Editorial: Reimagining Peer Learning as a Framework for Recognition, Inclusion, and Professional Growth

In this volume of the *Journal of Peer Learning*, common threads emerge across all the contributions, including peer learning as a catalyst for belonging, professional identity formation, and positive systemic change in higher education. Despite the varied contexts, each article demonstrates that learning among peers is not a peripheral activity but a core pedagogical and social mechanism that enables students to thrive, educators to innovate, and tertiary organizations to reimagine their learning culture. At the same time, these studies collectively call for greater institutional recognition and structured support to realize the full potential of peer learning.

Ralph Meulenbroeks and Janneke van der Hulst's article, "Recognition Where It Is Due: Towards a Teaching Qualification for Student Teaching Assistants in Higher Education," puts forward the argument that teaching assistants occupy an essential yet under-recognized role in the university's organization. The authors draw on focus-group data from Dutch universities, revealing that student teaching assistants desire structured preparation and official recognition, preferably through a voluntary student teaching qualification, rather than course credit. Their results suggest that such programs should mirror staff teaching qualification schemes by integrating pedagogical training, observation, and assessment into their development. Interestingly, Meulenbroeks and van der Hulst's proposal reframes teaching assistant work from casual employment to a developmental partnership that enhances both teaching quality and student identity formation. In doing so, their study lays a foundation for viewing peer educators as legitimate participants in the academic teaching community.

Lucy Chilvers' "The Peer-to-Peer Model: A UK Institution's Approach to Broadening and Embedding the Provision of Peer Learning and Support" extends this recognition to the level of institutional strategy. Her "peer-to-peer model" - developed through literature review, institutional mapping, and focus-group research at the University of Brighton - articulates five guiding stages for effective practice: co-design, inclusive recruitment, training and reward, safeguarding and supervision, and evaluation. Equally significant are the ten underpinning values - among them inclusivity, respect, compassion, and accountability - that frame peer interactions as both empowering and developmental. Chilvers' work moves peer learning from an isolated scheme to a systemic element of curriculum design and quality assurance, advocating for institutional responsibility for coherence and sustainability. Her emphasis on inclusivity and the elimination of the "remedial" stigma surrounding extracurricular support demonstrates how peer-learning can also function as a mechanism of equity in higher education.

Josefin Brodin and Sandra Einarsson's research note, "A Note on the Use of Peer Learning to Support the Development of Professional Judgment During Work-Based Learning," offers a focused lens on peer learning in clinical and vocational contexts. Writing from Swedish healthcare education, they emphasize how reflection between peers before, during, and after professional action nurtures the practical knowledge needed for ethical decision-making in real settings. Their discussion of the two-students-one-supervisor model highlights the social and emotional dimensions of judgment formation; peers create psychologically safe spaces for honest dialogue and shared meaning-making. The authors maintain that peer reflection is not supplementary but integral to professional competence, transforming supervision into a dialogic process rather than a hierarchical one.

In "Pharmacy Students' Perspectives on Institutional-Based Peer-Assisted Learning Placements," Sahiba Khurana and colleagues provide empirical validation of peer-assisted models in Canadian pharmacy education. Their survey of University of Alberta students who participated in 2:1 placement found that 84% would recommend the model. Students reported gains in therapeutic knowledge, confidence, and professional communication, echoing literature on reduced anxiety and enhanced collaboration in healthcare PAL schemes. Yet challenges of peer conflict, logistics, and giving difficult feedback still remain. Their call for explicit training in conflict resolution and clearer peer-role definitions reinforces the earlier themes of both Chilvers as well as Meulenbroeks and van der Hulst, who maintain that successful peer learning depends on intentional design and guided reflection, not merely proximity of learners.

The study by Vernice Hui Yan Chan and colleagues, "'Some Seniors Still Care About Us': Impact of Sociocultural Factors on Near-Peer Teaching in a Hong Kong Medical School," contributes an important cross-cultural dimension. Examining a student-led near-peer teaching (NPT) initiative born during Hong Kong's social unrest and pandemic disruptions, the authors show how cultural expectations, competition, and exam-orientation shape students' perceptions of peer teaching. Their participants valued the social support of NPT but questioned its pedagogical value compared to faculty instruction.

Sarah E. Gilman's "A Paired-Course Comparison of Supplemental Instruction and Traditional Tutoring" offers strong qualitative evidence for the academic benefits of peer learning. Using a paired experimental design across replicated chemistry courses, Gilman accounts for self-selection bias and demonstrates that Supplemental Instruction (SI) not only attracts higher attendance than traditional tutoring but also yields higher exam grades. This was seen particularly for underrepresented and marginalized students. Beyond achievement, Gilman situates SI as a mechanism of inclusion, enhancing belonging and retention in STEM for students historically underserved by traditional instruction.

Finally, Jared Berezin's "Compassionate Communication Among Peers in an Engineering Course Leads to Increased Social Connectedness, Reduced Perceived Stigma, and Improved Team Collaboration" is a mixed-methods study that evaluates a compassion-based classroom intervention called the "Care Bear Connection" in a first-year engineering course. Intervention students showed increases in social connectedness, willingness to seek and offer support, and perceptions of a compassionate classroom climate, alongside a major reduction in perceived stigma. Similar to Chilvers view of compassion as a core value in peer-learning interactions, Berezin recommends embedding customizable compassion-focused activities into existing the STEM curriculum to enhance wellbeing, reduce stigma, and strengthen collaboration.

Taken together, these contributions portray peer learning as a multifaceted educational ecosystem that includes the pedagogical, professional, and cultural. Meulenbroeks and van der Hulst call for formal recognition of student teachers, Chilvers provides an institutional framework, Brodin and Einarsson reveal its ethical depth, Khurana et al. evidence its professional applicability, Chan et al. expose its sociocultural contingencies, and both Berezin and Gilman quantify its efficacy and equity. The synergy among these studies lies in their shared insistence that peer learning deserves a place alongside traditional teaching. The collective message for educators and policymakers is clear: peer learning must be strategically embedded, supported, and championed. This means providing structured training and qualification pathways for student teachers, ensuring inclusive access across disciplines, designing reflective frameworks that develop professional judgment, and rigorously evaluating impact through both qualitative and quantitative lenses. When universities cultivate such a culture, they do more than improve grades or retention - they nurture peer communities of mutual care and shared growth.