

# Peer Support Roundtable (26 March) – Meeting Notes

## **Presentations**

### **What is Peer Support? An Exploration of Research and Practice**

Julia Pointon-Haas – King's College London Students' Union

- Julia recently completed her PhD at King's College London, exploring how peer support can enhance student mental health as part of a whole university approach. Alongside her research, she has been involved in related work at King's College London Students' Union.
- Her work responds to the growing number of students seeking mental health and wellbeing support, highlighting the need for approaches beyond traditional counselling services. Since students often turn to one another when facing challenges, peer support may play a crucial role in the whole university approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing - but there is currently a lack of clarity and consistency in how it is defined and implemented across HE.
- Julia's first study reviewed the literature on peer support in universities. Findings showed that certain types of peer support were effective in some cases; however, the reporting was too inconsistent to demonstrate the impact of peer support on student mental health and wellbeing. A second study explored staff perspectives on delivering peer support schemes.
- A key finding from Julia's research was the identification of four distinct types of peer support in HE:
  - Peer-led support groups (mutual support groups)
  - One-to-one peer support (one-to-one structured spaces for students seeking help from a trained peer facilitator)
  - Peer mentoring (higher year/more experienced students supporting/mentoring new, less experienced students)
  - Peer learning (academic-focused support in groups)
- Her research also highlighted common challenges: low student engagement, limited staff time and resources, and difficulties evaluating outcomes from the staff and student perspectives of those managing/facilitating peer support. Also, concerns were raised by students about training, confidentiality, and clarity around the types of support available, and when each type might be helpful.
- Further findings from Julia's research will be available to University Mental Health Charter members on [Student Minds' Library of Learning](#).
- Julia hopes that clearly defining these four types of peer support will promote more consistent language and better practice sharing across the sector. She has also developed a practical delivery checklist to help universities design effective

peer support schemes - tools that are already influencing the approach at King's College London Students' Union (more information on this can be found [here](#)).

## Peer Support Framework

Catherine McConnell – University of Brighton

- Catherine has been leading sector-wide work with AdvanceHE to develop the Peer Learning and Support Compendium. This publication features a comprehensive survey, literature review, and 24 case studies showcasing different models of peer learning and support in HE.
- Building on this, Catherine is developing a peer support framework to be included in AdvanceHE's wider peer support resource package. The framework serves as a practical guide for designing and implementing peer support schemes in HE.
- It outlines key principles that should underpin peer support schemes - such as empowerment, collaboration, inclusivity, and compassion - and maps out the stages of development, from co-design and piloting to training, embedding, evaluation, and recognition of peer mentors.
- It also considers where peer support fits within the student experience—curricular, co-curricular, or extracurricular—and presents a range of delivery models to support diverse students' needs.
- More information on the AdvanceHE compendium can be found [here](#).

## Rethinking Peer Support

Denise Meyer – Canterbury Christ Church University

- Denise shared insights from her career in developing peer support, combining practical experience with research. Her work includes the *Students Against Depression* website, the *Positive Minds* peer support course, sector-leading initiatives at the University of Portsmouth - such as the *Welcome Ambassador scheme* and an optional wellbeing and belonging-focused credit-bearing module (recognised by TASO in its student mental health evidence hub) - and her current work at Canterbury Christ Church University, where she has helped to shape a new academic framework embedding a compulsory credit-bearing module supporting peer community-building on every course.
- Her key takeaway is that authentic peer voices are powerful, but formal peer support schemes often struggle due to “deficit positioning” - the idea that students must identify as needing help, which many avoid.
- Denise advocates for a shift in approach. Rather than treating peer support as an add-on, universities should embed it into the curriculum. By providing structured, routine opportunities for students to develop competencies for co-creating inclusive, supportive learning communities, peer support becomes a

natural and empowering part of the student experience anchoring learning, retention and successful outcomes.

### **Key Points from the Broader Discussion**

- It can be difficult to build a business case to develop new peer support schemes when a lack of evidence exists for the efficacy of other/previous similar schemes. Thus there is a need to develop routine forms of evaluation that links to strategic priorities (e.g., retention or attainment).
- Current evaluations tend to focus on educational outcomes, but peer support likely offers broader benefits - particularly around wellbeing and belonging - that are often overlooked.
- There is growing recognition that peer support should be embedded into the curriculum to promote inclusivity and student engagement. However, with increasing pressures on the curriculum to accommodate multiple additional initiatives, institutions will need to make strategic decisions about what is prioritised. Input from senior leaders, informed by institutional strategies for student support and learning, will be essential to balance demands.
- The integration of peer support into the curriculum can also be negotiated by aligning it with graduate attributes or PSRB (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies) requirements. Course design and review processes present further opportunities to embed peer support meaningfully.
- To raise the profile of peer support and ensure its sustainability, institutions should explicitly link it to strategic goals - such as OfS conditions, Access and Participation Plans, or other regulatory activities. This will help secure resources, support robust evaluation, and elevate the visibility of peer support at the senior leadership level.
- Institutions should not view different peer support models as mutually exclusive. Different approaches may resonate more with different student groups, so a whole-institution strategy should incorporate a variety of models to meet students' diverse needs.
- While some peer support schemes (e.g. peer learning in the curriculum) have established training, wellbeing-focused models often lack consistency. As a result, institutions are creating their own training regimes. There is a clear need for more sector-wide collaboration and sharing of good practice.
- Sustainability is a key consideration. Paying students to deliver peer support may not always be feasible; instead, institutions should explore alternative forms of reward and recognition.
- Recent guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission emphasises the importance of support for disabled students. Student peer supporters or

mentors may receive disclosures of disability or mental health issues from fellow students, so institutions must ensure schemes are well-supervised, properly trained, and processes are in place to ensure compliance with the Equality Act.