

Enhancement of International Students' Psychological Well-Being and Social Integration Through Peer-to-Peer Support Networks

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Abstract: This study explores the efficacy of “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” in enhancing the psychological well-being and social integration of international students. Through a combination of literature review, innovative program design, and empirical evaluation, we address the prevalent issues of loneliness, cultural shock, and mental health challenges faced by this population. Our methodology involves matching students based on shared interests and backgrounds and facilitating monthly exchange activities to foster connections. Findings from questionnaire feedback highlight significant improvements in participants’ social interactions and mental health support, with a majority reporting enhanced well-being. This initiative underscores the vital role of peer support networks in educational settings, offering a replicable model for institutions aiming to improve international student experiences. Our results contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting structured peer support programs as a means to alleviate the psychological stresses of studying abroad.

Keywords: Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles; International students; Social integration; Mental health support

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized educational landscape, the influx of international students into universities worldwide has highlighted critical challenges in mental health and social integration. Despite the vast opportunities presented by international education, students often face daunting social, cultural, and emotional hurdles. These challenges, ranging from cultural shock to loneliness, significantly impact their psychological well-being and academic performance. This study introduces “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles,” an innovative intervention designed to mitigate these issues by fostering a supportive community through peer connections. Rooted in the concept of peer support as a potent tool for psychological resilience, this program pairs international students based on shared interests and backgrounds, facilitating structured monthly exchange activities to enhance social integration and emotional support. The initiative responds to the urgent need for

effective mental health interventions by leveraging the natural social networks within the student body. This approach acknowledges the unique challenges faced by international students and offers a scalable model for educational institutions seeking to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive campus environment.

This paper aims to detail the development, implementation, and impact evaluation of the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles,” providing insights into their potential as a replicable model for enhancing international student well-being across diverse educational contexts.

2. Literature review

The integration of international students into global educational systems presents significant psychological and social challenges, necessitating innovative support strategies. Literature emphasizes peer support’s pivotal role in enhancing international students’ well-being, addressing issues like loneliness, cultural shock, and language barriers that detrimentally affect their mental health and academic performance. Studies highlight the efficacy of peer support in fostering a sense of belonging and mitigating loneliness, underlining the value of initiatives like “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” that facilitate structured social interactions and emotional support ^[1].

The impact of cultural sensitivity and adaptation is also notable, with social networks playing a crucial role in easing cultural adjustment and reducing stress among international students ^[2]. Moreover, the evolution of digital platforms offers new opportunities for enhancing communication and support networks, suggesting the importance of online communities in providing accessible mental health resources ^[3].

However, research indicates gaps in implementing and scaling peer support programs effectively, calling for evidence-based approaches to maximize their benefits for international students’ well-being ^[4]. In summary, the literature review underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by international students and advocates for peer support as a crucial intervention, advocating for further research into optimizing these initiatives within educational settings.

3. Methodology

To investigate the impact of “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” on the psychological well-being and social integration of international students, we employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. This methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the program’s effectiveness from both statistical and personal perspectives.

The quantitative component consisted of a structured questionnaire distributed to participants before and after their involvement in the Wellbeing Circles. This survey assessed various dimensions of psychological well-being, including levels of loneliness, social support, and academic stress, utilizing validated scales such as the Psychological Wellbeing Scale ^[5] and the Social Support Questionnaire ^[3]. The pre- and post-intervention comparisons allowed for the measurement of changes in these areas.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants, chosen to reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences within the program. These interviews explored students’ personal experiences with the Wellbeing Circles, including perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s ^[6] thematic analysis framework, enabling the identification of common themes across participants’ narratives.

This mixed-methods approach was chosen to capture the nuanced impact of peer support systems on international students’ well-being, reflecting the complexity of their experiences. By combining quantitative data on psychological indicators with qualitative insights into personal experiences, this study aims to offer a

holistic view of the efficacy of “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles.”

4. Results

The evaluation of the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” revealed significant findings on their impact on the psychological well-being and social integration of international students. Quantitative data from pre- and post-intervention surveys indicated a notable improvement in participants’ reported levels of psychological well-being. Specifically, there was a statistically significant decrease in levels of loneliness and an increase in perceived social support, with the mean score of loneliness dropping from 4.2 (SD [standard deviation] = 1.3) on a 7-point scale to 2.8 (SD = 1.1), and the mean score for perceived social support increasing from 3.5 (SD = 1.2) to 5.4 (SD = 0.9).

Furthermore, qualitative interviews provided depth to these findings, with many participants sharing personal anecdotes of enhanced feelings of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation. One recurring theme was the value of shared experiences and cultural exchange, which not only mitigated feelings of loneliness but also facilitated cultural adjustment and integration into the campus community. Participants highlighted the importance of having a safe space to express themselves and share their challenges, which they attributed to their improved mental health and academic motivation.

An unexpected finding was the positive impact of these circles on participants’ academic experiences. Many reported feeling more engaged and motivated in their studies, attributing this change to the reduced stress and increased emotional support they received from their peers. This aligns with the research of Ziaian *et al.* ^[7], which suggests that social support can significantly enhance academic engagement and success.

The program also faced challenges, notably in matching students effectively to ensure meaningful connections. Despite the overall positive feedback, some participants felt that their matches were not well-aligned with their interests or backgrounds, suggesting a need for a more nuanced matching process.

Overall, the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” demonstrated a positive impact on international students’ well-being and social integration, supporting the notion that peer support can be a valuable resource for addressing the unique challenges faced by this group. The findings contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the implementation of structured peer support programs within educational settings to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students.

5. Discussion

The findings from the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” underscore the pivotal role of peer support in enhancing the psychological well-being and social integration of international students. The significant reduction in loneliness and increase in perceived social support align with existing literature, highlighting the effectiveness of peer-led interventions in mitigating the adverse effects of cultural displacement and academic stress ^[7]. These results affirm the critical need for universities to adopt holistic support mechanisms that address both the social and academic challenges faced by international students.

The qualitative insights reveal the nuanced benefits of such circles, particularly in facilitating cultural exchange and fostering a sense of belonging. This resonates with Daru ^[8], who emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity in support programs for international students. The positive feedback on the impact of Wellbeing Circles on academic motivation also suggests a broader application of peer support programs, extending beyond social integration to enhance academic engagement and success ^[1].

However, the challenges identified in matching participants highlight the complexity of implementing peer

support programs. The diversity of international student populations necessitates a more sophisticated approach to matching, considering not only shared interests but also cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. This finding points to the need for continuous refinement of matching algorithms and the incorporation of student feedback to improve the effectiveness of such programs.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge on the benefits of peer support for international students, providing empirical evidence to support the development of similar initiatives across educational institutions. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of adopting a multi-faceted approach to student well-being, integrating peer support with professional mental health services to comprehensively address the complex needs of international students.

6. Implications for practice

The positive outcomes of the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” underscore their potential as an integral component of university support services for international students. The findings suggest several implications for practice, aiming to enhance the well-being and academic success of this diverse student population.

Firstly, educational institutions should consider incorporating structured peer support programs as part of their student services portfolio. The significant reduction in loneliness and increase in social support observed in this study highlight the effectiveness of peer-based interventions in creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment ^[9]. Institutions could leverage existing student organizations or develop new programs to facilitate these connections, emphasizing the importance of careful matching to ensure meaningful relationships.

Additionally, the feedback on the importance of cultural exchange within the Wellbeing Circles suggests that universities should prioritize initiatives that promote intercultural understanding and integration. This could involve organizing multicultural events, workshops, and seminars that encourage students from different backgrounds to share their cultures and experiences, fostering a campus culture of diversity and inclusion ^[7].

The challenges identified in participant matching also point to the need for continuous improvement and adaptation of peer support programs. Universities should employ dynamic matching algorithms that consider a wide range of factors, including cultural, linguistic, and academic preferences, and regularly collect feedback from participants to refine these processes ^[8].

In short, the “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” offer valuable insights into the design and implementation of peer support programs for international students. By embracing these practices, universities can enhance the well-being, social integration, and academic success of their international student body, contributing to a more vibrant, inclusive, and supportive campus community.

7. Conclusion

The “Peer-to-Peer Wellbeing Circles” have proven to be a valuable intervention for improving the psychological well-being and social integration of international students. This study corroborates existing research demonstrating the critical role of peer support in enhancing international students’ academic and social experiences. Through structured social interactions and cultural exchange, students reported significant decreases in loneliness and increases in social support, validating the importance of such initiatives. Future efforts should focus on refining matching processes and expanding program reach, ensuring that peer support becomes a cornerstone of university support services. This research contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting the implementation of peer support systems across educational settings to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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