

Research Papers/Extended Abstracts

Establishment of a Peer Support Group at the Department of Medical Laboratory Science, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Ruhuna.

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Abstract

Peer support learning is recognized as an effective educational tool. It enables students to share knowledge, experiences and resources to gain academic success. Traditionally, in the Sri Lankan university culture, students rely on an informal method of peer learning known as ‘Kuppi classes’, where groups of students gather to study together, often in an unstructured manner. These informal peer study sessions often lack organization and consistency and possess less efficacy. Considering these facts the Department of Medical Laboratory Science (MLS), Faculty of Allied Health Sciences (FAHS) established a Peer Support Group aiming to provide an organized platform that encourages academic and emotional support for the students in challenging modules. This initiative was implemented in response to the programme review recommendations for the faculty. High-performing peer students, temporary demonstrators, and unit coordinators were appointed as the resource persons. Repeat and re-repeat students in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 were taken as the peer learning group. Peer learning sessions were designed aiming at the areas that students found challenging. The programme was conducted in hybrid mode. According to the resource persons, there was an active student participation since it provided structured sessions tailored to their academic needs. Attendance for the sessions varied from 8-92%. Feedbacks from the participant students were collected. In this manner, the first Peer Support Group was successfully established at the Department of MLS, FAHS, University of Ruhuna, providing insights to expand the programme with respect to other needy modules. Student feedback and examination results will be evaluated to assess the effectiveness of the Peer Support Group activities in future.

Keywords: ‘Kuppi Classes’, Peer Support Group, Safe Learning Environment, Under Graduates

Introduction

Peer support refers to a kind of support that comes from individuals who share similar life experiences or challenges. Peer support learning is accepted as a successful educational tool. This provides a platform for students to share knowledge, resources, and experiences. Further, peer support group activities are effective in building resilience, connectedness and a sense of possibility among students. These activities have been proven to improve academic performance and reduce feelings of isolation accompanying the academic struggles of students. A SWOT analysis conducted in the Department of Community Care at the Unnan City Hospital, Japan, has indicated that implementing Near Peer Learning offers a multidirectional approach such as improving the educational experience and optimizing patient management (Nishikura et al., 2023). A study conducted at Cincinnati College of Medicine, USA, has shown that peer support learning could create a safe learning environment by promoting student growth, enhancing independent thinking, and allowing learners to seek help when needed (Humphrey et al., 2022). A pilot study conducted at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, McGill University, Quebec, Canada has shown that near-peer teaching has gained extreme popularity in medical education by giving a comfortable learning environment to the students and improving scores in examinations (Sioufi et al., 2022).

Traditionally, in the Sri Lankan university culture, students rely on an informal method of peer learning known as ‘Kuppi classes’, where groups of students gather to study together, often in an unstructured manner. Most of the time these ‘Kuppi’ sessions can provide some academic support but, due to the lack of proper guidance, organization and consistency, do not fulfil a deeper understanding of the subject. This can lead to surface-level learning focusing on short-term exam preparation rather than fully grasping the concepts. This informal guidance limits their effectiveness due to the absence of a structured framework and the varying levels of knowledge among participants. The informal nature of ‘Kuppi’ sessions can create peer pressure and this may reduce individual learning. Without the guidance of a faculty member or a more knowledgeable peer, there is a risk of misinformation being shared during ‘Kuppi’ sessions. These limitations highlight the need for a more formal and structured approach to peer support.

Establishing official peer support groups enhances academic performance by providing a structured learning environment where students can share knowledge, resources, and experiences. Considering these facts the Department of Medical Laboratory Science (MLS), Faculty of Allied Health Sciences (FAHS) established a peer support group aiming to provide an organized platform that encourages academic and emotional support for the students. This initiative is further in line with the programme review recommendations for the faculty.

Objective

This study was aimed to establish a Peer Support Group at the Department of MLS, FAHS, University of Ruhuna.

Methodology

The Internal Quality Assurance Cell of the FAHS, made an open request to all departments to create Peer Support Groups. Under the permission of the Dean of the Faculty and the Head of the department, it was decided to implement this as a best practice in the department.

Written permission was obtained from the head of the department to establish Peer Support Groups. It was decided to implement this programme with respect to a module with a higher failure rate and to officially appoint good performing students (based on the results), demonstrators and unit coordinators as resource persons for the peer support group. Repeat and re-repeat students of the relevant modules were selected as the peer learning group. An initial discussion was conducted with the peer learning group to make awareness and get their consent to participate. Peers were instructed to have a second discussion with the group to identify the nature of support they needed, areas to be covered, their convenient times to participate etc. Based on the suggestions the required activities were identified, a schedule was prepared for peer group activities and permission of the head of the department was obtained to conduct the schedule. All scheduled activities were conducted under the guidance of the head and the unit coordinator. Attendance for each of the sessions was marked. At the end of the sessions the students' feedback over the Peer Group activities was obtained.

Results

A high failure rate had been observed in Biochemistry modules and therefore the Peer Support Group was established focusing Biochemistry modules namely: Enzymes, Bioenergetics and Hormone action (EBH) and Metabolism and Regulatory Mechanisms (MRM). A total of 20 Repeat and re-repeat students in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 were taken as the peer learning group. The module coordinator, two temporary demonstrators, and four peer students were appointed as resource persons for the peer support group. The temporary demonstrators and the students were selected based on their academic performance in the biochemistry modules. Students requested to conduct lecture discussions on selected topics, past paper discussions and tutorial discussions as Peer Support Group activities and based on their suggestions a schedule with 11 sessions was prepared. Approval from the head of the department was obtained to conduct sessions. Sessions were conducted in hybrid mode. Information was shared and communication was made through a special WhatsApp group created among peer learning groups, resource persons and the head of the department.

All sessions were conducted on schedule successfully. Students' attendance for the sessions ranged between 8-92%. According to the resource persons, the students actively participated in the sessions. At the end, considering students' request an additional session was also conducted.

Feedback of the participant students was obtained.

Conclusion

A Peer Support Group was successfully established at the Department of MLS, FAHS, University of Ruhuna, providing insights to expand the programme with respect to other needy modules.

Student feedback and examination results will be evaluated to assess the effectiveness of the Peer Support Group activities in future.

References

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