An international snapshot of peer leadership in higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper describes an exploratory, international research collaboration that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the development and experiences of peer leaders in higher education across different international contexts, namely the USA, Canada (CAN), Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) (ANZ), the United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa (SA).

Design/methodology/approach – Data are summarized and compared across each of the participating countries, providing a more global context and depth of perspective on peer leadership (PL) in higher education than is currently available in the literature.

Findings – The findings highlight some apparent differences between countries in relation to student engagement in peer leader roles and the ways in which PL is supported by higher education institutions, as well as some similarities across the different international contexts, particularly in the way peer leaders view the benefits of their involvement in PL.

Originality/value – These insights provide a valuable addition to the literature on PL and practical information to higher education institutions for supporting student leadership development and involvement.

Keywords Student engagement, Teaching and learning of leadership, Leadership in international contexts

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Student involvement in leadership activities is an increasingly important part of the student experience at university, as well as their preparation for life beyond university (e.g., Newton & Ender, 2010; Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). Peer leadership (PL) programs, in particular, afford student peers valuable opportunities for personal and professional development and for building skills in work-readiness and civic engagement (Astin, 1993; Ender & Kay, 2001; Shook & Keup, 2012; Skalicky & Caney, 2010). Student engagement in PL

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is also recognized as facilitating students' social, interpersonal and emotional development and enhancing their intercultural awareness (Cuseo, 2010a; Ender & Kay, 2001; Shook & Keup, 2012; Young & Keup, 2018). Moreover, the benefits of PL may extend to the broader communities, employers and organizations that students are or will be involved in, both during their studies as well as in their future careers (Newton & Ender, 2010; Skipper & Keup, 2017).

PL has been conceptualized and realized in various ways over time. The conceptual view of PL in this paper aligns with that of Ender and Kay (2001) who define peer leaders as "students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers [that] are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals" (p. 1). Common areas that higher education institutions have implemented PL programs include: academic mentoring and supplemental instruction, transition and orientation, social contexts and campus life (e.g., fraternities/sororities, clubs and societies), student health and wellness, sport and recreation, residential life, student governance, multicultural affairs and community service (Cuseo, 2010b; Ender & Kay, 2001; Young & Keup, 2018).

From an institutional perspective, the value of students' involvement in PL is recognized as being instrumental to student learning outcomes (Cuseo, 2010a; MacLeod, Yang, & Shi, 2019; Wawrzynski, LoConte, & Straker, 2011). Although the students being served by peer leaders are the primary beneficiaries, research has shown that engagement in PL can itself positively affect student peers' learning and academic performance and persistence with their studies (Blackwell, Katzen, Patel, Sun, & Emenike, 2017; Riser, da Silva, & Clarke, 2021; Shook & Keup, 2012). In addition, PL provides valuable opportunities for students to engage more broadly and more deeply with their university community, increasing student awareness of opportunities on campus and building a sense of belonging to the institution (MacLeod *et al.*, 2019). All of these benefits of PL are important aspects of student engagement and the overall student experience and are key factors underlying student retention and success (e.g., Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Tinto, 1993).

To develop a greater understanding of peer leader experiences, the USA National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (USA National Resource Center) developed the National Survey of Peer Leadership (NSPL) to examine how PL programs in the USA were structured and administered and their impact on the students who serve as peer leaders, from the perspective of the peer leaders. In 2009, the NSPL was administered online across multiple institutions of higher education in the USA, with responses from nearly 2,000 peer leaders. Overwhelmingly, participants were pleased with their involvement as peer leaders and found the experience rewarding, with nearly all indicating they would recommend PL to fellow students (Keup, 2016; Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). Many of the participants had held multiple PL positions throughout their university studies, with PL roles in academic and academic support programs, welcome and orientation programs and residential life being most common. In addition, the vast majority of participants had received formal training for their PL roles, although the duration of training varied greatly across different roles, from half a day or less to one week or more. Most peer leaders also reported that their involvement in PL had resulted in positive change across a range of skills development, undergraduate experiences and employability outcome areas.

In a previous publication (van der Meer, Skalicky, & Speed, 2019), we argue the need for higher education institutions to more rigorously examine students' engagement in extra- and co-curricular programs, including PL, by systematically collecting relevant and reliable data, particularly data related directly to students' experiences. The 2009 NSPL study conducted by the USA National Resource Center has been the lead in this respect, providing a broad nation-wide snapshot of PL in USA higher education, as experienced by peer leaders. Outside

of the USA, however, there has been little nation-wide research as to how student involvement in PL can contribute to leadership development and learning or to provide institutional context for the on-going development and delivery of PL programs. In addition, most research endeavors to date have been limited in educational context and typically housed within a single country or institution. Given the increased attention on student PL and leadership education and growth in new and emerging programs in higher education, a greater understanding of students' experiences of PL could inform the on-going development of training programs as well as institutional recruitment approaches to attracting leaders.

The research reported here is part of an international project that sought to add to the on-going study of PL and develop a broad understanding of the development and experiences of peer leaders across different national contexts. The international project involved a collaboration across research teams in the USA and in several other countries/regions: Canada (CAN), Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) (ANZ), the United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa (SA), using the NSPL for USA participants and an adapted version, the International Survey of Peer Leadership (ISPL), for participants in the other countries.

Several publications have reported the research findings for the individual participating countries (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Kenedy & Young, 2017; van der Meer *et al.*, 2019; Young & Keup, 2018) and for specific aspects of PL, including the influence of compensation type on perceived outcomes (Young & Keup, 2018), the relationship between academic PL experiences and academic success (Young, Hoffman, & Reinhardt, 2019) and the impact of PL involvement on student wellbeing (van der Meer, Skalicky, Speed, & Young, 2022). This paper explores the experiences of peer leaders across all of the participating countries and addresses three key questions: (1) what does PL involvement look like (e.g., number and types of roles, workloads) in the participating countries? (2) What are the structural characteristics of PL (e.g., training, compensation) in the different countries? And (3) how do peer leaders in the different countries perceive the impact of their peer leader experiences across a range of outcome domains? We hope that the insights gained from our international research collaboration provide a more global context and depth of perspective on PL in higher education than is currently available in the literature and also valuable information as to how PL programs can contribute to the student experience and leadership development.

Methodology

The first phase of the study was undertaken in the USA in 2013 and involved administration of the NSPL by the USA National Resource Center to students across 49 higher education institutions in the USA (for additional institutional details, see Young & Keup, 2018; Young *et al.*, 2019). Between 2014 and 2015, an adapted version of the NSPL, the International Survey of Peer Leaders (ISPL), was administered to students in the other four countries/regions, with student participation from across ten higher education institutions in CAN, five in ANZ, 19 in the UK and six in SA.

Survey

The NSPL is a 60-item online descriptive survey that explores students' experiences of engagement in PL and self-rated outcomes of their leadership experiences. The survey contains items relating to student demographics (e.g., age, gender, residency status) and details of their university studies [e.g. degree subject area, current course level and grade point average (GPA)], students' current and past engagements in PL roles (e.g., How many peer leader roles do you currently hold? How many total peer leader positions have you held during your university experience?) and structural characteristics of the roles such as time commitments, remuneration or compensation and training. Additional items relate to

participants' satisfaction with their PL experiences and whether they would recommend PL roles to other students. Most of these items have either forced-choice or multiple-choice response options with an open-ended 'other' response option for participants to provide alternative information.

A separate outcome section in the survey contains items that examine participants' perceptions of the effects of their PL experiences across five domains: skills development, institutional interaction, academic commitment, employability outcomes and academic success. These five domains were identified by Young and Keup (2018) using structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analyses based on previous research. Examples of these survey items include: 'To what degree have the following skills [e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork] changed as a direct result of your peer leadership experiences?' and 'To what degree have the following academic performance areas [e.g., your average grade/mark or GPA, the time to your expected graduation] changed as a direct result of your peer leadership experiences?' Participants are asked to indicate their self-rated change for each outcome item on a seven-point Likert-type response scale ranging from "greatly decreased" to "greatly increased."

The ISPL is an adapted version of the NSPL, contextualized for each of the other participating countries to reflect local terminology and demographic characteristics. The five additional countries in which the ISPL was administered were chosen with an eye toward adapting the NSPL, which was originally conceptualized in the USA higher education context. Because Australia, CAN, New Zealand, SA, the UK and the USA all share English as a common primary language of instruction and have roots in a common British higher education background, the adaptation of the survey instrument could be done as a first proof of concept of adaptation without having to consider additional cultural or language differences. While this provided an international group of participating countries, it is clear that the historical and cultural contexts of higher education fall into a shared Anglo heritage that provide an important backdrop for the interpretation of the results.

In addition, the ISPL contains several items not included in the NSPL, including: two demographic items (participants' age and whether they were a first-generation student) and six outcome items relating to problem solving, decision-making, adaptability and creativity skills, knowledge about people with different backgrounds and participants' feelings about contributing to the campus community. All six additional outcome items fit well into Young and Keup's (2018) five identified factors.

Participant recruitment and survey administration

The NSPL and ISPL were both administered online over a 3-month period with most countries using a convenience sample approach via email invitation to current students (undergraduate and postgraduate) who were engaged in one or more PL roles or who had engaged in PL in the past. Members of the research teams in each country recruited institutional representatives (e.g., coordinators or managers of PL programs) via email with a request for them to forward an email from the research team to current students who "hold or have held a peer leader position" at their university, inviting the students to participate in the research with an electronic link to the survey. Institutional representatives were typically drawn from within the researchers' own professional networks (see van der Meer *et al.*, 2019); although in the USA, they were identified by national organizations serving segments of the higher education community (Young & Keup, 2018). Note, however, that SA adopted a non-probability, purposive sampling technique in which six higher education institutions were selected to participate in the survey because of their historically high numbers of student peer leaders (see Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017). The recruitment strategies of the different countries resulted in student participation across diverse types of higher education institutions, as

detailed in the separate publications reporting recruitment and survey administration processes for individual countries (references cited in previous section). While the collaborative study represents the most recent and comprehensive datasets of PL in the participating countries, it should be noted that no attempt was made to collect representative samples of each country's university/college population in terms of institutional type, participant demographic characteristics or PL participation. Rather, the study aimed to provide an overall pilot snapshot of the international landscapes of PL in higher education.

Data analyses

In the current exploratory context, the aims of the study are purely descriptive and we presume no hypothetical assumptions or models about the participant populations or their theoretical structure. Most of the quantitative data analyses we report here are therefore descriptive and involve frequency analyses to summarize the experiences and perceptions of peer leaders and to gain a broad understanding of peer leaders and PL programs in the different countries that participated in the study. In addition, Chi-square analyses are undertaken to explore differences between countries on several key variables, with Cramer's V statistics calculated for the associated effect sizes. Note, interpretation of effect sizes are based on the conventions of Cohen (1988) and depend on the degrees of freedom.

For most survey items, participants were provided with an 'unknown' or 'unable to judge' response option. Data relating to these two response options were either recoded or removed from analyses as missing data (see Keup, 2016). Note, for several of the survey items (including, year of study, type of peer leader roles, compensation), analysis of participants' text responses in an 'Other' response category enabled many of the 'other' responses to be reclassified into one of the main item response categories by the current investigators. As a consequence, the data reported here may not match precisely the data of individual countries published elsewhere that did not re-classify or omitted from analyses the 'other' response category data.

Findings

Survey participants

A total of 4,016 students in USA tertiary institutions completed the NSPL and 1,643 students completed the international version of the survey (ISPL), including 482 students in CAN, 244 in ANZ, 466 in SA and 451 in the UK. Note: in most of the participating countries the institutional representatives who recruited students were not required to report the total number of students who were sent the email invitation and therefore response rates are not able to be reported. In the USA, where response rates were able to be determined, institutional response rates ranged from 8.9% to 85.3% with an overall response rate of 28.5% (Young & Keup, 2018).

Between 79% (ANZ) and 91% (SA) of participants were involved in PL activities at the time of surveying and between 9% (SA) and 21% (ANZ) had engaged in PL in the past only. Across all countries, the majority of participants were female students (between 60% SA and 74% CAN), domestic students (77% UK – 97% USA), students aged between 18 and 25 years (73% ANZ – 89% CAN) and students who were in their second or above year of undergraduate study (86% SA - 95% ANZ). Just over half of the USA participants (56%) were living in college residences at the time of surveying, while the majority of participants in other countries (66% SA – 87% ANZ) were living in private accommodation or with their families.

Note, one demographic item in both the NSPL and ISPL—participant race and ethnicity—is not included in the analyses reported here due to the diverse range of ethnicities within and across the participating countries. Several publications reporting the findings from

individual countries involved in the international collaboration have included analysis and discussion of participants' race and ethnicity and also gender (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Young & Keup, 2018).

Student engagement in peer leadership

Table 1 shows student engagement in PL roles. Across all countries, the majority of participants (between 70% USA and 91% SA) were engaged in one or two roles at the time of being surveyed, with many having also been in PL roles in previous years. There were, however, some notable differences between countries particularly with regards to participants' current engagement [$\chi^2(16,4936) = 253.76$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.23$]. More participants in USA and CAN were currently engaged in multiple PL roles compared to participants in the other countries, with 30% of USA participants and 21% of Canadian participants engaging in three or more concurrent roles. Far fewer participants in ANZ (13%), SA (10%) and the UK (10%) held 3 or more concurrent PL roles.

The total number of hours each week that participants engaged in PL activities also differed between countries [$\chi^2(24,5618) = 888.47$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.40$]. In the UK, the majority of peer leaders (76%) worked 5 hours or less each week, with almost all (93%) working 10 hours or less. The hours worked by most peer leaders in the USA (83%), on the other hand, varied greatly between less than 5 hours and up to 20 hours a week, with some 17% of peer leaders working more than 20 hours each week. The workloads of peer leaders in CAN, ANZ and SA fell somewhere between these two extremes, with a sizeable number

		USA	CAN	ANZ	SA	UK
Current PL roles	*N*	*3,527*	*417*	*198*	*421*	*373*
	1	39.1	54.0	65.2	60.6	67.6
	2	31.0	25.2	22.2	29.9	22.0
	3	17.7	12.0	7.6	6.4	6.7
	4	7.6	5.7	2.5	1.2	2.1
	5+	4.6	3.1	2.5	1.9	1.6
	$\bar{x}$	2.1	1.8	1.6	1.5	1.5
Total hours/week in current PL roles	≤ 5	19.0	22.8	42.6	30.7	75.9
	6–10	27.8	40.5	37.8	37.7	17.4
	11–15	20.5	17.0	10.6	11.9	2.9
	16–20	15.5	9.6	4.8	10.2	1.6
	21–25	7.3	3.1	2.7	2.4	0.5
	26–30	4.3	3.4	1.6	2.2	0.8
	>30	5.6	3.6	0	4.9	0.8
Total PL roles	*N*	*4,016*	*470*	*239*	*451*	*442*
	1	19.1	29.1	41.8	35.7	50.7
	2	19.8	23.0	25.5	28.8	26.9
	3	16.9	15.3	13.8	15.1	11.8
	4	13.6	9.1	4.2	8.6	5.7
	5+	30.5	23.4	14.6	11.8	5.0
	$\bar{x}$	3.7	3.3	2.6	2.6	2.0
Highest number of PL roles at one time	1	26.1	37.9	56.1	42.1	58.6
	2	28.0	28.3	21.8	37.5	27.6
	3	24.2	19.4	12.6	12.0	9.0
	4	11.7	7.4	5.0	5.3	2.7
	5+	10.1	7.0	4.6	3.1	2.0
	$\bar{x}$	2.5	2.2	1.8	1.9	1.6

Table 1. Students' engagement in peer leadership (% of responding participants, N)

Source(s): Table by authors

working 5 hours or less in PL roles each week and the majority working 10 hours or less (63% CAN, 68% SA, 80% ANZ). We also examined the relationship between the number of PL roles currently held and total hours worked each week by calculating Spearman's correlation coefficients for each country separately. The resulting correlation coefficients ranged from $\rho = 0.315$ for USA and SA to $\rho = 0.414$ for ANZ ($p < 0.01$, all countries), indicating a moderate positive relationship between the number of current roles held by peer leaders and the total hours they worked each week in those roles.

When considering all PL roles that participants had engaged in during their university studies, there were also some differences between countries [$\chi^2(16,5618) = 458.02$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.28$]. Overall, the majority of participants in ANZ (67%), SA (65%) and the UK (78%) had engaged in only one or two PL roles in total whereas a substantial number of participants in the USA (61%) had engaged in three or more roles and some 31% had engaged in five or more roles. In CAN, there was a fairly even split between the number of participants who had engaged in one or two roles and those who had engaged in three or more roles. Similarly, while the vast majority of participants from ANZ (78%), SA (80%) and the UK (86%) had undertaken only one or two concurrent roles at any time during their studies, many participants in the USA and CAN had engaged simultaneously in three or more roles [$\chi^2(16,5618) = 405.5$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.27$].

The survey also asked participants about the type of campus-based organization or institutional area in which they currently worked as a peer leader or had done so in the past. The responses were coded into types of PL roles which fell into ten main categories: (1) academic, (2) social clubs, activities and campus life, (3) pre-entry/transition, (4) housing/residential, (5) community service and service-learning, (6) sports and recreation, (7) health and wellbeing, (8) student governance, (9) multicultural affairs and international and (10) other. Table 2 indicates the percentage of participants who had held one or more PL roles in each of the different role categories, for each country separately. A standout feature of the data is the diverse range of PL roles covering many aspects of university life and student affairs that are available to students and that students engage in. Across all of the participating countries, there was representation across all or most categories of PL roles.

Academic-based PL roles (e.g., academic mentor/tutor, SI/PAL/PASS leader) were common across all countries and the most common type of roles that students engaged in

Peer leader Role/s	USA *n = 4,016*	CAN *n = 482*	ANZ *n = 244*	SA *n = 466*	UK *n = 451*
Social clubs, activities, campus life	60.1	50.2	20.9	8.9	27.1
Pre-entry and transition	45.2	46.5	34.8	21.9	26.2
Academic	50.1	72.8	84.4	95.1	90.5
Accommodation	29.4	12.9	9.0	11.6	1.8
Community service/ volunteering	23.9	18.3	9.0	7.9	0
Sport and outdoor recreation	12.5	11.4	6.6	7.5	0
Health and wellbeing	13.7	15.8	8.6	4.7	2.9
Student governance	12.1	11.8	0	3.6	0
Multicultural affairs/ international	11.3	13.1	11.5	4.7	3.3
Other	8.8	8.3	8.6	3.4	2.9
Total number of roles	13,724	1,816	641	1,086	939
Average number of roles	3.4	3.8	2.6	2.3	2.1

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2. Student engagement in different types of peer leadership roles (% of participants, n)

across all countries except the USA. In CAN, ANZ, SA and the UK, the majority of participants (between 73% ANZ and 95% SA) had engaged in at least one type of academic PL role. The most common types of PL roles that USA participants engaged in involved social aspects of university life, including social clubs and societies and other campus-based social activities, with 60% of participants having engaged in one or more socially-oriented roles. These roles were also common in CAN, ANZ and the UK, although to a lesser extent than in the USA. In addition, a substantial number of participants across all of the countries, particularly the USA and CAN, had engaged in pre-entry and transition types of PL roles, supporting new and soon-to-be students in their adjustment to academic life and to university or college communities. In the USA, where many students live in university or college residences, accommodation-based PL roles, (e.g., residential student adviser or assistant, representative on residential hall committee) were also common.

Training

Participants were asked about the initial training they received for their PL roles (current and past) and any on-going training received while undertaking these roles. Across all countries, between 81% and 86% of participants had received initial training for all or most of their PL roles. Note, however, a minority of participants indicated they had received no training for any of their PL roles (between 7% CAN and 14% USA). Table 3 shows that the amount of initial training undertaken by peer leaders varied slightly across countries and probably also across the different types of PL roles, although the data did not allow for analysis of different roles. As participants could select multiple training response categories, each corresponding to a different PL role undertaken, separate Chi-square analyses were conducted for each training period to explore differences between countries [$\chi^2(4,4753) > 26.10$, $p < 0.001$, for all training periods except 4 days, $\chi^2(4,4753) = 3.11$, $p = 0.54$]. Corresponding effect sizes (Cramer's V) were small to moderate, ranging from 0.01 (4 days) to 0.22 (2 weeks).

Approximately one-quarter of participants in the USA, CAN, ANZ and the UK and one-third of participants in SA received half a day or less training for one or more PL positions. Across most of the countries, more than 50% of participants had undertaken between one and three days of initial training (56% SA, 71% UK, 78% CAN, 85% ANZ) while a much smaller number (<20%) had received training that lasted for one week or more. In the USA, however, the duration of training varied greatly, with just under half of the participants having undertaking training that lasted between one and three days and a similar proportion having undertaken training of one to three weeks. In addition, nearly 20% of USA participants reported the requirement of enrolling in a mandatory class as part of their training. In these instances, students in the USA are required to enroll in a class or module

Table 3.
Duration of initial peer leader training (% of participants, n)

Training	USA *n = 3,353*	CAN *n = 422*	ANZ *n = 209*	SA *n = 390*	UK *n = 379*
1/2 day or less	22.8	22.7	24.4	33.5	28.2
1 day	18.6	27.5	31.1	19.5	26.6
2 days	17.5	33.2	44.0	19.7	29.6
3 days	10.8	17.1	9.6	16.7	14.8
4 days	5.8	5.5	3.8	4.6	4.5
1 week	17.3	7.3	2.4	9.0	1.1
2 weeks	21.0	9.2	4.8	1.0	1.1
3 weeks	7.3	1.7	1.4	1.8	1.3
Mandatory class	19.4	4.0	2.4	5.9	7.4
Other	6.9	4.9	1.4	1.5	3.4

Source(s): Table by authors

either before or during service in which they learn and practice the skills and knowledge required to perform their tasks as a peer leader. This is particularly common with residential assistants, orientation leaders, tutors and supplemental instruction leaders. The majority (65–70%) of participants from the USA, CAN, ANZ and SA had also received on-going training, mainly in the form of regular workshops, meetings with their supervisor or team meetings. Only 34% of participants in the UK indicated they had received on-going training, and the training was mostly via regular workshops.

Compensation

The types of compensation that participants received for PL roles also varied across the different countries. The data in Table 4 indicates the percentage of responding participants in each country (*n*) who received the different types of compensation for one or more of their PL roles. The category 'Financial paid' includes regular salaries, periodic stipends and honoraria, financial scholarships and grants. The category 'Other' includes a range of less common compensation types, including: gifts and gift cards, food vouchers, leadership/service credits on transcript or resumé and early or priority registration. Participants could respond across multiple response options for compensation relating to different roles they engaged in. Unfortunately, when it came to data analyses, this meant that we were unable to match the form of compensation to the type of PL role.

As was the case for PL training, separate Chi-square analyses were conducted for each of the compensation types to explore differences between countries [$\chi^2(4,5482) > 120.48$, $p < 0.001$, for all compensation types] with corresponding effect sizes in the moderate range (Cramer's $V = 0.15$ to 0.25). In the UK, the majority (74%) of participants engaged in PL positions on a voluntary basis, as did many participants in CAN (60%) and the USA (60%), whereas in ANZ, and particularly SA, the majority of participants engaged in positions that were financially remunerated. Many of the PL roles in CAN and the USA were also paid positions, although to a lesser extent. In the USA, where many students live in university residences, a reduction in accommodation fees was also a common form of compensation, particularly for PL roles that were accommodation-related. In addition, course credit is usually given to students in the USA who undertake the mandatory training class.

Perceived benefits of peer leadership involvement

Table 5 shows the percentage of participants from each country who believed that each of the listed outcome areas benefited ('Increased' or 'Greatly Increased') from their PL experiences, with the top 10 areas (based on response frequency) in bolded font. Note, one Academic Success item in the survey—'The time to your expected graduation'—was reversed coded to maintain consistency in reporting perceived benefits and reflects peer leaders' expectations about their involvement in PL in terms of facilitating a timely graduation (i.e., decreased time to graduation). Dashes in place of USA data in the table indicate ISPL items not included in

Compensation	USA *n = 3,942*	CAN *n = 452*	ANZ *n = 232*	SA *n = 430*	UK *n = 426*
Financial paid	57.2	62.2	69.8	85.6	28.6
Volunteer	60.8	60.4	37.9	22.1	74.6
Reduced accommodation fees	24.0	6.6	8.6	2.8	0.9
Course credit	15.2	8.2	1.7	3.3	4.2
Other	1.6	3.8	7.8	0.5	3.5

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 4. Types of compensation for peer leader roles (% of participants, n)

Outcome area	USA $n = 3860$	CAN $n = 442$	ANZ $n = 229$	SA $n = 416$	UK $n = 411$
Skills Development					
Leadership	*87.4*	*81.4*	*81.6*	*85.9*	*73.2*
Interpersonal communication	*82.5*	*74.1*	*77.7*	*81.8*	*66.4*
Adaptability	-	*71.3*	*75.5*	*81.8*	*55.2*
Teamwork	*77.5*	*74.2*	*66.8*	*79.3*	*63.4*
Organizational	71.5	65.4	62.3	73.2	*58.2*
Time management	*73.6*	67.0	59.9	70.3	52.0
Presentation	67.5	58.8	59.7	77.6	44.8
Decision-making	–	61.4	59.6	77.4	51.5
Creativity	–	53.8	58.9	72.7	39.0
Project management	73.0	64.0	56.7	69.4	51.6
Problem solving	–	56.8	53.3	75.6	40.9
Critical thinking	65.7	54.1	52.9	*80.3*	40.0
Written communication	53.4	44.8	48.7	66.2	31.4
Institutional Interaction					
Meaningful interaction with peers	*81.2*	*78.4*	*70.7*	*82.0*	*67.9*
Interaction with people of different backgrounds	*75.6*	*71.1*	60.9	*80.7*	52.3
Knowledge of people with different backgrounds	–	*71.1*	57.3	*80.7*	52.3
Understanding people from different backgrounds	72.9	68.1	56.7	79.2	49.0
Meaningful interaction with staff members	*75.9*	63.9	56.3	69.9	52.5
Meaningful interaction with faculty members	73.3	51.4	53.6	69.9	52.8
Academic Commitment					
Feeling of contributing to campus community	–	*85.2*	*84.9*	*80.0*	*67.6*
Feeling of belonging at institution	*76.6*	*73.2*	*70.8*	70.3	*58.4*
Knowledge of campus resources	*83.6*	*82.3*	*73.2*	73.3	*59.9*
Desire to stay at institution and graduate	68.9	59.9	54.5	68.2	48.1
Desire to engage in continuous learning	71.8	58.7	53.4	72.6	45.2
Employability Skills					
Building professional relationships at work	*78.3*	69.4	*69.5*	*81.0*	*59.8*
Providing direction through interpersonal persuasion	68.0	58.7	66.8	70.4	46.3
Creating innovative approaches to a task	65.7	55.3	*66.9*	72.2	43.1
Bringing together info from different places	72.0	66.5	61.9	78.4	49.5
Analyzing a problem from a new perspective	66.0	56.9	59.8	69.6	43.7
Applying knowledge to real-world setting	73.3	65.8	54.7	74.4	46.6
Expectations for success in FT job after grad'n	65.6	51.4	50.9	73.6	40.6
Engaging in ethical decision-making	64.6	53.1	45.9	71.9	34.3

Table 5. Percentage of participants in each country (n) who responded "increased" or "greatly increased" for each of the outcome areas

(*continued*)

Outcome area	USA $n = 3860$	CAN $n = 442$	ANZ $n = 229$	SA $n = 416$	UK $n = 411$
Sharing ideas with others in writing	46.5	44.0	43.5	64.4	33.5
Academic Success					
Academic skills	39.9	35.8	43.3	58.9	28.6
Overall academic performance	23.8	19.4	15.2	39.7	15.3
Grade point average	19.4	19.0	11.7	38.3	12.7
Number of completed subjects, units each term	14.8	9.7	6.0	27.4	10.4
Facilitated time to graduation (reverse coded)	1.9	2.2	1.8	3.2	1.3

Note(s): Top 10 areas (by %) indicated in italicized font
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 5.

the NSPL. The reported n value for each country indicates the total number of participants who responded to outcome items in the survey. For some outcome items missing data meant that the actual number of respondents was slightly lower than the reported n, however, calculated frequencies in the Table relate to the actual number of participants who responded to each outcome item.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of peer leaders across all countries responded that their involvement in PL activities afforded them benefits across most outcome areas surveyed. Although the composition and order of the top ten areas (as indicated by bolded font in the table) varied slightly between countries, there were some outcome areas that stood out across all or most countries. These included the development of leadership and interpersonal communication skills, enhanced feelings of belonging and contributing to the campus community and developing and engaging in meaningful interactions with peers and people with different backgrounds or cultures to their own. Other benefits to fall within the top 10 across most countries related to outcomes such as adaptability and teamwork, knowledge of campus resources and relationships with people in their place of employment.

Least beneficial was the perceived impact of PL on areas of academic performance and progression. Table 5 shows that, compared to all other self-rated changes examined by the NSPL and ISPL, all of the Academic Success items were perceived by fewer participants to have benefited from their PL involvement. Further analyses indicated that the majority of participants across all countries responded that their involvement in PL had no effect or at most only a slight effect (which was more often positive than negative) on aspects of their academic performance and progression, including overall academic performance, grade point average, the number of subjects they completed during an academic period, academic skills and their expected time to graduation.

The exception was participants in SA, nearly 60% of whom responded that their academic skills had increased as a result of their peer leader involvement. A chi-square analysis of responses to this item across countries was significant [χ^2 (24,5239) = 155.54, $p < 0.001$], indicating differences between the countries but with an overall small effect size [Cramer's $V = 0.09$]. Further analyses comparing directly the South African responses to this item with those from other countries revealed medium or large effect sizes across all comparisons [Cramer's V: ANZ = 0.23, CAN = 0.27, USA = 0.13, UK = 0.36]. In addition, some 21% of participants from SA reported negative effects on their expected time to graduation. Time to graduation was also the main Academic Success outcome identified by participants in the other countries to have been negatively affected by their involvement in PL activities, although to a lesser extent than by South African participants (range: 5% UK – 10% CAN).

Satisfaction with peer leader roles

Participants were also asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their PL experiences on a seven-point response scale that ranged from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied." Across all countries, the vast majority of participants (between 80% UK and 91% ANZ) reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their PL roles. Few participants (<3%) reported being dissatisfied overall with their roles. Further, most participants across all countries (between 89% UK and 98% ANZ) said that they would recommend being a peer leader to other students.

Discussion

In the current competitive higher education market, performance indicators are increasingly about student outcomes, and in particular, student retention and completion. It is therefore critical for higher education institutions to identify those factors that impact on student engagement and ultimately, retention and success and build effective practices and support strategies to enhance student outcomes. Furthermore, now more than ever, purposeful development of graduate employability and graduate outcomes through intentionally designed programs need to be key strategic priorities of higher education institutions. In 2020, nearly every country in the world was forced into unchartered territory with a pandemic casting uncertainty as to what the future will look like, particularly in relation to employment. In order to deliver on the graduate capabilities that employers are increasingly expecting, higher education institutions must have a genuine commitment to student leadership and a clear conceptual and pedagogic approach to intentional leadership development. The findings of the current study, together with previous research, show that student engagement in PL activities can enhance student development across a broad range of academic, professional, personal and social skills and attributes and positively contribute to their employability outcomes and workforce readiness. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized higher education sector and rising trends in outward and inward student mobility, we believe it is important that higher education institutions share in their understandings of international student communities to inform best practice and have national and international benchmarks against which to measure the quality of their programs and impact on student outcomes beyond the local context.

Although there were some differences between countries, a standout finding is the overall similar patterns across the different international contexts in terms of how the participants themselves perceive their involvement in PL activities impacts a range of academic and other outcomes. The majority of peer leaders in all participating countries believed that their responsibilities as leaders provided them with many benefits across a range of skill development, institutional interactions and employability outcome areas. There was also considerable agreement among participants from the different countries as to the outcome areas that benefitted most from peer leader involvement, with the highest reported gains including: the development of leadership and interpersonal communications skills, enhanced feelings of belonging and contributing to the campus community and institution and the development of meaningful interactions with peers.

With regards to academic outcomes, previous research has reported that peer leaders perceive the lowest gains from their PL experiences in the area of academic skills and that undertaking PL roles may have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Shook & Keup, 2012; Skipper & Keup, 2017). We found that, as in previous studies, a high proportion of peer leaders in all countries rated academic performance outcomes as the area that increased least from their PL experiences, despite many of the participants having held academic-based PL roles. Moreover, this varied by country (refer Chi-square test and associated effect sizes in Results sub-section on Perceived Benefits). For example, nearly 6 in 10 peer leaders in SA reported that they felt their academic skills were improved as a result of

their PL experiences. This can be contrasted with nearly half the prevalence (approximately) among peer leaders in the UK.

Although not explicitly examined here, further analyses of the USA data collected as part of this international project by Young *et al.* (2019) showed that engagement in academic PL roles and the total number of these roles are both positive predictors of self-reported overall academic performance. This suggests that peer leaders in academic-based roles, particularly those who engage in multiple roles, may view the connection between PL and academic outcomes differently from peer leaders in non-academic roles. A similar conclusion was drawn by Skipper and Keup (2017) in their analyses of the 2009 NSPL data; however, as both groups of authors point out, further research is needed to better understand this relationship. Shook and Keup (2012) and Skipper and Keup (2017) suggest that PL gains are rated lower in cases where there is an over-involvement in PL activities, where there is significant time needed to undertake PL responsibilities and where there is stress associated with the PL role. It is also possible that students' involvement in some PL activities is not directly aimed at enhancing academic outcomes but are more focused on developing students' graduate outcomes, which are also related to employability outcomes and developing life-long learning skills. However, according to Keup (2016), where there is a disconnect between PL roles and academic gains, PL programs need to have a "greater focus on the enhancement of academic skills as an outcome of students' service in this role" (p. 46).

Several authors have attempted to explain why the quality of students' university experiences and level of integration into institutional academic and social systems are so critical to student persistence and success. Tinto (1993), in his Student Integration Model which addresses institutional conditions for student success, proposed that the more engaged and assimilated a student is in their institution's academic and social environment, the more committed they will be to the institution and to their own academic goals and study, and therefore, the more likely they are to be successful learners and persist with their studies. More recently, the student engagement framework of Kahu and Nelson (2017) explains how curricular and co-curricular practices (in which we include PL programs) influence student engagement and success to positively impact student outcomes. The "educational interface" that Kahu and Nelson describe refers to a dynamic place where students engage in learning, formed by the interplay between student characteristics and university practices. According to these authors, at the heart of the interface are four psychosocial constructs—self-efficacy, emotion, belonging and wellbeing—that mediate the relationship between student and institution and act as potential pathways to student engagement. Co-curricular activities that positively influence the pathways, for example, by increasing self-efficacy or building a strong sense of belonging, increase a student's emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement with their study, resulting in successful outcomes. The findings of the current study fit well within the frameworks suggested by Tinto and Kahu and Nelson and highlight the important role that PL plays in the student experience. The peer leaders themselves identified a range of ways in which PL facilitates meaningful and deep engagement with the university community and builds sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution, in addition to development of important academic and employability skills.

The study reported here sought to describe students' experiences and perceptions of PL across the higher education contexts of different countries/regions, namely, the USA, CAN, ANZ (Australia and New Zealand), SA and the UK. Across all participating countries, higher education institutions offered students a diverse range of PL opportunities covering many aspects of university life and student affairs, and many students took up these opportunities, often engaging in multiple peer leader roles at the same time. This was particularly the case for peer leaders in the USA and CAN, where a substantial number of participants held concurrent responsibilities in multiple PL roles and tended to engage in more PL roles across their years of study than peer leaders in other countries, particularly those in the UK, who

typically engaged in only one or two roles while at university. Consistent with previous research (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Keup, 2016; Shook & Keup, 2012; Young *et al.*, 2019), academic PL roles and roles related to transition programs and to social aspects of campus life were the most common types of roles that students engaged in. In CAN, ANZ, SA and the UK, academic-based roles topped the list of peer leader roles, whereas in the USA, the majority of students engaged in roles related to social aspects of campus life, with academic and transition roles following closely behind.

There were also some differences between countries in the form of compensation or reward that peer leaders received for their work. Keup and colleagues (Keup, 2016; Young & Keup, 2018) suggest that the type of compensation peer leaders receive may influence the way they view their PL experiences and, in particular, the benefits that involvement in PL may afford them. Moreover, studies in this line of research (e.g., Young *et al.*, 2019; Young & Keup, 2018) using the USA dataset show that there is a relationship between students' self-reported outcomes and the depth of engagement as measured by total number of PL roles or time spent in PL roles. The amount of time dedicated to PL responsibilities varied between countries and depended, to some extent, on the number of concurrent roles they held. Students in the USA reported holding more than two current PL positions on average and an average 3.7 total roles. Similarly, more peer leaders in the USA and SA reported spending more than 30 hours per week on their PL responsibilities than students in the other national contexts. While the research found a connection between depth of engagement as measured by the number of roles held and the amount of time spent in the roles, program administrators and role supervisors in ANZ, CAN and the UK should not take this as free license to expand expectations for peer leaders under the guise of providing benefits to their student peer leaders. These results, taken with those about academic success, show that there is a point of diminishing returns on the benefits of the experiences for the students serving in these roles. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that the quality of structure of the experience is as important for achieving the benefits as the quantity of involvement (see Young & Keup, 2018).

Recommendations for practice

Recently, Skalicky *et al.* (2018) presented a framework for Developing and Supporting Student Leadership (DaSSL) to assist leadership program developers and coordinators in building the capacity of higher education institutions to be more genuine and purposeful in how they develop and support leadership in students. Where certain outcomes are particularly valued by an institution, for example, as part of realizing intended graduate or employability outcomes, the DaSSL framework explores how they could be more intentionally developed in leadership programs and subsequently evaluated as part of a continuous improvement approach to leadership development. The framework also includes principles and guidelines for the monitoring and institutional oversight of leadership programs to ensure that while leadership development is the primary deliverable and related outcomes are optimized, it is not at the expense of other outcome areas such as academic performance and success. These principles include 5 'Ps' of good program design, including purpose, people, positioning, practice and progress. The principles provide a framework for how educators can design, develop and deliver programs to develop capabilities and skills of student leaders (Skalicky *et al.*, 2018).

Related to these principles, several researchers (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Keup, 2016; Shook & Keup, 2012) have pointed to the critical role that training plays in developing the capabilities and skills of peer leaders, both in terms of preparing leaders for the specific duties they undertake and in supporting them throughout their leadership journey. In addition, the training and support peer leaders receive has been identified as a key factor that

differentiates PL roles from other peer-to-peer interactions that are common in higher education settings (Keup, 2016). The current findings indicate that training is an important component of peer leader development across all of the participating countries, with most peer leaders having undertaken initial training prior to commencing or early in their roles and, with the exception of UK peer leaders, receiving on-going training and supervision whilst engaged in PL activities. The duration of the initial training did vary across countries but was commonly between 1 and 3 days. The exception was in the USA, where a substantial number of peer leaders (approximately 50%) had received initial training in at least one of their roles that went for between one and three weeks.

Similarly, on-going professional development and supervision of peer leaders have also been identified as important components of leadership programs, particularly when peer leaders are encouraged to purposefully explore their personal leadership experiences. According to Wawrzynski *et al.* (2011), "encouraging peer educators to engage in reflective practices where they make connections between their academic and co-curricular experiences can make the learning process transformative" (p. 25). Furthermore, by explicitly reflecting upon and evidencing the accrued benefits of their involvement, in terms of their learnings and their broader skill and capability development, peer leaders may develop a greater appreciation of the value of their higher education experience beyond the attainment of their degree qualification and also be better able to identify and articulate their learnings and capabilities to others, particularly within an employment context (Fuglsang, Warr Pedersen, Skalicky, & Preston, 2018).

Future research

In 2023, the USA National Resource Center began rolling out the second administration of the ISPL across all of the countries involved in the first administration as well as several new countries. We anticipate the second administration will substantiate the results obtained in the current study and allow for new insights, particularly with regards to how the pandemic has impacted PL in higher education within different national contexts, both in terms of the operation and delivery of PL programs and the ways in which students engage in PL.

Limitations

The relatively small numbers of participating institutions and student respondents in some of the countries involved in this project reflects the pilot nature of the current study. In addition, there were several differences between the NSPL and ISPL and also between the ISPL administered in different countries. This means that not all of the available data was able to be used for comparisons across all countries. A more consistent international survey design and comprehensive institutional and participant recruitment strategies, as will occur in the second administration, will likely yield greater comparative data across the participating countries and more representative samples, across institutional types, participant demographics and PL programs.

As mentioned previously, the research involves an important backdrop that needs consideration when interpreting the results. Although the project involved a group of six international countries, the historical and cultural contexts of higher education in these countries clearly fall into a common or shared Anglo heritage. Additional research that extends the cultural backdrop of PL or examines directly the impact of culture factors on PL involvement could reveal additional insights into PL to what we have reported and identify important factors that influence students' PL experiences and outcomes.

The current project sought to understand students' perceived benefits of participation in PL programs. Some caution is required when interpreting these results, as perceptions of the

relative gains of these benefits may not necessarily manifest as actual gains, although, as Pike (1999) argued, self-reported estimates of learning are generally consistent and are therefore valid as indirect measures of change and as comparative measures. In addition, the benefits may not derive solely from participation in the leadership-related programs. For example, some of their perceived benefits may result from other experiences during their time at university (or beyond). Future research could seek to elicit specific examples from students for each of the benefits so as to assess or 'verify' their perceptions.

Conclusion

The study reported here provides a snapshot view of the contours of PL programs across five different countries/regions, offering insights into PL and PL programs as experienced by the peer leaders. The findings, for the most part, echo the results of the 2009 USA National survey and are consistent with other research on PL. They also extend the findings of previous research to an international perspective, showing how the different countries operationalize PL programs in higher education; and they further suggest that the national, institutional and socio-cultural contexts within which PL occurs is to some extent irrelevant to the impact it can have on students who engage in leadership activities, at least from the peer leaders' perspectives. These insights across international contexts add to the literature on PL and provide practical information to higher education institutions in different countries for exploring how program activities can contribute to student leadership engagement and development. Moreover, they afford valuable insights that extend beyond formal PL programs to show how student leadership can be embedded into a variety of other student supports and engagement opportunities (such as welcome and orientation programs, social and cultural experiences and broader community engagements) that enhance the student experience and support positive student outcomes.

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