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Cover Page Footnote

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ABSTRACT

The Student Learning Assistant (SLA) scheme was introduced in 2010 at Middlesex University Mauritius Branch Campus (MUMBC). The scheme is similar to traditional peer learning strategies, such as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), which are widely operated in higher education environments to motivate student engagement with their learning. Different departments at MUMBC employ the SLA scheme as a student-to-student support mechanism. General feedback from students receiving SLA support reveals benefits of the scheme in terms of students' active engagement with course materials and deeper understanding of their subject area. However, within these departments, lecturers' perceptions of the scheme are surprisingly varied. Since the 1970s, a comprehensive range of research has been undertaken on the expansion of peer learning and the welcome benefits it affords to students. Yet, the focus on student experience has been at the expense of overlooking lecturers' views of the scheme. This paper seeks to bridge this gap. It aims to examine lecturers' experience of the scheme and to recommend actions to overcome some of their apprehension with the project.

INTRODUCTION

Middlesex University Mauritius Branch Campus (MUMBC) was launched in 2010. There is no universal definition for the concept of "International Branch Campus" (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2011, p. 58). However, a common delineation is based on the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education's 2006 report, which describes it as an "off-shore entity of a higher education institution operated by the institution or through a joint venture in which the joint institution is a partner […] in the name of the foreign institution" (Becker, 2010, p. 3). Akin to the mother campus in Hendon (London), MUMBC is a traditional campus equipped with academic and student facilities, research opportunities, and diverse course prospects, aiming to offer an enriching university experience.

In addition to providing a quality education equivalent to the one at the home campus, MUMBC seeks to mirror the learning support networks that are already successfully embedded in Hendon. One such venture has been to replicate the Student Learning Assistant (SLA) support scheme at MUMBC. The project is comparable to peer learning strategies existing at other

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universities but which are labelled differently, namely as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) in the United States (US) or as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in Australia and New Zealand. These projects draw from the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model—an academic support system developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1973 (Arendale, 1994; Burmeister, 1996). By providing a framework for peer support, where students who have successfully completed a module help other students through group discussions and sharing of experience with the course materials, the SI model aims to enhance student retention and success with understanding "troublesome knowledge" (Meyer & Land, 2003) in courses that are considered to be historically difficult (Couchman, 1999). A range of higher education institutions have implemented the SI program and shared findings of their achievement with the scheme, notably in the US where the Department of Education has acknowledged its effectiveness (Martin & Hurley, 2005). Several Australian and New Zealand institutions have equally comprehensively expanded and customised the model for use since the 1970s (Ahrens et al., 1996; Barrett, Sutcliffe, & Smith, 1994; Beasley, 1997; Loh, 1993).

The SLA scheme functions similarly as a student-to-student support learning approach. The SLAs are undergraduate students from either second or third year who have already successfully completed a module in their previous academic year. The scheme operates in a structured context whereby "people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers help each other to learn and learn themselves by learning" (Ibrahim & Aaijaz, 2011, p. 93). The primary role of the SLA coordinators is to train the SLAs to act as facilitators to motivate student engagement and ultimately create effective learning environments in the non-teaching classrooms. SLAs are, hence, those individuals who have been identified and shortlisted by academics as ideal candidates based upon their educational achievements and other remarkable or transferable skills that they have showcased as students in their first or second year (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014, p. 2). They are model students who can be responsible for providing additional support during non-teaching classes. Following the selection process, the SLA coordinators also organise specific workshops to train and mentor the SLAs on how to adapt to and manage different classroom settings that they will likely facilitate in their role.

This form of peer learning is classroom-based; that is, taking place in labs, seminars, or workshops and strictly occurring outside the context of lectures. The focal point of the SLA approach is to create "cooperative learning within the framework of a partnership with the formal structures of the course" (Capstick, 2004b, p. 1) and a dynamic platform for active discussion and participation (Donelan & Kay, 1998; Donelan & Wallace, 1989; Spencer & Wallace, 1994). As a result, the benefits of the scheme at MUMBC are comparable to the advantages of PAL, largely because it extends to an array of areas. This includes benefits to the overall success of an institution, its academic teaching staff, its course programs, its students, and the SLAs themselves (Capstick, 2004b; Capstick & Fleming, 2001; Donelan & Kay, 1998; Packham & Miller, 2000; Smith, May, & Burke, 2007; University College London [UCL], 2014).

This paper, however, does not intend to focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience through this significant model or elaborate on the process behind the implementation of the SLA scheme at MUMBC (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014). The positive correlation between peer learning strategies and improvements in student learning and personal development is illustrated in ample research materials (Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, & van den Bergh, 2002; Coe, McDougall, & McKeown, 1999; Donelan, 1999; Ibrahim & Aaijaz, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Witt, 2005; Lundeburg & Moch, 1995; Micari, Streitwieser, & Light, 2006; Sultan, Narayansany, Kee, Huan, & Manickam, 2013). Yet, few academic studies focus on how lecturers, who are the teaching staff choosing to use or not use SLAs, perceive the concept of peer learning. Their opinions of this approach as a catalyst to enhancing the pedagogy through improved performance or widening student retention (Black & Mackenzie, 2008; Capstick, 2004b) are weakly accounted for. As argued by van der Meer and Scott (2009), in addition to institutional benefits and benefits to students, "effectiveness [of peer learning strategies] also needs to be considered from other perspectives" (p. 5).

Nonetheless, unlike van der Meer and Scott (2009), this paper concentrates neither exclusively on students' perceptions nor on institutional benefits. Instead, the authors of this paper, who are also the SLA coordinators, seek to examine MUMBC lecturers' varying experience with the scheme largely because "what works for one department does not necessarily work for another" (UCL cited in Green, 2011, p.5). On top of the conventionally researched PAL schemes on student experiences (Hammond, Bitchell, Jones, & Bidgood, 2010; Sultan et al., 2013; van der Meer & Scott, 2009), lecturers are equally key stakeholders in the venture. Yet, their significance in the successful functioning of PAL strategies is often overlooked (Huang, Pepper, Cortese, & Rogan, 2013). For example, at MUMBC, the teaching staff is the critical factor without which the SLA scheme would not exist because the lecturers are the ones who initially formulate the demand for SLAs. As pointed out by a research fellow in the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at UCL, "Before starting a scheme, academics should discuss why PAL is needed and how it will enhance their students' experience" (Macbean cited in Swain, 2008). SLAs are not a replacement for lecturers' teaching. Rather, they complement the lecturers' role by working closely with them while under their supervision. Hence, lecturers ought to be considered as critical stakeholders within peer learning projects, "especially in the context of university education where [the] teaching academic staff have a high stake in the success or failure of students" (Huang et al., 2013, p. 119). As a result, lecturers have to play a significant role in helping to identify and select those students who will make dedicated SLAs.

Yet, despite the significantly positive feedback collected from students who benefitted from SLA support (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014), the majority of lecturers on the campus remain sceptical of the scheme. Therefore, on account of the strikingly contrasting feedback received from lecturers on the SLA scheme at MUMBC, the SLA coordinators have taken the initiative to chart their perspectives with the aim of improving this peer learning strategy. Since the project is currently going through its final pilot stage, this paper seeks to analyse the feedback received from the lecturers in order to echo the findings for improvement so as to move it to a full-fledged project.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative approaches of data gathering have been employed to collect feedback from the teaching academic staff through different formats, namely questionnaires, interviews, and focus group meetings with each department at MUMBC. This paper's research questions, based on the objective of collecting feedback and improving the scheme, are summarised as follows:

- How does the teaching academic staff at MUMBC perceive the SLA scheme?
- Why did some lecturers not opt to use an SLA's support despite the campus's vision to encourage each teaching academic staff to have one?
- What aspects of the scheme were considered helpful?
- Can the lecturers who used SLA support shape the perceptions of those lecturers who did not use the scheme?
- What improvements can be implemented to overcome the challenges voiced by the lecturers?

In line with these research questions, the SLA coordinators adapted the questionnaires and interview questions for the focus groups based on Capstick's (2004a) PAL project research (Appendix A). Primary responses were garnered through feedback forms. Three distinct questionnaires were designed for the following categories: lecturers who used SLA support, lecturers who chose not to use SLA support, and lecturers who did not use SLA support for a second time despite having adopted the scheme when it was initially launched. Appendices A and B cover the questions pertaining to both the first and second categories while Appendix C is the questionnaire distributed to collect the feedback of those lecturers who chose not to use the scheme again. The feedback forms included a range of statements to which the teaching academic staff could respond on a 5-point Likert-scale (Carifio & Rocco, 2007). The parameters ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree and the questionnaires also contained some open-ended questions. The questions and statements were sectioned into the following categories: expectations of the scheme, responsibilities, experience, additional support, and preference for other evidence-based learning strategies. The narrative data were analysed thematically.

Instead of targeting the questionnaires at SLAs and students alone, which were initially administered for the first pilot stage of the research (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014), the survey instruments were this time intended for those teaching academic staff who attended the workshop introducing the SLA scheme at the beginning of each academic term. The interviews and focus groups were conducted at the end of the academic year and the statements were not tested before the questionnaires were distributed. The feedback forms were also anonymous and the focus group participants were informed of the research's purpose as well as the confidentiality of their responses before their interviews were recorded.

Outline of program courses and lecturers who were involved in the research

Before elaborating on the literature review and discussing the findings from the primary data collection, it is important to understand the reasons behind this paper's action research methodology. In this respect, it is critical to

consider the organisation of program courses at MUMBC and highlight those departments where SLAs have been used to facilitate non-teaching classes. The SLA scheme is applicable to MUMBC's nine undergraduate programs (Figure 1). The number of students at MUMBC have grown significantly from a small two-digit figure to a large three-digit capacity over the four years since its setup in 2010. One of the university's objectives is to encourage each full-time lecturer to use an SLA in order to ease student engagement during the increasingly bigger non-teaching classes. Yet, as indicated in Figure 1, a small fraction of the teaching staff uses SLA support. In fact, among the 15 lecturers who were contacted for the research, 11 lecturers completed the feedback form assigned to those choosing not to use SLA support (Table 1). Out of the four lecturers who have used the scheme (Table 2), two have also completed the questionnaire dedicated to those choosing not to use SLA support again despite having used it previously (Table 3).

Table 1
Details of lecturers who did not use the SLA scheme

Program*	Lecturer(s) who did not use SLA(s)	Teaching experience	Previous experience with SLA scheme
AFN	1	5 years	1 year
IB	1	5 years	-
IT	3	3, 4 and 6 years	-
LLB	3	1, 1 and 3 years	-
PSY	3	3, 4 and 5 years	-

Note. *Program abbreviations are explained in Figure 1.

Table 2
Details of lecturers who used SLA support

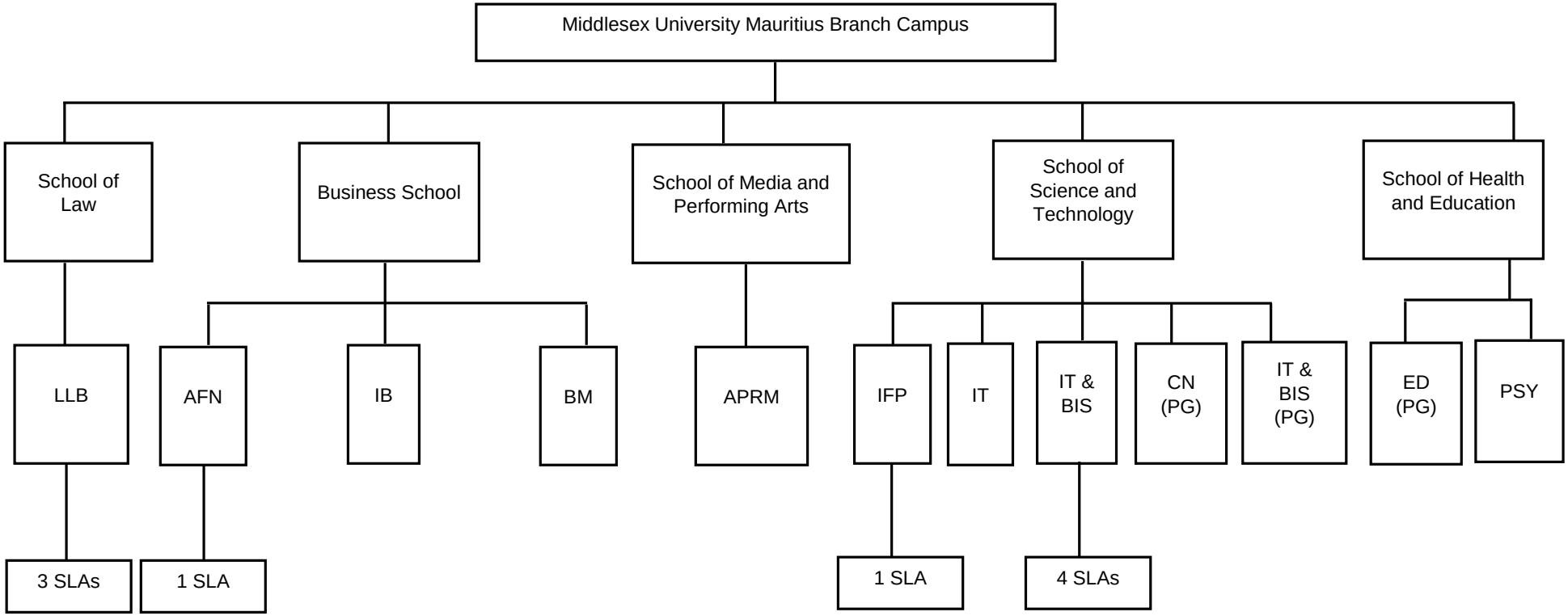
Program*	Lecturer(s) who used SLA(s)	No. of SLA(s) used	Teaching experience	Experience with SLA scheme
AFN	1	1	10 years	1 year
IFP	1	1	39 years	1 year
IT & BIS	1	4	5 years	1 year
LLB	1	3	4 years	1 year

Note. *Program abbreviations are explained in Figure 1.

Table 3
Details of lecturers who chose not to use SLA support again

Program*	Lecturer(s) who chose not to use the scheme again	Teaching experience	Experience with other learning strategies
AFN	1	10 years	-
IT & BIS	1	5 years	1 year

Note. *Program abbreviations are explained in Figure 1.



Undergraduate (UG) program		Postgraduate (PG) program	
AFN	Accounting and Finance	CN	Computer Networks
APRM	Advertising, Public Relations and Media	ED	Education
BM	Business Management		
IB	International Business		
IFP	International Foundation Program		
IT	Information Technology		
IT & BIS	Information Technology and Business Information Systems		
LLB	Law		
PSY	Psychology with Counselling Skills		

Figure 1. Program course composition and SLA support use at MUMBC since 2010.

From the feedback collected, it is important to indicate that previous experience or discussions of the scheme with other colleagues have not helped to shape the views of the majority of the teaching staff who did not use SLA support. This is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4
Questionnaire survey results for lecturers' experience with the SLA scheme

	Number of responses collected				
Experience	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
I used the scheme before or have received feedback from other colleagues and do not feel it has or will enhance my teaching approach.	1	2	6	2	0

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

As for the organisation of the SLA scheme, its structure is outlined in Figure 2. Two SLA coordinators are responsible for monitoring the smooth running of the project

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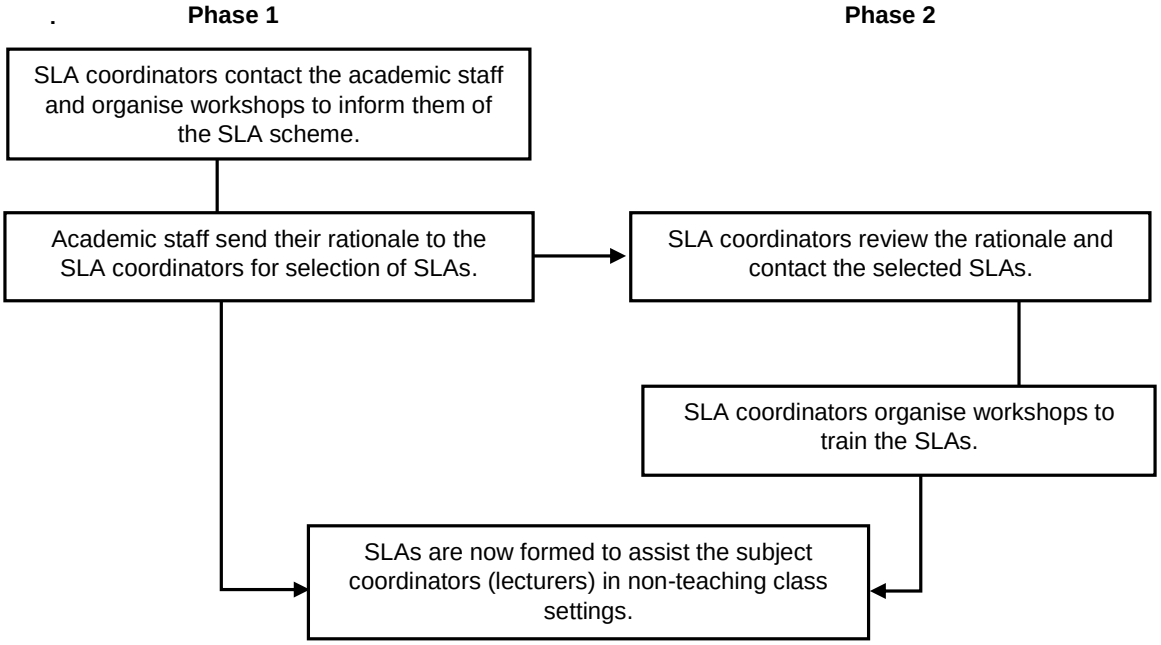

Figure 2. SLA scheme implementation structure (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014, p. 6).

Initial challenges are encountered in Phase 1 (Figure 2). Although the majority of the teaching academic staff show interest during the introductory workshop, which is also compulsory to attend if they seek to use an SLA, few lecturers send their rationale for review. Only about one third of the 15 staff who attended the workshops opted to use SLAs. The Information Technology and Business Information Systems (IT & BIS) program is the one where the scheme had initially been popular. It used a majority number of SLAs when

the scheme was launched (Figure 1; Table 2). Nonetheless, for the following academic year, the same program did not use any SLA. Similarly, the lecturer in Mathematics and Statistics for the program of Accounting and Finance who used an SLA during the initial phase of the pilot scheme did not seek to use this peer learning support again (Table 3). Currently, the Law (LLB) program is where a lecturer has voiced high interest in using SLAs for different modules. The International Foundation Program (IFP) department has equally expressed positive responses to the significant role played by the SLA used in the workshops.

It is against the teaching staff's apparent lack of active interest in using the scheme at MUMBC that this action research has been carried out. The contrasting perspectives collected within each department highlight the lecturers' doubts about the educational success of this particular peer learning strategy. The authors are undertaking action research in order to improve the rationality of the scheme, improve understanding of peer learning practice, and convince lecturers of the educational success of the model. The authors aim to "link reflection to action […] [so as to offer] teachers and others a way of becoming aware of how those aspects of the social order which frustrate rational change" (Carr & Kemmis, 2003, p. 179) can be improved. As a paradigm embracing a wide spectrum of research methodologies, action research seeks to improve SLA through understanding the SLA scheme's practice and the situations in which this practice is located (Carr & Kemmis, 2003, p. 165).

Literature review

Echoing the authors' concerns, the findings suggest that a majority of lecturers on the campus entertain principally doubtful convictions about how peer learning can enhance teaching and learning strategies at this stage, largely because the new campus is still growing. Ideally, lecturers ought to understand the benefits of the SLA scheme as fivefold. The literature on peer learning suggests that the benefits of student-to-student support reaches various stakeholders in higher education. These benefits are expressed as five overlapping levels in Figure 3, which illustrates that the benefits enjoyed by students who experience SLA support accrue to the institution's overall well-being through the advantages that the scheme presents to different stakeholders at different levels. Table 5 summarises some of these benefits.

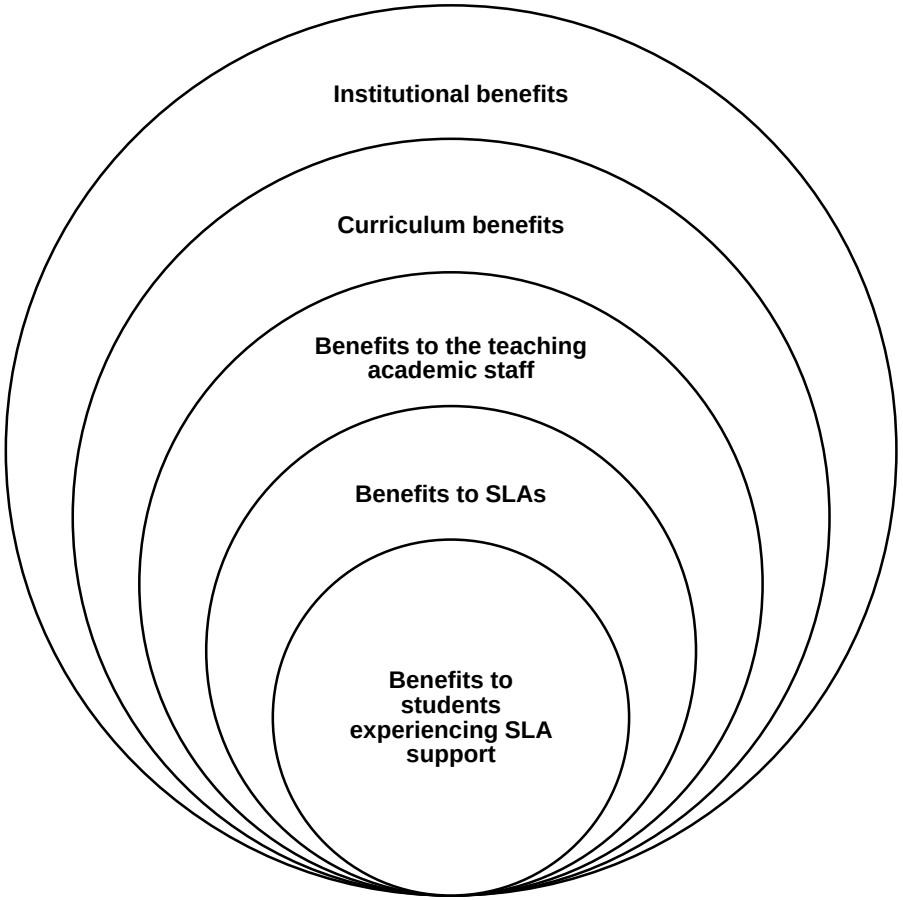

Figure 3. Overlapping benefits of the SLA scheme at MUMBC.

Table 5
A summary of some of the SLA scheme benefits to different stakeholders

Benefits to students	Benefits to SLAs	Benefits to academic staff	Curriculum benefits	Institutional benefits
• Quick adjustment to higher education life (Capstick, Fleming, & Hurne, 2004, p. 4). • Confidence to participate in a non-threatening learning environment, pushing students to go beyond their comfort zone without fear of criticism (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014, p. 3-4). • Develop independent learning skills, become effective learners, and perform better compared with those who observe teacher models (Braaksma et al., 2002). Students learn and enjoy the academic experience better by becoming actively involved in their learning (Astin, 1985). • Ownership of learning enables students to concentrate on curriculum areas that are most significant to them (Green, 2011, p. 4).	• Development of transferable skills (Price & Rust, 1995); enhancement of personal skills (Donelan & Wallace, 1989) Professional development and personal growth (Havnes, 2008). • Development of cognitive skills (Capstick & Fleming, 2001; Jacobs & Hurley, 2008) and application of ideas to other courses (Peters, Liu, & Ondercin, 2012, p. 122). • Receive training pertaining to learning and teaching strategies (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014) and are also remunerated. Develop skills of facilitation and their role is "informed by current views on effective practice on learning and teaching" (Skalicky, 2008, p. 91). • Group work skills: SLAs help each other learn while learning themselves (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014; Topping, 2005, p. 243).	• Reduction of minor requests. SLAs provide advice and reassurance for students' course-related concerns (Smith et al., 2007). • Better understanding of course because SLAs bring a student perspective to understanding the lecture materials. Ability to ease engagement with troublesome concepts through the contribution of PASS leaders (Bulmer, O'Brien, & Price, 2007). • Independent learning creates less reliance on lecturers especially at entry level (Sultan et al., 2013) – a key benefit within a campus of increasing student numbers. Using SLAs also provides lecturers with a window of opportunity to respond to students' queries during classes (Topping & Ehly, 1998). • SLAs provide lecturers with regular feedback on how the course materials are being received (UCL, 2014).	• Training and implementation of the scheme entails low to moderate adjustments to accommodate it within a curriculum (Maheady, 1998). • Using SLAs to identify challenging curriculum areas can inform the modification of program strategies that aim to better engage students with the complex aspects of the course (Green, 2011, p. 4). • Understanding of course materials in a meaning-oriented way leads to better performance in assessment (Capstick, 2004a, p. 47). Curriculum-embedded performance assessment tasks lead to useful information about student and program effectiveness (Cummings, Maddux, & Richmond, 2008). • Opportunity to monitor individual student performance enables developing strategies for diverse learning groups (Maheady, 1998).	• Reduction in dropouts. Positive impact on assessment marks (Bidgood, 1994; Coe et al., 1999) and graduation rates (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006). • Cost-effective student-to-student support scheme. Increased student retention leads to economic benefits (Jones, 2008). • Greater student satisfaction (McInnes, James, & Hartley, 1995). The added-value of peer learning support schemes on student experience can be used as a marketing tool. • Lessens demand on institutional resources or does not overly burden the developing resources of a new campus (Hoolash & Kodabux, 2014, p. 4).

Limitations of peer learning schemes

Despite the numerous benefits of PAL schemes, they are not an unmixed blessing. Although peer learning strategies have significantly expanded since the development of the successful SI model in the 1970s (Bidgood, 1994), they are not without their challenges. Research evaluating the accomplishments of student-to-student support projects suggests that a peer learning environment can result in a reduction of learning quality (Ashwin, 2003; Capstick, 2004b; Miller & Packham, 1999; Packham & Miller, 2000; Saunders & Gibbon, 1998; Topping, 1996). It can foster a surface attitude to learning as opposed to a deep engagement with course materials (Biggs, 2003; Marton & Saljo, 1976) because "students can adopt a more strategic but less meaning oriented approach to learning" (Ashwin, 2003, p. 169). In other words, students would use the peer support scheme with the aim of concentrating on securing success in assessments at the expense of developing a deeper understanding of course content.

In addition, according to Maheady (1998), "many disadvantages inherent in the use of PAL strategies may stem largely from attempts to use them systematically" (p. 53). Most successful peer strategies are methodically grounded in procedures ranging from training students to monitoring their performance in their role (Greenwood, Terry, Delquadri, Elliott, & Arreaga-Mayer, 1995). However, the teaching staff are not prepared to meet these demands (Maheady, 1998). Other research highlights that students acting as facilitators feel restrained in their role to judge their peers' performance owing to a lack of confidence (Tai, Haines, Canny, & Molloy, 2014). Lastly, focusing on performance as outcomes for such schemes puts the spotlight on enhanced grades as being the heart of the strategy in attempts "to prove that PAL works" (Capstick, 2004a). This is done at the expense of investing more efforts in the understanding of the enhancement of the students' learning experience that the scheme provides.

Acknowledging lecturers' concerns

More importantly, the concerns expressed by lecturers should also not be overlooked. Lecturers at MUMBC regard the scheme of little help to them unless it is already embedded in their program's curriculum. According to a senior lecturer and learner support tutor at Bournemouth University, "PAL must be fitted into the teaching strategy and embedded in a course program and timetable" (Fleming cited in Swain, 2008). The SLA scheme is not a "one-size-fits-all" strategy. It must be adapted to the learning needs of each department on a campus and "it would be unwise to seize upon [peer learning] as a universal, undifferentiated, and instant panacea" (Topping, 1996, p. 321). Modifying curricula necessitates a revision of learning outcomes, as well as of teaching and learning strategies, which would consume the teaching staff's time and add supplementary responsibilities to their workload. Embedding peer learning schemes requires thorough investigation before claiming it can improve teaching quality. Ideally, by sending a rationale explaining why an SLA is needed, lecturers would support how SLAs can enhance students' learning experience. Nevertheless, as expressed in the feedback forms (Table 6) and during the focus group meetings, lecturers consider it a long-winded route. One of the two lecturers who chose not to use the SLA scheme despite having used it before consented that "it was time-consuming to write a rationale detailing the reasons I

wanted to use an SLA and explaining which students I identified as ideal candidates" (Appendix C).

Table 6
Questionnaire survey results for lecturers' perceptions of their responsibilities when engaging with the SLA scheme

	Number of responses collected				
Responsibilities	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
There are additional responsibilities, such as meeting the SLA regularly, which I underestimated.	2	0	3	5	1
I thought the scheme would diminish my workload.	2	0	2	5	2
The SLA scheme is too rigid in its structure –e.g. writing a rationale.	1	1	2	4	3

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

The teaching staff at MUMBC are also hesitant to use SLAs because they are wary of the degree of commitment of an SLA irrespective of his/her level of academic performance (Table 7). Although SLAs are trained to behave professionally and to become responsible facilitators who maintain a clear distinction between academic and personal boundaries, the ethical issues and concerns associated with peer learning in higher education is highlighted by Anderson and Shore (2008) who pinpoint that the differences between academic advice and emotional support may become blurred. The level of an SLA's commitment may also be affected as we move further into an academic year. This would reflect difficulties with time-management (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004) and potentially "early withdrawal from the scheme without having fully utilised it" (Clark & Andrews, 2009, p. 35). Lecturers are unwilling to take this risk largely because a breakdown in the SLA's relationship with students can disrupt a class's smooth running.

Table 7
Questionnaire survey results for lecturers' expectations of the SLA scheme

	Number of responses collected				
Expectations	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
I am not convinced the SLA will successfully fulfil his/her role as a facilitator to earn the certificate.	2	1	3	1	4

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

In addition to these opinions about the SLA scheme, MUMBC lecturers highly regard other evidence-based teaching and learning schemes as better strategies to support students (Table 8). One such example is the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) scheme, which is an employment opportunity for recent graduates of MUMBC. Having studied on our campus, the GTAs are considered as being already familiar with the ropes of the campus's organisational structure and their respective program. They are also formally trained in teaching and learning strategies through the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. As a result, they are considered to be

trustworthy individuals to whom academic duties can be delegated and who can be responsible for teaching a class alone. According to Tulane and Beckert (2011), lecturers assume that GTAs are knowledgeable, "otherwise they would not have been granted the employment opportunity" (p. 52). Furthermore, their role is more flexible and their contribution to the overall department is deemed as more beneficial. For example, the GTA is considered to be someone who displays scholarly teaching skills (Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991) and can handle "the same responsibilities [that full-time lecturers] do such as preparing and delivering lecture material, […] grading papers and conducting laboratory sessions for courses" (Tulane & Beckert, 2011, p. 44). In comparison, lecturers regard SLAs as highly restricted in their responsibilities.

Table 8
Questionnaire survey results for lecturers' views of alternate teaching and learning strategies to support students

	Number of responses collected				
Preference for other evidence-based strategies to improve teaching	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
I prefer a Graduate Teaching Assistant's (GTA) support to an SLA.	0	1	2	3	5
I prefer a peer tutoring strategy, which takes place outside of labs/workshops/seminars.	0	2	3	2	4

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Additional findings are based on the focus group discussions that have been conducted at the end of the academic year. Qualitative data analysis from the program courses' focus groups principally revealed lecturers' contrasting views about the project. However, a prominent view shared by many lecturers was the added responsibility on their workload when using the scheme. Some of them initially understood SLAs as contributing to alleviate their workload. Instead, they now consider regular meetings with SLAs prior to classes and follow-up meetings as a hindrance. Other reasons, which are not necessarily shared collectively by lecturers for not using SLAs, are summarised as follows:

- The SLA's role is limited and inflexible. They are restricted in the tasks they can do during non-teaching classes only.
- Much more time is put into the training of SLAs. The input in training outweighs the output benefits.
- Using an SLA requires constant monitoring of his/her role as a facilitator.
- The SLA's own workload must not be underestimated. He/she is either a year two or year three student whose degree of commitment in his/her role as SLA is likely to diminish as we move further into the academic year.
- In the Psychology course, a lecturer reported that counselling workshops are considered private sessions where there is a sense of trust already established between the students and lecturer. The SLA,

as an outsider, can potentially harm this feeling and can distract a class's smooth running.

- The long-winded route to justify and explain why a lecturer rationally needs an SLA is felt as an obstacle when opting to use the scheme.
- There are other support schemes established within few programs at MUMBC, which are deemed to be more beneficial (e.g., a GTA whose role is more flexible, can be delegated more tasks, and does not require constant supervision).
- The scheme's contribution to improving academic results has been questioned. One lecturer is highly dubious of the scheme because measuring its success in terms of improved exam results is a missing feature.
- A majority of the LLB department considers SLAs as not sufficiently well-researched to facilitate workshops of such a fast-changing, fluid subject, which is law.

Additional reasons explaining why SLAs have not been used are not necessarily based on negative notions of peer learning. Instead, some lecturers did not use the scheme because they were responsible for newly introduced modules or for modules that have undergone curriculum modifications and they wanted to familiarise themselves with the changes first. Similarly, some first-time lecturers expressed that they may consider using the scheme in the future.

Alternatively, one focus group reported strong satisfaction with the SLA scheme. The peer learning initiative has been positively experienced within IFP, which is described by the lecturer as largely being a "peer learning"-oriented program consisting of numerous group work activities in addition to individual assignments. The lecturer expects his students to develop a finesse in their academic writing and language. The cohort's large size often makes it impractical for one single lecturer to cater for the varying learning needs of all students within one-hour workshops. Moreover, IFP students are those who need strong guidance when transitioning into a new higher education setting. The lecturer along with the SLA worked as a team to encourage students' engagement with the program's materials and tasks. The SLA acted as a role model and a bridge who filled the blanks when the lecturer was busy with other students. Feedback from students who experienced SLA support also revealed their positive enjoyment of this scheme in terms of the SLA's valuable sharing of her experience given that she went through the course before. Some, motivated by the SLA, have even expressed their interest in applying for this role. The few other lecturers who used SLAs and positively experienced this support scheme underline its importance in terms of preparing students for academic tasks, encouraging peers to overcome learning challenges, leading and participating in active class discussion, and demonstrating lab techniques.

It is once again important to highlight that the perceptions of those lecturers who used the scheme were not successful in positively shaping other colleagues' opinions during the focus group meetings. Although all focus groups were basically asked to discuss uniform items, explicit questions were asked of the lecturers who perceived this scheme positively on how they could use their experience to help improve other colleagues' perceptions of peer learning. To one of such questions, the IFP lecturer who holds 39 years

of teaching experience replied, “Other lecturers do not realise the benefits of the scheme because they have basically not experienced it.” The interview with this lecturer reveals that higher level of teaching experience can have a positive impact on the relationship between a lecturer and an SLA.

Hence, it is also essential to draw attention to the level of trust the teaching staff have in SLAs. This observation draws on both the feedback collected during the focus group meetings and on the work carried out by Huang et al.’s (2013) case study of the teaching staff’s expectations of the PASS program at the University of Wollongong (UOW), which has a long history of supporting students through peer learning (UOW, 2013). On the one hand, the UOW PASS program’s study reports that the majority of the teaching staff widely entertain a positive perception of the scheme, which is in stark contrast with the views of MUMBC’s lecturers. On the other hand, both faculties share similar concerns about whether peer learning strategies can improve students’ performance. They doubt whether PASS leaders or SLAs can be effective in their assigned roles. As discussed in the following section, these findings impact on the SLA scheme at MUMBC in different ways.

Implications of the findings on the SLA scheme at MUMBC

The lecturers’ general conception of peer learning at MUMBC principally represents challenges to the development of a full-fledged SLA scheme on the campus. The traditional method of instruction at MUMBC seems to be centred on the teacher and the findings reveal that lecturers are mostly hesitant to adopt a learner centred approach to teaching at this stage because the learning environment is still growing. Some of their reasons are valid, especially within the Psychology department where lecturers highlighted ethical concerns if SLAs were used in counselling workshops. Nevertheless, with the growing student numbers, the SLA coordinators would have expected lecturers to voice greater interest in using the scheme.

Whilst the feedback received has enabled the authors of this paper to examine the teaching academic staff’s perception of the project, they did not restrict themselves to a simple identification of challenges. More importantly, it has enabled them to understand the lecturers’ reasons for not using SLAs, to acknowledge the aspects of the scheme that have been received as positive, and to investigate whether those lecturers who used SLA support could influence those who did not use it. Having acknowledged their primary concerns, the final research question that remains to be covered is the suggestions or actions for improvements to overcome these challenges. The feedback collected from lecturers on peer learning principally contests the future development of the scheme at MUMBC because of a majority’s hesitance to use SLAs at this stage. Nevertheless, acknowledging their concerns does not connote that they cannot be addressed through actions for improvement. In addition, the minority lecturers’ eagerness to develop the venture further on the campus should also not be overlooked.

Hence, carrying out action research has allowed the SLA coordinators to examine the problems encountered in the scheme’s pilot implementation in an ongoing methodical way, which has enabled them to take actions to change that situation. The reflection-action-reflection-action process has provided a cyclical model in which research issues have been identified and actions have been improved, discarded, or become more focused (Pine, 2009,

p. 30). For example, one action, which has already been discarded, is the prerequisite for lecturers to send a rationale for justifying the use of SLAs. The SLA coordinators have already designed a simple tick-box recommendation form with a brief section for suggestions of SLA candidates. Moreover, instead of organising compulsory workshops for lecturers to attend if they seek to use SLAs, an information pack containing all details of the scheme has been produced and circulated to all lecturers.

Since the SLA scheme is widely employed by many of the university's counterparts on the mother campus in Hendon, the SLA coordinators have also focused their efforts on contacting colleagues overseas in order to formulate a list of the modules already successfully using the scheme. The SLA coordinators have strongly encouraged the lecturers on the branch campus to liaise with the module leaders who can explain better the success of the scheme to them and the benefits on their teaching.

Another area for improvement of the scheme regards the SLA's training organisation. Actions have already been taken to start their training prior to the academic term so that they are fully capable to start facilitation once workshops/labs/seminars begin during the term. The two SLA coordinators have additionally taken the initiative to motivate more colleagues to support the scheme's coordination on the campus because "it is important that several colleagues are engaged in peer learning [projects], and that embedding the [project] across the learning organisation and succession in planning is carefully considered well in advance" (Topping, 2005, p. 642-643).

Lastly, the final recommendations are based on the SLAs' influence on the successful running of the scheme at MUMBC. SLAs' efficiency as facilitators is one of the critical concerns of the teaching academic staff. Lecturers consider SLAs as not sufficiently well researched. However, lecturers should note that despite SLAs do not engage in "'teaching' as traditionally conceived, there are many aspects of [their] role that are informed by current views on effective practice in learning and teaching" (Skalicky, 2008, p. 91). In fact, at MUMBC they receive training in learning styles and in teaching and classroom management strategies, which are delivered by the SLA coordinators who in addition to their respective field of teaching expertise hold a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. Lecturers with relatively few years of teaching experience are also highly welcomed to provide the SLAs with an overview of what to expect in their new roles.

In addition, the SLA coordinators, as per a recommendation made in the focus group meetings, intend to organise regular sessions where SLAs responsible for facilitating different programs can meet to share their experience amongst themselves. The idea is that regular feedback can help strengthen their role and encourage finding solutions to challenges they might have encountered in the classes. As noted from previous research carried out by the SLA coordinators on the implementation of the SLA scheme on the new campus, the rationale for implementing the scheme is strengthened by the feedback received from both students who benefitted from SLA support and the SLAs themselves (Hoolash and Kodabux, 2014). The SLAs have acted as role models who have played an important role in developing a conducive learning environment, especially for first year

students—a key benefit which should not be overlooked especially for a growing campus.

More importantly, it is the level of trust between lecturers and SLAs, which should be reinforced. The individual quality of selected SLAs who are recruited for a specific discipline and their relationship between the lecturers add to the teaching staff's "overall satisfaction and positive perceptions of the program" (Huang et al., 2013, p. 127). As a result, the SLA coordinators plan on using the data collected from the academics to thoroughly shape the SLAs' training because their role, if carried out according to the structured criteria of the scheme, contributes a direct and unique input to its success.

CONCLUSION

The development of the SLA scheme initiative at MUMBC has not been without its challenges. It is mainly the teaching academic staff who have been the ones raising contestations about the venture on the campus. These concerns have been encountered because of their experience or their assumptions about peer learning. The focus group meetings and data analysis have been enlightening and constructive in numerous ways. It has allowed a better understanding of the organisation and highlighted the positive impact of peer learning strategies on teaching approaches in a few programs. However, lecturers who have used SLAs and experienced its positive benefits have not been successful in helping to shape other staff's opinions for the better. By acknowledging the lecturers' concerns, the authors of this paper have sought to draw attention to the existing gap in the literature on capturing the academics' views of peer learning strategies. A large proportion of the transcending argument remains focused on "the appreciation of the scheme's potential" (Green, 2011, p. 6). It is important to acknowledge the issues and variations in implementation of peer learning because it is not a scheme that can be applied uniformly across different programs. Constant inquiry into what learning in higher education entails is critical to enhancing students' learning experiences and teaching strategies. Research into the epistemological assumptions about learning necessitates continuous scrutiny because learning needs are constantly evolving and peer assisted learning can be a means of overcoming the challenges of growing student numbers in classes.

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APPENDIX A

Focus group agenda and interview questions for the teaching academic staff at MUMBC

The purpose of this focus group is to help the Student Learning Assistant (SLA) coordinators in better understanding how the lecturers at Middlesex University Mauritius Branch Campus (MUMBC) experienced the SLA support scheme. The focal point is on their actual experience within their respective department of how it was run especially for those who chose to use SLA support in facilitating their module's labs/workshops/seminars; how it worked in terms of enhancing student engagement and learning; and the views of those lecturers who did not use the SLA support.

Questions to lecturers who did not use the SLA support scheme:

The following questions aim to understand why lecturers did not use an SLA.

General views

1. From your perspective, what is the SLA support scheme?
2. Why did you not use an SLA?
3. How do you view the SLA scheme – as a positive or a negative peer learning strategy?

Challenges

4. What do you consider to be the challenges of this scheme?
5. Did you feel deterred to use an SLA because:
    a) you had to write a rationale?
    b) the coordinators of the scheme closely monitor the project?

Your suggestions

6. What improvements to encourage you to use the scheme would you encourage the SLA coordinators to implement?

Questions to lecturers who used SLA support:

The following questions are intended to discuss how the scheme personally worked for you and whether you would recommend it to your colleagues who did not use an SLA.

General views

7. Why did you choose to use an SLA?
8. What were the benefits and limitations of using the SLA support scheme for your labs/workshops/seminars?
9. Was it easy to meet the SLA regularly before every lab/workshop/seminar?
10. What has made you continue to use the scheme for more than one semester?

Student learning and experience

11. Has the SLA helped your students understand certain topics better?
12. What additional benefits did the SLA contribute to engage your students more actively with their learning?
13. Did the SLA's presence encourage or improve group work?

14. Has the SLA improved his/her own skills in terms of:
    a) Leadership
    b) Teamwork
    c) Interpersonal
    d) Facilitation and coaching
    e) Communication
    f) Effective writing

Challenges

15. What have been the barriers to enhancing student learning in your labs/workshops/seminars despite the SLA's presence?
16. Did you want to experiment the scheme further but felt deterred because of the monitoring by the SLA coordinators?

Your suggestions

17. What are your suggestions for improving the SLA scheme on our campus?
18. Please provide your views – either positive or negative – about the scheme.

APPENDIX B

Table B1
Questionnaire distributed to lecturers who chose not to use the SLA scheme

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Section I: Expectations					
1. The scheme is unhelpful to me because it is limited to labs/workshops/seminars only.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. The scheme is not what I expected it to be in terms of improving my teaching practice.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. The SLA coordinators closely monitor the scheme, which discourages me from experimenting the scheme.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. I am not convinced the SLA will successfully fulfil his/her role as a facilitator to earn the certificate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Section II: Responsibilities					
5. There are additional responsibilities, such as meeting the SLA regularly, which I underestimated.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. I thought the scheme would diminish my workload.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. The SLA scheme is too rigid in its structure – e.g. writing a rationale.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Section III: Experience					
8. I used the scheme before or have received feedback from other colleagues and do not feel it has or will enhance my teaching approach.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. The SLA scheme will not help to improve student engagement in my class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. The SLA's role is too restricted to help improve what I initially planned in my teaching.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Section IV: Preference for other evidence-based strategies to improve teaching					
11. I prefer a Graduate Teaching Assistant's (GTA) support to an SLA.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. I prefer a peer tutoring strategy, which takes place outside of labs/workshops/seminars.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. Students who express interest in becoming SLAs should be encouraged even if they do not have the required competencies and skills.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

APPENDIX C

Table C1
Questionnaire distributed to lecturers who chose not to use the SLA scheme for a second time

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	The SLA's role is limited to enhance student learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	I felt that the students did not benefit or interact well with the SLA.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	I cannot use SLA(s) because of syllabus changes.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	As a lecturer, I do not feel that the SLA meets all the criteria to earn a certificate of achievement.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.	Meeting with the SLA regularly adds additional responsibility to my workload.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6.	I prefer to use a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)'s support rather than an SLA.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7.	Despite the SLA's support, students did not stop asking me to solve their minor requests (e.g. awareness of course expectations, development of study skills, etc.).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8.	The student(s) whom I initially selected to be my SLA(s) were not available because of timetable clashes.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.	It was time-consuming to write a rationale detailing the reasons I wanted to use an SLA and explaining which students I identified as ideal candidates.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.	The SLA coordinators closely monitored the scheme, which demotivated me to experiment with the scheme.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐