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Fostering social mobility and employability: the case for peer learning

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ABSTRACT
Higher education institutions continue to face challenges in fostering social mobility and preparing their students for the world of work. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges via disruption to education and reduced opportunities for work-integrated learning. Framing this as our point of departure, we propose that peer learning can play an integral part in reducing the attainment gap by promoting learner autonomy. Our essay uses the example of Supplemental Instruction to highlight the benefits and challenges of peer learning. We end with a call for empirical research and knowledge sharing to advance peer learning in an impactful way.

Setting the scene

Higher education has the potential to improve social mobility by increasing employment outcomes and lifetime earnings of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there are concerns that the qualifications attained from higher education institutions 'primarily serve to maintain, rather than narrow, inequalities attached to social origins' (Bukodi 2017, 367). Subsequently, social mobility metrics have expanded from a narrow focus on university admissions to data on how universities add value to students from disadvantaged backgrounds during their degree courses and future careers. Approaches to measuring this impact remain in an embryonic state across the world. Examples in England include the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) with the Sutton Trust (2021) and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Social Mobility Index (2022). Concurrently, the global higher education landscape continues to evolve, whereby employability and employment outcomes take on increased importance over stand-alone measures of academic attainment (Mainga et al. 2022).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a global chance event, significantly disrupted education provision and exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities (Haelermans et al. 2022). There are concerns over the academic attainment of entrants to higher education due to the disruption of assessments, including the cancellation of examinations around the world (Daniel 2020). The pandemic also exacerbated a pre-existing issue

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whereby international students often struggle to adapt quickly to new environments and overcome feelings of isolation (Idris, Ion, and Seery 2019). Moreover, three in four university students and recent graduates reported a decrease in their subjective wellbeing between March 2020 and September 2021 (Donald and Jackson 2022). Additionally, current cohorts of students entering university and the labour market are some of the least prepared as they were denied opportunities to participate in internships, placements, and studying abroad due to pandemic-related restrictions in 2020–2021 (Dougherty et al. 2022). Resultantly, university career services are struggling to meet the increased demands from their students for career-related support, whilst employers are prioritising personal skills over technical skills in response to the global war for talent (Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch 2021).

In response, we posit that higher education institutions require new and emerging ideas to address social mobility challenges and prepare students for the future of work. Framing this as our point of departure, we propose that peer learning can play an integral part in reducing the attainment gap, increasing student retention rates, and overcoming differentials in employment outcomes. Our essay sets the scene, using the example of Supplemental Instruction to highlight the benefits and challenges of promoting learner autonomy through structured peer learning. This advances calls to consider alternative ways to foster a sense of belonging in under-represented students via 'informal practices and social interactions outside of formal educational spaces' (Timmis and Muñoz-Chereau 2022, 1). We end with a call for empirical research and knowledge sharing via communities of practice to advance peer learning in an impactful way.

Supplemental Instruction and peer learning

Supplemental Instruction is the predominant model for student-led academic peer learning based on an established set of principles and support (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2021). Terminologies, including Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), are sometimes used synonymously and sometimes used to mean different types of schemes (Arendale 2014). Peer learning and, more broadly, 'peer support' includes a wide range of practices and approaches encompassed within Supplemental Instruction. Peer learning schemes share standard features such as (i) scheduled or timetabled sessions in small groups, (ii) voluntary attendance, (iii) collaborative activities facilitated by trained, experienced students called 'peer leaders', and (iv) an aim to improve student grades and retention (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2021).

Peer learning involves training students from the years above to facilitate (rather than teach) regular timetabled sessions to support students to succeed in their programme of study (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2021). Topics covered in the sessions are determined by the students each week. They may include subject-specific knowledge, personal skills, or broader aspects of the student experience (e.g. housing, finance, careers). Peer learning incorporates three domains of academic integration, services and support, and social belonging from established models of student retention and success (Thomas et al. 2017).

In this essay, we are interested in how peer learning can help students to develop academically, provide signposting to support services, and create an environment that

promotes a sense of belonging via peer support networks. We begin with the benefits of peer learning for social mobility and employability.

Benefits of peer learning

Hockings et al. (2018) observed that the strongest influence on successful independent learning 'was the support, collaboration and advice of other (more experienced) students in non-assessed scenarios' (145). We view 'more experienced' students as not necessarily just students in more advanced years of study but also those with additional levels of human capital within the same cohort. Therefore, we present the benefits of peer learning for social mobility and employability by adopting Donald et al.'s (2019b) model of self-perceived employability. This incorporates career ownership and human capital comprising six types of capital: social, cultural, psychological, scholastic, market-value, and skills.

Taking ownership of one's career can increase self-perceived employability, foster life-wide and lifelong learning, and act as an antecedent to a sustainable career (Cole and Donald 2022; Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh 2019a, 2019b). Yet, the students who could benefit the most from study skills support, career guidance, and additional support services are those least likely to access them (Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch 2018). Consequently, we propose that peer learning can enhance social mobility and employability through self-reflection, identifying areas for self-improvement, and enhancing learner autonomy. Moreover, it can help students articulate and signal their employability to prospective employers (Tomlinson and Anderson 2021). The additional personal resources, combined with a deeper understanding of the recruitment process and the world of work, can help to operationalise self-perceived employability leading to enhanced employment outcomes. These prospects are especially significant for students engaged in peer leader roles who experience real leadership opportunities, exposure to intercultural communication, and improved conflict resolution abilities (Ford et al. 2015).

We also believe that peer learning can enhance social, cultural, and psychological capital and that these gains will be most significant in students with the lowest base levels. The COVID-19 pandemic reduced opportunities to interact in person resulting in a decreased level of subjective wellbeing and calls from students for more opportunities for peer interaction (Donald and Jackson 2022). Peer learning can play a vital role in addressing these concerns since it offers a collaborative approach to learning and facilitates social cohesion by providing a safe space for exposure to students from different backgrounds and cultures (Chilvers 2014). Moreover, there is the potential for peer learning to take place virtually via video call. However, this relies on students having access to the necessary technology and infrastructure, which may require university funding, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch 2021).

Peer learning has also been effective in increasing the performance and retention of student groups with historically lower levels of participation in higher education by providing a sense of belonging and an increased understanding of academic conventions (Hoiland, Reyes, and Varelas 2020). Additionally, we believe peer learning can improve the HERO dimensions of psychological capital, including Hope, Self-Efficacy,

Resilience, and Optimism (Nimmi et al. 2021). The sharing of experiences and the opportunity to give and receive feedback can improve confidence in student cohorts and provide formative opportunities to practice and evaluate their performance against their peers (Keenan 2014).

Furthermore, peer learning has the potential to enhance levels of scholastic, market-value, and skills capital. For example, empirical research in primary education has shown the benefits of peer tutoring for personal development and skills acquisition (Tymms et al. 2011) and resulted in changes to policy and practice that have had a direct positive impact on students (Topping et al. 2012). Peer learning supplements classroom-based and independent learning with interdependent learning (Boud 1988). We believe this can foster problem solving, creativity, and innovation in students via increased space for development beyond the traditional classroom setting. The ability to give and receive feedback, challenge existing ways of thinking, and value different experiences can also develop a sense of becoming a global citizen in preparation for the world of work.

Cumulatively, career ownership and these six types of human capital can address the domains of academic integration, professional integration, and social integration from established models for student retention and success (e.g. Thomas et al. 2017). The benefits of peer learning apply to those providing and receiving it.

Challenges of peer learning

Unfortunately, there is a risk that faculty administrators perceive peer learning as an opportunity to reduce the workload of lecturers. However, peer learning is most effective when it supplements classroom-based instruction (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2021). Resultantly, peer learning often requires more time and resources, albeit directed differently from traditional learning approaches (Adachi, Tai, and Dawson 2018). At either the school level, faculty level, or perhaps via a central university service, this may require formal accredited training for supervisors who can subsequently source and train students to offer peer learning. The opportunity for students to lead and own peer learning initiatives may also help overcome the difficulties lecturers face in engaging students outside of a traditional classroom setting (Brewer and Movahedazarhouligh 2018).

Supervisors and those providing peer learning need to be capable of communicating the benefits of participation to other students (Ajjawi and Bould 2017). They need to convince students that peer learning is more beneficial than just watching recorded lecture content online since mandating participation can undermine the benefits of peer learning (International Centre for Supplemental Instruction 2021). Supervisors may also need to manage conflicts between students or provide additional guidance and support to the students delivering the sessions. This emphasises the need to value specialist supervisors in education-focused roles and offer pathways to progress alongside research-focused colleagues to benefit academics and their students (Smith and Walker 2021).

Whilst some students enjoy peer learning, other students are less satisfied with this approach due to an increased perceived workload (Hall and DuFrene 2016), power dynamics between students (Adachi, Tai, and Dawson 2018) and a perceived lack of instructor availability (Brewer and Movahedazarhouligh 2018). Peer learning also

relies on students to have the social confidence to interact with one another and embrace the opportunity to be critical thinkers. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic caused adverse outcomes in students, including feelings of isolation, reduced mental and physical health, difficulties undertaking degree studies, and concerns for labour market competitiveness (Donald and Jackson 2022). Yet, the same research offers some hope since students asked universities to provide more interaction opportunities with peers and flexible study options to overcome lost opportunities during the pandemic. Thus, offering flexible options for peer learning, such as an in-person, virtual, or blended approach, may help to overcome a lack of social confidence and increase student engagement. This further emphasises the potential for peer learning to promote social mobility by sharing lived experiences and exposure to various cultures. It also indicates that peer learning can improve employability through personal skill development (e.g. teamwork, conflict resolution, intercultural communication, giving/receiving feedback, and critical thinking).

Final thoughts

We believe that peer learning can foster social mobility and employability in new ways to ensure universities remain relevant in preparing young people for entry into the labour market. There is a need for empirical studies to explore and examine the relationship between peer learning, social mobility, and employability outcomes in university settings following the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a need for supervisors and the students providing peer learning to consider new ways to discuss and share best practices beyond their localised networks (Beauchamp et al. 2022) since communities of practices have the potential to improve equity outcomes (Buchanan et al. 2022). We hope this 'Point of Departure' essay will stimulate discussion, debate, and empirical research to benefit all students across their lifespans.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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