

“AdvanceHE

+ Student-led peer learning and support

Part 1 - Executive summary

Edited by Dave Lochtie and Dr Catherine McConnell



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1 Introduction

This is an executive summary of a wider compendium of evidence into student-led peer learning and support in higher education, featuring a [literature review], [findings] from a sector-wide survey and a collection of resulting [case studies] from survey respondents. [All of the resources are available here.](#)

Student-led peer learning and support schemes can provide a vital sense of community and belonging to students in higher education (HE), as well as offer the potential to improve academic confidence and contribute to improved attainment, retention, progression, and completion. Across the HE sector both within the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally, peer learning and support is commonly situated across a variety of institutional contexts, featuring a diverse range of approaches, models, and terminology. This compendium of evidence maps the provision of student-led peer learning and support, primarily across the UK HE sector, identifying multiple perspectives, opportunities, challenges, good practice and potential avenues for future research.

This work is the result of two years of activity conducted by an Advisory Group of 24 university professionals working in peer learning and support from across the sector. In creating this compendium, we aimed to build upon a previous study *Mapping Student-led Peer Learning in the UK* (Keenan, 2014) which sought to detail the scope and range of peer learning, showcase innovative practice, and make recommendations for future practice. In considering the impact of many significant events to HE in the 10 years since Keenan's study, the editors and authors of the current compendium set out to investigate how these events have impacted on how peer learning and support is arranged.

Within this compendium readers will find an extensive [literature review] featuring 95 academic papers on peer learning and support. Our [findings] following a call for survey participants (n=69) are detailed in a dedicated report. An extensive set of 24 [case studies] of peer learning and support are also provided, to offer practitioners ample examples of effective practices. Through this work, we have responded to Keenan's recommendations (2014) below, as well as producing a refreshed set of recommendations, which bring the sector up to date with the developments in this growing area of educational practice.

2 Response to previous sector mapping

In 2014 Keenan published a report mapping student-led peer learning in the UK. Eight recommendations (2014, 6) were made to both the sector and to individual institutions as a call to further progress this area of educational practice.

The first two recommendations, aimed at the sector through professional bodies such as Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education Academy), called for the sharing of practice, national pooling of data and collaborative research, and the creation of a bank of impact studies. Keenan's report inspired the organisation of a community of practice in 2015, known as the Association of Peer Learning and Support¹, which now has over 500 members globally. Our current report responds to the need for collaborative research in this field and provides an extensive set of case studies aimed at sharing practice.

Keenan's third recommendation called for nationally recognised training and development for practitioners and peer leaders, to ensure that consistent and quality assured approaches are adopted prior to implementing schemes. We uphold this recommendation, observing a plethora of localised practices located in various departments within institutions through this current research, which may lead to further diversification of models and approaches to peer learning and support across the sector.

The final five recommendations, aimed broadly at institutions, called for the clear articulation, strategic leadership, consistent performance measurement, embedded (within the curriculum), timely and well-informed design of peer learning in collaboration with a range of stakeholders. These continue to be highly relevant recommendations corroborated by the current findings highlighted by the challenges found in the survey findings (13-14). Resourcing, practical arrangements (such as timetabling), reliable impact evaluation, and quality assurance are commonly cited as limitations to the progress of peer learning and support within institutions.

Set against Keenan's previous mapping report, there are clearly still significant similarities in practices demonstrating the longevity of formal schemes such as PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) and PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) particularly within the UK. However, the current findings presented across this compendium showcase a breadth of emerging peer practices internationally, which have adapted to address agendas other than those which are purely in the academic sphere.

3 Recommendations

In light of our responses to Keenan’s recommendations above, this report offers seven refreshed recommendations to both institutions and wider sector bodies such as Advance HE:

- 1 Extend the terminology to include peer learning “and support” to acknowledge the potential for peer learning to address a deeper appreciation of student needs, covering both academic and non-academic aspects of student life.
- 2 Ensure academically rigorous evaluation of peer learning and support is expanded to consider effective practice across key processes and applications of peer learning and support, across a spectrum of academic disciplines.
- 3 Conduct ethically robust quantitative evaluations of impact upon student outcomes, both at an institutional and multi-institutional level, considering the good practice established via this compendium.
- 4 Conduct specific evaluation at institutional level into targeted peer learning and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups.
- 5 Extend this compendium to include a review of international literature to capture the breadth of global practices, to enrich the field of peer learning and support with a greater diversity of approaches and perspectives.
- 6 Expand this compendium to include case studies based upon the theme of student partnership, to better harness the potential of student-led peer learning and support.
- 7 Advance HE, the Association for Peer Learning and Support, and other stakeholders take action to encourage institutions to support their Professional Services colleagues in conducting and disseminating the rigorous academic research into peer learning and support the field requires.

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5 References

Keenan, C (2014) '*Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*'. Hull, Advance HE.

Available at: [Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](https://advance-he.ac.uk/mapping-student-led-peer-learning-in-the-uk/) [accessed 21 May 2024].

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