2013

Meet-Up for success: The story of a peer led program's journey

Lindy R. Kimmins
University of Southern Queensland, lindy.kimmins@usq.edu.au

Meet-Up for success: The story of a peer led program's journey

Lindy R. Kimmins

ABSTRACT

Technological advancements have forced space and time to evolve to present a virtual university that allows increasing numbers of students to study from a university rather than at university. The best people to guide and advise students through their university journey are experienced students. As Longfellow, May, Burke, and Marks-Maran (2008, p. 95) put it, teachers may be content or subject experts, but current "students are experts at being students." Studies by Falchikov (2001) found that student leaders provide "expert scaffolding" that steps students from one level of learning to the next within the discipline area. Peer-assisted programs contribute to the development of a caring learning community as their trained leaders scaffold learning and negotiation between lecturer and student, both of which are desirable for student success and sustainable learning practices. Peer-assisted programs also provide a body of students with leadership qualities. This paper briefly explores the history and evolution of an on-campus peer led program to one that is embracing technology and online modes of peer learning. The program's endurance hints at excellence and its dynamic nature is founded on innovation.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY

A large number of non-traditional students are currently being accepted into universities and there has been a simultaneous growth in non-traditional modes of study, namely online or distance learning. There is a concern that students admitted to university on the back of these trends are falling by the wayside. This paper will briefly examine attrition as one of the prominent concerns of universities and academics today. It will explore the idea that the development of a sense of belonging is one of the mediators against attrition. It will also discuss the notion that the study skills that are essential for student success should not be addressed in add-on remedial modes but rather should be embedded into the context of the curriculum. This paper will argue that the development of a peer-led program is one successful way to promote the idea of community for both distance and on-campus students and address the challenge of integrating study skills into discipline content.

THE CURRENT STORY IN REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

Background

Students of today's university find themselves in a very different environment to that of their predecessors. Technological advancements have forced space and time to evolve to present a virtual university that allows increasing numbers of students to study from a university rather than at

university. The days of a select number of school leavers being university students have been replaced by today's situation where a larger number of people of all ages, of varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, with varying prior educational standards, and living in any part of the world, choose to undertake study from any of a larger number of universities as part of what they are "currently doing" (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The lack of homogeneity amongst today's student cohort has created new challenges for university staff globally (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Students are accessing universities from a wide range of spaces with a wide range of skills. They expect (even demand) information and support offered via technologically-current pathways at times and in spaces that fit with the rest of their busy lives. Despite these changes in student expectations, it is important that as educators we are not tempted to moan about "students today" and long for the good old days. The student has evolved with societal change and we must too. It is too easy to blame the student.

Distance Learners

The dominant and traditional spatial form of university study in western cultures since the middle ages has been the university campus we all recognise (Cornford & Pollock, 2002). In universities with large numbers of traditional on-campus students, there may be a tendency to focus predominantly on these campus-based students and marginalise the external student. It has been suggested that distance education is treated by educators as second best, the kind of education you get if you cannot put in the extra effort to attend on-campus (Raddon, 2006). Physical presence within time and space is afforded recognition and power: absence from it is to relinquish existence (Fuery, 1995). Distance learning then is positioned as "other."

Studies of distance learners, however, have found that most students reflect positively on distance studies, intimating that their choice to study a course is based on the provision of distance options. They enjoy the absence from the restrictive time and space requirements of university on-campus study. Indeed, many revel in what they consider to be the power and control they have over their studies (Raddon, 2006). Most of them view distance learning as an opportunity that they would not otherwise have been able to enjoy given the other factors in their lives, such as work and family. Rather than second choice, for some it is the only choice (Raddon, 2006).

One negative feature of distance study offered by the students in Raddon's (2006) study was the lack of communication and interaction. They suggested that the contact they experienced with staff was highly valued and that they yearned for contact with other students. However, it was noted that opportunities for contact that were provided were not always utilised, suggesting that these distance students prioritised their precious time for other aspects of their lives.

Learning at university has been defined as dialogue between lecturer and student. While traditionally this is achieved by both parties occupying the same space and time, it is believed that it can also be achieved by utilising today's synchronous technologies (Laurillard, 1999). If distance students are not accessing opportunities for contact regardless of the format they take,

then perhaps the university staff should refocus or rethink the support offered. Lecturers need to be given opportunities and training on online tools and strategies (Caladine, Andrews, Tynan, Smyth, & Vale, 2010). Feedback could also be sought from students on the type of support that would engage them.

Non-traditional students

Traditional university students were usually socialised into university culture by parents and siblings who had undertaken and generally survived the same experience (Laing, Chao, & Robinson, 2005). They could provide timely advice and warnings. Non-traditional students do not have this advantage. Many have unrealistic impressions of what university is all about: they see a glamorised image complete with a stereotypical exciting social life and a laid-back approach to academic work (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Other non-traditional students are influenced by their experiences in the school education system where many had not learnt to take responsibility for their own learning. These unrealistic expectations and perceptions and lack of preparedness can result in withdrawal from university.

Students who withdraw

Researchers have studied a range of factors that affect a university student's progression, or indeed, prompt withdrawal. For example, academic integration (Braxton & Lien, 2000, cited in Prescott & Simpson, 2004) and social inclusion (Prescott & Simpson, 2004) are both held to be significant factors. Yorke (2000) identified six main complex factors:

- poor quality of student experience
- inability to cope with the demands of the program
- unhappiness with the social environment
- wrong choice of program
- matters related to financial need
- dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision

In fact, much of the research into withdrawal has involved factors such as these. Prescott and Simpson (2004) however are at pains to point out that it is essential for university staff to ensure that what they call "hygiene needs" (which correspond to Maslow's basic physiological and safety needs) are met first. Students cannot progress to dealing with social and academic issues until the basic organisational and administrative requirements have been sorted out (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). Studies by Thomas (2002, p. 426) also identified a number of factors that influence a student's decision to withdraw from university. These include: "academic preparedness, the academic experience, institutional expectations and commitment, academic and social match, finance and employment, family support and commitments, and university support services."

If on-campus students are often disoriented when they arrive at university (Billing, 1997), it can be argued that distance students would be similarly affected when faced with the need to make adjustments to their personal, social, work, and intellectual life. Indeed Forrester, Motteram, Parkinson and Slaouti (2005) suggest that distance students experience a need for the same support services as traditional students. Research into induction programs offered to distance students at a traditional UK university by Forrester et al.

(2005) indicated that there were four main themes that needed addressing, one of which was the need "to feel integrated and have a sense of identity as a student of the university" (Forrester et al., 2005, p. 298). Developing this sense of belonging is a difficult task. One means of facilitating this sense of belonging is the opportunity to take part in synchronous online dialogue (Cain, 2003, cited in Forrester et al., 2005).

What is currently being done to help students

The strategy for managing the influx of non-traditional and under-prepared students has been to establish support courses or workshops run by non-discipline specific departments that focus on generic academic skills (Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). It is then hoped and assumed that students will go off to their various faculties and apply these skills in context. This has been the approach as discipline-based lecturers in many universities have been reluctant to address the issue for many reasons, including time restrictions. Many students are simply not benefiting from such courses.

However, research has for some time suggested that unless study skills are integrated within the content of the course, they have little bearing on the student's overall academic performance (Keimig, 1983). This has been supported more recently by many researchers who claim that for students to successfully develop the academic skills required to be successful in their chosen discipline, study skills/academic learning skills need to be addressed through the curriculum. Gee (1990), who has researched South African universities, argues that support courses that are usually run by academic literacy/language practitioners are, by nature, generic and decontextualised. They discourage students from seeing the link between these skills and their course content. They are even, he suggests, creating their own "pseudo-discourses" that stand alone and are not part of any other discourse within the university (Gee, 1990). It can be argued that in peer led programs that are integrated into courses or programs, students see study skills as part of the course (Longfellow et al, 2008). Students are guided seamlessly in what to learn as well as how to learn it.

If, as it is argued, students learn academic literacy skills best from within their discipline of study, the best people to learn from are "insiders": those who have mastered the specific discourse and are themselves part of the discipline's community (Jacobs, 2005, p. 477). As Longfellow et al. (2008, p. 95) put it, teachers may be content or subject experts, but "students are experts at being students." Studies by Falchikov (2001) found that student leaders provide "expert scaffolding" that steps students from one level of learning to the next within the discipline area. Hand-in-hand with this discipline based approach is the growing recognition that social interaction with peers is also a solid platform for learning. Lave and Wenger (cited in Longfellow et al., 2008, p. 95) have proposed a theory of "situated cognition" in which they claim that knowledge does not exist solely in people's minds but is communicated through social interaction.

Wingate (2006) agrees with the need for discipline-based programs. In her research of the UK system, she notes that the approach taken was remedial or based on a deficit model in all but two of the universities searched (Wingate, 2006, p. 458). The students were considered to be the problem as they were viewed as being weak or deficient. She claims this "bolt-on"

approach is ineffective and has severe limitations (Wingate, 2006). Because the support is not embedded into the context of the discipline the students have come to university to study, they can gain the impression that certain techniques can be acquired separately and attached to any type of study. This counters the epistemological belief that learning involves deep engagement with the subject and the specific discipline in which it is set.

A solution

This paper argues that a peer-led program can assist academic staff in their aim to reduce withdrawal numbers by providing a comfortable embedded base from which learning can thrive and flourish. Once the effect and impact of successful orientation programs has faded, peer led programs based in the faculties can build on the embryonic sense of community and fledgling awareness of university culture, developing the students to a stage of maturity and confidence in their chosen discipline-specific learning career. The peer leader is the "insider" that Jacobs (2005) claimed was essential for embedded learning. The peer led program provides students with a comfortable discipline-based forum where both social and academic integration can occur.

Beer and Jones (2008, p. 67) list some advantages from a student perspective of being part of an effective learning network: additional assistance with challenges, especially from peers; more perspectives on problems; access to expertise; more meaningful participation; and a stronger sense of identity within their chosen discipline and university life in general. By participating in peer led programs, students are also taking ownership of their learning skill development. Longfellow et al. (2008) considered this a significant benefit of peer programs, particularly in light of the focus in the UK on retaining students from non-traditional backgrounds. Similarly in Australia, Geoff Scott (2008), researching retention at the University of Western Sydney, identified a number of factors that are of particular relevance. The following are all factors that are covered by peer led programs: the presence of a supportive peer group; consistently accessible and responsive staff; clear management of student expectations, including active briefings on "how things work around here"; prompt and effective management of student queries; and "just-in-time" and "just-for-me" transition support, including the use of self-teaching and orientation materials written by students from a similar background who have successfully managed the transition and are willing to share their experience.

It is important to note that the peer led programs discussed here are academic support programs, not mentoring programs; Topping (2005, p. 632) claims confusion between the two is evident in the literature. Mentoring involves supporting, encouraging, and positive role-modelling and is often one-to-one. While peer learning encompasses this form of support, it covers much more. Peer learning engages with the cognitive domain as well as the social. A peer leader provides "support and scaffolding from a more competent other" who can also provide a "cognitive model of competent performance" (Topping, 2005, p. 637). Topping's research is largely school-based but he suggests it parallels significantly with university peer learning as the principles underpinning it are the same. Topping (2005) claims that peer learning encourages active participation in learning, fosters personal as well as social development, and facilitates the development of transferable

academic learning skills, such as communication. It also grows motivation, confidence, and enjoyment in learning, which are sustainable. Peer learning also demonstrates a caring ethos that contributes to a sense of a cohesive learning community (Topping, 2005, p. 643).

THE STORY OF PEER LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Brief history of the university

The University of Southern Queensland began its life as the Queensland Institute of Technology (Darling Downs) in sheep paddocks on the edge of the city of Toowoomba in 1967. In 1971, it became the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE) and was finally named the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in 1992. There are currently three campuses: Toowoomba on the Great Dividing Range 120 kilometres west of Brisbane, Springfield on the south-western outskirts of Brisbane, and Fraser Coast at Hervey Bay. The university now has more than 26,000 students, 75% of whom study by distance.

Peer learning beginnings

The highly successful peer mentoring scheme Supplemental Instruction (SI) has spawned the development of many successful peer led programs. SI was developed by Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1973 (Martin & Arendale, 1993). It has since been implemented in many countries around the world. In Australia, SI is often known as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). The program was started to encourage students to actively engage with course content and each other, exploring strategies for successful learning. Here at the University of Southern Queensland, an SI program was first run in a nursing course in 1995. This program expanded into other discipline areas such as finance and accounting. In 1998 it was decided to develop a more USQ–specific peer program and PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Strategy) was born. It continued in operation in a small number of courses over a number of years. In 2003, the Australia Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reviewed USQ and PALS received a commendation. It was then placed on the AUQA (2011) Good Practice Database.

Traditionally a face-to-face program, PALS was expanded in 2005 to include online synchronous dialogue via MSN Messenger. USQ has long been recognised as a distance learning university that strives to support its students wherever they live (Taylor, 2008). USQ was one of the first universities to adapt its peer program for distance students via audiographic sessions and night on-campus classes. The sessions were again hailed by students as a success as they provided that extra element of rapport and comfort that is difficult to achieve in lecturer or tutor/student situations, particularly as a distance student. As one student noted on her survey in 2006: "It's good to talk to others who have the same questions and as an external student you miss out on asking the spontaneous little question."

Students also appreciate the opportunity for contact with other students. When asked if they enjoyed the opportunity to interact with other students that MSN Messenger provided, one student responded: "I did, it was my first MSN chat too so I was probably a little over excited! But, like I said, when you're external, you sometimes feel like you're the only one." Students also

believe peer sessions help improve their grades: '"I definitely got points I wouldn't have otherwise received in my assignment" (2006 student).

In its traditional form as support for on-campus or local distance students, the program engendered enthusiasm from both students and academic staff. For example, the lecturer of a first year marketing course in 2006 found that "the students who attended PALS sessions found them exceptional value for their learning and understanding of the course content, course requirements and the various assessment items" (2006 lecturer).

The Meet-Up program
As staff increasingly began to develop and modify PALS to suit USQ and its students, the program no longer fitted perfectly under the SI banner. Consequently Meet-Up was created in Semester 2, 2008. The program continued to service on-campus students at all three USQ campuses, but has also specifically targeted distance students. As Meet-Up developed away from the traditional SI model and was adapted to suit USQ's stakeholders and their needs, further development of Online Meet-Up was an obvious decision. The program now addresses the growing need for digital forms of peer learning by engaging in new online initiatives. With the majority of USQ's students studying externally, it was imperative to seek new means to assist them.

The aims of the program are to provide academic assistance to students through the development of their academic learning skills and their understanding of discipline concepts in order to enhance their academic performance and develop a sense of learning community. This assistance is provided in on-campus sessions and/or online environments by trained student or peer leaders who facilitate activities, exercises, problems, or practice opportunities in collaboration with lecturing staff. The program also aims to contribute to the establishment of a body of student leaders at the University and assist with the development of student leadership skills.

The Meet-Up program's objectives are to:

- provide a social learning platform where students can engage with discipline learning via group participation with their peers
- improve students' learning skills, including thinking and reasoning, independence, and reflection
- provide students with useful and successful study strategies and techniques
- develop leadership skills in student leaders
- provide feedback to academic staff on students' needs and expectations
- serve as an explicit example of USQ and Faculty support for students

Meet-Up therefore is a peer learning academic program integrated into courses and programs that develops cognitive as well as social skills; it is not a mentoring program. As such, it incurs a cost as leaders are paid. Despite the cost of the program, the benefits to leaders, student attendees, and the wider university are significant in terms of student success and retention, student satisfaction, the development of student leadership skills, and the enhancement of graduate skills and qualities. In addition, the financial cost of the program is outweighed by the cost to the university of student

withdrawal. The program is flexible and exists in a number of different models to cater for the varying needs of students and staff.

Students who have been successful in their studies in a course are selected by the Meet-Up Co-ordinator and/or course lecturers to be student leaders. They are interviewed and then trained by the Meet-Up Co-ordinator in techniques that facilitate collaboration and help participating students develop the learning skills they need to be successful in the course. Student leaders are also trained in online procedures that facilitate learning. Training encourages leaders to share their personal study experiences with other students. Training is carried out on all three campuses.

These trained student leaders then conduct sessions, face-to-face and/or electronically. They are required to meet regularly with their lecturer to plan and reflect on their Meet-Up work. They are also required to complete surveys about their experiences. If they are selected as leaders in subsequent semesters, they are invited back to training days to advise, trouble-shoot and role-model for the new batch of leaders. They are asked to share reflections on their experiences and form an "expert panel" as part of a professional development session.

Online Meet-Up

Peer led programs are not restricted to on-campus students but can also be run for distance or off-campus students via technologies such as MSN Messenger in the past and now Wimba, Blackboard, and others. The structure of the Meet-Up program ensures that it can cater to all students, traditional or non-traditional. An online forum managed by a Meet-Up leader provides a comfortable, informal, and friendly space where students can ask their "silly" questions. Students' confidence can grow in this supported comfortable space and the interaction with the leader and other students contributes to quality learning (Kop, 2012). Currently many courses are running an Online Meet-Up forum.

In these various forums, student leaders (generally from Toowoomba campus), post advice, exercises, and material that the students can engage with actively or passively by "lurking." Dennen (2008) argues that lurking in online environments is positive. Students may be peripheral participants engaged in legitimate vicarious learning. Reports generated on activity in Meet-Up forums demonstrate that students are certainly visiting the space.

Feedback provided on the forums includes comments such as this: "Thanks heaps for this post. I'm a distance student so it is nice to get some tips and hints like this on the forums because I can't attend the on campus meet ups. Thanks again" (Semester 1, 2012, nursing student).

Table 1
Number of times Meet-Up Forums accessed from Weeks 1-7, Semester 1, 2012

Course	Total no. of students enrolled (external, on the 3 campuses, online)	No. of times accessed
ECO1000: Economics	371	1262
FIN1101: Introduction to Corporate Finance	424	2574
NUR1120: Social Determinants of Health	523	1315
MAT1500: Engineering Mathematics 1	335	1136
STA2300: Data Analysis	302	930

EVALUATION OF MEET – UP

Attendance at Meet-Up sessions is recorded and a summary report is compiled each year using attendance data and data from feedback surveys. In Semesters 1 and 2 in 2011, 846 students availed themselves of the opportunity to attend on-campus Meet-Up sessions in approximately 30 courses.

All stakeholders (lecturers, student leaders, and students) are given the opportunity to provide feedback about Meet-Up in surveys made available each semester. The surveys provide qualitative data and focus on participants' views of the support offered.

Lecturers who run Meet-Up in their courses are convinced of its benefit to their students, their leaders, and themselves: "I can see the quality of on campus students' assignments have improved and those who regularly attend the meet up sessions have achieved satisfactory results for this course" (Semester 1, 2011, lecturer).

Similarly, students who participate in Meet-Up, generally find the experience rewarding.

> Starting University has been a fairly stressful experience, which has been full of unexpected tasks that have been challenging… Attending the meet up groups that have been running every week was an excellent way of being able to complete this interview… Talking to the second year student helped me a lot in understanding how and where to find help. It was good to hear from other people that everyone goes through much the same as what I am experiencing at the moment. (Semester 1, 2010, nursing student)

On the end of semester student surveys, questions are asked that relate to students' perception of Meet-Up. Students are asked if they believe they increased their understanding of course concepts by attending Meet-Up. They are also asked if they are comfortable asking questions in Meet-Up and if they believe Meet-Up helped them do better in exams and achieve a better grade.

As an example, in the 150 surveys completed by students in Semester 1, 2011, 92% stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that Meet-Up helped them do better in assignments (Figure 1). It is unfortunate that while 463 students attended Meet-Up across the three campuses in Semester 1, leaders in some cases neglected to provide surveys until the last week of semester when attendance was low or when students were at clinical placements or practicums. Some leaders were also tardy in returning their surveys, missing the deadline to have their data inputted.
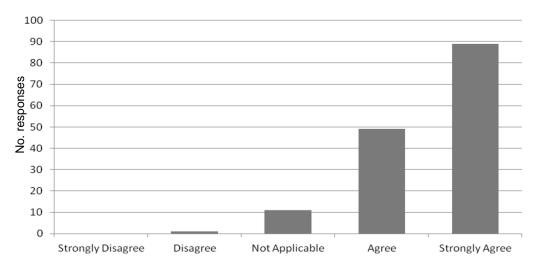

Figure 1. Student responses (n = 150) to the survey item: "I believe Meet-Up helped me do better in assignments."

The surveys also allow space for comment should students choose to do so. Two comments from Semester 1, 2011 were: "I liked speaking with people who had 'been there done that' and found I could relate with them on a different level to lecturers," and "I found Meet Up was conducted in a very supportive and comfortable environment. [Leader] was and continues to be very well prepared and offers a lot of advice. He actually makes [discipline] fun."

Student leadership

Peer tutoring has also been found to have benefits for the leader as well as the student and the lecturer. The "expert" in the process is believed to benefit too by being the "teacher" in the process (Vygotsky, 1978). This supports the old saying still believed by many that "to teach is to learn twice" (Topping & Ehly, 1998, p. 12; Topping & Ehly, 2005, p. 635).

Meet-Up is run by a dynamic group of student leaders. They are trained initially in small group facilitation before their first sessions. In subsequent semesters, these leaders are invited back to advise, trouble-shoot and role-model for the new batch of leaders. These students grow in capacity in all communication skills with each session they deliver. They develop the graduate skills and qualities desired by employees as they go about their weekly tasks as Meet-Up leaders. An extract from a Meet-Up leader's comments on a Semester 1, 2011 survey is given below:

Meet-up has had a significant impact on my own skill development. This experience has given me the opportunity to improve key interpersonal skills that are invaluable to personal and professional development. The skills that have been positively built on include; communication, planning, organising, collaboration, leadership and problem solving. These skills not only enable future professional development, but also help with interactions with people and the building of meaningful relationships. Meet-up has helped me improve on these skills. The skill that has greatly been impacted is communication. Meet-up has enabled me to communicate better with groups of people, where I otherwise would not have been able to. The involvement with Meet-up this semester has helped me maintain my focus on my own academic growth, as Meet-up required me to stay organised and plan my time effectively. Meet-up gives leaders, including myself, the opportunity to contribute positively to our own academic growth and skill development.

Research conducted into leadership activity participation in 10 institutions in the United States by Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) revealed that students benefited from leadership roles in a number of ways. Not only did they develop the more apparent leadership skills, including goal setting, decision-making, and conflict resolution, but they also became more community-minded; that is, they increased their commitment to encouraging the development of leadership and the understanding of different racial and ethnic groups in other students (Cress et al., 2001, p. 25). However, the researchers found an anomaly within the institutions. While many institutions claimed that the development of leadership skills in their students is an important educational goal, Cress et al. (2001) observed that "competing institutional priorities often hinder the advancement of intentional leadership development programs" (p. 15). Little attention was paid to committing to provide opportunities for students to experience "the tangible developmental outcomes" that leadership activity programs offer.

More recent studies of student leadership have confirmed the findings of Cress et al. (2001). Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) undertook a phenomenological study of student leadership, interviewing a number of student leaders in American colleges. The studies revealed an overwhelmingly positive response from the leaders involved. For example, student leaders commented on the number of people, including lecturers, whom they met, the benefit of being eased out of their comfort zone, the pleasure of getting something more out of university than just having gone to class, and the improvement in their own grades despite the additional busyness that being student leaders entailed (Logue et al., 2005).

While the impact of leadership skill development programs in organisations has been investigated and explored, the student leadership arena of peer learning in universities has experienced few studies and is not well-researched (Cress et al., 2001, p. 15). This is an area I am planning to explore further.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of societal and university life calls for a readjustment by university staff of the structures and pedagogies used to assist students in their learning journey. One thing that has not changed is the need to develop a sense of belonging. This sense of community appears to be a pre-requisite to successful study for the majority of students whether they are distance students or on-campus. This sense of feeling part of the wider "family" can be developed in programs of peer led sessions. This paper has argued that a peer-led program, well-managed and closely supervised, can assist academic staff in their aim to reduce withdrawal numbers by providing a comfortable embedded base from which learning can thrive and flourish. Peer led programs based in the faculties can build on the embryonic sense of community and fledgling awareness of university culture, developing the students to a stage of maturity and confidence in their chosen discipline-specific learning career. The peer leader is the "insider" that Jacobs (2005) and others claim is essential for embedded learning. A peer led program provides students with a comfortable discipline-based forum where both social and academic integration and skill development can occur.

Peer led programs have been found to benefit student leaders as much as the students who attend the sessions. Recent research on student leadership is uncovering the benefits to universities, as well as to individual students, of creating a pool of student leaders who can be retained after graduation as quality lecturers and tutors. It also produces graduates who possess the leadership skills prized by employers. Engagement with leadership activities such as those provided by peer led academic programs is a means of benefitting all participating students. This area is under-researched at this point. It is an area that needs further exploration and extension.

Meet-Up is a peer program developed specifically for USQ and its students. It has assisted on-campus students since 1995, and is now addressing the growing need for digital forms of peer learning. Meet-Up is a peer learning academic program integrated into courses and programs that develops cognitive as well as social skills; it is not a mentoring program. The benefits to leaders, student attendees and the wider university are significant in terms of building a sense of community in students, contributing to student academic success and retention, and developing student leadership skills.

It is the Co-ordinator's role to ensure that the Meet-Up program continues to offer quality academic peer assistance to all USQ students, regardless of mode of study, utilising appropriate technological innovations. This means that rigorous evaluation and subsequent continuous improvement of the program needs to be undertaken to ensure the program's aims are being realised and the objectives met.

REFERENCES

Australia Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). (2011). Peer Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS), AUQA Good Practice Database. Retrieved from http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=164

Beer, C., & Jones, D. (2008). Learning Networks: Harnessing the Power of Online Communities for Discipline and Lifelong Learning. In D. Orr, P. A. Danaher, G. Danaher, & R. E. Harreveld (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning: Reflecting on Successes and Framing Futures, Keynote and Refereed Papers from the*

5th International Lifelong Learning Conference (pp. 66-71). Rockhampton, Australia: Central Queensland University. Retrieved from http://hdl.cqu.edu.au/10018/13162

Billing, D. (1997). Induction of new students to higher education. *Programmed Learning, 34*(2), 125-134.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report.* Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Retrieved from http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv32134

Braxton, J. M., & Lien, L. A. (2000). The viability of academic integration as a central construct in Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 11-28). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Caladine, R., Andrews, T., Tynan, B., Smyth, R., & Vale, D. (2010). New communications options: A renaissance in videoconference use. In G. Veletsianos (Ed.), *Emerging technologies in distance education* (pp.249-268). Edmonton, CA: AU Press.

Calder, A. (2000). Online learning support: An action research project. Retrieved from https://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers/CalderPaper.doc

Christie, H., Munro, M., & Wager, F. (2005). "Day students" in higher education: Widening access students and successful transitions to university life. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 15*(1), 3-30.

Cornford, J., & Pollock, N. (2002). Working through the work of making work mobile. In K. Robins, & F. Webster (Eds.), *The virtual university?: Knowledge, markets, and management* (pp. 87-104). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Cress, C., Astin, H., Zimmerman-Oster, K., & Burkhardt, J. (2001). Developmental outcomes of college students' involvement in leadership activities. *Journal of College Student Development, 42*(1), 15-27. Retrieved from http://cudrlstudentstaff.pbworks.com/f/Developmental+Outcomes.pdf.

Dennen, V. P. (2008). Pedagogical lurking: Student engagement in non-posting discussion behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior, 24*(4), 1624-1633.

Falchikov, N. (2001) *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education.* London, England: Routledge.

Forrester, G., Motteram, G., Parkinson, G., & Slaouti, D. (2005). Going the distance: Students' experiences of induction to distance learning in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 29*(4), 293-306. doi: 10.1080/03098770500353185

Fuery, P. (1995). *Theories of desire.* Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press.

Gee, J. P. (2007). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London, England: Routledge.

Jacobs, C. (2005). On being an insider on the outside: New spaces for integrating academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education, 10*(4), 475-87. doi:10.1080/13562510500239091

Keimig, R. T. (1983). *Raising Academic Standards: A Guide to learning improvement* (ASHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report No. 4). Washington, D.C: Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Kop, R. (2010). Using social media to create a place that supports communication. In G. Veletsianos (Ed.), *Emerging Technologies in Distance Education* (pp. 269-284). Edmonton, CA: AU Press.

Laing, C., Chao, K., & Robinson, A. (2005). Managing the expectations of non-traditional students: A process of negotiation. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 29*(2), 169-79. doi: 10.1080/03098770500103572.

Laurillard, D. (1999). A conversational framework for individual learning applied to the "learning organisation" and the "learning society." *Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 16*(2), 113-122.

Logue, C., Hutchens T., & Hector, M. (2005). Student leadership: A phenomenological exploration of postsecondary experiences. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(4), 393-408. doi: 10.1353/csd.2005.0039

Longfellow, E., May, S., Burke, L., & Marks-Maran, D. (2008). They had a way of helping that actually helped: A case study of a peer-assisted learning scheme. *Teaching in Higher Education, 13*(1), 93-105. doi: 10.1080/13562510701794118

Martin, D., & Arendale, D. (1993). Foundation and theoretical framework for supplemental instruction. In D.C. Martin, & D. Arendale (Eds.), *Supplemental instruction: Improving first-year success in high-risk courses* (pp. 41-50). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Ozga, J., & Sukhnandan, L. (1998). Undergraduate non-completion: Developing an explanatory model. *Higher Education Quarterly, 52*(3), 316-333.

Prescott, A., & Simpson, E. (2004). Effective student motivation commences with resolving "dissatisfiers." *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 28*(3), 247-59. doi: 10.1080/0309877042000241733

Raddon, A. (2006). Absence as opportunity: Learning outside the institutional space and time. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 30*(2), 157- 67. doi: 10.1080/03098770600617596

Scott, G., Shah, M., Grebennikov, L., & Singh, H. (2008). Improving student retention: A University of Western Sydney case study. *Journal of Institutional Research, 14*(1), 9–23. Retrieved from http://www.aair.org.au/articles/volume-14-no-1/14-1-improving-student-retention-a-university-of-western-sydney-case-study

Taylor, J. (2001). Fifth generation distance education. *e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology* (*e-JIST*), *4*(1), 1-14. Retrieved from http://eprints.usq.edu.au/136/1/Taylor.pdf

Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy, 17*(4), 423-442.

Topping, K. (2005). Trends in Peer Learning. *Educational Psychology, 25*(6), 631-45. doi: 10.1080/01443410500345172.

Topping, K., & Ehly, S. (1998). *Peer-assisted learning.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wingate, U. (2006). Doing away with "study skills." *Teaching in Higher Education, 11*(4), 57-69. doi: 10.1080/13562510600874268

Wingate, U., & Dreiss, C. (2009). Developing students' academic literacy: An online approach. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 3*(1), pp. 14-25.

Yorke, M. (2000). The quality of the student experience: what can institutions learn from data relating to non-completion? *Quality in Higher Education, 6*(1), 61-75.

Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2008). *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK*. Retrieved from Higher Education Academy website http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/archive/web0573_the_fir st_year_experience.pdf