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The Value of Peer Learning For First-Year Postgraduate University Students' Social And Academic Integration

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Abstract

Peer support and need-based aid, particularly in the first year of university are vitally important to university students' social and academic integration and achievement. Taking account of the increasingly diverse student population, this paper explores the perceptions of first-year postgraduate university students concerning support for social and academic integration and focus on the value of peer learning to increase the social and academic integration of first-year postgraduate university students. Focus group interviews (n=5) and individual interviews (n=35) were conducted between spring and winter of 2014 with transfer students (n=35) and working students (n=14). Using Appreciative Inquiry, participants suggested that during the first semester of the academic year the creation of a social setting which facilitates the connection to like-minded, same-age peers is essential for peer relationships and experiencing the benefits of peer support and peer education in an informal context. They further suggested that a reciprocal befriending-scheme organized in a more 'noncommittal' informal setting without any obligations, stimulates students to participate and demonstrates to be more helpful for their social integration. For their academic integration, face-to-face and online peer learning such as student counseling and peer modeling, are especially important tools.

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1. Introduction

Supporting student integration has become an important educational objective, certainly since adequate student integration is considered with improved performance (Bitzer, 2009; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The theory of integration was developed by Tinto (1993) to explain voluntary student departure from undergraduate institutions. Integration encompasses both an academic component (i.e. academic integration) and a social component (i.e. social integration). According to Tinto (1975) “academic integration is the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life.” Academic integration is considered as the willingness (motivation) and the ability (e.g. cognitive abilities) to belong to a group (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Social integration on the other hand can be defined as the extent to which students adapt to the social way of life at university (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). Socially integrated students have many friends at the university, feel at home, take part in extra-curricular activities and feel connected with fellow students and teachers (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of social and academic integration, recommendations have predominantly focused on new first year students coming directly from secondary school (e.g. Byl et al., 2015). This paper however, takes the increasingly diverse student population into account – e.g. greater number of older students, part-time students, working students (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Experiences, needs and wishes of postgraduate students concerning student support for social and academic integration[†] are explored.

Research shows that peer learning provides important opportunities to help new students cope in the first year of university and beyond (Callcott et al., 2014; Byl et al., 2011; Lehmann, 2014) as well as providing an important role model for student success (e.g. Goff, 2011; Story, 2013; Makura, Skead, & Nhundu, 2011; Tangwe & Rembe, 2014). Peer learning can be defined as ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions’ (Topping, 2005, p.631). According to Topping (2015), recent years have witnessed a greater emphasis upon equal-opportunity involvement in peer learning, engaging all members of the educational community without exception. There has also been an increase in reciprocal tutoring and various forms of peer mediation and peer befriending have gained increasing attention (Topping, 2015).

Peer learning can be understood as a social process, in which peer interactions are fundamental (Roscoe, 2013; De Backer, 2015). Social interaction with peers is important for developing a sense of community, which is valuable for all students (e.g. Ke & Xie, 2009; Kahu et al., 2013; Byl et al., 2015). Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to investigate whether peer learning among first-year postgraduate university students can promote social and academic integration during the first semester at university. Therefore, the research questions addressed in the present study are: (1) how should integrational peer support be designed and (2) what is the value of peer learning to optimize the social and academic integration of first year postgraduate university students?

2. Methodology

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach was adopted for this research. AI is a strengths-based research approach that focuses on identifying and replicating successes (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996) and was considered more appropriate than research methods that focus on identifying and solving problems. AI aspires to capture *what* is working well in an educational experience, *why* this is the case, for *whom* and how we might translate success in one aspect of an educational endeavor to other aspects of that endeavor (Fergy, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Shapcott, & Burke, 2011). Hence, we asked participants the following questions: What experiences do you consider successful with regards to peer support in relation to your social and academic integration? What are your wishes and needs for support from peers regarding social and academic integration? What actions need to be taken to promote your socially and academically integration in the university?

[†] Postgraduate students are students who already have a degree in higher education.

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