Peer Mentoring Programs and the Retention of Non-English Speaking International Students in Canadian Post-Secondary Education Institutions

Michael Crant
Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador
Michael Crant
PO Box 6, Site 3, RR1
Benoit's Cove, NL
A0L1A0

Abstract

There is a demonstrated need outlined in the literature for post-secondary education institutions to alleviate transitional barriers for first-year, non-English speaking international students. Peer mentoring programs are one example of a non cognitive institutional method that may be used to alleviate transitional barriers for new international arrivals. The purpose of this research project is to examine the impact of peer mentoring programs on retention rates for first-year, non-English speaking international students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions in an extensive review of existing literature surrounding this issue. More research is needed to determine whether peer mentoring programs would positively (or negatively) impact first-year, non-English speaking international students who choose to study in Canadian post-secondary education institutions.

Key Words: peer mentoring, retention, non-English speaking international students, post-secondary education.

Introduction

The transition to post-secondary education may be a challenge for any student, but may be particularly challenging for non-English speaking international students. International students refer to those "individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their own citizenship or permanent residence in order to participate in international educational exchange as students" (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010, p. 177). Non-English speaking international students not only face the same problems and challenges other students face but also have added issues related to living in unfamiliar cultural environments and studying in a different educational system and language (Campbell, 2012).

Non-English speaking international students making the transition to post-secondary education often feel a sense of disorientation and sometimes alienation that can be overwhelming for these students (Campbell, 2012). However, Shigaki and Smith (1997) suggest that local peers have a positive impact on the successful adjustment of international students in the new country. The challenge is in the act of getting domestic and international students to interact. Zhang and Brunton (2007) point out that there is often a big gap between desired and actual levels of contact with host national populations and international students, as domestic students are largely uninterested in initiating contact with their international peers.

In this light, host institutions could take on the responsibility to facilitate positive environments that encourage interaction among domestic and international students. Post-secondary education institutions can facilitate peer mentoring programs that match one experienced domestic student with one inexperienced international student to establish and encourage a system of support for the new student. In view of the relationship between contact of international students with the host culture and degree of personal social adaptation, a structured program for establishing one-to-one association between the visiting student and a host national student may be referred to as a peer mentoring program (Westwood & Barker, 1990). In addition, peer mentoring programs are one example that implements the practice of the theoretical perspective that contact between domestic and international students increases the intercultural competence of participants known as the "contact hypothesis" (Otten, 2003, p. 15). Finally, mentoring has been increasingly viewed "as a retention and enrichment strategy for undergraduate education" (Jacobi, 1991, p. 505).

By facilitating interaction among domestic and international students, post-secondary education institutions can help alleviate transitional burdens for new international arrivals. Specifically, a peer mentoring program could establish a support and networking system for first-year, non-English speaking international students who choose to study in Canadian post-secondary education institutions to ensure a successful transition to post-secondary education that promotes academic success and positive retention rates.

1. Research Question

There is a demonstrated need in the literature for post-secondary education institutions to alleviate transitional barriers for first-year, non-English speaking international students. This research project will critically examine evidence and arguments for and against the position that peer mentoring programs increase retention rates for first-year, non-English speaking international students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions. This research report will aim to answer the following research question:

1. What would be the impact of implementing peer mentoring programs for international students in terms of increasing retention rates among first-year, non-English speaking international students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions?

2. Rationale

The University of Sydney in Australia noticed that the transition to university involves adapting to a new academic and social environment and that research demonstrates this transitional process is difficult for at least some students (Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001). They established that these transitions may be alleviated by institutional measures such as a peer mentoring program.

Likewise, United States researchers Williams and Johnson (2011) also found that international students face many difficulties adapting to United States culture and academic life. Specifically, international students face many challenges with regard to language and cultural differences. They highlighted that in addition to language and cultural differences, developing a social support network and in particular forming cross-cultural relationships with United States students can be very challenging. Williams and Johnson (2011) uncovered that taking institutional measures to have a domestically based social support system is important for easing the acculturation process and for the successful adaptation of international students to their host culture.

They reported that international students who felt connected to a host country's social network were less likely to experience symptoms of acculturative stress, and also that social connections lead to successful post-secondary adjustments. Similarly, Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed (1998) found that international students tend to experience a variety of adjustment concerns when matriculating at universities in the United States. They reported that International Peer Program participants showed significantly higher social adjustment scores than nonparticipants, suggesting that peer mentoring programs positively influence international students.

Finally, Abel (2002) reported that academic success seemed to correlate modestly with attitudes toward learning and learning strategies, as measured by the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI). Specifically, he reported that the number of course withdrawals by international students correlated significantly with LASSI scales that measured attitudes toward studying, effective time management, and concentration. Abel (2002) stated that academic success for the international student flows from the confluence of a number of factors, including language proficiency, learning strategies, and classroom dynamics and that equally important are the roles of social and educational assistance provided by study groups, peer-pairing, and mentoring.

There are, however, clear problems in the literature. Researchers have failed to establish a direct correlation between the presence of a peer mentoring program and increased or positive retention rates, specifically for first-year, non-English speaking international students (Peat et al., 2001; Williams & Johnson, 2011; Abe et al., 1998; Abel, 2002). For example, Canadian researchers Rodger and Tremblay (2003) expected that peer mentoring would positively affect students' academic achievement and that peer mentoring would increase the retention of mentored students between freshman and sophomore years; however, they concluded that participation in peer mentoring programs "provided only partial support for the hypothesis that peer mentoring would have a positive effect on achievement" (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003, p. 12). In order to measure an increased or positive rate of retention, researchers must measure the number of students who continue to second-year versus those who drop-out.

For example, if a group of international students with access to a peer mentoring program in the first-year had greater numbers entering second-year than a group of international students without access to a peer mentoring program, the peer mentoring program would be said to have an increased or positive effect on retention rate. There is a clear problem in the literature to demonstrate whether peer mentoring programs positively influence retention rates among first-year, non-English speaking international students. Therefore, this research project will critically examine evidence and arguments for and against the position that peer mentoring programs increase retention rates for first-year, non-English speaking international students by asking the question, "What would be the impact of implementing peer mentoring programs for international students in terms of increasing retention rates among first-year, non-English speaking international students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions?"

3. Literature Review

A peer mentoring program may be viewed as a non cognitive method to enhance the first-year transitional experience of non-English speaking international students. A peer mentoring program can establish support and a networking system to ensure successful transitions to post-secondary education for international students that promote academic success and positive retention rates. Peer mentoring programs can enhance the first-year experience during the initial stages of the transition process. Peer programs can help students establish supportive peer groups that provide a buffer against the difficulties of the initial period of transition, as well as provide a structure for students to assist each other in academic study (Peat et al., 2001). Peer programs that match one experienced domestic student with one inexperienced international student, for example, have the potential to reduce acculturative stress, improve psychological well-being, integrate international students into host societies, and establish mutually-benefiting relationships between host nationals and non-English speaking international peers. In an effort to reduce barriers for international transitioning to post-secondary education, peer mentoring programs aim to increase academic success and retention rates among new international arrivals.

3.1 Peer Programs and Academic Achievement and Retention

Peer mentoring programs aim to reduce transitional barriers for new international arrivals in a concerted effort to increase academic achievement and retention rates among international students. Abel (2002) reported that academic success for the international student stems equally from the roles of social and educational assistance provided by study groups and peer tutoring. He found that academic success seemed to correlate modestly with attitudes toward learning and learning strategies, as measured by the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI), an assessment measure of student-learning and test-taking strategies. Specifically, "the number of course withdrawals by international students correlates significantly with LASSI scales that measure attitudes towards studying, effective time management, and concentration. The LASSI total score also correlates significantly with the number of withdrawals" (Abel, 2002, p. 14). In other words, peer support provides international students with a means to attain higher academic achievement and increase retention rates among those students who regularly use peers to help them learn.

Rodger and Tremblay (2003) of the University of Western Ontario employed a rigorous experimental design to test the effect of peer mentoring on academic achievement and retention among first-year university students as well. They predicted that peer mentoring would positively affect students' academic achievement and that peer mentoring would increase retention rates of mentored students between freshman and sophomore years. However, Rodger and Tremblay (2003) reported that the results of the study provided only partial support for the hypothesis that peer mentoring would have a positive effect on achievement. No support was found for this hypothesis when the peer mentored groups were compared to the two control groups.

However, when participation level among peer mentored students was taken into account, a positive effect was detected. The study revealed that "participation is not contingent on level of academic motivation, and given that students with high levels of participation experienced significantly higher grades, more research is needed to identify what influences participation" (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003, pp. 12-13). In the end, they concluded that peer mentoring worked particularly well for some students; however, like Westwood and Barker (1990), they were unable to determine if those who participated in the program were simply more motivated students than those who did not select to participate in the program. Another revelation exposed a cognitive influence of mentoring. The peer mentoring program's success may have been because the first-year students received study tips or other cognitive skill training from their peer mentors.

Rodger and Tremblay (2003) also found that there was evidence supporting the notion that both information processing and study skills can improve through treatments that include both cognitive-behavioural and study skills instruction. The explanation of social influence would also hold if it was discovered that first-year students in the peer mentoring program had a greater sense of belonging, or felt more comfortable with their peer group (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Woods et al. (2013) also reported their Local Aussie Mentor Program (LAMP) appeared to produce the desired effect of bridging the cultural divide between local and international students. For example, as the program progressed, students spent more and more time with their cross-ethnic peers following LAMP intervention; however, they could not establish a significant relationship or provide co relational evidence to support whether the peer program benefited retention rates of the international students. Rather, they suggested that "LAMP holds useful potential as a tool to build cross-cultural friendships for mentees and for addressing some of the adaption difficulties faced by international students at universities" (Woods et al., 2013, p. 534). The program did, however, indicate an increase in academic success among international students who participated in the LAMP intervention.

Several years prior, Jacobi (1991) also concluded that peer mentoring "interventions reflect the belief that mentoring can improve students' levels of academic achievement" (p. 526). However, Jacobi (1991) concluded, unfortunately, "the concept of mentoring remains unclear and imprecise, and the effectiveness of informal or formal mentoring in promoting undergraduate academic success is assumed rather than demonstrated" (p. 526).

3.2 Peer Programs and Cross-Cultural Contact, Social Adaptation and Adjustment

Some researchers have investigated peer mentoring programs as a means to integrate new international arrivals into host social networks. The idea is that if new international students have a greater sense of belongingness or an improved sense of psychological well-being through active participation in cross-cultural contact, academic success and retention rates would also increase invariably. The Faculty of Science at the University of Sydney in Australia established supportive peer groups for its large intake of students into the Bachelor of Science and related degree programs. In response to a concern that many of the students were not settling-into university life as quickly as might be considered appropriate, and an awareness of the added pressures on students when the university introduced semester-length units of study, the faculty looked at ways of offering students an induction session that would help them to help themselves. The solution was a one-day workshop, held before the official university orientation period which concentrated on the development of social and academic networks (Peat et al., 2001).

The one-day workshop supported the contention that students who attended the transition workshop made a more successful transition to university life than students who did not, both in academic and social spheres. Workshop attendees thought less about deferring or dropping out of university studies, were more likely to have been involved in collaborative learning activities and were more likely to have met in social settings outside of the university. Workshop attendees were also more academically motivated, had a greater sense of purpose and identity, and rated their courses more highly adopting a "deep" approach to their learning (Peat et al., 2001, p. 210). A key factor facilitating transition in the workshop attendees appeared to be the establishment of peer groups and social networks. Social support groups acted as a buffer against the onset of anxiety and depression during periods of stress and in enhancing self-esteem (Peat et al., 2001). For example, peer mentoring groups, such as the establishment of cooperative learning groups and supportive learning communities, expedited the study process and enhanced the psychological well-being of the first-year undergraduates. The premise grounding the peer mentoring programs was cemented in the fact that student learning is a function of the context of learning and students are best served by a learning environment in which they can meaningfully interact with other students.

The facilitation of the one-day workshop allowed participants to interact, reducing acculturative stress, and increased domestic and international participation. The workshop provided a non-threatening playground that allowed the establishment of relationships among cross-cultural peers leading to successful integration of the new international arrivals. Similarly, Williams and Johnson (2011) also found that international students face many difficulties adapting to United States culture and academic life. In addition to language and cultural differences, developing a social support network and in particular, forming cross-cultural relationships with United States students can be a challenge. Williams and Johnson (2011) discovered that having a domestically based social support system is important for easing the acculturation process and for the successful adaptation of international students to their host cultures.

They found that while developing friendships with someone of the same ethnicity provided critical social support and were an effective and beneficial acculturation strategy, "using a bicultural or multicultural strategy is more adaptive" (Williams & Johnson, 2011, p. 42).

Williams and Johnson (2011) based their research on the grounds that international students who felt connected to a host country's social network were less likely to experience symptoms of acculturative stress, and also that social connections lead to successful adjustment. They also reported that international students who did not have American social support can be negatively affected by a lack of social connectivity. Limited social contact with members of the host country contributed to symptoms of acculturative stress and was related to feelings of anxiety, depression, and alienation in international students (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Their research suggested that peer programs positively influence social adjustment among international students who participate in them. For example, participants with international friendships reported lower levels of apprehension in intercultural settings than those without international student friendships; as well, participants who reported having more experiences in intercultural settings reported less anxiety in these situations (Williams & Johnson, 2011).

Cross-cultural pairing seemed to establish social connections with host nationals reducing dissociative behaviours among the international students. At the same time, cross-cultural pairing seemed to encourage interaction among host nationals and the international students promoting the successful integration of the international students in the host culture reducing transitional barriers. Therefore, cross-cultural pairing in the form of peer mentoring, by extension, is believed to lead to academic success and positive retention rates among international students.

The Office of Residence Life and the Office of International Student Services at a public university in the Midwest United States implemented a semester long International Peer Program in the Fall of 1997 (Abe et al., 1998). The International Peer Program had a significant impact on international students' social adjustment. The peer program positively influenced adjustment and development of academic skills in the participants. Abe et al. (1998) found that "pairing students with similar academic interests could potentially enhance academic adjustment of international students" (p. 546). The International Peer Program participants scored significantly higher than the control group on social adjustment, suggesting that organized interactions created by the program enhanced the international students' interpersonal skills, which are crucial for success in the campus environment. Moreover, the results of the study uncovered that the diverse adjustment needs among international students indicated that future programs should target specific adjustment goals such as academic, social, personal-emotional, or institutional attachment, that could intentionally shape the content of the peer programs to achieve specific outcomes (Abe et al., 1998). This recommendation would shed light on future iterations of the project and potentially yield focused results that could better explain whether improved social adjustment does in fact lead to increased academic success or retention rates among international students.

Campbell (2012) implemented a buddy project at a university in New Zealand. The purpose was to have host students be buddies to the international students for a semester, providing social support during the latter's initial settling-in period. The project provided the host students with a practical and meaningful experience in intercultural communication that, in the process, would help them to understand concepts and theories covered in class and develop an understanding of their own intercultural communication competence. The buddy project would at the same time help make international students' transition and adaptation in the early stages a more positive experience by reaching out and offering a helping hand (Campbell, 2012). The majority of students reported that the exercise did provide meaningful, positive intercultural experiences that they would otherwise not have had (Campbell, 2012). For international students, being paired with a host student meant that the biggest stumbling block in the path towards making friends with local peers was removed. The overwhelming amount of interest in the project, expressed by international students, also confirmed that there was a need for this kind of intervention.

The buddy project was designed to help expand international students' social networks by encouraging buddy pairs to get together with one or more other student pairs at least once. Host students recognized the potential for increasing social connectedness and suggested that more joint encounters be required in future iterations of the project. The experience complemented and enhanced host students' learning and they reported that "the buddy project can be a useful tool in facilitating a smooth transfer to life in New Zealand for international students" (Campbell, 2012, p. 222).

To augment Campbell's (2012) claim that cross-cultural interaction benefits social adjustment among international students, Zhang and Brunton (2007) found that home stays also facilitate more opportunities for interaction with host cultures. Home stays are another non cognitive method that may provide opportunities to foster intercultural relations and intercultural understandings for new international arrivals. Home stays are programs whereby international students temporarily live with host families to enhance opportunities for interaction with host nationals. Home stays are designed to allow international students to familiarize themselves with the host culture and improve English language skills.

However, Zhang and Brunton (2007) found that home stay interactions did not provide adequate opportunities to meet the needs of international students. Respondents reported they were lonely because of a lack of leisure activities, local community activities, and host national friends. Such findings suggest the need to look at the attitudes of host nationals within education institutions, as there is a role in facilitating interaction among host nationals and international students if students are to benefit from the recognized advantages of bonding with one another (Campbell, 2012; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). The lack of support found to suggest home stay programs are beneficial to international students augments the argument that post-secondary education institutions should facilitate peer mentoring programs to initiate cross-cultural contact among host nationals and international peers. Learning environments at higher education institutions seem to provide better opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction than home stay programs for new international arrivals.

Researchers at an Australian university compared two groups of international students; one group participated in a multicultural intervention program and another group did not (Sakurai et al., 2010). They examined the longitudinal consequences of participating in a multicultural intervention program for social tie development, cultural orientation, and psychological adjustment of international students. Students who participated in the program tended to develop a greater number of friends overall and particularly local (Australian) friends over the period of three months. The participants also maintained their interests and involvement in the local culture while the non-participant group weakened their local cultural orientation and strengthened their home cultural orientation (Sakurai et al., 2010).

Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) offer a more detailed response. They suggested that international students who experience academic and adjustment problems feel the need for someone to provide help, guidance, or emotional support, whereas those who are doing well are less likely to feel a lack of support. When support is not needed, the support of others may be taken for granted and hence be less salient and less predictive. In this light, Sakurai et al. (2010) could not determine whether participation in a multicultural intervention program positively affected the international students' increased sense of social tie development, cultural orientation, and psychological adjustment as it related to student retention or academic achievement. Perhaps the international students' perceived increase in social adjustment was not due to the increased contact with host national peers, but due to the fact that the international students did not need social support. In fact, the researchers stated that their "results are preliminary and causal effects of the programme participation cannot be established" (Sakurai et al., 2010, p. 184). They did note, however, that the impact of a lack of peer support on academic outcomes only augments the importance and value of programs that promote study groups, peer mentoring, or similar services that help students find the support they need to deal with the pressures of college.

3.3 Peer Programs and Contact, Social Adjustment, and Academic Achievement

Westwood and Barker (1990) developed a peer program based on the relationship between contact, adjustment, and achievement whereby incoming international students were matched with trained host national students during their first academic year. Their study was a joint venture between the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau and the University of British Columbia to investigate the relationship between the participation in a peer-pairing program and academic achievement, drop-out rates, and social adaptation among first-year international students. The results of the study suggested that "contact with certain host national individuals is positively correlated with academic success and lowered probability of dropping out of academic programs for international students" (Westwood & Barker, 1990, p. 260). They indicated that social adjustment is facilitated through increased contact with the host culture and that academic achievement seems to be related to social adjustment and well-being of the student. Unfortunately, Westwood and Barker (1990) were not able to define what factors accounted for the better performance and lower failure rates among those who participated in the peer program.

Westwood and Barker (1990) were unable to determine if those participants who opted to participate in the program were more motivated students than those who did not select to participate in the program. Furthermore, the researchers were unable to determine if success in the program was due to the increased access to and awareness of student services. Skeptics may argue that participants "were able to gain more critical information about how to function in the new society [by] learning the unwritten codes of the local culture" (Westwood & Barker, 1990, p. 260).

Glass and Westmont (2014) also examined the buffering effects of a sense of belongingness on cross-cultural interaction and academic success. Their research indicated that "belongingness exerted a direct positive effect on academic success and cross-cultural interaction" (Glass & Westmont, 2014, p. 115). They examined the interaction between international and domestic students and concluded that the study provided "robust evidence of a significant relationship between belongingness with the cross-cultural interaction between, and academic success of, international and domestic students, with comparatively sizeable effects of belongingness on both outcomes for international students" (pp. 117-118).

The study had significant theoretical implications for resilience-based approaches to the study of international students' acculturative processes and extends the relationship of belongingness with academic success and cross-cultural interaction. Glass and Westmont (2014) concluded that "[p]articipation in co-curricular activities, more than coursework alone, increased students' sense of belongingness, and indirectly increased academic success and cross-cultural interaction" (pp. 116-117).

4. Discussion

Agreement on the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs appears to be divided. More specifically, there seems to be a segmented approach in arguing the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs. Some researchers argue that peer mentoring programs directly affect academic success and retention rates among new international arrivals, while others contend that peer mentoring programs act as a buffer to reduce transitional anxieties (such as acculturative stress, psychological well-being, and a lack of a sense of belongingness) that indirectly affect academic success and retention. More clearly stated, some argue peer mentoring programs directly increases academic achievement and retention rates. Others argue peer mentoring programs provide an arena for cross-cultural contact as a means to reduce transitional barriers that lead to an increase in academic success and improved retention rates. Researchers, however, have not been able to significantly correlate any empirical evidence to suggest either to be affirmative. In fact, agreement exists only in the fact that a lack of cross-cultural contact negatively affects the academic success and retention rates of international students. The reverse has not been demonstrated.

In terms of non-English speaking international students in Canada, Cheng and Fox (2008) reported, most universities in Canada are engaged in aggressive programs of internationalization. Canadian immigration has increasingly drawn from language groups other than English over the past twenty years, and there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students using English as a second language in undergraduate university programs. In general, support programs have been implemented to focus on the development of English language skills, with the ultimate goal of supporting successful academic acculturation. For example, a number of studies have explored the academic success of non-English speaking, international students in relation to language proficiency, learning and coping strategies, demographics, and a variety of personal characteristics (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). Again, these studies have generally failed to connect academic success factors to English language support programs, such as peer mentoring programs (Cheng & Fox, 2008).

Researchers do agree, however, that academic acculturation does not occur as a result of language or disciplinary learning alone; rather, it is a complex and somewhat idiosyncratic interplay between academic and non-academic experience that allows for acculturation in non-English speaking international students' intellectual, personal, social, and cultural life (Cheng & Fox, 2008). In other words, acculturation does not evolve as a one-way transmission of information for international learners; active interaction in a variety of social contexts is necessary to develop learning and coping strategies that relate to academic success for non-English speaking international learners (Cheng & Fox, 2008). In this sense, there is a demonstrated need for post-secondary education institutions to promote cross-cultural contact among host nationals and international students. Programs such as peer mentoring programs aim to ensure successful transitions for non-English speaking international students.

Peer programs can be used to facilitate successful post-secondary transitions for non-English speaking international students who choose to participate in international educational exchange as students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions to promote academic success and increased retention rates.

4.1 Peer Programs and Academic Achievement and Retention

Peer programs provided the strongest non cognitive predictor of international students' academic achievement. Abel (2002) speculated that assistance from friends helped to overcome limitations in language proficiency and cultural background. The correlation of the LASSI total score with the number of course withdrawals suggested that peer mentoring programs positively influenced retention, as a significant reduction in course withdrawals was detected in those who actively participated in study groups and peer tutoring. However, Rodger and Tremblay (2003) expected that peer mentoring would positively affect students' academic achievement and increase the retention of mentored students between freshman and sophomore years; they were unable to positively correlate any significant difference in this respect. Similarly, Westwood and Barker (1990) set out to investigate the relationship between participation in a peer-pairing program and academic achievement, drop-out rates, and social adaptation among first-year international students. They found that contact with certain host national individuals is positively correlated with academic success and lowered probability of dropping-out of academic programs for international students; however, they were unable to determine if this was in fact a statistically significant result or a coincidence based on the fact that highly motivated students signed up for the program.

Finally, Jacobi (1991) concluded that interventions such as peer mentoring programs were based on the belief that mentoring can improve students' levels of academic achievement. However, there existed neither empirical nor theoretical evidence to support the concept that mentoring promoted undergraduate academic success among international students. Researchers were unable to quantitatively demonstrate statistically significant empirical evidence to support the notion that peer mentoring programs directly and positively affected academic achievement or retention rates of international students in their transition to post-secondary education.

4.2 Peer Programs and Cross-Cultural Contact, Social Adaptation and Adjustment

Cross-cultural contact, however, does imply improved social adaptation and adjustment among new international arrivals that may lead to increased academic success and retention. Research does suggest that social support plays a prominent role in facilitating cross-cultural transition encouraging post-secondary institutions to try various means of initiating contact with host nationals (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011).For example, Williams and Johnson (2011) uncovered programs that fostered meaningful cross-cultural relationships; Abe et al. (1998) studied the effects a peer program had on international students' awareness, knowledge and use of campus resources, and assessed the effects of ongoing, organized interaction with host students on international students' adjustment; and, Campbell (2012) evaluated a buddy project used to connect host students with newly arrived international students to provide a perceived need for social support.

Although, in each of these cases, neither study was able to provide a solid argument that social support through participation in peer programs increased academic success or retention of the newly arrived international students. However, these studies did provide a rationale to support the positive influence that host or domestic peers have on international students in terms of improved social adjustment, improved psychological well-being, and a perceived reduction in acculturative stress. In the end, the studies were not able to effectively correlate improved social adjustments, improved psychological well-being, and reduced acculturative stress with increased academic success or increased retention. Furthermore, neither study could directly correlate participation in peer programs with an increase in academic success and retention. Instead, the only conclusion drawn was that increased cross-cultural contact reduced transitional barriers, such as anxieties related to social adjustment, psychological well-being, and acculturative stress.

For example, Peat et al. (2001) set out to collect quantitative data to analyze academic and social adjustment, academic performance, and the development of social and study networks to uncover whether a one-day workshop would facilitate the development of peer networks. The results did support the contention that students who attended the transition workshop made a more successful transition to university than students who did not. As well, they did uncover that students are best served by a learning environment in which they can meaningfully interact with other students. However, the results did not link any significant correlation between peer groups, peer-pairing, or peer networks and increased academic achievement or increased retention rates.

This same phenomenon held true for Kashima and Loh (2006) who examined the relationship between international students' acculturation and social networks that international students developed in the host society. The researchers reported that the more social ties international students developed in the new country, the better adjusted they were psychologically. There was no suggestion that increased ties or contact increased retention. While psychological well-being may be beneficial in the retention of international students, the researchers were unable to determine any direct correlation to suggest that the social ties which led to increased psychological well-being among the international students actually resulted in increased retention of the international students. Bartrum (2007) further noted that international students in higher education were prone to prioritize the particular importance of their socio cultural needs. What he found even more surprising was that socio cultural needs "were noted by students not just initially during the transition phase but in all three years of the programme" (Bartrum, 2007, p. 212).

Many students felt the need for staff and lecturers to assist them socially, and there were indications that some students felt they lacked the ability to independently manage without external help. The study did offer tentative evidence of some students who were particularly reliant on external support and again felt they lacked the ability to independently manage without this external help (Bartram, 2007). The diversity of student needs in itself raises questions about the nature of student support and the best ways to provide it. Such scrutiny may no doubt lead to the formalization of student support policies (Bartram, 2009). In other words, the fact that international students demonstrated a need for external support in subsequent years of their post-secondary educational experience serves only to augment the need for support in the first-year of study. If international students who successfully transition to second-year and beyond continue to feel the need for external support, first-year international students would benefit from these support systems that much more.

Finally, Zhang and Brunton (2007) who set out to explore international students' experiences related to learning goals, language adaptation, and education achievements did uncover two interesting facts. First, home stays were found to be less effective than on-campus interaction programs and that more research needs to be done to review attitudes of host or domestic students on international students to uncover why domestic students are reluctant to help facilitate the successful transition of their international peers, especially in terms of the advantages and disadvantages as they relate to host or domestic students. While home stays do provide cross-cultural contact to provide language exposure and meaningful relationships with host nationals, they were found to be less effective than social support networks, such as peer mentoring programs, found on-campus. Peer programs provide a playground to facilitate leisure activities, local community activities, and host national friends, as well as provide an environment to adapt learning contexts, learning styles, and meaningful cultural experiences. These experiences were found to be more beneficial to new international students when compared to similar experiences revealed in the home stay programs.

More research regarding the success of peer programs as a means of reducing transitional barriers needs to be completed. Researchers need to measure specific outcomes to strengthen claims that peer programs are successful, specifically in terms of which social adjustment strategies are most fruitful in meeting the needs of new international students. Additionally, researchers need to measure which strategies best increase academic achievement or retention rates directly or indirectly. Furthermore, if post-secondary education institutions need convincing to facilitate peer programs, the programs must be tailored to validate and achieve specific outcomes. Defining specific social adjustment outcomes, for example, would help researchers understand which adjustment needs are being met by a given peer program (Abe et al., 1998).

4.3 Peer Programs and Contact, Social Adjustment, and Academic Achievement

Some research has been done to connect the effectiveness of cross-cultural contact, social adjustment, and academic achievement as a means to increase academic success and retention rates among international learners. Several studies have demonstrated the buffering effects of cross-cultural interaction on social adjustment and the academic success of international students (Westwood & Barker, 1990; Glass & Westmont, 2014). Again, research indicated while cross-cultural social contact does provide a buffer to reduce social anxieties experienced by new international arrivals, there is no indication that there is a direct and positive correlation in cross-cultural contact and an increase in social adjustment or academic achievement of new international arrivals. While Glass and Westmont (2014) were able to provide some of the strongest evidence to support the significant relationship between belongingness and the cross-cultural interaction among international and domestic students, they were not able to demonstrate any correlation with academic achievement.

Smith and Khawaja (2011) reviewed the fact that many universities have taken measures to target the acculturation of international students through the establishment of support services predominately focusing on help for practical and academic matters. Behavioural programs, such as peer mentoring programs, seek to help international students gain confidence and skills in academic and everyday interpersonal situations that aid in successful adaptation in post-secondary environments. Smith and Khawaja (2011) stated that "behavioural peer-pairing interventions have been found to aid social adjustment, enhance social support, improve academic achievement, and increase utilisation of university services including counselling services" (p. 708). Essentially, these researchers have specifically set out to make the connection between social adjustment and improved academic achievement. While they did determine that specific interventions at the individual and the group level could be a source of social support that enhances the adaptation of international students, they could not determine that these interventions improved academic achievement.

Likewise, López, Ehly, and García-Vázquez (2002) set out to determine whether social support affected academic achievement. They measured academic achievement by grade point average, but found that "results of the relation between degree of acculturation and academic achievement were not significant" (López, Ehly, and García-Vázquez, 2002, p. 254). Kuh (2011) argued that a major factor in students benefitting in desired ways from the college experience is "the degree to which they engage in educationally purposeful activities that are linked with desired outcomes of college, such as campus leadership positions, study abroad, and collaborative study groups" (p. 258). Recent studies showed that student engagement has compensatory effects, in that those who start college less advantaged tend to benefit more in terms of their grades, for example, than higher achieving students if they take part in effective educational practices (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). This evidence does point to the importance of social engagement, and can be related to the participation in peer mentoring programs, if social support and desired educational outcomes are aligned. Like Glass and Westmont (2014), they were able to point to the significance of social interaction, but were unable to offer a plausible explanation as to whether social contact led to an increase in academic achievement.

Of lesser significance, Todd and Nesdale (2006) also set out to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention designed to promote contact between members of two culturally distinct groups to facilitate subsequent contacts with out-group members, as well as intercultural knowledge and acceptance. In pursuing this objective, their research was of considerable importance due to its support for the international contact hypothesis, and the practical issue of promoting intercultural contact, knowledge, and acceptance between culturally distinct university students. While the study did report increased contact among the two culturally distinct groups, the study did not suggest any relationship between increased contact and increased academic achievement.

Grayson (2008) suggested one reason to explain this phenomenon. He reported that international students, in addition to the usual problems of adjustment to university, must face the difficulties associated with coming to a new country, such as "loneliness, homesickness, depression, arrival confusion, the maintenance of self-esteem, somatic complaints, family problems or the loss of loved ones, time pressure, adjustment to food and climate, finances, stress, language problems, difficulty in making friends, and employment" (p. 216). Although Grayson (2008) did not advocate peer mentoring programs specifically in his research as a means to alleviate the concerns of international students arriving in a new country, he did suggest that "international students are not integrated into many aspects of campus life and receive relatively little social support" (p. 216).The lack of support for international students correlates with the degree of involvement of international students (compared to domestic students) which may predict educational outcomes (Grayson, 2008; Jon, 2013). Host societies have not been able to determine the factors that contribute to international student success. More research needs to be done to determine which factors contribute to successful integration of international students into host societies. Although much research has been conducted regarding factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes of domestic students, the relationship between campus experiences and educational outcomes of international students has largely been ignored.

5. *Limitations in the Research*

There exists a limitation in the research. There is a gap in the research which does not adequately correlate a link between (a) the increased social contact among domestic and international students that leads to positive behavioural outcomes, and (b) that positive behavioural outcomes lead to an increase in academic success and positive retention rates of first-year international students.

More clearly stated, some research does exist to demonstrate that social contact, in the form of peer mentoring programs for example, positively influences the social adjustment of new international arrivals; however, there is a gap in the research to correlate any connection, positive or negative, among social adjustment and increased academic success or positive retention rates of newly arrived international students. Furthermore, there is no statistically significant evidence to support the notion that peer mentoring programs directly or positively affect academic achievement or increased retention rates among international students. Further research is needed to close this gap.

6. Recommendations

First and foremost, as there exists no conclusive or statistically significant evidence to directly support the notion that peer mentoring programs do in fact positively (or negatively) influence the academic success or retention of international students, more research needs to be completed in this area. Furthermore, there is much research that suggests a positive correlation between international students who participate in peer programs and a positive sense of belongingness, an increased sense of well-being, and an increase in cross-cultural contact, there is no conclusive evidence that suggests either of these factors lead to an indirect increase in academic success or retention rates among international students.

Westwood and Barker (1990) encourage further investigation of specific ways that knowledge of the adaptation process and involvement of host nationals contribute to helping international students meet their primary goal – academic success in a foreign country. Jacobi (1991) stated there is a critical need for more research about mentoring, especially as it applies to undergraduate academic success. Peat et al. (2001) recommend the need to replicate the findings of their one-day workshop to explore the many relationships observed between attitudes and experiences of transition and academic performance.

Rodger and Tremblay (2003) point out that the results of peer mentoring on retention and academic achievement have only been evaluated in the short term. More research must be completed to gain further insight as to whether peer mentoring does in fact positively influence retention and academic achievement of international students.

Glass and Westmont (2014) studied advanced resilience-based models of acculturation by examining the buffering effects of a sense of belongingness on cross-cultural interaction and academic success. They suggest that opportunities from cross-cultural encounters often exist in pockets within the university. International student offices, counselling centers, and other student support services can partner in efforts to enhance the campus climate for all students. These units could partner in co-sponsoring programs or organizing campus-wide conversations on diversity and the need to belong. Partnerships would not only better serve students, but also they would help educators learn from each other in order to become more responsive to the increasingly diverse student population.

7. Conclusion

While there is some empirical evidence to suggest peer mentoring programs allow international learners to achieve higher success rates and increased retention rates, there does not appear to be enough direct evidence to conclude that peer mentoring programs would increase retention rates for international students among first-year, non-English speaking international students in Canadian post-secondary education institutions. While some research does suggest positive correlations among peer mentoring programs and academic achievement, acculturation, and social buffering, empirical evidence does not suggest an indirect correlation between international retention rates of non-English speaking students and peer mentoring programs either. More research must be conducted in these areas to provide a better response to the research question.

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