The Chinese social media platform WeChat for an online, onshore/offshore peer mentoring program.

Key Words

peer mentoring, online, social media

Abstract

Online peer learning is a recent addition to the suite of Victoria University's (VU) student mentoring strategies that aim to provide peer-to-peer learning to students who may not have access to such opportunities. Following recent interest on the feasibility of online peer mentoring (Hizer et al. 2017), this Pecha Kuchu discusses the implementation and challenges of a small-scale, onshore to offshore online peer learning program. Despite difficulties inherent to the use of chat communication between students, this program was successful in increasing offshore students' academic performance and establishing social connections with their Australian counterparts. The pilot's aim was to provide peer-facilitated academic support to students studying a first-year business unit at the China University of Finance and Economics (CUFE), providing them with the same support as onshore students. Delivered bilingually and online during their pre-exam period, the synchronous student peer interactions were offered to offshore students studying a specific accounting undergraduate unit accredited at both CUFE and Victoria University. The two undergraduate Chinese-speaking onshore students had previously studied the unit in China themselves and were experienced student mentors. Influenced by a similar earlier program at VU titled 'Building Bridges' (Best et al. 2007), current iterations of this program are conducted via WeChat, a Chinese social media platform, to offshore students who may not have the same opportunities to gain a sense of community amongst their peers within their home country. This online program has been designed to provide the same benefits of face-to-face peer mentoring by following its core theoretical framework of socio-constructivism. Edwards and Bone (2012) have shown that the same benefits that students experience through social interactions in face-to-face peer mentoring can also be achieved in an online environment. Taking peer mentoring theories into account, it stands to reason that an online peer mentoring space which follows the pedagogical and theoretical structures set out by Edwards and Bone (2012) will be effective in helping students connect with their peers and institution. Thus mentoring through WeChat has been designed to overcome the tyranny of distance, and to socially connect peers in a learning environment. In a meta-analysis of research projects undertaken to measure the benefits of peer mentoring, Dawson et al. (2014) concluded that peer mentoring not only helped to improve student grades but connected them to their peers and their university. Despite considerable technological and logistical challenges, the two iterations of the program have so far delivered tangible benefits to the participants in terms of social and academic engagement. Almost ninety percent of respondents affirmed they would join such a program again. For the students who attended, pass rates increased by over 4 percent in 2015 and over 7 percent in 2016 for the CUFE. There are plans to continue to connect these and other offshore business students to the onshore student mentors at VU. This includes the expansion of the program into three additional business units across CUFE and Malaysia's Sunway University in Semester One, 2017.

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