

Just in Time, Just for You: Growing a Peer Learning Program

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Abstract

Peer learning programs are well established as an effective approach to improving students' learning and wellbeing. However, they can be difficult to implement and grow in practice. This paper describes the introduction of a "just-in-time, just-for-me" Peer Skills Advisers program and how it has evolved over the last five years. The peer staff found that the role improved their sense of belonging and employability but observed that it is challenging to set boundaries with students. The program grew steadily over time as students and staff became more aware of the service, although there is still room for growth in online support.

Keywords

Peer learning, Tertiary education, Student support

Introduction and background

Peer learning can take a variety of forms: in-curriculum collaboration between students on team assessment tasks, individual tutoring and mentoring, and extracurricular student-led learning support programs. Regardless of form, however, these programs have gained substantial attention as an innovative and effective approach to enhance students' learning experiences. For example, benefits of peer assessment are well established and include improved collaboration skills in providing and responding to constructive feedback (Boud et al., 1999; Dennis et al., 2005; Topping, 1996; Topping, 2005). At the start of the 21st century, there was also a trend, in van der Meer and Scott's (2008) opinion, towards shifting the balance from relying on staff instruction towards facilitating opportunities for students to learn from peers upon commencement of their learning journey at university. More recent studies have built on this understanding with an increasing focus on integrating student perspectives into how peer learning occurs in practice and incorporating it into whole-of-institution strategies for increasing positive student-to-student interactions at scale (Gamlath, 2022; Zhang & Bailey, 2019).

Building student wellbeing in a higher education setting is also a key benefit of delivering peer learning programs. In a four-year study, Hanson et al. (2016) found that exposure to peer learning experiences led to a significantly positive influence on students' psychological wellbeing. Similarly, other studies have found that peer learning support improved student confidence (Hilsdon, 2014) and ability to self-regulate when adjusting to the pressures of studying at university (Räisänen et al., 2021 Won et al., 2018). Peer learning support programs build a sense of belonging for students by facilitating informal interactions with their peers to make new friends and share challenges with those who have had similar study experiences, and connecting students to other relevant support services at an institution (Jeng et al., 2023; Masika & Jones, 2016; Maunder, 2018). Such interactions are especially critical for first-year students and those from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education to feel welcomed and supported (Ribera et al., 2017).

In addition to peer learning focused on assessment and wellbeing, many institutions also deliver extracurricular programs that provide foundation level learning support and academic skills advice.

These often include individual support, drop-in sessions, and group workshops, offered either on campus or online (Copeman & Keightley, 2014; Kelly et al., 2020; Kirchhoff, 2016; O’Kelly et al., 2015). Some also deliver a hybrid version of both extracurricular and curriculum aligned programs, in which the content is focused on a particular subject or disciplinary area. In the Australian context, one of the most popular examples are Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programs, in which high-achieving students facilitate group sessions focused on specific disciplinary content (Larkin & Hitch, 2019; Phelan et al., 2022; Sultan et al., 2013). Overall, the literature suggests that, although each of these types of peer programs has slightly different target cohorts and purposes, they tend to refer to consistent underlying principles: they are student-led, reciprocal, build skills and confidence, connect students with other students as well as relevant support, and deliver programs in a normative way that encourages help-seeking behaviours (Copeman & Keightley, 2014; Gamlath, 2022; Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021).

Like other well-established peer learning and peer support programs, Edith Cowan University’s (ECU) Peer Skills Advisers (PSA) program aims to enhance a “sense of belonging”, which is strongly associated with student success in higher education, through fostering social and academic networks (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Crawford et al., 2023; Dawson et al., 2014). The program model draws on social learning theories, especially Vygotsky’s socio-cognitive theory of learning (1978) where knowledge is actively built by student collaboration with more able peers (within the zone of proximal development). Researchers have emphasised the role of social and cognitive congruence in creating effective peer-led programs (Brown et al., 2014; Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021; Lockspeiser et al., 2008). Academically advanced peers are “experts” in being students and, thus, are uniquely placed to not only break down complex content in accessible language but also to offer advice and strategies for success based on their own experiences (Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021). Likewise, social congruence, based on social similarities, is crucial in peer-assisted learning as it enables a “safe space” where students feel able to share their learning difficulties in a non-judgmental learning environment. PSAs’ approachability, when combined with their ability to offer practical help, works to normalise help-seeking behaviours (Copeman & Keightley, 2014).

Context

ECU’s PSA program provides friendly, inclusive peer-to-peer foundational academic skills advice to all enrolled students. Sitting within the Centre for Learning and Teaching’s (CLT) Learning Support team, PSAs are high-achieving students who support student peers on a “just-in-time, just-for-me” (Kift, 2015, p. 54) basis. No appointment is needed, and students are welcome to drop-in—either face-to-face or online—for a 10–15-minute consultation. Between seven and 14 students are employed each semester across ECU’s campuses in two- or four-hour shifts. During service hours, the PSAs serve as the first point of contact for students, advising their peers on what is expected of a successful student, including sharing their own effective learning strategies and study habits; offering tips on how to get started on assessments; and connecting students to a variety of ECU support services, including referrals for individual consultations with learning advisers, librarians, or careers advisers. The PSA program forms part of a suite of ECU peer support services designed to increase student success and retention as per the *Student Success Blueprint (2018-2021)* and the current *Educational Experience Plan (2022–2026)* (Edith Cowan University, 2023a). Peer services include volunteer peer mentoring, which matches commencing first-year undergraduate students with more experienced peers; International Café; ECU Alumni Mentor-link; Library Peer Assistants; and more targeted approaches, such as PASS.

The program’s 2019 launch was prompted by the establishment of Academic Skills Centres on three of ECU’s campuses: Joondalup; Mount Lawley; and ECU South West (Bunbury), which is

located two hours' drive south of Perth. Staffed by ECU's Learning Adviser team, these Centres—and, later, the Learning and Career Hub created in the Joondalup Library—are a one-stop-shop for students to develop their study skills, understand an assignment, or receive feedback on a draft. Initially, PSAs were only available on campus. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily discontinued face-to-face peer support services, paradoxically opened the door to new ways of working. Responding to ECU's abrupt pivot to online teaching and learning, CLT's Peer Advisers and the Library's SALT (Student Assistance with Learning Technologies) were temporarily merged to form one Virtual Peer Support team (VEEPS). Students seeking support called or initiated an online chat to connect almost instantly with a VEEPS team member via Microsoft Teams during service hours. Students could also leave questions on chat after hours, which were answered when team members came on shift (Kelly et al., 2020). It was never intended that these peer teams be permanently merged, as funding was separately sourced and teams offered support in different areas. However, combining the skill set of these peer teams in response to ECU's abrupt pivot to online learning not only benefited the overall capacity of the VEEPS team to effectively support their fellow students but also individual team members enhanced their understanding of other ECU services by working with cross-portfolio peers. Following students' return to campus, the two teams de-merged but continued to work closely together to refer and support students. The synchronous/asynchronous aspect of Microsoft Teams chat was retained by both teams after students returned to campus, due to its potential benefit to support diverse cohorts, especially since approximately 25% of ECU's cohort are enrolled fully online (ECU, 2023b). As the online chat has expanded, so have training resources. For example, the PSAs have developed template welcome texts and a distinctive "voice" to use in messages.

A less easily resolved challenge was post-pandemic shifts in on-campus student engagement. The original intention was that the PSA service would run on all three of ECU's campuses; however, a drop in student engagement led to the PSA service being discontinued on the Mount Lawley campus after Semester 1, 2021. While the PSA program overall has grown steadily, data showed that, while the Mount Lawley-based service ran for 20 hours per week and the South West service was only available for 12 hours, the regional campus's number of consultations was slightly higher than that of the Mount Lawley campus (16.09% and 16.55% of total consultations respectively). This indicates that the South West campus provided more impact for less funding. PSA programs are currently run at the Joondalup and South West campuses' Learning Centres and through the online chat.

Their physical campus location and online presence mean that PSAs play a vital role in supplementing staff capacity and enabling the Learning Adviser team to meet an ever-increasing demand from students for individual consultations. PSAs provide administrative support to ECU staff by directing students to resources and/or university facilities; data entry; and photocopying resources. The PSA program training has sought to reconcile the simplicity and limited scope of these key duties with the requirement to exercise judgement as "expert" students to guide other students. Here, the close relationship between Learning Support staff and PSA team members facilitates conversations around allowable capabilities that ultimately benefit the program, as evidenced by increasing student engagement. In effect, the PSA drop-in service can triage students seeking learning support by assessing whether their issue is relatively simple, in which case the PSAs can resolve it by sharing resources and advice, or whether they need to be referred to a Learning Adviser.

Much like the model offered by the University of Canberra's Academic Skills Rovers program (Copeman & Keightley, 2014), PSA consultations have a time limit, which both encourages students to focus on what they want to achieve from the consultation and prevents PSAs from

offering more direct assignment support than is appropriate for the scope of their role. This time limit was initially 15–20 minutes, but concerns from the Learning Advisers as to whether PSA training gave team members sufficient tools to effectively redirect those students who overstepped boundaries and asked for direct assistance on their assignments led to this time limit being reduced to 10–15 minutes in 2021. In addition, PSA training and promotional material explicitly state that PSAs do not proofread or edit work for students, nor do they directly assist students with assignment content, as this would be collusion. The PSA program is promoted through a range of channels, including on the Academic Skills website and at orientation. However, the most effective method of promotion appears to be staff referrals, for example, through Library staff directing students who ask for assignment support and from lecturers who embed links to the PSA information in their unit Learning Management System.

In the following sections, feedback from the PSA team and data on the program are presented. Human Ethics approval was obtained to share this information (2023-04469-SULLIVAN). Quotes from the PSAs are shared and acknowledged by name with permission.

Experiences of the PSA team

As fellow students, PSAs are in a unique position to provide support to students who require assistance with their study or academic skills. In many cases, students feel more comfortable asking questions to other students rather than a lecturer or other academic staff member (as observed in Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021). Drawing on their current learning experiences, students can share their own tips and strategies that worked for them to achieve academic success. Feedback from students who used the PSA service has been overwhelmingly positive. Anecdotally, student feedback suggests that they learnt something relevant to their academic learning, felt comfortable asking questions, and that the PSA was helpful. PSAs said that students particularly liked the instant advice so that their questions were solved immediately and they could continue with the next stage of their work. Consistent with Hilsdon's (2014) findings, many students returned regularly, which the PSAs thought was due to the informal, comfortable environment created:

I think that many students who begin to use the service also realise that there is no question too small or quick to ask the PSA. We have many students return again and again because they feel comfortable enough to do so. (Allivia Pyne)

I believe they find it helpful to gain that advice from someone who is going through the same thing as they are. (Peer Skills Adviser)

A key ethos of the Learning Advisers and PSAs is that they work to develop students' capacity to learn effectively and independently. They are encouraged to be learning experts, not content experts. The model runs similarly to the PASS program by facilitating students to find answers for themselves:

I have also learnt that it is more important to help students to learn self-help behaviours, than to try to solve all of their problems for them. The old "teach a man to fish" saying. (Allivia Pyne)

PSAs are experts in being high-achieving students but are not subject or discipline experts. Challenges experienced by PSAs include difficulties in assisting non-native English speakers, and trying to solve problems in assignments they are not familiar with, especially when the student expects the PSA to tell them “the answer” or complete work for them:

The main difficult aspects are when a student comes up with their half-finished assignment and says “can you tell me if this is right” there is no “right” answer and there are so many aspects they want me to look at. (Peer Skills Adviser)

PSAs are encouraged to set boundaries and explain to the students the expectations of the role as it can sometimes be difficult to negotiate the boundary between assistance and instruction, as observed by Brown et al. (2014). To aid this, PSAs are encouraged to limit consultations to 10–15 minutes and direct students to other ECU resources, as needed. One PSA said her main challenge was:

When individual students become dependent and expect you to edit their work. I have learned to be more assertive and set boundaries this semester. (Rona Moseley)

The physical location of the PSA desk close to the Learning Advisers means that staff are able to support PSAs and demonstrate boundary setting when problems arise. Upon learning to set boundaries, many PSAs reported that the majority of students just needed reassurance and their stress eased. van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman (2020) found that new students are often looking for respect, communication, kindness, and social connection when they join university.

Other challenges include keeping busy when there are no students. This is particularly relevant to quieter days (Fridays) and to the South West campus with fewer on-campus students:

Sometimes there are no students to help in a day, I find the quiet times challenging. (Allivia Pyne)

During quiet periods, PSAs are encouraged to help staff with administrative duties to support the operation of the Academic Skills Centre or the Learning Support team. PSAs are also asked to contribute to the development of new learning skills resources, for example, by providing feedback from a student perspective.

The most cited benefit reported by PSAs was job satisfaction. All PSAs stated that they valued their experience, finding the position rewarding. They enjoyed feeling helpful and liked the interactions with students. As a result, this increased their confidence in their own capabilities and solidified their own academic skills, providing further positive reinforcement:

The most rewarding aspect is helping students feel empowered after leaving the service.
(Rhys Hughes)

I get the pleasure of being able to help others, I get validation from students and staff, and I am constantly updating my academic knowledge and skills. (Hannah Simpson)

Interaction with the students is the most rewarding part of the PSA role for me. (Rona Moseley)

PSAs also reflected on friendships built. They highlighted the positive experience of being part of a supportive team and being a valued member of the ECU community, with South West campus staff feeling particularly connected. This is consistent with Kahu et al. (2022) who found that working, socialising, and spending time with peers and staff developed students' interpersonal belonging at university:

I feel that I am a connected member of the ECU South West campus, staff know me and are friendly towards me and so are students. That connectivity is a nice feeling in a world where digitalisation is becoming the norm. (Allivia Pyne)

I've gained amazing friends and colleagues who are super welcoming and supportive!
(Constance Green)

When asked what skills they had gained during their participation, the most prominent responses were on the theme of critical thinking and "thinking on their feet". They felt the role helped their ability to break down a question to get to the root of the problem. Other skills mentioned included improvements in consulting and communication skills, assertiveness, managing expectations, professional empathy, and rapport building:

I am learning how to be resourceful myself, developing people skills, and how to be empathetic, encouraging, and reassuring when dealing with stressed and distressed students. (Rona Moseley)

We also learn academic skills such as rational inquiry and exploratory endeavour surrounding academic writing, structure of assignments, and a knowledge of what other disciplines expect in learning outcomes. (Rhys Hughes)

The PSA role has also been helpful in student employability. Many PSAs have progressed to other casual roles or full-time work at ECU. Malm et al. (2022) similarly found that student leaders

developed transferable job skills, and the experience gained from their positions positively influenced their future employment choices:

Starting as a PSA several years ago was foundational in getting me to where I am today—I had been a stay-at-home parent for nearly 15 years, and had no confidence in my ability to get a job. Just having the opportunity to ease back into paid work, interacting with others and working in a supportive environment gave me the confidence to apply for and be accepted into an [internship], start relief teaching and begin working. (Hannah Simpson)

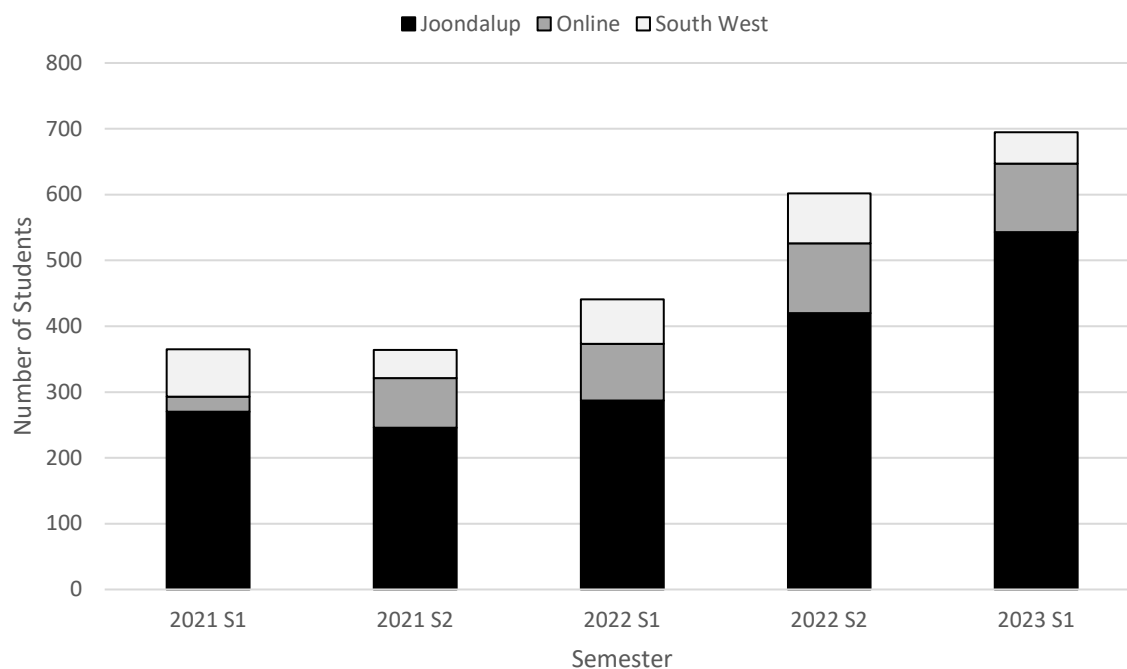
Program growth

Since its inception, the PSA program has grown steadily (Figure 1). This growth is primarily driven by an increase in the number of interactions at the Joondalup campus. Although the South West campus has fewer face-to-face interactions, their PSAs handle more of the incoming online queries. These numbers only include students who had a discussion with a PSA. In Semester 1, 2023, the PSAs also provided directions to another 271 students (e.g., to the bathrooms, printers, and appointment waiting area), which reduced interruptions for other staff.

The online chat with PSAs remains less popular than the on-campus options. This is in direct contrast to the Learning Adviser service, where online bookings increased to a similar level to in-person appointments (Sullivan & McAuley, 2023). This suggests that there is lower awareness of the online availability for PSAs.

Figure 1

Growth in Student Use of the PSA Service Over the Last Five Semesters

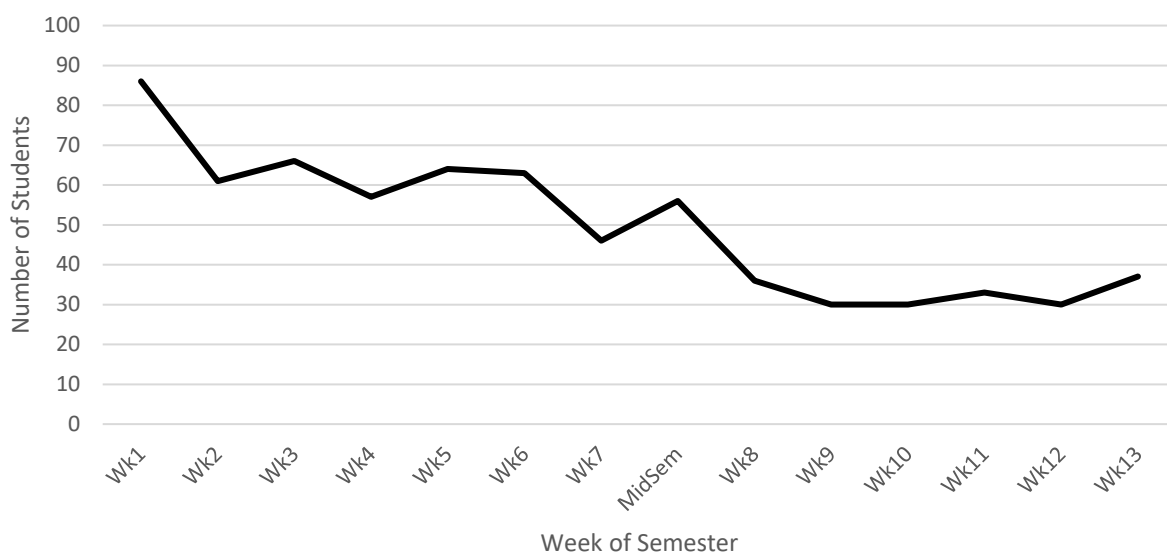


Data from Semester 1, 2023 show that most students asked PSAs for support with understanding their assignment task ($n=229$), referencing queries ($n=197$), general writing feedback ($n=108$), and discussing or booking other student support services ($n=111$). This is similar to Garcia-Melgar et al.'s (2021) study of a similar peer program at La Trobe University. They also noted that referencing, understanding the assignment task, and writing feedback were the top three requests for their peer program. PSAs regularly referred students to other ECU services, most frequently to Learning Adviser workshops and appointments or to the Careers and Employment Team. PSAs also support students to communicate better with their unit coordinators, for example, by helping them to write emails or use the discussion board. As Garcia-Melgar et al. (2021) observed, not all students are comfortable contacting academic staff.

Use of PSAs was highest prior to the mid-semester break, dropping in the second half of the semester (Figure 2). The most frequent users of the PSA service were nursing students—accounting for approximately 40% of users—followed by arts and humanities, and medical and health science students at around 15% of users each. This is quite different to the findings of Garcia-Melgar et al. (2021), whose peer service was used more at the end of the semester by health science students.

Figure 2

Use of PSAs Across Semester 1, 2023



The data collected about PSA consultations are used to drive service improvements. For example, as most student consultations occur on a Monday or Tuesday, experienced team members are scheduled on those days and new team members are scheduled on quieter days to grow their confidence.

Conclusion

The PSA service has demonstrated benefits to students, PSAs, and the university. Students are able to receive fast responses from an approachable peer; PSAs gain an increased sense of belonging to the university and gain employability skills; and the university increases its support capacity as PSAs reduce interruptions, complete administrative work, provide feedback on resources, and triage students seeking support.

The success of the program is dependent on several key factors:

- Hiring high-achieving students who normally have previous experience in customer service or client engagement.
- Supporting PSAs through structured training, and physically co-locating them beside the Learning Advisers for ongoing mentoring.
- Being responsive to changes in use and student demand, based on data and feedback from PSAs.
- Support from the university Library and teaching staff to promote the program to students.

The PSA service has significantly grown in popularity, demonstrating that it takes several years to embed new student support programs. Goals for continuing to grow the program include:

- Increasing student and staff awareness of the online service, which is currently underutilised compared to the on-campus options

- Continually updating training to improve quality of service and PSA job experience, based on ongoing feedback from PSAs and survey data.
- Upskilling PSAs to support students to use generative AI effectively.

In summary, the PSA program at ECU is a valuable resource for students seeking timely and personalised academic support. The program's emphasis on peer-to-peer assistance has not only facilitated academic learning but also offered opportunities for “genuine connection” with peers (Crawford et al., 2023, p. 10) that support a sense of belonging within the student community.

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