Harnessing the power of peers to support student learning: three initiatives for EAL students in the Faculty of Health

Key Words

peer learning support partnerships health mentor language communication student program

Abstract

With ongoing cuts to university funding, increased competition among higher education providers, and continual advances in technology, there is increasing pressure on universities to find innovative and cost-effective ways of engaging and supporting students in their learning. Students are a valuable and often underutilised resource in higher education and it is not surprising that there has been a move towards partnering with students to create more meaningful and supportive learning experiences. One of the reported benefits of peer mentoring is a greater sense of connection to other students, faculty and the university experience as a whole (Tredinnick, Menzies, & Van Ryt, 2015). This is particularly valuable for international students who often report feelings of isolation and a sense of being overwhelmed by the new learning environment. The supportive relationships nurtured through peer learning programs is reported to bring rich reciprocal international experiences while helping students to relax and learn (Jeong, Hickey, Levett-Jones, Pitt, Hoffman, Norton, & Ohr, 2011). Peer support by other international students also allows culturally and linguistically diverse students to share their own experiences and develop a sense of belonging (Kilstoff, Rogan, Brown, & San Miguel, 2006). If effectively implemented, peer learning initiatives can facilitate positive learning outcomes for both mentors and mentees in higher education institutions (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). Academic Language and Learning educators and advisors are becoming increasingly involved in peer programs to support students in their learning and career outcomes both within faculties and as standalone points of engagement. Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Connections for Learning Program (CLP) is an innovative co-curricular program that provides contextualised, scaffolded learning experiences to support students in their successful transition to academic study and WIL (Work Integrated Learning) in the Faculty of Health. As a significant proportion of these students have English as an additional language, it is essential to provide effective and flexible learning support to ensure positive student outcomes and prevent attrition. In line with QUT's vision to strengthen student engagement and learning (Queensland University of Technology, 2014) three initiatives in peer learning and support for coursework students are currently being implemented and further developed in the CLP: • Student writing mentors in writing clinics • Social Work and Human Services Peer Support (SWAHPS) • Interprofessional role play workshops This brief presentation outlines and evaluates these three initiatives in terms of addressing identified gaps in learning support and creating a sense of connectedness. It also identifies the challenges associated with facilitating peer support programs and suggests considerations for future practice.

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