Student perceptions of the benefits of peer leadership in higher education: An international perspective

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Abstract

The research reported here is part of an international project that sought to develop a deeper understanding of the development and experiences of peer leaders across different national contexts. The project involved collaboration across higher education institutions in the USA, Canada, Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), the United Kingdom and South Africa, and was a follow-up study to the 2009 USA investigation into how peer leaders themselves perceive the impact of their peer leader experiences (Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). The insights gained from the current study provide a more global context and depth of perspective on peer leadership in higher education than is currently available in the literature and also valuable information as to how peer leadership activities can contribute most effectively to the student experience and to student success.

Introduction

Student involvement in leadership activities is an increasingly important part of the student experience at university, as well as their preparation for life beyond university (e.g., Shook & Keup, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010, Skipper & Keup, 2017). Peer leadership programs, in particular, afford student peers valuable opportunities for personal and professional development and for building skills in work-readiness and civic engagement (e.g., Astin, 1993; Ender & Kay, 2001; Harmon, 2006; Skalicky & Caney, 2010; Shook & Keup, 2012; Ford, Thackeray, Barnes & Hendrickx, 2015). Student engagement in peer leadership is also recognised as facilitating students' social, interpersonal, and emotional development and enhancing their intercultural awareness (Cuseo, 2010; Ender & Kay, 2001; Harmon, 2006; Shook & Keup, 2012; Young & Keup, 2018). Moreover, the benefits of peer leadership may extend to the broader communities, employers, and organisations that students are or will be involved in, both during their studies as well as in their future careers.

From an institutional perspective, the value of students' involvement in leadership programs has been recognised as being instrumental to student learning outcomes. In addition, peer leadership provides valuable opportunities for students to engage more broadly and more deeply with the University community, increasing student and awareness of opportunities on campus and building a sense of belonging and connection to the institution. All of these benefits of peer leadership are important aspects of the student experience and are key factors underlying student persistence and success in their studies (e.g., Tinto, 1993; Kahu and Nelson, 2017), and importantly, retention rates.

In recent years peer leadership has been recognised as an emerging high-impact practice (HIP) that facilitates student progress towards what has been identified as fundamental learning outcomes (global and intercultural competence, intellectual and practical skills development, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning; Brownwell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008) and provides students with the "essential preparation to address the personal,

civic, economic and social challenges that individuals are facing in society today" (Keup, 2016, p.33). Many higher education institutions implement a range of 'high-impact practices', including peer leadership programs, with the intent on promoting these positive student outcomes. Although the conventional context within which peer leadership has been considered a high-impact practice has its focus on recipients of peer leader programs, that is the students who are served by peer leaders, we would argue, as does Keup (2016), that peer leadership in itself can be considered a high-impact practice. Additionally, engaging students as partners in the delivery and support of student learning is a cost-effective practice that can mitigate financial constraints and provide a strong value proposition for higher education institutions (Keup, 2016; Shook & Keup, 2012; van der Meer, Skalicky & Speed, 2019).

In 2009, the USA-based National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition investigated peer leadership from the perspectives of the peer leaders themselves (Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). Of particular interest was how peer leaders perceive the impact of their peer leader experiences across several key outcome areas including skills development, undergraduate experiences, employability, and academic performance. The authors developed and administered the National Survey of Peer Leadership across multiple higher education institutions in the USA, with responses from nearly 2,000 peer leaders. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of students responded that their responsibilities as peer leaders enhanced their undergraduate experience, in particular, their knowledge of campus resources; their meaningful interactions with faculty, staff and other students; their feeling of belonging to the institution and desire to persist in their studies; and their understanding of and interactions with diverse people. In addition, they reported positive change across a range of skill development areas (e.g., leadership, interpersonal communication, time and project management, critical thinking, written communication, and academic skills) and other employability outcomes (e.g., innovative and creative problem solving, collaboration, collating and applying information from different sources, and ethical decision making).

The USA National Resource Center study provides a broad nation-wide snapshot of peer leadership in USA higher education. Outside of the USA, however, there has been little nation-wide research as to how student involvement in peer leadership can contribute to leadership development and learning or to provide institutional context for the ongoing development and delivery of peer leader programs. This paper reports a follow-up study of peer leadership that involved an international collaboration across higher education institutions in six countries, the USA, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and South Africa, using a modified version of the NSPL, the International Peer Leader Survey (ISPL), which was contextualized for each of the participating countries. A number of publications have reported on specific details of the research in individual participating countries, including the USA (Young & Keup, 2018), Canada (Kenedy & Young, 2016) Australasia (van der Meer, Skalicky & Speed, 2019) and South Africa (Frade and Tiroyabone, 2017). In this paper, we explore and compare students' perceptions of the benefits of engaging in peer leadership across all of the participating countries, to inform good practice and provide a more global context and understanding of peer leadership in higher education than is currently available in the literature

Methodology

The National Survey of Peer Leadership (NSPL) is an online descriptive survey that explores undergraduate students' experiences of engagement in peer leadership roles and self-rated outcomes of their leadership experiences across five domains: skills development, institutional interaction, academic commitment, employability outcomes and academic performance. Participants are asked to indicate their self-rated change for each outcome item on a seven-point Likert-type response scale ranging from "greatly decreased" to "greatly increased".

The International Survey of Peer Leadership (ISPL) is an adapted version of the NSPL, contextualized for each of the other participating countries to reflect local terminology and demographic characteristics. The ISPL also contains several outcome items not included in the NSPL, including items relating to problem solving, decision making, adaptability and creativity skills, knowledge about people with different backgrounds, and participants' feelings about contributing to the campus community. Note also that the ISPL used by the UK included four additional outcome items categorized as 'Confidence Building' in that they related to peer leaders' confidence in interacting with peers and faculty, in undertaking academic work and in gaining employment. These items are not included in the analyses here, as they related only to participants in one country.

The first phase of the study was undertaken in the USA in 2013 and involved administration of the National Survey of Peer Leadership (NSPL) by the USA National Resource Center to students across 49 higher education institutions in the USA. Between 2014 and 2016, the ISPL was administered to students in the other countries, with student participation from across ten higher education institutions in Canada, five in Australasia (Australia and New Zealand combined), 19 in the United Kingdom and six in South Africa. Both the NSPL and ISPL were administered online, with most countries using a convenience sample approach via email invitation to students who, at the time of surveying, were engaged in one or more peer leader roles or had engaged in peer leadership in the past. Note, however that South Africa adopted a non-probability, purposive sampling technique (refer Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017).

Participant responses to the outcome items involved frequency analysis to describe and compare the perceptions of peer leaders across the different countries. Additional analyses of the data have been reported elsewhere for the individual participating countries separately (Frade and Tiroyabone, 2017; Kenedy & Young, 2016; van der Meer, Skalicky & Speed, 2019; Young & Keup, 2018).

Findings

A total of 4,016 students in USA tertiary institutions completed and returned the NSPL, and 1,643 students completed the international version of the survey (ISPL), including 482 students in Canada (CAN), 244 students in Australasia (ANZ), 466 students in South Africa (SA) and 451 students in the United Kingdom (UK). Across all countries, the majority of participants were female students, domestic students, students aged between 18 and 25 years, and students who were in their second or above year of undergraduate study. Most participants (range: 70.1% USA to 90.5% SA) were engaged in one or more peer leader roles at the time of being surveyed, with many of those participants having also been in peer leader roles in previous years. A smaller number of surveyed participants (between 9% SA and 21% ANZ) were not currently engaged in peer leader roles but had held peer leader positions in the past.

The peer leader roles that participants engaged in were numerous, with academic-based peer leader roles common across all countries, particularly Canada, Australasia, South Africa and the UK, and roles that involved social aspects of university life most common in USA participants. In the USA, where many students reported living in university or college residences during their study periods, accommodation-based peer leader roles, such as residential student adviser or assistant and representative on residential hall committees and associations, were also common. Other types of peer leadership that participants in all or most countries engaged in included roles associated with pre-entry and transition programs, student governance, community service, sport and outdoor recreation, health and wellbeing, and multi-cultural affairs.

Across all countries, the majority of participants (between 80%: UK and 91%: ANZ) indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with their peer leader roles, with very few participants (<3%) reporting dissatisfaction. Similarly, most participants (between 89%:UK and 98%: ANZ) reported that they would recommend being a peer leader to other students. Further, the majority of participants across all or most countries responded that their involvement in peer leader activities afforded them many benefits in terms of their skills development, institutional interactions, academic commitment and employability.

Table 1 shows the percentage of participants from each country who believed that each of the listed outcome areas benefited ('Increased' or 'Greatly Increased') from their peer leader experiences, with the top 10 areas (based on response frequency) in bolded font. Although the composition and order of the top ten areas varied slightly between countries, there were some outcome areas that stood out across all or most countries. These included the development of leadership and interpersonal communication skills, enhanced feelings of belonging and contributing to the campus community and developing and engaging in meaningful interactions with peers and people with different backgrounds or cultures to their own. Other benefits to fall within the top 10 across most countries related to outcomes such as adaptability and teamwork, knowledge of campus resources, and relationships with people in their place of employment.

Participants in the USA, South Africa and the UK reported the greatest impact of peer leadership to be in the area of leadership skills, with more participants believing this outcome benefited from their engagement in peer leader roles than any other area. Leadership skills were also identified by the majority of participants in Canada and Australasia, however, feelings related to contributing to the campus community was at the top of the outcome list for most participants in these two countries

Least beneficial was the perceived impact of peer leadership on academic skills and academic performance. Table 1 shows that, compared to all other self-rated changes examined by the NSPL and ISPL, academic performance and progression was perceived by far fewer participants to have benefited from their involvement in peer leadership. Further analyses indicated that the majority of participants across all countries (>75% in USA, CAN, ANZ and UK; >57% in SA) responded that their peer leader roles had no effect or at most only a slight effect (more often positive than negative) on aspects of their academic performance and progression, including overall academic performance, grade point average, the number of subjects they completed during an academic period, and their anticipated time to graduation.

Overall fewer participants in the UK perceived benefits from their peer leader experiences compared to participants in the other countries, and this pattern was consistent across nearly all outcome items in the survey. Although not included in the current analyses, it should be noted that two of the four 'Confidence Building' outcome items included in the UK ISPL were rated as top ten areas to have benefitted from peer leadership experiences (confidence interacting with peers: 67%; confidence interacting with faculty: 63%), suggesting that it may be valuable for future research to explore this outcome area in greater detail.

Discussion

The study reported here aimed to describe and compare the perceived impact of involvement in peer leadership across the higher education contexts of different countries/regions, namely, the USA, Canada, Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), South Africa and the United Kingdom. Although there were some differences between countries, a standout finding is the overall similarities across the different international contexts in terms of how the participants

Outcome Area	**USA** n = 3860	**CAN** n =442	**ANZ** n =229	**SA** n =416	**UK** n =411
Skills Development					
Leadership	**87.4**	**81.4**	**81.6**	**85.9**	**73.2**
Interpersonal communication	**82.5**	**74.1**	**77.7**	**81.8**	**66.4**
Adaptability	*****	**71.3**	**75.5**	**81.8**	**55.2**
Teamwork	**77.5**	**74.2**	**66.8**	**79.3**	**63.4**
Organisational	71.5	65.4	62.3	73.2	**58.2**
Time management	**73.6**	67.0	59.9	70.3	52.0
Presentation	67.5	58.8	59.7	77.6	44.8
Decision making	*	61.4	59.6	77.4	51.5
Creativity	*	53.8	58.9	72.7	39.0
Project management	73.0	64.0	56.7	69.4	51.6
Problem solving	*	56.8	53.3	75.6	40.9
Critical thinking	65.7	54.1	52.9	**80.3**	40.0
Written communication	53.4	44.8	48.7	66.2	31.4
Institutional Interaction					
Meaningful interaction with peers	**81.2**	**78.4**	**70.7**	**82.0**	**67.9**
Interaction with people from different backgrounds	**75.6**	**71.1**	60.9	**80.7**	52.3
Knowledge of people with different backgrounds	*	**71.1**	57.3	**80.7**	52.3
Understanding people from different backgrounds	72.9	68.1	56.7	79.2	49.0
Meaningful interaction with staff members	**75.9**	63.9	56.3	69.9	52.5
Meaningful interaction with faculty members	73.3	51.4	53.6	69.9	52.8
Academic Commitment					
Feeling of contributing to campus community	*	**85.2**	**84.9**	**80.0**	**67.6**
Feeling of belonging at institution	**76.6**	**73.2**	**70.8**	70.3	**58.4**
Knowledge of campus resources	**83.6**	**82.3**	**73.2**	73.3	**59.9**
Desire to stay at institution and graduate	68.9	59.9	54.5	68.2	48.1
Desire to engage in continuous learning	71.8	58.7	53.4	72.6	45.2
Employability Skills					
Building professional relationships at work	**78.3**	69.4	**69.5**	**81.0**	**59.8**
Providing direction through interpersonal persuasion	68.0	58.7	66.8	70.4	46.3
Creating innovative approaches to a task	65.7	55.3	**66.4**	72.2	43.1
Bringing together info from different places	72.0	66.5	61.9	78.4	49.5
Analysing a problem from a new perspective	66.0	56.9	59.8	69.6	43.7
Applying knowledge to real-world setting	73.3	65.8	54.7	74.4	46.6
Expectations for success in a FT job after graduation	65.6	51.4	50.9	73.6	40.6
Engaging in ethical decision-making	64.6	53.1	45.9	71.9	34.3
Sharing ideas with others in writing	46.5	44.0	43.5	64.4	33.5
Academic Success					
Academic skills	39.9	35.8	43.3	58.9	28.6
Overall academic performance	23.8	19.4	15.2	39.7	15.3
Grade point average	19.4	19.0	11.7	38.3	12.7
Number of completed subjects, units each term	14.8	9.7	6.0	27.4	10.4
Facilitate timely graduation (reverse coded)	8.0	2.2	1.8	3.2	1.3

Table 1: The percentage of participants in each country (n) who responded "increased" or "greatly increased" for each of the outcome areas. (* Items not included in the NSPL)

themselves perceive their involvement in peer leader activities impacts a range of academic and other outcomes. The majority of students in all participating countries believed that their responsibilities as peer leaders provided them with many benefits across a range of skill development, institutional interactions and employability outcome areas. There was also considerable agreement among participants from the different countries as to the outcome areas that benefitted most from peer leader involvement, with the highest reported gains including: the development of leadership and interpersonal communications skills, enhanced feelings of belonging and contributing to the campus community and institution, and the development of meaningful interactions with peers.

These student insights into the benefits of peer leadership involvement align closely with, and also complement, other outcomes that are known to contribute to student success and provide evidence as to the ways that universities can engage peer leaders in purposefully designed programs that build on the student outcomes realised through other avenues. Moreover, they afford valuable information that extends beyond formal peer leader programs to show how student leadership can be embedded into a variety of other student supports and engagement opportunities (such as welcome and orientation programs, social and cultural experiences and broader community engagements) that enhance the student experience.

With regards to academic outcomes, previous research has reported that peer leaders perceive the lowest gains from their peer leader experiences to be in the area of academic skills, and that undertaking peer leader roles may have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). We found that, as in previous studies, a high proportion of peer leaders in all countries rated academic performance outcomes as the area that gained least from their peer leadership experiences, despite many of the participants having held academic-based peer leader roles. For the most part, participants believed that their peer leader experiences had no effect or, at most, only a slight effect on their academic performance and progression. These findings are not entirely surprising, given the competing demands of peer leadership roles and students' academic studies. Shook & Keup (2012) and Skipper & Keup (2017) suggest that peer leadership gains may be rated lower in cases where there is an over-involvement in peer leadership activities, where there is significant time needed to undertake peer leadership responsibilities, and where there is stress associated with the peer leader role.

Recently, Skalicky and colleagues (2018) presented a framework for Developing and Supporting Student Leadership (DaSSL) to assist leadership program developers and coordinators in building the capacity of higher education institutions to be more genuine and purposeful in how they develop and support leadership in students. Where certain outcomes are particularly valued by an institution, for example, as part of realising intended graduate or employability outcomes, the DaSSL framework explores how they could be more intentionally developed in leadership programs, and subsequently evaluated as part of a continuous improvement approach to leadership development. The framework also includes principles and guidelines for the monitoring and institutional oversight of leadership programs to ensure that while leadership development is the primary deliverable and related outcomes are optimised, it is not at the expense of other outcome areas such as academic performance and success.

Several authors have attempted to explain why the quality of students' university experiences and level of integration into institutional academic and social systems are so critical to student persistence and success. Tinto (1993), in his Student Integration Model which addresses institutional conditions for student success, proposed that the more engaged and assimilated a student is in their institution's academic and social environment, the more committed they will be to the institution and to their own academic goals and study, and therefore the more likely they are to be successful learners and persist with their studies. More recently, the student

engagement framework of Kahu & Nelson (2017) explains how curricular and co-curricular practices (in which we include peer leadership programs) influence student engagement and success to positively impact student outcomes. The 'educational interface" that Kahu and Nelson describe, refers to a dynamic place where students engage in learning, formed by the interplay between student characteristics and university practices. According to these authors, at the heart of the interface are four psychosocial constructs - self-efficacy, emotion, belonging and wellbeing – that mediate the relationship between student and institution and act as potential pathways to student engagement. Co-curricular activities that positively influence the pathways, for example, by increasing self-efficacy or building a strong sense of belonging, increase a student's emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement with their study, resulting in successful outcomes. The findings of the current study fit well within the frameworks suggested by Tinto and Kahu and Nelson and highlight the important role that peer leadership plays in the student experience. The peer leaders themselves identified a range of ways in which peer leadership facilitates meaningful and deep engagement with the university community and builds sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution, in addition to development of important academic and employability skills.

In the current competitive higher education market, performance indicators are increasingly about student outcomes, and in particular, student retention and completion. It is therefore critical for higher education institutions to identify those factors that impact on student engagement and ultimately, retention and success, and build effective practices and support strategies to enhance student outcomes.

Furthermore, now more than ever, purposeful development of graduate employability and graduate outcomes through intentionally designed programs need to be key strategic priorities of higher education institutions. In 2020, nearly every country in the world was forced into unchartered territory with a pandemic casting uncertainty as to what the future will look like, particularly in relation to employment. In order to deliver on the graduate capabilities that employers are increasingly expecting, higher education institutions must have a genuine commitment to student leadership and a clear conceptual and pedagogic approach to intentional leadership development. In addition, in an increasingly globalised higher education sector, and rising trends in outward and inward student mobility, we believe it is important that higher education institutions share in their understandings of international student communities to inform best practice and have assurance of their quality of their programs and impact on student outcomes beyond the local context.

Conclusion

In a previous publication (van der Meer, Skalicky & Speed, 2019), we argue the need for higher education institutions to assess the benefits of students' involvement more rigorously in extra- and co-curricular programs, including peer leadership, by systematically collecting relevant and reliable data related directly to students' experiences and perceptions of their involvement. The 2009 NSPL study conducted by the USA National Resource Centre has been the lead in this respect. The findings of the current study, for the most part, echo the results of the 2009 USA National survey and are consistent with other previous research on peer leadership showing benefits of students engaging peer leadership across a range of student outcomes. They also extend the findings of previous research to an international perspective, and further suggest that the national, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts within which peer leadership occurs is to some extent irrelevant to the impact it can have on key outcomes areas such as those examined here, at least from the peer leaders' perspective.

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