

# **Enhancing student success and retention: An institution-wide strategy for Peer Programs**

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## **Abstract**

*Higher Education's widening participation agenda prioritises improving access to university for low-SES students. Parallel with these ambitious national participation targets, is the challenge for universities to significantly improve student retention rates; hence, the need to implement strategies aimed to improve the quality of the student learning experience and build a 'sense of belonging'. Within the framework of the First Year Experience Program, Queensland University of Technology has embarked on establishing a whole-of-institution model for peer programs that aims to: 1) improve the student learning experience and outcomes; and, 2) establish quality assured and sustainable programs. This paper reports on the maturation university-wide peer program strategy and considers the challenges of implementing, evaluating and resourcing a sustainable and inclusive approach to peer programs.*

## **Introduction**

Framing QUT's First Year Experience & Retention (FYER) policy are 'whole-of-institution' strategies that aim to improve retention by enhancing the transitional experience of students. An underlying principle of the FYER Strategy is the notion that first year is everybody's business with teaching and support staff having a shared responsibility in providing learning environments that enable students to 'engage academically, socially and personally with their institution' (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2011:2). Current FYER initiatives include: 1) designing and enacting curriculum that engages students in learning, 2) active monitoring of student engagement and intervening when students show signs of disengaging (e.g. Student Success Program add reference), and 3) an enhanced and extended university-wide Orientation program. An institution-wide approach to peer programs forms the final integrated component of the FYER strategy.

Enabling students to make connections with more experienced peers is understood to promote a sense of belonging and facilitate engagement (e.g. Tinto, 2009; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Lack of institutional connection to fellow peers is identified as correlating to early departure; therefore plays a pivotal role in prevention. 'The single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development is in peer groups' (Astin cited in Kift, 2008: 2). Differences of age and gender as well as educational, social and cultural backgrounds are all contributing factors to students' preparedness for higher education and affect their capacity to succeed; hence a student's capacity to 'access' support services is also not equitable (Nelson et.al., 2011; Yorke, 2006). With this understanding, the development of an institutional strategy for enacting peer programs has been framed within a social justice perspective where the active involvement of students from diverse backgrounds is prioritised.

As learning is a social act, the challenge in developing an inclusive Peer Programs Strategy was how to provide meaningful learning-centred opportunities for these students to confidently engage with trusted and experienced peers.

### **Maturation of the Peer Program Strategy**

Faculties and divisions currently manage and provide a range of intentionally designed peer-to-peer activities in support of the FYER strategy. These include mentoring, supplementary instruction, advising, and buddy schemes; and, while these activities and others operate independently, collectively they have become known as 'Peer Programs'. Peer Programs range in purpose, design, evaluation, peer leader role and responsibilities, and importantly their level of accessibility for students. All students have access to university-wide divisional programs through (e.g. Orientation Connectors, Library Peer Advisers) ensuring every student has some access to experienced peers. However, at a faculty level, opportunities for students to interact with experienced peers, in order to enhance their university learning experience, is not equally available across discipline areas (e.g. mentor or learning-centred programs).

### ***What is the Peer Program Strategy (PPS)***

The Peer Program Strategy addresses key institutional priorities around widening participation, retention, social inclusion and academic success. The strategy aims to ensure: 1) growth, sustainability, quality assurance and evaluation of programs; and 2) institution wide coverage of programs ensuring all students have access to a range of coordinated and intentionally designed peer activities for the duration of their student lifecycle. Key elements include:

1) Establish a framework and infrastructure with guidelines and operational support for all existing and new peer to peer activities:

- Communication and promotion (aim: create an institutional understanding that participation in peer program is an integral element of the QUT student experience)
- Streamlining of training e.g. suite of quality-assured training modules; central timetabling
- Centralised operational support staff to facilitate program implementation e.g. peer leader recruitment and training, promotion of programs
- Resources and infrastructure to assist with designing, implementing and evaluating peer programs e.g. peer leader online reflection instruments and attendance records
- System of recognition and reward for peer leaders; and
- Community of practice: program coordinators and peer leaders share practices and expertise

2) Establish learning-centred peer programs for at-risk cohorts (e.g. students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds or discipline areas with challenging threshold skills and concepts).

### ***Development of the Peer Program Strategy (PPS)***

Development of the PPS has been a collaborative endeavour between the Learning and Teaching Unit, Equity Services, Student Support Services, along with faculty and divisional peer programs coordinators. The strategy draws on literature and good practice in the sector to foreground the unique contribution experienced peers, from similar backgrounds or discipline areas, can make for less experienced students by making the implicit explicit. Importantly, peer interactions assist students to be engaged and successful learners through: 1) developing a sense of student

identify and belonging to the university community; 2) acquiring critical academic and learning skills, and 3) developing deeper discipline content knowledge and understanding.

In 2010, a profiling of the QUT peer programs landscape was undertaken to identify the reach, requirements and characteristics of current programs. From this audit five core categories of peer programs and peer leader roles were identified:

- Connectors – Orientation support
- Buddies – faculty-based transitional support during the first few weeks of semester
- Mentors – ongoing sustained relationship with mentees, focus on academic/social support
- Learning facilitators (Peer Learning Communities, PLC) – learning support
- Advisers – specialist support; para-professional (e.g. Library's Peer Advisers, Student Success Advisors), or academic 'training' roles (e.g. Maths Access Centre (MAC) tutors, Faculty student learning advisers).

A gap analysis was undertaken to determine the range, suitability and coverage of peer programs across faculties, discipline cohorts, with a specific focus on equity or at-risk groups. In 2011, new learning-centred programs were trialed to meet the needs of identified high-risk cohorts. A range of one-on-one (e.g. MAC) and group learning-centred initiatives (PLCs) were implemented at QUT's Caboolture campus (60% equity students) aiming to promote student engagement and enhance levels of academic persistence, progression and performance. While trial programs were designed to meet the needs of high risk groups, access was available for all students. Program design was tailored to meet the cohort's learning needs: 1) discipline threshold and learning concepts/skills; and 2) particular challenges related to their educational situation e.g. external students or return to study / mature-aged / second-chance learners. Identification of the specific challenges confronting these cohorts was informed by the QUT Student Success Program that monitors at-risk students (Quinn, Bennett, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010).

### ***Outcomes of trial initiatives: Access does not equal inclusion***

"Access to higher education for under-represented groups is fundamental, but it does not necessarily lead to active participation, engagement, empowerment or success." Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler & Bered-Samuel, 2010:23).

Trial initiatives were evaluated on the basis of program uptake, participation rates of the target cohort and learner profiling (e.g. social, learning and communication preferences). While program participation rates were positive, an analysis of the participant cohort who attended sessions indicated programs were typically accessed by students who were already academically successful; hence the initiatives did not meet the needs of the target at-risk cohorts. Further analysis indicated a range of impediments relating to issues of access and inclusion: 1) self-efficacy and the perception that programs did not provide inclusive social support (students did not feel confident in their academic or social capacity to participate); 2) other time commitments (e.g. family or work), inconvenient time; 3) unaware of program; and 4) lack of understanding of the value of programs. These inhibiting factors resulted in under-representation and participation of students from high-risk backgrounds in the learning-centred programs.

Persistent inequalities exist in educational participation with social inequalities in 'access' despite the range of peer programs designed to support their needs. Importantly, establishment of 'group

learning communities' did not equate to 'equal access and social equity.' In shaping the PPS, a key question emerged '*Do students have equitable access to peers?*' Findings highlight program design must recognise and prioritise students' learning and engagement preferences both socially and academically. Hence, inclusive learning-centred programs require the following framing considerations: 1) are programs available for all students (coverage); 2) do programs meet the needs of the cohort (psychosocial, information or instrumental); 3) are students aware of programs (i.e. communication strategies ensuring student and staff awareness); and of greatest importance, 4) are students able to physically and/or emotionally access the service (e.g. timetabling, other time commitments, computer access and self-efficacy).

A review of current literature into the social determinants of participation in supplementary peer-led academic programs identified the following predictors of attendance: 1) student's perception of themselves and their 'role/responsibility' as a learner; and 2) social-comparison, self-efficacy and a student's in-group identify (Macari & Drane, 2011; White, Thomas, Johnston, & Hyde, 2008). Macari & Drane (2011) identified a student's learning and role identify strongly predicted the likelihood of them accessing a peer program; i.e. the more a student perceives attendance as part of their 'role' the more likely they are to attend. More importantly, a student's self-efficacy as a learner is significantly related to social-comparison concerns and the degree of comfort they experience in participating in group learning activities. Macari & Drane identified that students who dropped out of peer learning programs reported significantly higher social comparison concerns than students who remained in the program. Similarly, White et. al. (2008) identified student's self efficacy around their academic ability in comparison to other students was also a strong predictor of whether they accessed, or ceased to attend, a group learning community.

These findings raise questions around equity, reinforcement of social status differences and how increased diversity in students' cultural and social backgrounds impacts on inclusive learning practices and associated educational outcomes. Macari & Drake caution 'if small-group, peer-led learning is to fulfill its promise, students need to feel comfortable and confident enough in their group roles to participate fully and enjoy the benefits that the method has to offer' (2010:185).

### **Peer Program Strategy: practices to promote social inclusion and academic success**

Educational, social or economic disadvantage means students do not enter university with equal capacity to succeed. A range of peer-to-peer social and learning-centred engagement opportunities must be provided that enable students to both physically and emotionally participate in programs. Further, a framework of institutional support must facilitate flexible, collaborative and student initiated activities. Social inclusion strategies include:

- Blended (face-to-face and virtual) social/learning environments that acknowledge and support students' communication and engagement preferences. Virtual environments enable: 1) students to observe and/ or actively participate; 2) timely and convenient access with sessions recorded for later review; and 3) asynchronous and synchronous communication,
- Group and one-on-one learning communities formed with peers from shared backgrounds e.g. interests, discipline, academic, ethnic or social background, and
- Peer-to-peer learning strategies: 1) facilitate learner awareness and competence in applying effective peer initiated cooperative learning practices e.g. study groups, study buddies; 2) provide institutional support e.g. physical/virtual learning spaces and resources.

- Promotional strategies that target challenging and changing students' learning behaviours by 'normalising' the practice of attending additional social and learning support programs. The 'student voice' is understood to be a powerful persuasive strategy that can be used to change students' belief systems and behaviours e.g. student digital stories to change students' 'role' identity and normalise the practice of attending supplementary peer programs.

### Key Questions for Discussion

Focus: 'Do students have equitable access to peers?' How can institution implement learning-centred peer programs that are socially inclusive.

- Do participants face the same challenges in their own institutions?
- If so, what strategies have participants implemented to promote social and academic inclusivity in their peer programs?
- What are the major challenges in implementing inclusive peer programs?

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