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Developing an embedded peer tutor program in design studio to support first year design students

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ABSTRACT
An improved first year student experience is a strategic focus for higher education in an increasingly competitive marketplace. A successful peer tutoring program creates a visible community of practice, supports the student learning experience, elevates senior students as ambassadors of the program, and reinforces an emphasis on learning through collaborative exchange. The Interior Architecture program at the Faculty of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, has supported a peer mentor program for several years, predominantly based on an anecdotal understanding of student needs. Using an action research framework, this study reviews the current peer mentor program and develops a best practice model of peer tutoring in the first year design studio setting. This review is based on current scholarship on peer learning particularly in relation to design studio, the student voice from focus groups and exemplars from design programs in higher education.

THE VALUE OF PEER LEARNING IN DESIGN EDUCATION
This paper critically reviews best practice in peer learning and mentorship in design education as a platform for developing a relevant and sustainable peer tutor program in the studio setting. This is achieved by: reviewing recent literature on the role and value of peer mentoring in design education, reviewing publically available models of peer mentoring in design studio, evaluating the current peer mentor program offered in the Bachelor of Interior Architecture (BIA) at The University of New South Wales (UNSW), and developing an enhanced model for implementation in 2015. An action research framework has been used to underpin this study, as the review cycle offers an opportunity for continued reflection and improvement. This paper reports on the *first three phases* of the action research cycle: identifying the problem through analysis, devising a plan, and implementing the plan. Further funding was sought to continue the research, and this will allow a formal evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the new program. In this sense, the current paper focuses on the evaluation of the current program and its subsequent redesign, while future research will focus on the evaluation and further refinement of the new program.

This initiative complements recent changes to the first year curriculum in the BIA program that place greater emphasis on collaborative exchange amongst students, industry, and academic staff in an extended community of practice (Zamberlan & Wilson, in press). There are a number of student learning issues

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that underpin its development. In the BIA program, design educators teaching first year often experience cohorts accustomed to more didactic models of teaching rather than experiential learning environments. Students, the majority of whom transition directly from high school, are more familiar with being rewarded for their ability to reiterate information rather than demonstrate a "deeper" learning that results from more exploratory research processes. Student learning in the design studio is often impacted by a fear of failure, an aversion to risk and ambiguity and a lack of familiarity with processes of enquiry. Further, first year design students tend to view creativity as something that is innate rather than something that can be advanced through exposure to exploration and collaboration. As a result, students are often reluctant to take self-motivated risks to explore avenues of design interest, thereby limiting their capacity to engage broadly with the community of creative practices and to critically participate in their own learning. In assessment-led learning (Harris & James, 2006), the source of expertise is focussed on the studio leader for knowledge transmission, a construct often reinforced by assessment in design studio due to a focus on product above process. This issue is perpetuated by the atelier tradition of design studio, which reflects the expert/novice approach to learning. Learning in the design studio within this traditional model can be considered a rite of passage rather than a transparent, constructive, and collaborative exchange.

This research initiative into the BIA peer mentor program was to support a strategic re-emphasis on the development of a community of creative practice in the first year studio and to facilitate the first year transition experience into the culture of collaborative learning in design studio. In particular, the development of a revised peer tutor program was driven by the recognition that interdisciplinary and collaborative skills and processes, such as co-creation, are becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary design practice (Wilson & Zamberlan, 2015) and rely heavily on effective peer relationships. This study recognises that there is a genuine opportunity to target the development of these emerging skills through effective peer mentor processes in design education.

Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2002) define peer learning as a reciprocal learning activity involving "the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants" (p. 3). They identify key benefits for students in the following areas: working with others; critical enquiry and reflection; communication and articulation of knowledge, understanding, and skills; managing learning how to learn; and self and peer assessment (p. 3). The importance of these skills in design education is clear. Students need to be able to work with their peers, clearly articulate their design ideas, and critically reflect on their own work and the work of others. In this paper, peer learning is discussed through the mechanisms of peer mentoring and peer tutoring programs.

There are a number of different peer learning models described in the literature in the context of higher education (Boud et al., 2002; Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad & Hirst, 1989; Topping, 2005). The aim of some programs is primarily to foster social connections between students. For others, the emphasis is more on providing academic support for learning or support for the development of particular skills. Many programs incorporate a number of

these aims. These distinctions are often reflected in the language used to describe programs and approaches. For example, programs focusing on socialisation often use the term peer mentoring, while those focused more on academic learning within a course or discipline are often referred to as peer tutoring or peer learning. As suggested by Chester et al. (2010), programs can also be shaped by the particular cohort of interest, such as international students, at risk, or mature-age students. Peer tutoring programs may involve senior students tutoring junior students or students tutoring or partnering other students from the same year (for example the "innovative learning cells" referred to in Boud et al., 2002, p. 3), and sessions with mentors can be conducted one-on-one or in groups. Supplemental programs such as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) are often add-on programs that students can volunteer to participate in outside of class time if they need additional support for their learning, while other models are embedded into the curriculum.

As recognised by Kinniburgh (2013), the value of peer mentoring and peer tutoring is comprehensively demonstrated in the literature. There is significant evidence to suggest that such programs benefit both peer mentors and mentees in terms of factors such as educational experience, sense of belonging, and students' transition to university (Boud, et al., 2002; Coe & Keeling, 2000; Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad & Hirst, 1989; Price & Rust, 1995; Topping, 1996a, 1996b, 2005). In a study at Oxford Brookes University, Price & Rust (1995) noted that students who received supplemental instruction from peers, which involved the sharing of ideas and approaches, became more confident in a range of areas, such as approaching coursework, presenting the coursework, taking part in seminars and answering questions, oral skills, and working with people. Topping (2005) identifies additional potential benefits for peer tutors including the ability to critically analyse the work of peers, enhanced leadership and interpersonal skills, and importantly, an enriched understanding of the process of learning in the discipline. A study at Curtin University of 858 mentors participating in a range of peer mentoring programs across the institution revealed benefits for mentors that fell into four major categories including altruistic, cognitive, social, and personal growth (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). These kinds of studies emphasise that peer mentoring and peer learning opportunities can benefit everyone involved. The challenge is to maximise these benefits in the design of such programs. The higher education literature on assessment has often reported that assessment can limit creativity and exploration (e.g. Amabile, 1998), capacities that are central to design learning and practice and therefore central in the promotion of peer learning in this project.

The first year experience literature offers an important perspective on peer learning. Studies focusing on the first year student experience in Australia have highlighted the importance of balancing two key factors: academic challenge and supportive interactions with staff and other students. Attention to these factors has been linked to positive student experience, increased retention, and academic success (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2009; Kinniburgh, 2013, p. 1). This research resonates with the work of Tinto (2009) who has shown that students who are engaged in learning communities are more involved in their learning. Structured peer learning programs are one way to embed learning communities in the curriculum and foster supportive interactions amongst

students. As stated in Clarkson and Luca (2002), peer learning programs can also contribute to the development of graduate attributes through the "pro-active role in thinking, questioning and sharing knowledge" (p. 1).

The literature addressing "transition pedagogy" argues that a student's sense of belonging can be developed through small-scale initiatives that contribute to supporting students' transition needs (Kift, 2009). In particular, these initiatives need to support peer-to-peer relationships, encourage positive interactions between staff and students, and integrate curricular and co-curricular activities (Araújo, et al., 2014). Opportunities for first year students to work with other students in a collaborative way can be seen as embedded cohort-building activities, and support the notion that students' orientation to university is a "process not an event" (Kift as cited by Araújo et al., 2014). In creative disciplines, the first semester of first year has been identified as a crucial time to establish competencies related to work sharing, critique and collaboration (p. 30). Kift's (2009) First Year Curriculum Principles suggest "learning communities should be promoted through the embedding in the first year curriculum of active and interactive learning opportunities and other opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher-student interaction" (p. 41). Surveys of student engagement in other parts of the world reflect similar findings and recommendations (see for example the National Survey of Student Engagement in the US: http://nsse.indiana.edu/). While these opportunities are important throughout a student's degree, they are particularly important in first year in establishing an environment for learning and supporting students pathway towards self-directed learning.

The Supplemental Instruction scheme at Oxford Brookes University was specifically implemented to address dramatically increasing student numbers (Price & Rust, 2011). In addition to creating enriched learning experiences for students, peer learning processes can help teachers respond to increasingly limited resources and significant demands on their time. As suggested by Boud et al. (2002), peer learning opportunities allow students to learn from one another and practice taking responsibility for their own learning: "It is not a substitute for teaching and activities designed and conducted by staff members, but an important addition to the repertoire of teaching and learning activities that can enhance the quality of education" (p. 4). Design educators often report on the limited time they have to provide feedback to individual students in the studio context (Zehner et al., 2009). Providing opportunities for peer learning in the studio is one way to address this issue and expands the range of feedback students receive to help them formulate questions and critically reflect on their work. Smith and Hatton (as cited by Boud et al., 2002) provide evidence that "fostering critical reflection and reassessment of views more readily comes from interchange between peers than even from well-planned discussion sessions with teachers" (p. 8). This suggests that creating an environment that helps to facilitate collaborative interactions rather than focus on the "expert view" can be highly beneficial to student learning.

As recognised by Wilson (2002), providing individual attention and feedback to every student each week in design studio is not always feasible: "To supervise the processing of projects and the criteria-based assessment of 90 individual design projects effectively appeared as an insurmountable problem. I could no longer rely on traditional strategies…" (p. 100). The

challenge is to develop a peer learning strategy where the model of design practice can be maintained, as well as "the important characteristics of experiential learning that [develops] each student's ability to engage in an unfamiliar process of reflective action to learn how to visually refine their budding ideas" (Wilson, 2002, p. 101). It is clear that peer learning provides an opportunity to develop many of the skills expected of designers, which include offering feedback to, and benefiting from the feedback of, colleagues as they move from initial concept to the final realisation of a design project (Wilson, 2002, p. 100). In the context of design, the real value of peer learning is clearly expressed by Wilson (2002) who suggests "designers must develop good interpersonal communication skills and be prepared to value innovation but be analytically critical of personal ideas in the light of experienced collective opinion" (p. 102).

It is important to acknowledge that peer learning shares similarities with other well-documented learning and teaching approaches such as collaborative and cooperative learning. While these approaches overlap in many ways, there may be varying degrees of involvement from the teacher. For example, cooperative learning tends to emphasise the teacher more strongly, while collaborative learning and other forms of peer learning may involve less direction from the teacher (Boud et al., 2002). An emphasis on peer learning can help foster a community of practice amongst learners. The Peer Learning Framework developed at the University of Tasmania conceptualises peer learning programs as communities of practice (Adam, Skalicky, & Brown, 2011) and is used to increase the sustainability of such programs. Peer learning contexts are viewed as communities of practice because they are characterised by "collective and active participation of peers towards a stated goal" (Adam et al., 2011, p. 11).

Boud et al. (2002) emphasise that an important aspect of peer learning is that peers do not have "power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities," and acknowledges that peers may have considerable experience and expertise or very little (p. 4). The authors describe peer teaching or peer tutoring as "a far more instrumental strategy where advanced students, or those in later years, take on a limited instructional role" and where students receive some form of credit or payment for their role (p. 4). There may be a need to apply some of the research on peer learning more generally to peer teaching and peer tutoring contexts to maximise the potential for reciprocal learning and the development of effective learning communities. Boud et al. remind us that peer learning is not a single practice but covers a wide range of activities that can be combined in different ways depending on the context (p. 5). Bruffee (1993, as cited by Falchikov, 2001, p. 4) also cautions that peer tutoring can be compromised by the kinds of tasks that tutors are given by lecturers "which often imply or reinforce the authority structure of traditional education." This suggests that the way tutors are taught is a key determining factor in the "degree of peership" that occurs (p. 4).

While the value of peer learning in higher education is well recognised, Boud et al. (2002) suggest that an investigation of the various ways it is being used in courses reveals that approaches are often ad hoc in the way they are introduced. They stress that this can result in confusion for students and that significant learning opportunities can be missed (p. 3). Hall and Jaugietis

(2011) recognise that "implementation of these programs needs to be informed by theoretical analysis and empirical evidence on the components that contribute most to successful outcomes" (p. 51). In response, the purpose of the current study is to move toward a research-led model that capitalises on the collaborative potential of the studio environment with embedded benefits for mentors and mentees and the extended community of the design program.

In addition to an appeal for more research-led approaches to peer mentoring programs, the literature calls for improvements in the way research is conducted on the *impact* of peer learning programs. For example, based on a review of research on the effectiveness of "Supplemental Instruction," Dawson et al. (2014) note that we should not assume that an improvement in grades is equivalent to an improvement in learning, as involvement from peers can result in students taking a more strategic (but not necessarily deep) approach to learning and assessment (p. 7). More generally, they caution that many of the studies on the effectiveness of peer learning commonly cited would not be considered formal experimental or controlled studies.

In summary, the literature reviewed above highlights that the *potential* benefits of an effective peer mentor or peer learning program are vast. It suggests that students' first year experience can be enhanced through embedded peer learning opportunities, and that peer learning in design studio can help maximise feedback opportunities for students and support the development of key graduate attributes in design education.

PEER MENTOR PROGRAMS AT OTHER AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Several examples of peer mentoring in design education in other Australian universities are of interest in the present study. In 2012, RMIT University reported on a project to design and implement an integrated peer learning approach into the first year of core programs in Art and Industrial Design. The approach involved giving students the opportunity to work together in studio study groups to provide peer feedback on studio projects. The model is based on Boud et al.'s (2002) reciprocal peer learning model. The project at RMIT is of interest in the present study as it set out to "extend, enhance and maximise studio learning" (de la Harpe, Mayson, Mason, Blythe, & Grierson, 2012, p. 5). It involves students in the same course contributing to each other's learning. It also aligns with the peer learning approach promoted in Topping (2005) that "involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing" (p. 1). Peer study groups comprised three to four students and provided the opportunity for peer-to-peer interaction outside of studio class time. In Industrial Design, 20% of the course assessment was allocated to peer learning activities. Students were required to capture the contribution of peer interaction and feedback to the projects in a reflective journal. The evaluation of the program revealed a relationship between the study groups and students' grades, with assessment results for Industrial Design students being significantly higher than in previous years (de la Harpe et al., 2012, p. 5). The program features links between the activities of study groups and assessment, the provision of comprehensive supporting resources and the promotion of group-led learning. A key difference between the RMIT program and the proposed program outlined in this paper is RMIT's focus on creating

groups outside of class time rather then embedding peer learning within studio practice time.

The Architecture School at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has developed a Peer-Tutoring in Architecture (PTA) program to "respond to the unique learning culture of the architectural design studio" (Kinniburgh, 2013, p. 4). Based on substantial research on the first year experience and first year student transition (e.g., Kift, 2009; Krause et al., 2005), the program links with broader institutional peer mentoring practices and strategies while ensuring depth at the school level. For example, the manager of the University's peer mentoring program (U:PASS) collaborated with architecture staff to develop appropriate training for peer-tutors. The program recognises that expectations of high performance need to be balanced with appropriate support and is underpinned by a strong community of practice framework (as espoused by Wenger, 1991). It has also been consciously developed and evaluated according to Tinto's (2005) five institutional conditions for student success and therefore represents an example of a strongly research-led program supported by university First Year Experience Project grant funding and learning and teaching grants.

The UTS program involves selected senior architecture students acting as peer tutors to junior students in the design studio. Peer tutors, who are considered exemplary students, support junior students "in specific critical aspects of the studio culture" (Kinniburgh, 2013, p. 4). Peer-tutoring is offered in all tutorials across five subjects in the first two years of the architecture program. Peer tutors attend three-hour tutorials and their involvement results in a doubling of the amount of time students get to interact and receive feedback (i.e., they have time with their regular tutor as well as the peer-tutor). The program was introduced to engage students in a culture of critique, provide technical assistance to students, provide role models from diverse backgrounds, add value to the educational experience of tutors and tutees, and improve retention rates and students' sense of belonging. The significant strength of this program is in the alignment with the specific enquiry culture of design studio and the emphasis on interactive feedback between peers. Similarly, the revised program outlined in the current study allows staff, studio mentors, and first year students to be engaged in the same space of the design studio, thereby validating the relationships between each and enabling transparent interaction for the progression of learning in real time.

REFLECTIONS ON THE BIA PEER MENTOR PROGRAM

A BIA peer mentor program was conducted in design studio over five weeks in the first semester of the first year program in 2014. In this program, fourth year students were offered the opportunity to submit an expression of interest to participate as mentors at the commencement of the academic semester and candidates were selected according to their weighted average mark and evidence of extra curricular participation in the BIA program and UNSW community. Once selected, a briefing meeting was conducted with the studio convenor outlining the protocols expected, the extent of the contribution and the tasks the first year students are engaged in. One mentor was allocated to each first year studio tutorial group providing one tutor and one mentor for 15 first year students. To complete the peer mentor program successfully mentors had to:

- complete a one page of "top tips" to assist first year students for success in the design studio (tips include: best interiors to visit in Sydney, best places to buy materials and get printing done, best places on campus, best ways to enjoy the BIA experience, and a sample description of the mentor's project work with images);
- participate fully in all briefing meetings and attend three first year scheduled studios;
- demonstrate professionalism in written, verbal communication and punctuality and engagement in constructive student support; and
- pass all required phases of the fourth year studio.

Participation in the peer mentor program was included in a second testamur for the fourth year students involved.

In the first year design studio environment, mentors engaged in the studio group as an additional support to the studio tutor. At anytime in the studio tutorial, for those students not engaged in consultation with the tutor, the mentor was available for assistance on research, idea development, or communication techniques. Mentors were expected to contribute to learning development and culture by:

- creating a welcoming environment for the first year cohort;
- supporting the studio as a vibrant learning environment;
- encouraging students to discuss their work and any issues they may be having in design development and communication;
- sharing knowledge, experience, technical tips, ideas and expertise on learning in the studio; and
- reinforcing ideas on how best to succeed and get the most out of the studio environment.

At the end of each studio day, the convenor would conduct an informal round up with staff and mentors to discuss any issues to be addressed in the weeks ahead.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

Focus groups were considered an appropriate method for evaluating the current peer mentor program. The range of participants' views, experiences, and suggested ideas for improvement, in conjunction with an analysis of recent scholarship, was considered an effective basis for redesigning the program to enhance student learning outcomes. The focus group methodology allowed the researchers to draw on respondents' attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way that would not have been possible using other methods (e.g., one-to-one interviewing or surveys). The data generated by the *interaction* between participants in the focus groups was considered important. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from The Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel under authority of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New South Wales. Focus groups were held with both mentors and mentees involved in the current peer mentor program. The fourth year mentors who participated in the focus group had not had prior mentoring experience, so they were sharing their perspectives on the experience of mentoring for the first time. The data provided many insights into both the benefits and limitations of the program. While a full description of the feedback will be reported elsewhere, the focus

for this paper is to report on areas that were identified by students as needing further improvement. These areas have directly informed the development of the revised model outlined in the following section.

Feedback from fourth year mentors on their experience of the program

A group of fourth year mentors were asked to describe how they experienced being a mentor for first year design students, what the benefits were, aspects of the program they thought didn't work well and how they could be improved, whether being a mentor had any impact on their sense of belonging within the program, if the training they received was helpful, and if being a mentor had any impact on the way they engaged with their own studies. They were also asked what they learnt about design learning by being a peer mentor, if they received enough feedback on their performance in the role, what they would include in a revised program, and what else senior students could do to support first year students in developing their creativity and creative confidence. Fourth year mentors identified both key benefits and constructive suggestions for improving the program based on their experience. The benefits reported by participants strongly resonated with those noted elsewhere (e.g., Topping, 2005). Participants indicated that one of the key benefits of being a mentor was that it helped them to think about their own approaches:

> ...the more you speak to someone the more you gain yourself. You're very surprised about what you know - your own knowledge. Giving advice to someone else makes you think about your own project, for example why didn't I think about my own project that way? You go home and think maybe I could approach it this way. You start taking that teaching to yourself as well. (Fourth Year mentor)

The analysis of focus group data revealed five key suggested areas for improvement: extending the training of mentors, further clarifying the role of mentors, building more structure into the program, enhancing the collaboration between tutors and mentors, and improving the provision of feedback to mentors on their performance. These findings strongly support Goodlad's (1999) criteria for designing and implementing effective peer mentor programs.

Feedback from first year mentees on their experience of the program

First year students were asked how they experienced the peer-mentoring they received, which aspects were most helpful, how the program could be improved, if the mentors helped their learning and understanding of design, whether the mentors had an impact on their transition and sense of belonging within the program/Faculty/University, and if the mentors had any impact on their confidence as designers or their enthusiasm for design studies. Students were also asked if the mentors had any impact on their creativity or creative confidence. While students identified many benefits associated with the program, they also identified four key ways in which the program could be improved. These included further clarification of the role of the mentors and how to approach them, aligning mentor support with the phases of a studio project, using mentors to help model the design process, and having mentors run additional workshops within studio that draw on their particular strengths and are linked with specific challenges faced by first years.

MOVING FROM A PEER MENTOR TO A PEER TUTOR PROGRAM IN THE BIA

The new model responds predominantly to the focus group data regarding an expanded program, with more defined structure, training, and support. This model is reinforced by Kift's (2009) research on transition pedagogy in first year programs, particularly the benefit of collaborative engagement and the promotion of learning communities of practice. The new peer tutor program in the BIA is focussed on support for peer learning in a discipline-learning context within the design studio, rather than an exclusive emphasis on the social transition to university life. In this model, senior students are formally contracted as demonstrators in the design studio and work with the studio staff team (both academic and industry practitioners) to assist in the development of design processes to support learning and visual communication techniques. Described in the UNSW Enterprise Agreement, "[d]emonstration involves the performance of such duties as the conduct of practical classes by setting up or supervising the correct method of use of equipment; issuing prepared instructions about experimental procedures or projects from the lecturer; supervising undergraduate students in carrying out experiments or laboratory work and being a source of technical advice" (UNSW, 2011, p. 61). Engaging senior students in this way has manifold impact. Employment supports the students' financial burdens in an increasingly expensive learning environment and clarifies their roles in a contractual arrangement. More importantly, however, this form of engagement acknowledges students' leadership potential, assists in developing a collaborative and creative community within the design studio and makes more transparent the creative dynamic possible between academia, industry, and student within a practice based learning environment. For the first year cohort, this model of support enables academic transition into the university environment through the work of design studio, the core of the design studies at the BIA. In addition, establishing this form of community of practice encourages the socialisation of first year students through the promotion of relationships with the senior student cohort. For the BIA, it also assists in succession planning and building stronger relations with the student body as future industry leaders.

Employment as demonstrators will be based on expression of interest, good rankings in design studio, excellent communication skills, the potential to work effectively as part of the staff team and the ability to engage with junior students in supportive dialogue. In the first iteration and in a common shared studio environment, five demonstrators will act as "satellite" workstations amongst the eight studio groups for eight weeks of the 12-week semester program. In the studio, the demonstrator's role is to undertake the design studio projects within the scheduled class time and concurrent with the first year cohort. Modelling the design process in real time, demonstrators will assist students on how to commence a project, consider and develop research, progress experimentation, critique and develop ideas and the skills associated with completing a proposal for submission. Importantly for the first year cohort, and in direct response to the focus group data, demonstrators will model and be able to assist in the development of various communication techniques required of a design studio proposal including concept hand drawn sketches, models, Photoshop renderings, and portfolio development. In the scheduled class time, first year students will therefore have access to the studio tutor for more formalised

feedback and a group of senior student demonstrators dedicated to assisting in research through design and skill development.

Demonstrators will receive workshop training in creative collaboration, student engagement, and peer support particular to design studio learning. The workshop will introduce demonstrators to the first year studio projects and the driving intention of the studio along with a briefing meeting with all studio staff to introduce and delineate roles within the studio. Demonstrators will also attend weekly studio staff meetings to discuss the progress of the studio and assist in redirection of assistance as required. Focus groups will be run at the end of the semester with the demonstrator group and first year students to assess the success of the revised program and changes will be made accordingly. Supplementary to this renewed approach to peer learning in the BIA program is a faculty-wide and student-led peer mentor program aimed specifically at improving students' transition to university at a social level. The BIA demonstrators are also able to access the training and resources of this Faculty-wide mentor program.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to improve a peer mentor program for students enrolled in the Interior Architecture degree at the University of New South Wales. Recent literature on peer learning and mentoring, and case studies from other Australian Universities, revealed the importance of a research-led approach to developing such a program. Feedback from students who participated in the current peer mentor program identified a number of areas for improvement. These included further training and role definition for mentors, stronger communication between studio tutors and mentors, opportunities to link learning with studio projects, using mentors to help model the design process for first year students, and having mentors run additional workshops within studio that are linked with specific challenges faced by first years.

These areas resonate with the scholarly literature on what constitutes an effective peer mentor program. Collectively, the literature, case studies and student feedback contributed to the development of the revised model outlined in this paper. The importance of an enhanced peer mentor program in the BIA was also strongly motivated by the notion that peer learning, when embedded effectively, plays a vital role in helping students to develop their creative confidence and skills—abilities that are emerging as central to contemporary interdisciplinary design practices where processes such as collaboration and co-creation are paramount.

At the writing of this paper, funding from UNSW has been granted to evaluate the effectiveness of this program and refine the approach to peer learning within the BIA program, thereby continuing the action research cycle. This support will enable a review of the initiative, the development of resources for support and training of the peer tutors and the studio staff and reflection on possibilities for improvement and expansion of the program.

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