

RESEARCH ARTICLE

International Survey of Peer Leadership (ISPL): An Emerging Snapshot of the Status of Peer Leadership in South Africa

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Abstract

The power and importance of peer influence in educational settings has been well documented (Cuseo, 2010; Ender & Kay, 2001; Keup, 2010). In South Africa, research supports international trends that student involvement in peer-led activities contributes to student success and ultimate throughput (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). A plethora of research exists attesting to the benefits for students who are the recipients of peer-led activities. In South Africa, however, knowledge gaps exist pertaining to a national perspective on the experiences and, to some extent, on the benefits of peer leadership activities for peer leaders themselves. The purpose of this study is to provide an initial national snapshot of the development and experiences of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education, using the International Survey of Peer Leaders (ISPL). The research design adopted was a non-probability purposive sampling technique, with a sample size of N=466. Data were analysed using descriptive analyses. Findings validate previous findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of the types of peer leadership positions held, the training and support peer leaders receive, levels of engagement, and the benefits of being involved in peer-led activities.

Keywords

peer leadership; higher education; student engagement; student involvement; peer leader development; peer leader gains; trends

Introduction

Globally, institutions of higher education have increasingly begun to utilise undergraduate and postgraduate peers in student support and service delivery (Cuseo, 2010; Keup, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). These students, known as peer leaders, are chosen to use their influence to assist undergraduate students in a way that is more accessible and less intimidating than when delivered by teaching staff, professors, or administrative staff (Cuseo, 2010).

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Current international research also indicates that peer leader positions are beneficial to both the students serving in the leadership role and the students they support. With regards to the benefits reported by peer leaders, Harmon (2006), for example, found that peer mentors for first-year students reported increases in their ability to manage groups, empathise with students, and facilitate learning. Peer leaders across America also continue to report improvements in their communication and leadership skills; increased knowledge of campus resources; more interaction with teaching staff, professors and peers; greater engagement in critical thinking and diverse problem solving, and refined interpersonal skills (Astin, 1993; Ender & Kay, 2001; Shook & Keup, 2012). These aforementioned studies, conducted at various institutions in America, also provide insight into the selection, training and compensation models for peer leaders. In addition, they further attest to the development and positive experience gained, and position peer leadership as an emergent high-impact practice (HIP) (Keup & Young, 2014). HIPs are defined as “teaching and learning practices (that) have been widely tested and have shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds (and represent) practices that educational research suggests increases rates of retention and student engagement” (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). Specifically, HIPs are characterised as practices that include an investment of time and energy, substantive interaction with faculty and peers, high expectations, feedback, exposure to diverse perspectives, reflection and applied learning, and accountability (Keup, 2016).

Historically, research in South Africa has predominantly focused on particular types of peer-led activities ranging across academic as well as co-curricular lines. (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). This has resulted in localised studies and has failed to provide a national picture of the development and experiences of peer leaders.

This study explored the development and experience of South African peer leaders using the International Survey of Peer Leaders (ISPL). The ISPL is an expansion and adaptation of the 2013 American National Survey of Peer Leaders which was used to gather national data by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The ISPL instrument was standardised to be responsive to the South African context. During 2014 and 2015, data were collected at six representative South African institutions of higher education. This study provides insights on an initial rollout of the ISPL as a pilot study and begins to foreground peer leadership as an emergent HIP. In addition, this study calls attention to the diverse ways in which peer leadership has historically been implemented in South Africa and offers opportunities for internal comparisons between institutions which can inform best practice around peer leadership. Looking ahead, this study provides prospects for international comparisons, which can help South African institutions of higher education to align themselves with international trends around peer leadership.

Literature Review

Educationalists define peer leaders as students who have been selected, trained, and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers. These services

are intentionally designed to assist peers to cope with the demands of tertiary education (Newton & Ender, 2010). Peer leaders are then chosen to provide support, as they are perceived as more approachable and less judgemental than an authority figure (Cuseo, 2010). In addition, both students and their peer leaders are at proximal stages of cognitive and social development, which facilitates student identification with and comprehension of the peer leader (Vygotsky, 1978; Cuseo, 2010).

The significant role that peers assume in human development has been widely documented within educational contexts (Cuseo, 2010; Ender & Kay, 2001; Keup, 2016; Newton & Ender, 2010). In fact, most theories on student development highlight the significant influence that peers have on intellectual development, academic engagement, moral development, clarification of political and social values, formation of self-concept, and interpersonal skills (Greenfield, Keup & Gardner, 2013). Peers not only influence developmental processes, but are also instrumental in interacting with and encouraging other students to become involved on their campus. Scholars such as Astin (1993), Alexander, Wogelgesang, Ikeda and Yee (2000) suggest that academic involvement and interaction with faculty and fellow students increases the time and physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience. Astin (1993, p. 398) concluded, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years”. In the light of this perspective, there has been a proliferation in the use of peer leaders in almost every area of academic and student support (Hilsdon, 2013; Keup & Skipper, 2016; Newton & Ender, 2010).

Keup (2012) suggests that training is critical for developing the capabilities and skills required for peer leadership. Furthermore, training differentiates the peer leader role from informal peer-to-peer interactions (Keup, 2016). Ender and Kay’s (2001, p. 1) definition of peer leaders as “students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers” reinforces this view. This definition supports the notion that peer leaders must be trained to undertake their respective roles within the institution. According to Latino and Ashcraft (2012), intentional and ongoing training is a prerequisite for any successful peer leadership programme and further state that training should be intentionally designed to adequately prepare peer leaders for their roles and responsibilities.

Globally, peer leadership has come under scrutiny in an attempt to better understand the practice as well as its benefits. In the the Kingdom of Bahrain, a localised study was conducted in the Basic Medical Science Department at Qatar University (Kassab, Abu-Hijlek, Al-Shboul & Hamdy, 2005), to investigate the experiences of students engaged in problem-based learning (PBL) and the development of peer leaders. Peer leaders reported development in the following areas: interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, evaluation, and feedback skills.

In Australia, research traditionally focused on particular types of peer led activities, for example, tutoring. Researchers have concluded that tutors play a crucial role in university teaching in Australia as tutoring supports student engagement with discipline-specific curricula (Bell & Mladenovic, 2014). Given that a significant percentage of Australian

tutors aim to transition into academic careers, tutoring has been identified as a useful practice for “growing one’s own timber” (Bell & Mladenovic, 2014).

In the higher education sector in Portugal, peer leadership is a widespread practice. Unfortunately, as in many other countries, limited research into the peer leader experience exists. A study conducted with peer tutors involved in Project-Led Education (PLE), found that tutors expressed satisfaction with the programme and experienced a sense of personal fulfilment (Simao, Flores, Fernandes & Figueira, 2008).

American researchers Colvin and Ashman (2010) investigated the roles, risks, and benefits of peer-mentoring relationships in higher education. Their research findings have confirmed that the most common areas that involve students helping other students are peer tutoring and peer mentoring. In addition, they found that successful peer mentoring and peer tutoring does not happen within a vacuum, but is the result of relationships among students, mentors, and instructors. Furthermore, Wawrzynski, LoConte and Straker (2011) conducted a National Peer Educator Study (NPES) to evaluate the national peer education programme and the experiences of peer educators at American colleges and universities. Results from this evaluation, yielded parallel findings to the work of Astin (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), which indicated that peers have the most significant influence on one another’s growth and development in college and that peer educators applied the information that they presented to their peers to their own student lives.

Additional studies conducted in America, focusing on the benefits associated with being a peer leader, have shown that students who serve as peer leaders also experienced gains in social and emotional development, such as improved social skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of purpose and personal identity (Shook & Keup, 2012; Cuseo, 2010; Harmon, 2006; Ender & Kay, 2001). In addition, peer leaders reported a greater sense of belonging at their institution, gained a deeper understanding of institutional processes and governance, built stronger relationships with faculty and staff, became more responsible, increased their appreciation of diversity, and gained awareness of professional and ethical standards (Keup & Skipper, 2016; Latino & Ashcraft, 2012). Furthermore, it was evident that peer leaders were also more likely to experience integrative and applied learning in their educational experience (Shook & Keup, 2012), which could positively affect employability and the development of career-relevant leadership skills (Cuseo, 2010).

In 2009 and 2013, the American National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) conducted a national survey. The purpose of the National Survey of Peer Leaders (NSP) was to gather student and institutional data to examine the ways in which peer leader programmes were structured and administered and their impact on the students who served as peer leaders. Responses from 4932 students in peer-leader roles at 49 institutions of higher education in the United States of America provided insights into the experiences and outcomes of these positions (Keup, 2014; Keup & Skipper, 2016). Peer leaders were asked to rate their growth in four outcome areas, namely: skills development; undergraduate experiences; employability; and academic performance. They reported that their involvement and experience in peer leader positions had resulted in positive gains, specifically in skills development, undergraduate experiences

and employability outcome areas (Keup, 2014). Interestingly, despite the fact that a high number of survey respondents were engaged in academic peer-leader roles, the academic performance outcome area was the least affected. Qualitative results revealed that this was due to an over-involvement in activities, poor time management and the stress associated with the peer leader role (Shook & Keup, 2012).

Research in South Africa has predominantly focused on particular types of peer-led activities within individual institutions of higher education, for example, tutors, mentors and Supplemental Instruction leaders (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). South African research supports international trends suggesting that the recipients and providers of peer-led activities benefit academically, which can make a difference to student success and, ultimately, throughput (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). This is evident from research conducted by Loots (2009), who found that involvement in an academic peer-mentoring programme enhanced student performance, resulting in both academic and social integration for the mentor and mentee. Additional studies focusing exclusively on the experiences of mentors (Norodien-Fataar, 2012) found that mentors created links between their technological usage, engagement, and their learning. Further studies focusing on the experiences of Supplemental Instruction leaders show that they developed leadership skills and pursued careers in academia (Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). It is clear that involvement in peer-led activities provide benefits to the students who receive the service and the peer leaders themselves.

Methodology

Research design

This study formed part of a collaborative international research project led by the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) in the United State of America. The said project was conducted in five English-speaking countries across the globe, namely, the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The 2013 American SPL was used as a point of departure to develop the ISPL in an iterative and interactive way with inputs from all stakeholders.

The purpose of the ISPL was to provide a deeper understanding of the development and experiences of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education. Given this, the ISPL had to be standardised for the South African situation to ensure its validity for the South African higher education context. This task was entrusted to representatives of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) who were identified by the NRC as the South African representatives to coordinate the ISPL. The standardisation of the ISPL was a collaborative process involving staff and students, who selected changes. Finally, the completed instrument was piloted with a small group of peer leaders. The following changes were unique to the South African version of the ISPL: (a) The SPL survey only included undergraduate respondents, but for the SA context, postgraduate students were also included; (b) South African peer leaders were requested to indicate if they were degree or diploma students.

Participants

The representatives responsible for coordinating the South African ISPL were tasked with identifying and recruiting potential participants. Six South African institutions of Higher Education were selected to participate in this survey, namely the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Stellenbosch University (SU), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the University of the Free State (UFS), the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), and the Central University of Technology (CUT). These institutions were selected because of the historically high numbers of student peer leaders employed by each of these institutions to increase student learning and engagement in higher education. In addition, these institutions represent the three institutional types in South Africa, namely traditional, comprehensive and universities of technology, allowing for generalisation and nuanced inter-institutional-type comparisons.¹ Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from each participating institution.

Sampling

This study adopted a non-probability, purposive sampling technique. Sampling occurred on two levels, the first being that institutions were representative of the three types of institutions of higher education in South Africa; the second institutional sampling dimension was their consistent use of peer leadership. Institutional sampling of peer leaders varied as illustrated in Figure 1; 466 respondents participated in the survey. In each of the six institutions, the entire population of peer leaders for that year were included. The sample size, although consisting of representatives from all participating institutions, comprised a significant number of respondents from the University of Johannesburg (N=278). The reason for this was that UJ was the primary location of the study, which meant that the national representatives had direct access to the peer leaders. Furthermore, this may be because the sampled institutions were represented by only a sample of their peer leaders and not the entire population of peer leaders for the year.

¹ Universities in South Africa are divided into three types, namely, traditional universities, which offer theoretically-orientated university degrees; universities of technology, which offer vocationally orientated diplomas and degrees; and comprehensive universities, which offer a combination of both types of qualifications (<https://e.m.wikipedia.org>).

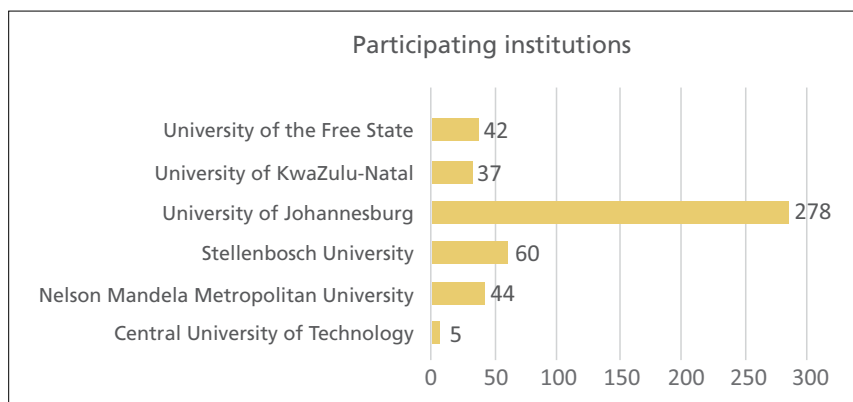


Figure 1: Frequency distribution of survey respondents per institution

Instrument

The ISPL contained questions in three main areas: demographics, structural features of the peer-leader experience and outcomes of the peer-leadership experience. Peer leaders were asked to provide demographic information including the number of years attended at university, residency, gender, and race/ethnicity. The section on structural features contained questions that focused on the number of peer leader experiences at university, the quantity of time spent performing duties per week, the amount of training received, and the types of and locations of the experiences (e.g. peer tutor, residence assistant, and orientation leader). The outcomes section included questions that focused on how the peer-leadership experience contributed to gains in relation to the institution, the development of skills, the development of workforce readiness, and overall academic success.

The ISPL consisted of quantitative and narrative measures to capture respondents' varied experiences. Each response category was coded as a dichotomous variable for analyses. The outcome variables were worded as self-reported gains, thereby representing perceived measures of change rather than direct gauges of development. Respondents were asked to indicate their self-rated change on an eight-point scale – “greatly decreased”, “decreased”, “slightly decreased”, “no change”, “slightly increased”, “increased”, “greatly increased” and “unable to judge”. These self-rated measures limit the scope to draw conclusions about true impact but do provide descriptive analyses of perceived peer-leader experiences (Keup, 2016).

Data collection

Data collection was carried out via web technology in that each participating institution received a unique URL link. This link was sent to coordinators in each of the participating institutions who in turn made it available to the various peer leaders in their institutions. This web link allowed peer leaders to voluntarily and anonymously access the ISPL, which was completed between October 2014 and March 2015. The web link took students to

an online data-collection platform where students could respond to the survey. On this webpage, students were informed of their rights as participants in this research and were given the opportunity to opt out with no penalty.

Data analysis

Analyses of the data were undertaken using quantitative methods. The data were analysed with IBM Statistics SPSS 22. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was used to investigate the experiences of peer leaders in terms of the variables being measured in the ISPL instrument (questions 1–69). Frequency tables were also drawn to help describe and summarise the experiences of peer leaders in a more meaningful manner. Another level at which the data were analysed involved calculating cross-tabulations to better depict the number of times certain variable combinations occur as a result of another variable in the sample data.

Findings and Discussion

The discussion below is based on the responses of 466 students in peer-leader positions at six universities across South Africa. These results were compared to some of the results from the American 2013 National Survey of Peer Leaders as conducted by the NRC. Two unique data point adaptations to the South African version of the ISPL yielded the following results: (a) the majority of respondents were enrolled for a degree (86%) and only 14% were enrolled for a diploma; and (b) 64% were undergraduate as opposed to 36% postgraduate students. Typically, South African peer leaders were found to be senior or postgraduate students in their third to fifth years of study. This is congruent with the literature, which states that postgraduate and senior students are viewed as having developed a greater sense of interpersonal and intellectual competence, and are therefore better able to inspire and motivate undergraduate students (Astin, 1993; Colvin, 2007).

Further analysis of the South African demographic frequencies indicated that the largest age group participating in peer-led activities was within the age group 21–25 (52%). In South Africa, half of the respondents were female (50%) in contrast to 71% females in America and 53% were black South Africans in contrast to 72% being white in America; the racial mix is representative of each country's demographic composition. In addition, 55% of the South African peer leaders resided off campus compared to 43.7% in America; furthermore 52% of peer leaders in South Africa studied in the same province that they resided in; in America, a larger proportion, 76%, were in-state students. The majority of South African and American respondents reported having held between one and two peer-leader positions concurrently. South African peer leaders, however, reported spending between one and 10 hours per week performing their peer-leader responsibilities, whilst their American counterparts spent more time, namely between six and 15 hours per week. The most common use of peer leaders across the sampled South African institutions was for academic purposes (71%), followed by 17% for co-curricular (i.e. student clubs, student governance and student housing) peer-led activities and 12% for programmes that facilitate

student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and First Year Experience (FYE)). This is in sharp contrast to the American sampled institutions as peer leaders were most commonly used for co-curricular activities, followed by programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and FYE) and lastly for academic purposes (Keup, 2014). The use of peer leaders in South Africa for academic purposes highlights the gap that exists between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school leavers for academic study and in turn the way the peer leader role is conceptualised. Institutions of higher education in South Africa are increasingly utilising peer leaders in order to deal with the learning needs of students who were previously disadvantaged as a result of apartheid-era secondary schooling (White Paper, 2013).

The American NRC study revealed that 86% of the respondents reported having been trained which is comparable to the South African ISPL respondents who reported that 84% of them had received training (Keup, 2014). Table 1 depicts the length of initial formal training that the South African and American peer leaders reported receiving in preparation for their peer leadership roles. This clearly shows that a number of peer leaders in South African and America were generally trained for half a day or less. This suggests an emergent model of best practice for peer leadership training that represents sustained development via initial training and ongoing support and supervision. From the research findings, it is evident that South African peer leaders spend between 1–10 hours per week fulfilling their roles. In order for students to gain the maximum benefit from interacting for this substantial amount of time with peer leaders, training should be intentionally designed and sufficient to provide the necessary support to students. Training should also differentiate between levels of experience, as peer leaders are often reappointed year on year. Thus, irrespective of the peer-leader position held, peer leaders must be sufficiently trained for all the positions they hold (Keup, 2012, Latino & Ashcraft, 2012).

Table 1: Duration of the initial formal training for all peer-leadership positions held

Training		
Length of formal training	South Africa	America
Half a day or less	28%	23%
One day	16%	19%
Two days	17%	18%
Three days	14%	11%
Four days	4%	6%
A week	8%	17%
Two weeks	1%	21%
Three weeks	2%	7%
Enrolled in class	5%	19%
Other	1.3%	7%

Just more than half (54%) of South African respondents reported receiving additional ongoing training after their initial training, while in the 2013 NRC study, 68% of the respondents indicated having received additional ongoing training. Table 2 indicates the type of additional training that was offered to peer leaders in both South Africa and America. In South Africa, additional ongoing training predominantly took the form of regular meetings specifically dedicated to training (46%), whilst in America the preferred type of additional ongoing training (61%) occurred during staff meetings (Keup, 2014).

Table 2: Types of additional ongoing training for all peer leadership positions held

Ongoing Additional Training		
Type	South Africa	America
Retreat	4%	39%
Staff meetings	6%	61%
Meeting with supervisor	11%	48%
Workshops	46%	7%

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the data, cross-tabulations of the South African data were calculated to examine the relationships between specific sets of data (e.g. ongoing additional training and three broad categories of peer-leader positions). Despite the fact that 84% of the ISPL respondents reported receiving training, the researchers felt that the important role that training plays in preparing and sustaining quality peer leadership needed to be further explored.

In South Africa, only 63.3% of the academic peer leaders reported having received initial training. Peer leaders employed in programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (orientation and FYE) reported that 61.9% had received training for these positions. Lastly, respondents participating in co-curricular peer-led activities reported that only 59.4% had received training. With regard to sustained support and development, only 63.4% of the academic peer leaders, 58.4% of peer leaders employed in co-curricular activities, and 61.9% of peer leaders employed in programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (orientation and FYE) reported having receiving ongoing additional training. This highlights the fact that many South African peer leaders are placed in positions for which they receive no training. This lack of training can hinder the quality of peer-mediated interventions and adversely affect student engagement in peer-led activities (Shook & Keup, 2012, Newton & Ender, 2012).

Peer leaders who are not trained cannot sufficiently assist students, and may not even be fully aware of their roles and responsibilities, which are highlighted during training. In addition, peer leaders need to receive ongoing support and development as this creates opportunities for them to form support networks with fellow peer leaders and with staff who are responsible for peer-led initiatives (Keup, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). These support networks allow peer leaders to identify with the institution and to feel a sense of belonging at the institution and the campus community (Astin, 1993).

Further analysis of the results shows that almost all the South African respondents rated their involvement in peer-leadership roles as satisfying (91%). This finding is comparable with results from the NRC study (95%) (Keup, 2014). In order to ascertain the benefits of peer-leadership activities on peer leaders themselves, respondents were requested to report their growth in four outcome areas, namely, the development of skills, the undergraduate experience, employability outcomes and academic performance. Concerning these four outcome areas, the majority of the South African respondents reported positive gains.

Table 3 depicts the gains reported by South African and American peer leaders in relation to the development of skills. The top three identified skills for both the South African and American respondents, as depicted by the numerical value assigned in brackets ranging from 1–3, were interpersonal communication (90% and 87.3%, respectively), leadership (91% and 82.5%, respectively), and teamwork (90% and 77.5%, respectively). This table clearly shows that more South African respondents reported increases in skills development than did their American counterparts. This suggests that many peer-leadership opportunities in South Africa may be contributing to some of the learning and personal development outcomes that significantly impact on the development of career-relevant leadership skills (Cuseo, 2010).

Table 3: Self-rated skills development gains

Skills Development	Peer leaders who reported increased skills		% Difference
	South Africa	America	
Leadership	90 (2)	87.3 (1)	2.7
Interpersonal communication	91 (1)	82.5 (2)	8.5
Teamwork	90 (3)	77.5 (3)	12.5
Time management	86	73.6	12.4
Project management	81	72.9	8.1
Organization	86	71.5	14.5
Presentation	87	67.5	19.5
Critical thinking	93	65.8	27.2
Written communication	80	53.4	26.6

Key: the ratings in brackets (1-3) indicate which skill gained through peer leadership was rated most important.

Peer leaders were asked to rate how peer leadership affected selected university experiences. Table 4 highlights the ways in which involvement in peer leadership positions enhanced the South African and American respondents' undergraduate and postgraduate experiences. Amongst South African respondents, the top three rated undergraduate and postgraduate experiences were: being provided with opportunities for meaningful interactions with their peers (94%), interacting with and understanding people from diverse backgrounds (92%; 93%, respectively) and interacting with staff members (92%). The American respondents

reported that their peer-leadership positions had affected their undergraduate experiences in that they had provided opportunities for increased knowledge of campus resources (83.6%), meaningful interaction with peers (81.2%) and promoted a sense of belonging at the institution (76.6%). More South African respondents once again reported experiencing greater increases in positive experiences than their American counterparts did. As Kuh (2007) notes, students who are engaged with staff members and peers, and feel part of the campus community, are likely to be more motivated to perform at higher levels and more likely to persist, suggesting further positive effects on peer leaders' persistence. South African institutions of higher education are increasingly under pressure to improve access, success and throughput rates (White Paper, 2013). In order to meet these demands, practices like the use of peer leaders to promote academic and personal growth and to intentionally engage student, hold potential.

Table 4: Self-rated undergraduate and postgraduate experience gains

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Experience	Peer leaders who reported increased positive experiences		% Difference
	South Africa	America	
Knowledge of campus resources	89	83.6 (1)	5.4
Meaningful interaction with peers	94 (1)	81.2 (2)	12.8
Feeling of belonging at institution	84	76.6 (3)	7.4
Meaningful interaction with staff members	92 (3)	75.9	16.1
Interaction with people from different backgrounds	92 (3)	75.6	16.4
Meaningful interaction with faculty	85	73.3	11.7
Understanding people from different backgrounds	93 (2)	72.9	20.1
Desire to engage in continuous learning	90	71.8	18.2
Desire to persist at institution	77	68.9	8.1

Table 5 illustrates findings with respect to respondents' perceptions of their gains regarding skills that may enhance their employability. The top identified employability skill for both the South African and American respondents was their ability to build professional interpersonal relationships (93% and 77,9%, respectively). The second- and third-highest gains as reported by the South African respondents were being able to analyse problems from a new perspective (92%) and creating innovative approaches to a task (91%). In contrast, the American respondents reported their second- and third-highest gains to be: applying knowledge to real life settings (72.7%) and integrating knowledge from different places (71.2%). The difference in reported increases between the South African and American respondents ranges between 15 and 35%. In terms of employability outcomes, far more South African respondents reported increases than American respondents. The

findings show that involvement in peer-leadership activities provides the opportunity for peer leaders to develop the knowledge, skills, competencies and values (graduate attributes) that are required for them to function effectively, creatively and ethically in the world of work (White Paper, 2013).

Table 5: Peer leaders' self-rated employability outcome gains

Employability Outcomes	Peer leaders' increased sense of their own employability		% difference
	South Africa	America	
Building professional interpersonal relationships	93 (1)	77.9 (1)	15.1
Applying knowledge to real life settings	88	72.7 (2)	15.3
Integrating knowledge from different places	90	71.2 (3)	18.8
Providing direction through persuasion	89	67.8	21.2
Analysing problems from a new perspective	92 (2)	65.8	26.2
Expecting to find a job after graduation	83	65.5	17.5
Creating innovative approaches to a task	91 (3)	65.4	25.6
Engaging in ethical decision-making	87	64.5	22.5
Sharing ideas with others in writing	82	46.2	35.8

Given that the most common use of peer leaders across the sampled South African institutions was for academic purposes, it is interesting to note that gains in academic skills were the lowest. Qualitative analysis of the ISPL results suggest that this less positive outcome can be linked to the peer leaders' inability to balance their roles and responsibilities with their own academic activities, which resulted in less time spent studying. Table 6 shows that only 57% of the South African and 23.9% of the American peer leaders reported that their peer-leadership experience had a positive effect on their overall academic performance. In addition, 53% and 19% of the South African and American respondents, respectively, reported a positive effect on their average mark. This is less positive than all the other reported self-rated changes and is in sharp contrast to findings by Astin and Sax (1998) and Kuh and Pike (2005) who suggest that participating in service during the undergraduate years substantially enhanced the students' academic development and had a positive correlation with retention and academic performance. Despite this less positive outcome, at least 57% of the South African peer leaders reported that involvement in peer-leadership activities had a positive impact on their academic performance. This is particularly significant given that South African institutions of HE have increasingly come under pressure to broaden access to historically under-represented groups who are often underprepared for tertiary education (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). From a South African perspective, involvement in peer leadership activities has the potential to provide access to the epistemological discourse of *the academy*.

Table 6: Self-rated academic performance gains

Academic Performance	Perceptions of improved academic results amongst peer leaders		% difference
	South Africa	America	
Overall academic performance	57	23.9	33.1
Grade point average	53	19.0	34.0
Number of modules completed each per term/semester	34	15.1	18.9
Facilitate timely graduation	24	1.8	22.2

The findings of this study validate research findings mentioned in the literature (Astin, 1993; Shook & Keup, 2012; Cuseo, 2010; Keup & Skipper, 2016; Latino & Ashcraft, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010; Keup, 2014, 2012; Harmon, 2006). This research has confirmed that peer leadership provides benefits to the students who receive the service and to the peer leaders themselves. In particular, it appears that peer leaders in less developed countries, like South Africa, gain substantially from being involved in peer-leadership programmes. It further calls on the custodians of peer-led activities to design training programmes that are intentional and that will equip peer leaders with the necessary skills to provide effective support to students. In addition, it highlights the need for sustained training and development so that peer leaders can be further supported and developed, and have opportunities to establish support networks with their fellow peer leaders. It further positions peer leadership as a HIP in that it requires time and effort, facilitates experiential learning, results in positive gains, promotes meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourages interaction with diverse individuals and provides regular feedback (Kuh, 2008).

Conclusion

This study confirms that peer leaders regard the role they play as significant in their own development, a phenomenon which has been widely documented, particularly within educational contexts (Cuseo, 2010; Shook & Keup, 2016, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). Given the powerful and global quality of peer leader influence, higher education has begun to utilise peers in student support and service delivery because they have the potential to be positive role models and promote academic and social accountability (Keup, 2012). As confirmed by this pilot study, peer influence can also lead to positive outcomes for the peer leaders performing their roles.

This study, although a pilot, provides a better understanding of the development and experience of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education. Findings show that peer-leader positions in South Africa are primarily for academic support (71%), followed by co-curricular support (17%), and then lastly for programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and FYE) (12%). In addition, this study

shows that parallels exist between graduate attributes (depicted by employability outcomes) and the gains made by peer leaders. It further highlights the need for peer leaders to be more extensively trained, developed and supported. On a national level, institutions of higher education should begin to re-evaluate the peer leadership programmes they have in place to ensure that peer leaders are receiving the necessary training and support to effectively fulfil their roles. In addition, institutions should be encouraged to form communities of practice around peer leadership in order to share best practice and potentially work towards the accreditation of peer leadership positions. Furthermore, institutions of HE should begin to harness the power of peer leadership programmes in supporting underprepared students, addressing retention and throughput rates and promoting epistemological access to their disciplines.

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