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Editorial: Focus on Peer Leaders and Peer Learning in Different National and Disciplinary Contexts

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Editorial: Focus on Peer Leaders and Peer Learning in Different National and Disciplinary Contexts

Clare Power, Henk Huijser, and Charith Rathnayaka

Welcome to Volume 15 of the *Journal of Peer Learning*. It is pleasing to see the number of quality submissions this year, which has led to the publication of a second volume for 2022, a clear indication that peer learning is an important area of research and scholarship. This edition comprises six peer-reviewed articles offering perspectives on peer learning from across the globe. Three of the articles focus on the experiences of peer leaders, which have received increasing attention in recent years, just as there has been an increasing focus across the higher education sector on the related notion of students as partners. In the Australian enabling education context, Pham considers the role of professional development in strengthening peer leaders' capacity to offer non-academic support as well as a pedagogical focus. Cofer et al. also focus on the importance of non-academic skillsets, in particular those of peer tutors and Supplemental Instruction Leaders in North American learning centres. The third article draws on research into the online peer-assisted learning context at an English university to explore the motivations and experiences of the peer leaders in their program. The focus in the fourth article then shifts to The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) were piloted within a General Education Foundation Programme to support student learning. The final two articles are set in the health disciplines with Safari et al. examining peer tutoring in a midwifery course at an Iranian university and Dennis et al. investigating the possibilities in combining simulation-based learning with peer-assisted learning in the physiotherapy context. The diversity on display in this volume, both in terms of the focus of individual papers as well as the contexts in which peer learning applies, shows the fundamental strength of the notion of peer learning and its expanding application across the higher education sector.

In Pham's article, the author draws on their research data to argue for the importance of contextualised professional development training for peer leaders in an Australian PASS program. The title of the article refers to the specific context of pre-degree enabling programs through which, on successful completion of course and grade requirements, students can apply for their preferred undergraduate programs. The case for the importance of contextually tailored training in fostering the effectiveness of peer leaders as enablers of these students' learning is based on student and peer leader surveys, reflections, and teacher commentaries. The research findings indicate that the capacity for peer leaders to provide vital non-academic support is strengthened through training, which includes pedagogical practices and skills but also provides opportunities for leaders to reflect on and share their experiences and needs while students in enabling programs. Pham suggests that non-academic support, such as trust, social connection, and acceptance, is particularly important for leaders and students in the enabling program

context. Further, the benefits of peer leaders communicating with academics in teaching programs are highlighted as a means of informing faculty about students' needs and concerns.

Cofer et al.'s article similarly focuses on peer educators and includes consideration of non-academic skillsets as important aspects of their role. The context for this article is predominantly learning centres in the United States and includes some comparison between two different modalities of peer educators: peer tutors and Supplemental Instruction Leaders. The researchers employed a survey to explore the perceived gains of peer educators across three subcategories, including academic performance and learning, non-cognitive skillsets, and self-confidence and fulfillment. The findings show that of the three subcategories of gains, those related to non-academic skillsets scored highest with some variance between peer tutors and Supplemental Instruction Leaders. Based on these findings, greater resource allocation for peer educators is recommended to enable ongoing training and reflection.

The article by Rawson and Rhodes reports on a study that investigated the motivations and perceived benefits for students who volunteered to become online peer-assisted learning (PAL) leaders at the University of Derby in the UK. Their study draws on theory and research related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of students who study by distance. However, they have identified a gap in the research that relates specifically to what motivates online students to volunteer for the role of PAL leader. This has, of course, gained urgency as a result of COVID-19. Their study identified that intrinsic motivation was related to an altruistic and empathic approach to help other students to adapt to study in an online environment. Extrinsic motivation included the potential for PAL leaders to improve their own study skills, to gain transferable work-related skills, and the possibility of an award to acknowledge their involvement. While acknowledging that they drew on a small sample, their study includes some interesting suggestions by participants, such as providing rewards in the form of digital badges or other tangible rewards, which could serve as incentives and aid in the recruitment of new leaders. Their study ultimately contributes to providing an equitable and inclusive experience for online students.

Szeto et al.'s article focuses on a General Education Foundation (GEF) Programme at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. To help students in reading classic texts and discussing challenging topics, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) were piloted as part of the programme, and the interdisciplinary nature of the programme makes this an unusual context for PASS. Szeto et al.'s article examines how PASS could improve student learning in seminar-style courses in the form of a mixed-method study from a student perspective. The results show that PASS successfully improved students' understanding of the course content at a cognitive level, that it assisted and motivated them to prepare better for the seminar discussions, and that it also improved confidence and motivation. While these are excellent outcomes, the authors also identify some significant challenges, including differences in PASS leaders' approaches and organisational difficulties.

Peer learning is inherently a collaborative endeavour, where students work together searching for knowledge, solutions, and deeper meanings in their

corresponding disciplines. Safari et al. examine the experiences and attitudes of midwifery student tutors and tutees as part of a reciprocal peer tutoring program that involves a certain degree of role-playing. In this peer learning approach, students can assume the role of a teacher in the classroom followed by group Q&A sessions and case-reporting to assess the overall efficacy of the exercise. In addition, this article discusses how the alternation of roles from student to teacher and vice-versa can lead to rich and insightful learning and teaching. The authors argue that this reciprocal peer tutoring approach can lead to enhanced motivation and positive attitudes towards the overall learning and teaching process while leading to increased multi-channel interactions between students and instructors. This investigation could provide useful insights not only for midwifery and health professional curricula but also for many other practice-based disciplines.

Simulation-based learning has proven to be a valuable learning tool in many practice-based disciplines, including the health-related disciplines such as nursing, midwifery, and allied-health professions. In their article, Dennis et al. present the findings of an investigation where they have combined simulation-based learning with peer-assisted learning to address a scarcity of clinical placements for physiotherapy students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their investigation utilises a prospective qualitative observational design using feedback from peer learners with respect to the efficacy of the peer-assisted learning approach. In addition, the authors discuss the enablers and barriers towards a successful learning and teaching experience while pointing out how this combination of simulation and peer-assisted learning model can be further improved. This approach has the potential to become a sustainable solution at a time when health systems around the world are struggling to cope with extraordinary demand due to a range of challenges on multiple fronts.

As noted, this volume offers an interesting and diverse mix of perspectives from a variety of contexts and disciplines, and we invite you to explore this diversity and imagine its potential applications in your own context.

We thank all the authors and peer reviewers for their contributions to another excellent volume of the journal, and a special note of gratitude goes out to Amber Smith for a great copyediting job once again.