

## Guest Editorial

### **Melanie Giles**

University of Ulster, UK

### **Marcia Ody**

University of Manchester, UK

This Special Edition of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education focuses on academic peer learning. A focus on peer learning evolved from the Higher Education Academy's recent commissioned project and publication 'Mapping student-led Peer Learning in the UK' (Keenan, 2014). The survey and subsequent publication clearly identified a further boom period for academic peer learning, not only in the UK but internationally. Indeed, there have been a phenomenal number of submissions for this journal and we are delighted that there will be a second part to this special published in the spring of 2016.

As is evident from the survey, there is a plethora of different peer learning models and as Ody and Carey (2013) identified, there are different models of peer education often with different titles; terms like 'peer tutoring', 'peer mentoring' and 'peer coaching' are used frequently. However, they are normally based on the principle of 'peer learning' and as such generally involve 'the practice of more experienced students being trained to guide and facilitate the learning of less experienced students in an organised and supported way' (Keenan, 2014, p.5). In this special edition, Skoglund et al. discuss different approaches to peer academic mentoring and highlight that whilst there are common elements, models of practice may vary in their focus and structure depending on the context. Additionally they highlight that models of academic peer learning can sit alongside each other for different purposes.

Within the UK, the two most prominently named schemes are Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) and Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Essentially they are one and the same thing but use different nomenclature; the approach derives from the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model which originated in the US and has been adapted to work in the UK

context. An overview of the PAL/PASS model is provided here in Sedghi and Lunt's paper, which focuses on the implementation and organisation within one institution and some of the practical elements as well as identifying some benefits. Whilst the management and coordination of schemes varies from one institution to the other (perhaps calling for a more holistic institutional approach to implementation as described in the paper reported here by Eyre), most schemes operate across disciplines. They typically involve trained second year students (sometimes utilising online activities as described by Hettrick and Moses-Allison) working in pairs to facilitate regular study groups with students in the year below. The purpose is to support the student experience through collaborative discussion and in so doing, improve academic performance and achievement and reduce anxiety, thereby aiding the transition process.

Indeed, as the findings reported by Liou-Mark et al. demonstrate, participating in peer led workshops has the potential not only to improve grades but also to reduce failure rates and thus support the transition into higher education. These findings are echoed by Byl et al. who use an Appreciative Inquiry approach to highlight the potential of peer learning to facilitate social and academic integration of first year students. Scriver et al. also report on the potential of PAL to improve academic performance and its ability to empower learners. Further, Sneddon comments on the potential of peer tutoring to increase confidence. Many other benefits to students have been reported. For example, the creation of a safe environment where students are encouraged to ask questions has been shown to improve the communication process between students and staff and enhance students' sense of belonging which is particularly important in the context of retention and attrition (see e.g. Trowler and Trowler, 2010). Thus as Keenan (2014) points out, peer-led learning schemes have the potential to demonstrate commitment to building student engagement and creating multi-layered partnerships, which in turn creates opportunities for institutions to enhance their reputations for a relatively low investment.

Of course, the benefits of peer learning will to some extent be dependent on the nature of the relationships established. As Garcia-Melgar et al. highlight, the mentor-mentee relationship is critical to the success of peer learning. In their paper they define effective relationships as the balanced presence of social and cognitive congruence between mentor and mentee and suggest this relationship could be enhanced through training. Regardless, evidence is also accumulating to suggest that the students who participate in peer-led learning sessions are not the only ones to benefit. As is evident from several of

the papers reported here including those of Zacharopoulou et al., Guyon et al. and Ford et al., those who assume the role of peer leader report improvements in a range of transferable personal and professional skills and experiences including better communication, organisation, leadership, decision-making and team work skills and increased confidence and empathy, which in turn should improve their employment prospects (see also, Keenan, 2014). Pritchard's paper reports on the benefits to be gained from assuming the role of a writing mentor, particularly in terms of self-confidence. Further, the case study by Gentle et al explores the value of reflection as a tool for leaders to examine their relationships with the group as well as the skills they are developing as a way to increase their professional capability and personal development. Yet as, Zacharopoulou et al.'s paper highlights, it is possible that the increased focus on skills may serve to identify deficiencies in some areas, reinforcing the need to provide other opportunities for students to build on and further develop the skills and experiences provided by peer learning schemes. Their paper also highlights the need for a more robust approach to the evaluation of these schemes.

Certainly, one of the challenges reported by Keenan (2015) identified through the survey commissioned as part of the 'Mapping student-led Peer Learning in the UK' project, was to provide robust data to support the implementation and sustainability of schemes. As is apparent in this special edition, evidence is accumulating to suggest that peer learning does have real value. However, the absence of both a consistent approach to evaluation and the identification of key impact measures present obstacles to achieving buy-in from key stakeholders and is thus preventing the introduction of new schemes and the development of existing ones. Clearly what is needed is 'the pooling of data and collaborative research into the participative pedagogies' and the creation of 'a bank of impact studies' (Keenan, 2014, p. 44). What was also apparent from the 2014 report was the need to establish a community of practice for the national and international peer learning community that would not only promote research but would also encourage the sharing of good practice, the enhancement of knowledge and the further development of existing schemes.

With this in mind, a new Academic Peer Learning Network was launched in June 2015 during a peer education event at the University of Manchester. Already the network has 250 subscribers representing 145 institutions/organisations from 12 countries worldwide and is providing opportunities for international collaborations. For example, there is

currently a great deal of interest in areas relating to STEM such as gender, identity, confidence, and the role of peer led academic learning in transforming learning for STEM students and leaders. Additionally the network is working with graduate interns across the United Kingdom to engage students in sharing practice between institutions. There is a JISCmail group for this network and subscribers are welcome from across the globe to seek advice and support or share their experiences, research and ideas. For more information about the network please contact: Chris Keenan ([ckeenan@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:ckeenan@bournemouth.ac.uk)) or Marcia Ody ([m.j.ody@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.ody@manchester.ac.uk)).

In light of the need to provide evidence to persuade policy-makers of the benefits reported here and drive the research and evaluation agenda forward, an impact/research Special Interest Group (SIG) has been established as part of the new Academic Peer Learning Network. Broadly speaking, the aims of this group are to determine key impact measures, share evaluation practices and coordinate collaborative research. A specific priority of this group will be to develop a large impact study involving institutions within the UK and beyond. To this end, the SIG has analysed existing surveys and reflected on the findings reported here and elsewhere. As a result, it is apparent that the variety of outcomes identified in evaluative research, the measures employed and the methods and designs adopted are limiting the conclusions that can be drawn in terms of impact. As such, the immediate task is to create and test an evaluation toolkit that can be used across institutions, thereby ensuring a more consistent approach to evaluation. The plan is to pilot this toolkit during 2016.

Training is a critical component in the success of academic peer learning, indeed the Mapping Student-Led Peer Learning report recommends practitioners to: 'Participate in nationally recognised training and development, ensuring consistent and quality-assured approaches are adopted prior to implementing schemes' (Keenan, 2014 p. 6). Currently PASS/SI training is offered in the UK through the National Centre based at the University of Lund, Sweden. For more information please go to: <http://www.si-mentor.lth.se/english/si-supervisor-training-in-the-uk/>

Marcia Ody and Melanie Giles, guest editors for the special edition

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### **A note from the editorial team**

We hope that readers will find the contents of this first part of our special edition on academic peer learning informative, useful and inspirational. We have certainly been energised and enthused by working in collaboration with Marcia, Melanie and the authors of these papers to produce this 'bumper' edition. It became quite clear early on in the process that we would have more material than could be included in one single edition. Given the high quality of submissions and the importance of the content we quickly decided to split this special edition into two parts, with part two to be published early in 2016. This will allow all those who submitted relevant material the opportunity to have their peer-reviewed work published in the JLDHE. The editorial team felt it important to make this possible given the huge contribution being made to the field of Learning Development by those involved in designing, delivering and evaluating academic peer learning schemes in higher education. We believe that peer learning processes and practices have a great deal to contribute to HE and very much welcome the focus this brings to the role that students themselves play in how learning develops, its purposes and potential for both scholarship and community. We are now working with Marcia and Melanie on part two of the special and are very much looking forward to announcing publication in the near future.

Editorial

Helen Bowstead; Andrew Doig; Amanda French; Andy Hagyard; John Hilsdon; Christina Howell-Richardson; Moira Maguire; Stephanie McKendry