The Value of Peer Learning For First-Year Postgraduate University Students' Social And Academic Integration

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Abstract

Peer support and need-based aid, particularly in the first year of university are vitally important to university students' social and academic integration and achievement. Taking account of the increasingly diverse student population, this paper explores the perceptions of first-year postgraduate university students concerning support for social and academic integration and focus on the value of peer learning to increase the social and academic integration of first-year postgraduate university students. Focus group interviews (n=5) and individual interviews (n=35) were conducted between spring and winter of 2014 with transfer students (n=35) and working students (n=14). Using Appreciative Inquiry, participants suggested that during the first semester of the academic year the creation of a social setting which facilitates the connection to like-minded, same-age peers is essential for peer relationships and experiencing the benefits of peer support and peer education in an informal context. They further suggested that a reciprocal befriending-scheme organized in a more 'noncommittal' informal setting without any obligations, stimulates students to participate and demonstrates to be more helpful for their social integration. For their academic integration, face-to-face and online peer learning such as student counseling and peer modeling, are especially important tools.

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1. Introduction

Supporting student integration has become an important educational objective, certainly since adequate student integration is considered with improved performance (Bitzer, 2009; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The theory of integration was developed by Tinto (1993) to explain voluntary student departure from undergraduate institutions. Integration encompasses both an academic component (i.e. academic integration) and a social component (i.e. social integration). According to Tinto (1975) "academic integration is the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life." Academic integration is considered as the willingness (motivation) and the ability (e.g. cognitive abilities) to belong to a group (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Social integration on the other hand can be defined as the extent to which students adapt to the social way of life at university (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). Socially integrated students have many friends at the university, feel at home, take part in extra-curricular activities and feel connected with fellow students and teachers (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of social and academic integration, recommendations have predominantly focused on new first year students coming directly from secondary school (e.g. Byl et al., 2015). This paper however, takes the increasingly diverse student population into account – e.g. greater number of older students, part-time students, working students (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Experiences, needs and wishes of postgraduate students concerning student support for social and academic integration[†] are explored.

Research shows that peer learning provides important opportunities to help new students cope in the first year of university and beyond (Callcott et al., 2014; Byl et al., 2011; Lehmann, 2014) as well as providing an important role model for student success (e.g. Goff, 2011; Story, 2013; Makura, Skead, & Nhundu, 2011; Tangwe & Rembe, 2014). Peer learning can be defined as 'the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions' (Topping, 2005, p.631). According to Topping (2015), recent years have witnessed a greater emphasis upon equal-opportunity involvement in peer learning, engaging all members of the educational community without exception. There has also been an increase in reciprocal tutoring and various forms of peer mediation and peer befriending have gained increasing attention (Topping, 2015).

Peer learning can be understood as a social process, in which peer interactions are fundamental (Roscoe, 2013; De Backer, 2015). Social interaction with peers is important for developing a sense of community, which is valuable for all students (e.g. Ke & Xie, 2009; Kahu et al., 2013; Byl et al., 2015). Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to investigate whether peer learning among first-year postgraduate university students can promote social and academic integration during the first semester at university. Therefore, the research questions addressed in the present study are: (1) how should integrational peer support be designed and (2) what is the value of peer learning to optimize the social and academic integration of first year postgraduate university students?

2. Methodology

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach was adopted for this research. AI is a strengths-based research approach that focuses on identifying and replicating successes (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996) and was considered more appropriate than research methods that focus on identifying and solving problems. AI aspires to capture *what* is working well in an educational experience, *why* this is the case, for *whom* and how we might translate success in one aspect of an educational endeavor to other aspects of that endeavor (Fergy, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Shapcott, & Burke, 2011). Hence, we asked participants the following questions: What experiences do you consider successful with regards to peer support in relation to your social and academic integration? What are your wishes and needs for support from peers regarding social and academic integration? What actions need to be taken to promote your socially and academically integration in the university?

[†] Postgraduate students are students who already have a degree in higher education.

The sample consisted of first-year postgraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational science in 2013-2014. Participants were asked to participate in focus groups interviews. Recruitment was via email, and face to face in classes. In total, five focus group interviews and 25 individual interviews were conducted with transfer students (n=35) and working students (n=14). Focus group interviews were tape-recorded. They lasted between 120 and 200 minutes and were driven by the students' answers to the questions. Three researchers made complete verbatim transcripts. Maxqda was used to transcribe and analyze the data. Focus group data were all conjointly analyzed by two researchers. The phases were analyzed separately. Inter-rate reliability exceeded 90% and discussions took place to ensure a consensus was reached in all cases.

3. Results

Following the principles of AI, the results are related to good examples of support from peers and to the needs and wishes of students for support in social and academic integration. The results are presented according to the various themes identified in this research and related to the support and timeframe in which they appear: the first weeks after arrival, after one month, and during the last four weeks of the semester.

3.1. First weeks after arrival: group-specific introduction activities and peer counselling

Participants particularly recognize the importance of social support for integration into the university program. Both transfer students and working students acknowledged the significance of organizing group-specific supportive activities within a small like-minded group. They experienced a sense of collegiality generated by the commonality of their current life situation. Overall, participants expressed many needs and wishes that pointed to the importance of combining social support with academic support in welcome initiatives. Transfer and working students shared the view that the current support is primarily accommodated "to new first-time first-year students coming directly from secondary school". They indicated the demographic differences with first-year students. As a consequence, they did not feel very comfortable by participating in the same activities. Transfer students particularly suggested their need for extra social support and explained that more help for making contacts in their class is important.

> *"I felt lost the first weeks. I had only second-year courses. You come there and felt as a stranger. [Student 101: transfer student – large-group learning context]*

Transfer students acknowledge the importance of academic support for integration into the university program. About half this group of transfer students reported that they had too little or incorrect information and believe that institutions should take more actions to provide students with the necessary information related to their study program and the academic system (e.g. profiles and composition) to support their academic integration. According to transfer students, the student ambassadors lack the knowledge and experience to effectively support the specific situation of transfer students.

> "Before I started, I came to the open campus day. I had a good conversation with one of our student ambassadors. She gave me very interesting information and told me 'how she experienced'. But it had been more useful if a working student was present that I could talk to. [Student 120: working student - evening programme]

3.2. After one month: group-specific teambuilding activities and peer-befriending scheme

About half of the participants reported that the development of friendship for transfer students is less straightforward than those in a regular program. Everyone has an individual program, which does not make it easy to share lectures and experiences. It implies fewer times to spend time together. Consequently, it is argued that more social activities are needed in a formal educational context to take away current barriers of participation. Regarding the social integration of first-year postgraduate students, some transfer students believed that a mentoring scheme can provide a great source of instrumental support but claim that a buddy project needs some typical support

requirements: a more 'noncommittal approach' without any obligations. Participants further indicated that faculties have to organize social activities with an academic purpose in which all students should participate. Additionally, it is believed that format, time and place, as well as the student involvement in organizing these activities are very important. Furthermore, Facebook is considered as a very useful tool to provide opportunities to get an easy access to information, to be aware of the on-going activities and to get in contact with other students. According to participants, faculties need to provide opportunities to be up-to-date of on-going activities and to get into contact with other students.

> *"You need first to ask people for being Facebook friends before they could invite you for example on events. And yet, only when you start to like events and pages on Facebook, people of the university will invite you and send messages that will make you aware off activities at campus. Let's say that if you are very introverted, you may not discover this. [Student 109: Transfer student - small-group learning context]"*

3.3. The last four weeks: like-minded peer education and online peer modelling

Most participants acknowledged the importance of support from classmates and higher year students for their academic integration. Positive experiences were mostly linked to the last weeks of lectures and during the examination period. During the examination period peer support and interactions seems particularly important. Students value social media. Almost half of the students mentioned Facebook as a positive element for study and for academic integration. Students believed it provides opportunities to get easy access to information about courses and activities. Working students on the other hand, acknowledged the importance of face-to-face peer interactions. They believed that having a break together with peers is essential to clear the mind and de-stress. They also referred to the importance of a like-minded person and argued that the fact that someone is in the same position as himself/herself is very important.

> *"It's important for me (…) that you can talk to some one like-minded. You can share concern. And they understand you because they have also the same context: they have also a family and children. Yes it's important for me to feel bonded. That you feel they are in the same position." [Student 114: working student – large-group learning context]*

Transfer and working students shared the view that there is a big difference between college and university and that they need time to adapt their learning method. They believed that the current co-curricular activities were very accommodating for regular students and that information about requirements of subject and examination matter is better supported in the regular program. They furthermore pointed to the fact that the student counseling service organizes a lot for many students, but not everyone is equally well informed. Overall, students expressed many needs and wishes that pointed to the importance of academic peer support initiatives, including material support (e.g. a list of examination and learning requirements for each course, examples of learning schedules). They preferred the idea of an extra lesson in the beginning of the academic year on how to study at university and on how to write scientific articles. They suggested that peer support and examination samples or earlier exams would greatly benefit their academic integration.

> *"It feels a bit unfair. You have to take the same exams but you don't get any advantage for that matter. I believe that everyone has to get the same opportunities and chances. If you get less information, I believe this is dishonest." [Student 09: transfer student - large-group learning context]*

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the perceptions of first-year postgraduate university students concerning support for social and academic integration. We used the method of Appreciative Inquiry to address our research question: how should integrational peer support be designed to optimize the social and academic integration of first year postgraduate

university students? With regards to social integration, our results show that faculties would benefit in setting up need set up various face-to-face introduction activities in smaller like-minded community groups, that include the necessary social and academic support (supported by online resources) and ensure students getting all the necessary information about the university system and the content of the program of study. These activities should support students in meeting and greeting their fellow students, and share experiences with fellow students. According to the participants, a social setting which facilitates the connection to like-minded, same-age peers is essential for peer relationships. Faculties on the other hand also need to provide opportunities to be up-to-date of on-going activities and to get into contact with other students. Participants suggest setting up social activities such as teambuilding activities that are open to all students. Our results suggest that the better a relationship is with a like-minded classmate, the more emotional and esteem support students perceive to receive. Participants also suggested that a reciprocal befriending-scheme organized in a more 'noncommittal' informal setting without any obligations should stimulate students to participate and should be more helpful for social integration. Peer befriending primarily functions to get access to like-minded companionships. With regards to academic integration, participants suggested that faculties would take advantage to stimulate face-to-face and online peer counseling. In such approach, student counselors need to be representative for the whole student population and primarily function as a reliable and accessible informant. On the other hand online peer modeling is an especially important tool in the last four weeks of the first semester. This research indicates that combining peer assisted integrational support with peer learning methods such as peer counseling, peer education, peer befriending and peer modeling as early as possible requires a large investment for faculty in the first semester of the academic year while generating a large additional value for first-year students' social and academic integration. In this sense, the present paper demonstrated from a first-year postgraduate student's point of view, the merits of peer learning for promoting academic as well as social integration.

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