

Student Support in Research Capacity Development

Reflections on Experiences of Peer Support in an Open Distance Learning Context

BACKGROUND

Embarking on postgraduate studies encompasses a magnitude of unexplored learning territory. The postgraduate journey often commences with feelings of desolation and uncertainty as students enter into a postgraduate study programme as isolated individuals.

In acknowledgement of the challenges that students might encounter when entering into postgraduate studies, a study supervisor at an ODL university in Gauteng encouraged her collective group of students to engage and connect as a cohort. The foundation of the cohort establishment was to enhance the learning experience through peer group support.

The personal value gained through peer group support led to the development of this poster to depict the purpose and advantages of a supportive peer network when commencing in postgraduate studies.

AIM OF THE PRESENTATION

The presentation aims to explore the experiences of novice researchers regarding the unique contribution and value of peer support and to describe the experiences of participants regarding learning during proposal development in an ODL context.

METHODOLOGY

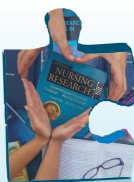
A case study using a qualitative explorative research design was used to explore the experiences of participants, regarding the utilisation of a cohort to enhance peer support, when commencing with the proposal phase of research. Data were collected by means of reflective accounts e.g. informal conversation and written narratives in reflective journals. Narrative data were analysed by an independent coder. The reflective conversations of cohort members were analysed as field notes to enrich the identified themes derived from narrative data. Members of the cohort used a conceptual framework in educational design for transfer of learning, to describe their experiences related to peer group support.

"The strongest relation to quality of life"

Having peer members available to:

Listen, care, sympathise, provide reassurance and make one feel valued, loved and cared for

Peer support drives motivation and development of momentum in progress



Emotional Support



Instrumental Support



Informational Support

Tangible peer assistance to:

Access literature, how to use E-library, on-line application and student registration process, information sharing, e.g. textbook exchange

Provision of information and guidance through:

Research supervisor's inputs

Realisation of gaps in knowledge levels, emphasising focus on research process, providing feedback and critique on work

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CONCLUSION

Peer support in an ODL context alleviates the individual perception of desolation and loneliness, because support connections increase peer interaction in various direct and indirect ways. When students with homogeneous learning tasks engage in an unstructured social environment, they construct progressive emotional independence gained from the initial social support structure. Both formal and informal peer support approaches encourage critical reflection in the process of research capacity development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promotion of peer group activities to a wider student community is recommended.
- Purposeful engagement and commitment to group activities enhances individual outcome.
- Peer support activities should have clear ground rules.
- Peer group activities should be student driven and not supervisor driven.

FINDINGS

Participatory learning within the support-context and formal and informal role player interaction equip students in both cognitive and affective learning domains. The role of the supervisor as a guide in the unknown territory of research was described as much more than being a cognitive role and responsibility.

In the affective domain, peer support addresses the different levels of support in terms of the relationships between the students and supervisor, as well as amongst the students.

Support structures provide instrumental, emotional and structural support foundations that enhance synergistic achievement towards future independence and academic development as a researcher.

SUPPORT enables people



References available on request