner is not a 'normal' student attribute, and that institutions should not assume students enter university with the necessary positive learning mindset; however, these attitudes can be fostered by institutions through structuring learning opportunities that enable meaningful relationships to form between learners.

The powerful influence of experienced peers in fostering fellow students' self-efficacy as a learner is well established (Astin, 1993; Glasser, Hall & Halperin, 2006; Tinto, 1998). Astin states 'the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years' (1993:398). Recognising this potential, a plethora of peer programs have been implemented across universities with the intention that these connections will enable students to make a positive transition, and become confident

and capable learners. Experienced peers perform a range of roles including ‘meeting and greeting’ new students during orientation, discipline content learning support and mentoring. In taking on these roles, peer leaders are empowered to exert an influence over the students they are recruited to support. Importantly, in forming these relationships there is the potential risk of negative outcomes where peer leaders may over-step their responsibility, and in doing so, produce adverse outcomes for the students they support. Similarly, if the peer leader is ill prepared for their role, there is the potential for the relationship to have a nil effect, or conversely to have a negative outcome for the peer leader themselves. Program success and positive learning outcomes needs not be left to chance (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Zephke, 2013). Safeguarding learners by ensuring relationships are mutually constructive and beneficial for all participants, places a responsibility on institutions to ensure program fidelity through purposefully guiding program implementation processes and practices.

Responding to this responsibility, QUT has implemented a range of measures that aim to protect the interests of all stakeholders by mitigating potential risks, and in doing so, optimise the positive outcomes of peer programs for participants. Initiatives focus on developing systems, practices and resources that aim to better support and scaffold the knowledge and capabilities of staff and peer leaders to ensure the interests of all stakeholders can be safeguarded. To promote consistency and best practice across programs, a set of standards and practical resources have been developed that provide a framework with guidelines and benchmarks around peer leader roles: responsibilities, training and systems for rewarding and recognising peer leaders. Recommended benchmarks are determined by the peer leader role and are commensurate with the level of responsibility and skills required to perform the role.

QUT context and challenges

QUT has a long history of providing peer programs which are typically championed by individuals who design, implement and coordinate programs (Menzies & Nelson, 2012). This autonomous approach has been an effective mechanism for providing targeted support; however, results in variability in the reach, quality, consistency and sustainability of programs. Responding to these concerns, in 2010 a more strategic university-wide approach to supporting and implementing programs was enacted. The approach did not aim to replace the bespoke model but to implement additional programs where there was an identified need. A key initiative was the establishment of support systems and services provided to ensure existing and new programs were sustainable and designed to meet learner needs.

An initial audit of peer programs across the university was undertaken to establish a profile of the range and characteristics of programs. In undertaking research into program integrity, Dane & Schneider (1998) found that where programs are implemented by a diverse group of implementers it is difficult to ensure that procedures are implemented with fidelity. The audit of QUT’s landscape similarly identified broad variability and inconsistency across programs in regards to all aspects of program implementation and design including: terminology and language, peer leader training and preparedness to undertake roles, expectations around program coordinator and peer leader responsibilities, along with systems to reward, remunerate and recognise leaders. These inconsistencies presented challenges not only in terms of communication between stakeholders, but capacity to provide appropriate peer leader training, systems of reward, remuneration and recognition, and scope to effectively evaluate programs to determine their impact.

Common language and terminology was initially the greatest impediment with inconsistencies and contradictions in key stakeholders’ (program coordinators, training

providers and peer leaders) use of terms to describe the type of program and leader role. The term ‘mentor’ was particularly problematic having an amorphous form and used generically to refer to any program type or leader role e.g. learning facilitation and buddy. Terms including adviser and ambassador, were similarly diversely used as labels for a spectrum of peer leader roles and associated responsibilities. These inconsistencies in naming conventions created confusion and presented an immediate communication barrier as there was not a common shared understanding around peer leader roles, appropriate responsibilities and program objectives.

Variability in program design was similarly problematic and strongly related to program coordinator’s level of experience and expertise with coordinating a peer program. This inexperience routinely resulted in a poor fit between the needs of learners, roles of peer leaders and program design; and routinely program implementers’ enthusiasm and support for continuation of the program beyond the pilot phase. A significant program implementation integrity variable centred on the different types of peer leader roles and the level of preparedness and support provided for students to take on different roles and associated responsibilities. Similarly, systems for rewarding, remunerating and recognising peer leaders varied across programs. As the majority of roles are in a volunteer capacity this raised a further concern with regard to the Fair Work Act and ensuring students are appropriated rewarded or remunerated.

Program implementation integrity and safeguarding measures

Program integrity refers to a set of implementation benchmarks that provide an indication as to the degree of trustworthiness of a peer program and its capacity to create learning outcomes that will be mutually constructive and beneficial for all stakeholders. Success of any peer program is dependent on the skills, commitment and performance of peer leaders and program coordinators. Establishing the conditions for success relies on developing the knowledge and capabilities of both peer leaders and program coordinators to ensure transparency and accountability. In response, QUT is developing a set of guidelines and systems that aim to create the conditions for accountability and trustworthy of programs. Measures include development of guidelines for: peer leader role and responsibilities, pre-requisite and ongoing training, a peer leader rewards framework, program coordinator’s roles and responsibilities to peer leaders. While it is recognised that not all elements are required for a program to be mutually beneficial for peer leaders and learners, the quality of program implementation integrity is considered central to the level of successfulness and that applying these practices will heighten trustworthiness. The following are a sample of initiatives that have been implemented.

Common language: peer leader role descriptors

A key institutional strategy centred on establishing a common language and descriptors around peer leader roles that aligned leader responsibilities with program objectives and training needs. A peer leader role descriptor tool was developed to assist with categorising peer leader roles and responsibilities. To encompass the spectrum of roles, Ender and Kay’s (2001) definition of ‘peer leaders’ was adopted as it most strongly resonated with QUT’s spectrum of roles:

“students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers [that] are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and

persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals” (Ender & Kay, 2001:1).

The umbrella term ‘Peer Leader’ incorporates five generic roles: Orientation Leaders, Buddies, Mentors, Learning Facilitators and Advisers (Menzies, 2015). Role descriptions are designed to guide the decision making process in determining appropriate leader positions: responsibilities, recruitment, training and remuneration. This classification aims to provide greater transparency, equity and consistency across leader positions in regards to appropriate role and responsibilities with commensurate remuneration, reward and recognition. Roles are classified according to the level of responsibility, with ‘Adviser’ being the highest, requiring advanced competencies to perform tasks and extensive ongoing role training. Adviser roles are deemed to be para-professional, non-voluntary, requiring a recruitment process, contract and role descriptions. The framework has now been in use for three years and has proven to effectively represent QUTs current range of peer leader roles and programs. While program coordinators are free to adopt any name to personalise their peer leaders, this shared understanding has enabled clear communication and clarity around expectations of peer leader in the various roles.

Peer Leader Training

Centralized modularised training provides consistent, relevant, and quality-assured training for students taking on peer leader roles (Van Ryt, Menzies, & Tredinnick, 2015). Leader performance is optimised through beginner and ongoing training that progressively develops the knowledge and competencies required to perform duties inclusively, accountably and skilfully. The model differentiates between baseline ‘core competency’ that must be completed only once, and ‘ongoing training’. For leaders who take on multiple roles this process avoids duplication of training across programs, enables training to be designed to meet program and leader needs, and ensures skills and capabilities are continually enhanced.

Volunteers, the Fair Work Act agreements and institutional responsibility

Clarity around leader roles enabled a suite of best practice strategies for managing peer leaders. As the majority of peer leader positions are voluntary this has implications in terms of the university’s responsibilities under the Fair Work Act. A set of resources and guidelines support program coordinators and leaders to remain compliant and safely positioned inside the Fair Work Act requirements. Recruiting and managing volunteers guidelines include: 1) framing questions to determine the nature of the role, 2) position statements, 3) Volunteer Agreement, 4) Volunteer Terms and Conditions, 5) training, and 6) framework of reward and recognition (Tredinnick, Menzies & Van Ryt, 2015). These practices aim to develop the knowledge and capabilities of program coordinators to appropriately support and manage peer leaders ensuring the ongoing development of their personal and professional skills.

Reward, recognition and peer leader development

To ensure peer leaders contributions and commitment are appropriately recognised, a range of institutional and program specific initiatives focus on developing students’ skills, capabilities and opportunities. At a program level, best practice leader management, reward and recognition resources and guidelines have been developed. Recognising that students take on multiple leadership roles, a Peer Leader Capacity Building Model (Tredinnick, Menzies & Van Ryt, 2015) has been developed in collaboration with peer leaders that ‘person-centred’ integrated perspective of the leader experience that encourages students to take control of their ‘learnership’ journey. The model rewards individuals by enabling them to curate and integrate their individual leader/learner experiences (service, training & PD).

Future directions

Program coordinators play a pivotal role in ensuring peer-to-peer experiences are mutually constructive and beneficial for participants and peer leaders. Developing the knowledge, skills and capabilities of program coordinators to manage peer leaders is critical to the success of programs and safeguarding learners. The next phase of QUT's Peer Program Strategy is development of a Program Coordinator Capacity Building Model which aims to supports and reward good practice in program design and peer leader management.

Questions

What other quality assurance practices have other institutions adopted to safeguard the interests of learners and peer leaders?

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