

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0307

L9 | Caerphilly

Chaired by Pauline Kneale

Thu 12 Dec 2019

15:00 - 15:30

Peer-to-peer support: enhancing undergraduate experiences

Tania M. Dias Fonseca¹, Rebecca J. Maccabe¹

¹*Kingston University, Kingston-upon-Thames, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Peer-to-peer programmes are growing in popularity in higher education (HE) due to an increased interest from institutions to engage students as partners in learning and teaching. Working with students as staff can play an important role in addressing the issue of large class sizes and can contribute to an enhanced student experience; which is particularly important in a marketised HE system. This research explores one institution's approach to engaging final year undergraduate students as teaching assistants (TAs) in engineering to support first year transition and academic success. A questionnaire was designed to ascertain TA experiences of participating in a student-staff role and the impact the role had on academic and non-academic skills development. Since the TA initiative was a pilot study in engineering, the generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations.

Paper: Peer-to-peer support: enhancing undergraduate experiences

Introduction

The HE sector in the United Kingdom is facing challenges due to the globalization, digitalization, rankings, and the social changes on who has access to further and HE. In this context, HE institutions understand the need to rethink teaching strategies, which will best accommodate students learning needs in spite of the qualifications at the start of their undergraduate studies. The tuition fees paid by students raise concerns over quality and as the support provided increases, this adds pressure to university staff. In response to this pressure, institutions across Europe have implemented a range of strategies to support their students to succeed while taking their undergraduate studies (Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2015). Peer-to-peer programmes has been one of these strategies.

This presentation is a first attempt to describe how a peer-to-peer initiative was implemented on the first year of engineering undergraduate programme, having final year undergraduate students from different programmes as TAs to support the transition and academic success of first year students during the academic year of 2018-2019. Not only students could share useful information with the

first year students they would also be able to speak to the experience of a transition having experienced a transition themselves. On the other hand, by supporting first year students, explaining and revising concepts and content, we expect that the TAs would also benefit from the experience both academically and professionally, promoting the development of employability skills.

According to Healey, Flint, & Harrington (2014) 'engaging students as teachers in the learning process is a particularly effective form of partnership.' (p.8). Healey et al (2014) acknowledge the importance of the dual role of staff and students in the teaching partnership. At a time when university resources are stretched and class sizes are increasing, peer-to-peer teaching can play an important role in facilitating an interactive classroom environment and stimulating students' metacognitive skills (Stigmar, 2016). Conversely, reduced resources in HE could result in student TAs being 'under-valued or poorly supported in the contexts in which they are employed' (Sherran, 2016, p.39). Clarence (2018) highlights the need for lecturers to be involved in student TA development and training to form an effective partnership and make tutorials more inclusive. As noted by Sturdivant and Souhan (2011) student-led instruction is mutually beneficial to both the TAs and the student participants as the student TAs consolidate their own subject knowledge whilst supporting the learning of less experienced peers.

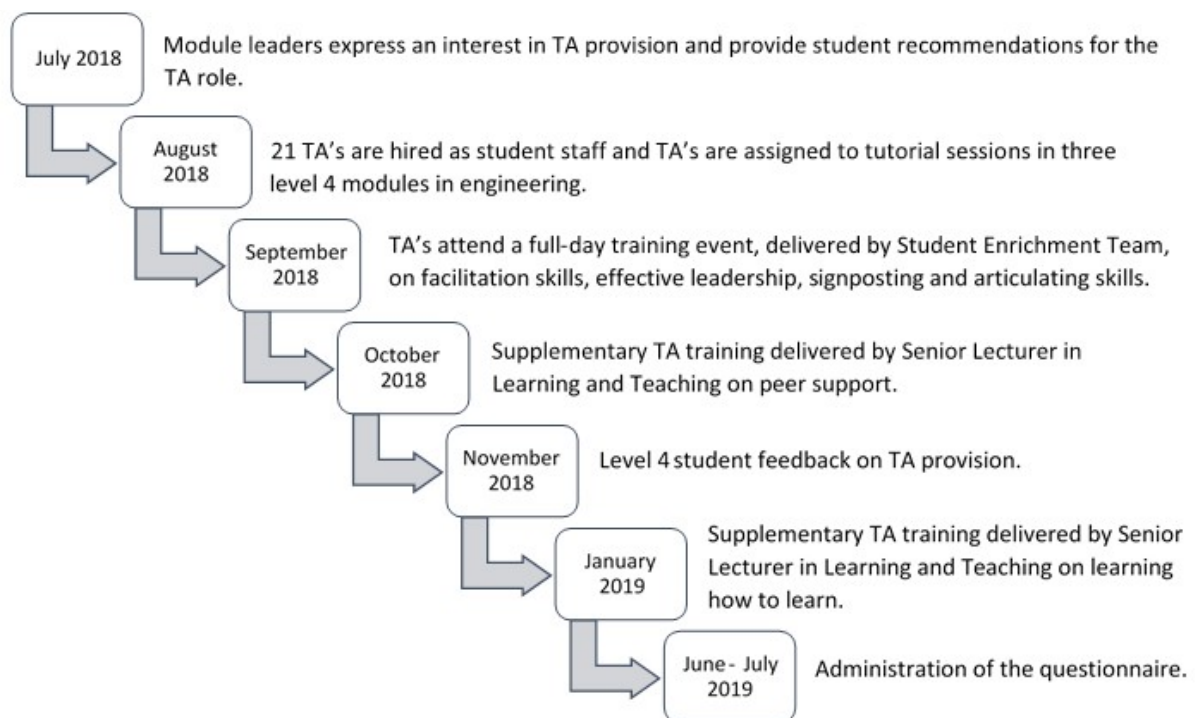


Figure 1. Pilot study timeline

Thus, this presentation will bring preliminary results of a pilot study, which aimed to:

- a) understand the perceived impact on academic and non-academic skills development of the undergraduate TAs when involved in a peer-to-peer programme,
- b) describe the main attributes valued by TAs when supporting their peers, and
- c) evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of having undergraduate students acting as TAs, from their perspective.

The research questions of this study were; what are the skills involved, and developed, by the students when involved in a peer-to-peer programme? Which attributes are most valued by students supporting their peers?

Methodology and data analysis

A mixed methods approach was used through an online questionnaire to collect data to help answer the research questions. The questionnaire had open and closed questions divided in four sections: Overall experience, Academic skills, Transferable skills, Belonging and employability. These sections will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions on both their skills development and the attributes they value most. It will also allow the researchers to evaluate the disadvantages and advantages identified by these students on taking part on a project of this nature.

The questionnaire was designed by the researchers and piloted by students. After the pilot, changes were made and the administration of the questionnaire started in June and it will end July. After this process, a descriptive statistical analysis will be used to analyse the questionnaire-closed questions. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the qualitative data in order to identify common patterns and identify themes that emerge from the data. This data will be coded by the research team.

Conclusion

As the questionnaire is still being administrated, we are unable to report on the results at this point and a discussion will be presented on the SRHE conference.

Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that the project was undertaken to design, deliver and evaluate undergraduate TA provision in engineering. Although this study focuses on the use of TAs in one discipline at one institution, the findings may well have a bearing on the importance of student staff partnerships in HE. Students want more than just a degree from their university experience and on-campus employment can help to enrich their student experience whilst contributing to their academic success.

The preliminary results show that students would recommend this role to other students, it helped to consolidate their learning, developed their team-working skills, and they feel more confident expressing information to peers. Further findings also shed light on university partnerships when designing programmes to enhance students' learning experiences. It will also allow us to reflect on the CPD offer to their academics and on designing workshops on peer support and 'learning how to learn' to students.

References

Clarence, S. (2018) Towards Inclusive, Participatory Peer Tutor Development in Higher Education. *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning*. 6(1).

Collings, R, Swanson, V, Watkins, R (2015). Peer mentoring during the transition to university: Assessing the usage of a formal scheme within the UK. *Studies in Higher Education*. 41(11), 1995-2010 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1007939>

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Sherran, C. (2016). Peer tutors as learning and teaching partners: a cumulative approach to building peer tutoring capacity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v4i1.69>

Stigmar, M. (2016). Peer-to-peer teaching in Higher Education: A Critical Literature Review. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 24 (2), p124-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2016.1178963>

Sturdivant, R.X. and Souhan, B.E. (2011). Peer-to-Peer Teaching Using Multi-Disciplinary Applications as Topics. *Problems, Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies*, 21(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511970903039621>