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Integrated learning communities as a peer support initiative for first year university students

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Abstract

Peer Mentoring schemes tend to be developed as retention strategies, however, they can also serve other purposes (psychosocial or career-related). However, evidence of the effectiveness of these presents mixed results and less is known about the horizontal peer support schemes which may help students capitalize on existing peer relationships. We developed an integrated learning communities (ILC) peer support scheme, building on the theoretical principles of social identity theory, which we embedded within our existing teaching framework and designed functional activities. Collective activities were undertaken to promote the processes of social identity with the intention that these may foster social and academic integration experiences. This intervention was undertaken with an entire cohort of first year undergraduate psychology students. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a self-selected sample of these students (N = 17). Thematic analysis revealed two main themes, each with two sub-themes. These were: "Divergent Experiences" with the sub-themes of "dependent on people" and "types of support", and "Good idea in principle" with the sub-themes of "Theory ≠ Practice" and "Dependent on student engagement". Although identifying with a peer group was not transparent in the interviews, the existence of a peer support scheme was perceived positively by students which might explain the success of the newly developed student-led Psychology Society. Indeed, this Psychology Society can provide a lasting framework for further amplification of the student voice. We conclude that our embedded ILC was both feasible and potentially valuable, but it is crucial for the peer support approach to have transactional significance.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the context of the teaching excellence framework (TEF), retention is a key priority for UK universities. That is, among other metrics, continuation data as obtained from HESA functions heavily as a metric as part of the TEF assessment. To exacerbate this issue further, within the forthcoming introduction of subject-level TEF, university departments will be expected to become more accountable for the retention of their students given that the proportionate weighting of retention metrics are set to be increased. As such,

departments will be expected to ensure that effective strategies are in place to reduce the chances of student attrition. Paradoxically, the removal of student number control by the UK Government in 2015, along with the popularity of Psychology as a subject choice at university level (OfQUAL, 2019), results in many university Psychology departments supporting large cohorts of students, making student retention increasingly difficult to manage. Increases in student numbers within the sector has indeed been found to be a source of pressure for university staff, particularly in relation to the impact this may have on workload and stress (Darabi, Macakill, & Reidy, 2017; Jabbar, Analoui, Kong, & Mirza, 2018). As a result, departments are increasingly developing and trialling new initiatives designed to support their retention practices. However, the efficacy of these remains under scrutiny.

Retention initiatives often are characterized as peer support schemes, particularly via "peer mentoring" initiatives (Lee, Germain, Lawrence, & Marshall, 2010) or "peer-assisted learning" schemes (Byl et al., 2015, 2016) whereby students are invited to elect themselves as a "peer mentor" in which they may be one of many ambassadors for their cohort and/or department. This works on the principle that this may facilitate peer-to-peer support, and that students who may typically be at risk of leaving university, may be more willing to seek support from a peer rather than a tutor. The format of such peer mentoring schemes takes many forms and may be designed for academic or social support, or indeed a combination of these. Irrespective of their format, their purpose is to support attrition, as well as garnering benefit to new students in feeling that they belong, as well as for existing students who may develop new skills as a result of being a mentor (Andrews, Clark, & Thomas, 2012).

The academic literature evidencing the effectiveness of peer mentoring schemes presents mixed results. That is, while some evidence demonstrates the efficacy of peer mentoring schemes for first year undergraduates for supporting retention (e.g., Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014), other evidence does not (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). For example, Collings et al. (2014) compared first year Psychology cohorts who had a peer mentor scheme and those which did not. Particularly, the mentoring scheme surrounded one-to-one psychosocial support and was largely used within the first few weeks of university. In contrast, Rodger and Trembley (2003) randomly assigned first year university students in a year-long peer mentoring scheme (relative to those who served as a control sample). However, when exploring retention from year 1 to year 2, being mentored did not appear to hold any benefit in this regard. In respect of attainment rather than retention outcomes however, evidence illustrates favorable academic outcomes associated with peer mentoring (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), particularly for connectedness, culture, and resourcefulness, as well for supporting the learning approaches and psychological literacy (Chester, Burton, Xenos, & Elgar, 2013). For example, Chester et al. (2013) implemented a scheme whereby first year Psychology students took part in group-based weekly tutorials for the majority of their first semester. Mentors were third year students in which mentoring focused on the assessment tasks and included tutor input in tutorial sessions. However, other research findings do not find consistent evidence to corroborate this effect (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2017). There may be many explanations for these disparate findings. Some of these may be explained by the fact that mentors' experiences can be both positive and negative (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, & Wilss, 2008) and often that different stakeholders have different perspectives about what the role of the peer mentor should be (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). As such, it is likely that there is a great deal of diversity in the operationalization of the peer mentor and mentee relationship. To acknowledge this, a review (Terrion & Leonard, 2007) revealed there to be many peer mentor characteristics in respect of mentoring function. From this, these authors developed a taxonomy to classify these, in an effort to understand what constitutes successful peer mentoring relationships (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). In summary, this taxonomy revealed there to be five *pre-requisites* for what constitutes an effective peer mentor (ability and willingness to commit time; gender and race matching in mentoring relationships; university experience; academic prior experience; academic achievement); two characteristics which support *career-related aspects* of this role (program of study; self-enhancement motivation), and eight characteristics for supporting the *psychosocial functions* (communication skills; supportiveness; trustworthiness; Interdependent attitude to mentoring, mentee, and program staff; empathy; personality match with mentee; enthusiasm, and flexibility).

Within the literature there is a consensus that an effective peer mentor relationship is dependent on the mentee's university experience (Johnson, 2002; McLean, 2004) most likely because it serves a bidirectional purpose. On one side, the mentees consider that senior students are better able to provide valuable advice and mentors feel more proficient in their role due to a more developed knowledge and skill. Although academic achievement of a mentor could add credibility (Johnson, 2002; McLean, 2004; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Shmidt, Marks, & Derrico, 2004), further research into this area is needed. A poorly performing student can improve on university work and become an effective mentor with valuable experience on how to succeed academically. The taxonomy proposed by Terrion and Leonard (2007) also highlights that mentors with prior experience in peer mentoring were willing to continue with offering support (Allen, Poteet, Russell, & Dobbins, 1997), but there are no recent studies to add credit to such claim. It should be noted the possibility of an overlapping of the three pre-requisites (university experience, peer support experience and academic achievement) in that peer experience and academic achievement both are linked to the actual academic experience. Most importantly, it is less clear how horizontal peer support could align to such pre-requisites.

Although early research (e.g., Allen et al., 1997) has shown that mentee satisfaction with the relationship does not increase as time spent with the mentor increases, more recent studies found that the willingness to interact on a structured timely manner with peers was seen valuable for an efficient peer network (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; McLean, 2004). Moreover, Ferrari (2004) claimed that a weekly peer encounter would be ideal. However, no other research replicated Ferrari's findings. Hence, whether time could

explain the outcomes of mentoring relationships should be investigated in greater depth.

Out of the two career-related attributes of the mentors, it appears that an identical *program of study* can shape the mentee's perception of the mentor as a reliable source of advice (McLean, 2004; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003), with relevant academic knowledge (Ehrich et al., 2004), but *self-enhancement motivation* could be double-barrelled. Mentors who are motivated by self-enhancement will provide greater career-related support to the mentee (Allen, 2003), but mentors with high expectations might act authoritatively, or even patronizing and set unrealistic targets for their mentees (Awayaa et al., 2003). Therefore, understanding the social aspects of this relationship is important. In line with this, in relation to the psychosocial aspects of the peer relationship, *communication* has been rated as the top quality of an ideal mentor (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Rose, 2003). As such, additional work which explores the psychosocial processes and experiences of these schemes is a fundamental area of enquiry.

There are, however, a number of other issues with typical peer mentoring schemes. First, these largely omit to include academic tutors within this system. That is, these schemes are often implemented as an "add-on" strategy which fails to draw in the integrated support systems already in place in most university departments, such as the Personal Tutor. As such, this may be perceived as being disjointed from the existing support provision, and fails to provide a basis to support the maintenance of tutor-student relationships, which we know are fundamental to effective learning environments (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). A second limitation of peer mentoring schemes is that they typically operate on an opt-in basis, whereby it is likely that it is not all-encompassing as a departmental-wide strategy for all students. That is, it is conceivable that the most "at-risk" students who are most likely to benefit from such scheme, are unlikely to engage in this, and thus such initiatives do not fulfill their intended purpose. Finally, peer mentoring schemes often aim to create a vertical structure of support but often fail to capitalize on the horizontal structures which may exist in students' existing peer cohorts and groups. It is well understood that it is these peer networks which are the "go-to" resource for support relating both to academic and social concerns (Buote et al., 2007). Based on this limitation, it is important to consider the efficacy of these horizontal peer support (rather than peer mentoring per se) opportunities.

The majority of the academic literature on horizontal peer support at university is either focused on studying how perceptions of social support relate to outcomes, or on assessing the effectiveness of schemes which are designed for specific user-groups. For example, research has explored this in relation to students with depressive symptoms (Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney, 2013), doctoral students (Devenish et al., 2009), students with disabilities (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005), and international students (Quintrell & Westwood, 2006). Beyond this, there is little evidence available of structured peer support initiatives which are designed around supporting horizontal peer relationships within cohorts. As such, it is not established whether planned peer support schemes which capture horizontal cohort groups are effective as a retention-boosting strategy. There are also additional theoretical considerations to note here. That is, there is little evidence to suggest that peer schemes which exist within UK universities are based on theoretical principles available in the academic literature. That is, there is little interrogation or application of the social science literature, which otherwise would provide a theoretically informed rationale and approach to establishing these strategies (c.f. Collings et al., 2014). Therefore, there is clearly a need for a theoretically informed approach to this, particularly in relation to how peer support schemes may be efficacious.

1.1 | Theoretical considerations

There is extant knowledge in the academic literature which may go some way to inform the effective peer support strategies. Within the psychological literature alone, there is an extensive literature particularly within the social psychology literature which provides a scientific basis for exploring group processes and their applicability within applied settings (Hogg & Gaffney, 2018). One of the prominent theoretical bases for research exploring social processes and behavior which may be relevant in the context of peer group processes, is that of Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT posits that individuals define themselves in respect of their affiliations to social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Here, it is widely evidenced that enhanced group identification or affiliation has both psychosocial as well as behavioral benefits. For example, group identity has been found to be related to positive well-being, such as an enhanced sense of self-worth, psychological well-being, social competence, and lower loneliness (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine & Broadnax, 1994; Kaye, Carlisle & Griffiths, 2017; Kaye & Quinn, 2020; Kaye, Kowert, & Quinn, 2017). In addition, behavioral outcomes particularly within organizational settings include: task motivation, task intentions, willingness to contribute to collective goals, and performance (Ellemmers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999; Tyler, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Van Knippenberg, 2000). In respect of educational settings, research has also found that social identity at university is related to outcomes such as course satisfaction (Pennington, Bates, Kaye & Bolam, 2018). Clearly these outcomes are relevant to university contexts in which a structured peer support system may function for fostering positive psychosocial experiences, and importantly, positive behavioral outcomes (e.g., attendance, course adherence) which may support the retention efforts.

However, in order for the theoretical principles of SIT to be effective in this regard, the practical strategies must align to the theoretical principles outlined by SIT. Specifically, SIT posits that group identity is fostered through three interrelated processes; social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Indeed, this has been operationalized for organizations through the ASPIRe model (Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003), which proposes a four-phase approach which is designed for "Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources". The first phase involves establishing which social identities people should collectively use to define

themselves, followed by the second phase where relevant subgroups create goals which are relevant to those identities. Following this, the larger organizational unit takes these forward to develop overarching goals to correspond to these. In the final phase, organizational planning takes place as informed by the outcomes of the preceding phases. Therefore, this provides a useful theoretical basis for designing peer support strategies within universities, which we outline in the following section.

1.2 | Practical strategy

Drawing on the ASPIRe model, we developed a peer support strategy which was embedded within the culture of students' university experiences and guided by personal tutors. As such, this led to the development of our integrated learning communities (ILC) initiative. The ILC initiative works on the principle that students are placed in small "clusters" as they enter their first year of their course. This is to buffer against the fact that they may feel "lost" in the context of their large cohort of peers, and instead join a smaller cluster of 12–15 peers. This approach is akin to "Hogwarts houses" (as per the Harry Potter franchise) in which students operate in much smaller, better-defined peer clusters. This structure was then used as a basis for implementing a number of embedded activities which were intended to promote the workings of the clusters, particularly around promoting collective identity as well as other experiences such as sense of belonging, given that we know these factors help retain students in higher education (Thomas, 2012). Specifically, each cluster (12 clusters per cohort of approximately 15–20 students) had its own Personal Tutor (PT) assigned to it, who led and supported the cluster-based group activities aligned with the PT system remit. As such, the ILC was designed as both a peer support system, as well as way of supporting more effective tutor-student relationships. The basic principles of SIT via the ASPIRe model were supported accordingly, using the activities discussed next.

Focused specifically on the social categorization process, we applied the first phase of the ASPIRe model whereby we aimed to ascertain the social identities our students felt was representative of their respective cluster group. This took place within a designated cluster session with PTs within Freshers' Week (Cluster Session 1). The purpose was to establish similarities of cluster members and agree on core attributes of the cluster. Students were asked about their feelings and thoughts about starting university (e.g., "How are you feeling about starting university?", "What has brought you to study psychology?"). Students were asked to write as many ideas which came to mind as possible on Post-It notes (Activity 1) and then attached these to a large poster which had a number of themes outlined on it (e.g., Feelings, Perceptions, Motivations). As such, students could start to build up a profile of the cluster to ascertain similarities among them (Activity 2). See Supplementary Material for examples of all activity materials. This was then used as a discussion, led by the PT to illuminate these similarities, and to discuss the importance of how this would lead onto the collective goal-setting (discussed below). Additionally, from a PT perspective this could also provide a platform to establish any student worries or anxieties which may have been provided via the Post-It notes (anonymously) to give any reassurance or further detail to address these concerns. Cluster members were also encouraged to develop an agreed cluster name, to further promote the collective categorization process.

Following from the social categorization process, the subsequent activities were designed more specifically around supporting the social identification within clusters. This was largely applying the second and third phases of the ASPIRe model. This was undertaken across a series of cluster sessions, and largely resolved around a collective goal-setting approach. This approach supports group members to define their group attributes and then use these as a basis for establishing group goals. Previous work demonstrates the effectiveness of collective goal-setting, with meta-analytic research highlighting that group goals have a robust effect on group performance (Kleingeld, van Mierlo, & Arends, 2011). Additionally, other work illustrates how this may relate to other group processes such as collective efficacy and group cohesion. For example, group goals have been found to mediate the relationship between the collective efficacy and group performance (Bray, 2004). However, no research to date has applied this approach to a university setting, specifically within peer group support system practices which may be less focused on performance per se, but instead on retention and/or social belonging outcomes. As such, we sought to develop a strategy by applying the principles from the ASPIRe model in this regard. This was intended to support the development of collective cluster identity and thus promote favorable behavioral outcomes, such as adherence and attendance.

The first of these sessions (Cluster Session 2) was around Week 4 of Semester 1 designed to establish collective goals (Activity 3). This included support on what constitutes effective goal setting (SMART targets), outcome goals and how process goals and time-framing were important within this. This moved to the subsequent session (Cluster Session 3), around Week 8 of Semester 1, which was to review (Activity 4) and re-evaluate (Activity 5) collective goals based on a discussion and reflection on progress. This included reflecting on the external versus internal attributions for goal successes or failures, and how reinforcements had been or could operate around supporting these further. Following this, part of a subsequent cluster session at the beginning of Semester 2 (Cluster Session 4) was to continue monitoring goals (Activity 6). This continued to include a reflection of the attributions relevant to goal attainment and discussions around how to manage these internal and external factors for successful goal fulfillment. This collective goal-setting within individual clusters therefore aligns with the second phase of the ASPIRe model outlined by Haslam et al. (2003) on the importance of subgroup goals. However, alongside this, we integrated strategies which aligned to the third phase of this model relating to larger organizational units. To achieve this, we asked each cluster to nominate a rep who would join other cluster reps as a committee, to feedback and discuss the respective cluster goals. This took place initially between Cluster Sessions 2 and 3, whereby they were able to consolidate the

goals from Session 2 to form overarching goals, which cluster reps then fed back to their respective clusters in Session 3. An outcome of the cluster rep committee was that these formed the basis of a Psychology Society committee who therefore were able to take forward organizational planning to meet the need of students across the respective clusters, whereby the final phase of the ASPIRe model was operationalized. See Figure 1 for the process we followed.

1.3 | Aims

The ILC initiative was designed as an intervention. The study represented here provides the process evaluation aspect of a larger intervention-based project. That is, as highlighted by Moore et al. (2015), undertaking rigorous process evaluation is fundamental to effective intervention development. Specifically, this can help establish an understanding of the causal assumptions which may underpin an intervention to better inform how it may work in practice. In respect of the ILC, we were specifically interested in knowing whether SIT was the most appropriate theoretical basis to use, particularly in relation to how this was relevant to the context of the target Department, the effectiveness of the delivery process of the SIT strategies, and participant responses to these. Therefore, we conducted a series of interviews with first year undergraduate psychology students who had experienced the ILC scheme in its year of inception. This was to ascertain the extent to which the ILC system was effective in promoting the processes of social categorization and identification of SIT.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Context

The target Department was a Psychology department within a mid-sized post-92 university, based in the North West of England. This Department has experienced extensive growth in student numbers over the last few years, with most recent cohorts each consisting approximately 200 students. Upon enrollment to the university, each student within the Department is provided with a Personal Tutor who is an academic member of staff and remains their "go-to" support tutor academically and pastorally for the duration of their course. The department is self-contained physically in respect that all Departmental staff and facilities are located within one building.

2.2 | Participants

Participants (N = 17) were first year Psychology students at a university within the North West of England. These were 14 women and three

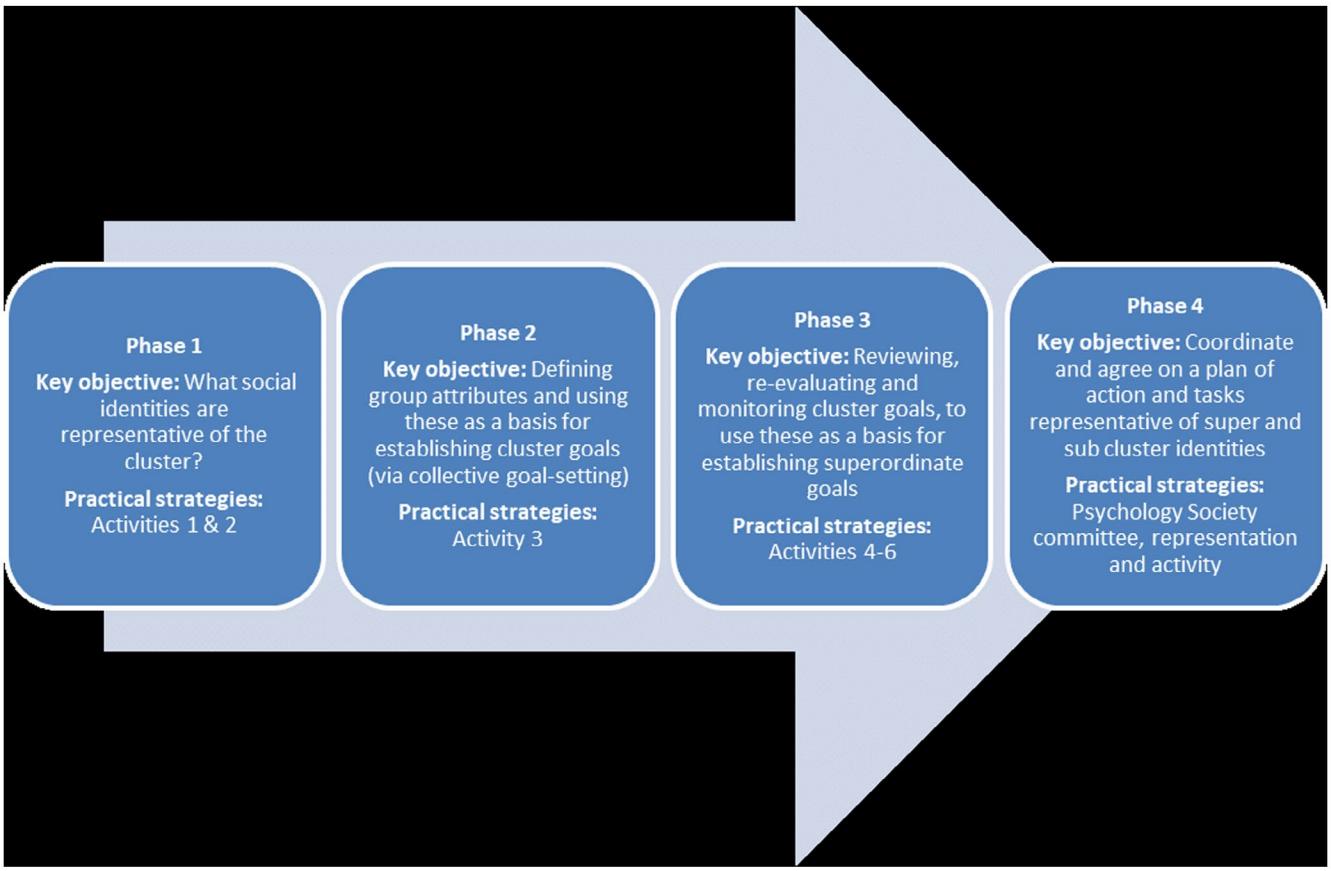

FIGURE 1 Application of the ASPIRe Model via the ILC initiative [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

men ranging from 19–23 years old. To try to obtain a representative perspective of the ILC scheme, it was important to recruit participants from as many of the "clusters" as possible. The final sample consisted nine of the 12 clusters being represented by participants (clusters 7, 10, and 12 did not receive representation). Participants were reimbursed in the form of participation credits or £5 for their participation.

2.3 | Procedure

First year undergraduate psychology students (academic year 2018–2019) were recruited through targeted sampling via the Departmental research participation system (SONA). Once they had agreed to take part, participants were invited to a semi-structured interview at a mutually convenient time. Interviews were conducted by one of three trained Doctoral Tutors* who were involved within the project work. This was advertised as a study to understand "Social support at university". Participants were fully briefed and given the opportunity to ask any questions prior to providing written consent, in which they agreed to their data being audio recorded and used for the purposes of the research. Following this, the interview commenced with some warm-up questions, followed by the main agenda items. These related to social identity processes such as "What helps you feel connected as a group?", "What has been the best example for you in helping you gel together as a group?". This was followed by questions asking specifically about the collective goal-setting strategy: "What sort of goals did your cluster develop?" and "When you came to re-evaluate your goals, how did you negotiate this process?". Finally more general questions about the ILC scheme were asked such as: "How might you suggest we improve the ILC/cluster scheme and the activities we do" and "If you were running this scheme, how would you do it?" Before the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had anything else to add or ask. Interviews lasted, on average, 18 min and 11 s, with the shortest interview being 6 min, 18 s, and the longest being 34 min, 19 s. All audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim, to permit analysis.

2.4 | Analysis and discussion

Thematic analysis was used for the analysis, given its utility to identify, analyze and report themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommended procedure was followed in which first, the transcripts were read through a number of times to aid familiarity with the data and note initial themes. Coding was then undertaken, following by these being transformed into potential themes through selecting relevant extracts from the data. Following a review of these themes, these were then finalized and relevant extracts were selected to be reported within the current paper.

Two main themes were identified and each of these had two subthemes. The first main theme was "Divergent Experiences" with the two sub-themes of "Dependent on people" and "Types of support". The second main theme was "Good idea in principle" with the two sub-themes of "Theory ≠ implementation" and "Dependent on student engagement". The following sections detail these in turn and includes illustrative quotes.

2.5 | Divergent experiences

One of the main themes found was that there were divergent experiences derived from the ILC scheme across the sample. In relation to participants' perceptions of their cluster group, many reported very positive experiences, particularly in their descriptions of the cluster, whereas others did not hold these same experiences. That is, in responding to a question about what three words would they use to describe their cluster, the following responses were given:

"Awkward but friendly" (PP2)

"Helpful supportive and nice" (PP3)

"Good support, helpful to have one, but quite restricted just to work" (PP4)

"Friendly, comforting and supportive" (PP6)

"Creative, kind and innovative" (PP8)

"Formal, irregular and eye-opening" (PP9)

"Awkward, helpful and new" (PP12)

"Quiet, nice and smart" (PP13)

"Supportive, friendly and non-judgmental" (PP14)

"Supportive, friendly and engaging" (PP15)

"Talkative, friendly and open" (PP16)

"Quiet and separate" (PP17)

However, these divergent experiences were attributed to two key factors: first, who the people were in their cluster, and second, the type of support participants felt they gained from this. These are discussed next.

2.5.1 | Dependent on people

The diverse experiences of the scheme represented by participant responses is partly attributed to variations in tutors and peers across the cluster groups. That is, this was discussed in relation to the interactions between members based on their compatibility.

> *Yeah. I mean I guess it would depend on the tutor and how they run it and also the people that are in it, it could just be we're not that talkative, but it could be other cluster groups are a lot more close. It could be that within my cluster there's people that are a lot more close; I think it depends on people that are in it (Participant 3)*

Participant 6 supports this idea further by discussing how the efficacy of the cluster is dependent on the chance that certain types of people are allocated to the same cluster.

> *I don't think you could do anything to improve the cluster, it's more the people in it I think, 'cos how the people work with it, everyone like together, and how they interact, 'cos you can't really make people interact in a certain way, you can't force people to be friends. I think it's just by chance that you end up with someone that you're really good friends with or not. But they are generally … like you can't do anything about what we do in them, like that's good anyway. (Participant 6)*

Further to this, Participant 11 that they believe they scheme was useful for other people, but not for them based on their own social preferences.

> *I think some of them do from what I remember who were in there, I see a few of them around, so I think it's probably worked for people … maybe it's me, maybe I'm just less willing to be in that kind of group scenario thing. (Participant 11)*

Overall, it seems that in respect of participants' experiences being dependent on the people, some clusters were more effective than others. Participants largely attributed this to be due to the level of interaction with their peers and also the level of attendance within the cluster sessions. Those who reported positive experiences made reference to much greater levels of interactions and collective engagement compared to those who had less favorable attitudes to the scheme.

2.5.2 | Types of support

As well as being largely dependent on people themselves, the diverse experiences of the ILC scheme could also be attributed to the ways people gained different types of support from their cluster. That is, the scheme was initially devized as a way of providing social support in the form of collective identity and action. For those who garnered this form of social support, this was largely related to them reported positive experiences.

> *Probably how small the groups are, 'cos when you see in lectures and the lecturer tries to engage with like a room filled with like sixty or seventy people, no-one really wants to engage, whereas when it's on a smaller basis people will engage a bit more 'cos there's less of that anxiety and sort of intimidation, 'cos if you've got so many people watching you when you say it like in a lecture hall it makes you feel small, whereas in that smaller group you can say something and if it is wrong it doesn't seem as bad or like you have a bit more open friendliness in a smaller group. (Participant 3)*

> *Well I feel like it's just a really good opportunity for support, because obviously it's a time where you're not like in a seminar and you can talk to a tutor and talk to the rest of the people in like a more casual way and if there's anything you're unsure about you can talk about it rather than having to stay behind after a seminar or whatever. (Participant 5)*

However, it appeared that even though some participants reported they garnered social support from their cluster, the relationships between peers was not based on friendships, rather more like acquaintanceship.

> ***Facilitator**: Okay. So in terms of the number of people that you talk to or like actually call them, do you have any people that you call friends in the group itself?*
>
> ***Participant 8**: Not in my group I wouldn't say, but we're friendly.*
>
> ***Facilitator**: Okay.*
>
> ***Participant 8**: But I wouldn't consider them close friends.*
>
> ***Facilitator 8**: Okay. So it's like more than acquaintances, less than friends' kind of situation?*

Social support was not the only form of support which the clusters appeared to provide. Therefore, although the scheme may not always have been effective in achieving its primary aim, there appeared to be secondary benefits or unintended consequences from other types of support, which perhaps were not acknowledged as strongly by participants in their evaluations of the effectiveness of the scheme. Specifically, there was more evidence that the clusters provided a platform for informational support, particularly for course-related tasks. Participant 3 gives a useful summary of what they felt were the most helpful and least helpful activities within the scheme and how this related to providing informational rather than social support.

> *So not helpful at all is the kind of making … not not helpful at all, but the least helpful is probably the kind of getting to know each other and the one fact about yourself, stand up and say it activities. And then the most helpful probably the sitting and kind of sharing the feedback you've got and how you've been doing,*

> *knowing that you're not the only one that's done that badly and you're not the only one that's having trouble with that. Or kind of knowing some things and … yeah. (Participant 3)*

Participant 14 discussed that it was early assessment tasks which served a basis for their collective working, but importantly, this served as a form of informational support in the way they could learn from each other.

> *I think with us it was our first ever assignment at University and it was our Cog and Bio essay and because everyone was just getting used to like adapting into it, like we were able to talk about it more so we'd all sit round and like discuss what we needed to do for each different thing and I think that helped us gel better as a group, 'cos we realised that we're all first time, so we understood more from others that we could get through uni. (Participant 14)*

Further to this, this participant also discussed other assessment tasks and interestingly, how their cluster embedded these tasks into their cluster collective goal-setting exercises.

> *Well, with us our goal is quite ongoing 'cos we've got the web based assessment all the way through, but we've seen how everyone got on each time, say if I was off one week and got less than the others because I've done it separately, we'd speak about it and then see how we can help there and then move it forward by going and focussing on the next one. (Participant 14)*

Other examples relating to informational support included the fact that clusters provided a basis for students themselves to develop their own networking groups, via WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, and this served a good resource for sourcing and sharing information.

> *Yeah, it's also somewhere where you could like put a message if you needed to know something quickly, yes. (Participant 3)*

In general, it seems that the cluster format may serve some types of support over others, highlighting that the effectiveness of the scheme may be dependent upon how important these types of support are to students. Regarding social support, if this is to be a key objective of the ILC scheme, participants' discussions suggest that this may be more effective if smaller clusters were devized.

> *I don't know. I think at first there's going to be awkwardness, but like after the first session maybe start letting people do a lot more work in just little groups, 'cos they're a lot less awkward when you've just got like four people you're trying to talk to instead of twenty. (Participant 3)*

Further, that within smaller clusters, these could form the basis of task groups for project work. Participant 4 suggests that including take-home activities focused around projects could be one way to encourage greater participation in the cluster scheme. As such, this may be a useful mechanism to draw together both social and informational sources of support.

> ***Participant 4**: I think definitely bring in like takeaway activities so that people have to like get together outside of uni.*
>
> ***Facilitator**: And do you have any examples of this takeaway activity?*
>
> ***Participant 4**: Erm {long pause} I don't know to be honest. I think if it was something that was little, like a little project or something that you had to do, but you had to do it like outside of the cluster group, like time, yeah.*

It seems then that although the SIT strategies did not appear to be so effective for achieving the primary objective of fostering collective social identity, there were some secondary, unintended outcomes which should not be overlooked. Namely, being part of a cluster for some participants was a useful platform for informational support, such as to gain support regarding feedback literacy, general assessment information, and in some cases, for supporting group project work. Therefore, SIT may not necessarily be the most relevant theoretical approach to take in this regard, and suggests that peer support or mentoring schemes may be better suited to looking beyond the notion of "social support" as the central feature, and instead consider the utility of schemes which are more task or informationally focused. On an operational level, the findings suggest this may work to the greatest effect for smaller task-focused groups, rather than the size of the cluster groups used in the current scheme.

2.6 | Good idea in principle

The second main theme of "good idea in principle" was found, which consisted two sub-themes of "Theory ≠ implementation" and "Dependent on student engagement". That is, it was generally recognized that the ILC scheme was useful, but its effectiveness was dependent on implementation which was more varied based on the issues discussed within the following sub-themes.

2.6.1 | Theory ≠ implementation

Many participants discussed that they recognized the value which the ILC scheme could hold, but some were keen to discuss some of the implementation issues which they felt may have hindered its effectiveness.

I feel like a lot of people think it's pointless, like it's just there for the department to tick a box, like I don't really think of it like that but … I think it's like a good idea just I don't know, it isn't a hundred percent effective, but I see like … 'cos there's a lot less people we've kind of gone as well because you get more tips I suppose about what's going on and like more advice and stuff like that and we haven't really followed … do we not have like PowerPoints that they were supposed to follow. We haven't really followed them so we're just kind of tailored it to what we want to talk about. But, yeah. (Participant 2)

This view is also supported by Participant 13 who provides a quantitative scale to indicate that they felt the implementation let down the scheme, despite them believing in principle that it was ok:

***Facilitator**: Okay. Just random, on a scale of one to five, bearing one is terrible, five is well done, excellent, what do you think––when you first heard about the scheme which I believe was during the orientation period, right–– what do you feel about the proposed ideas about the scheme on a scale of one to five? Where will you stand on it?*

***Participant 13**: Probably about three.*

***Facilitator**: Okay. Then the actual implementation of it, what do you think if you were to give a score …?*

***Participant 13:** Probably a two.*

When asked whether they felt there were any downsides to being in a cluster, many participants reported that there were none:

I can't really think of any, no. (Participant 16)

Therefore, it appears that although participants in general reported there to be no downsides of being in a cluster, this may have been due to their appraisal of the principle of the scheme rather than their actual experiences of it. That is, there was little evidence of participants holding an emotional association to their cluster group, therefore this could explain the rather apathetic appraisal of the scheme overall.

2.6.2 | Dependent on student engagement

Other participants took the discussion further and their responses indicated that they felt the ILC scheme was effective, specifically for bringing people together, but only for those who sought to engage in it.

I think it's quite a good idea and it's a good way of bringing people together that want to do Psychology Society, but it's not great if you're getting people involved that aren't necessarily interested, but then I don't know how you would anyway. (Participant 4)

This idea is corroborated by Participant 2 whose responses suggest that for them personally, they did not find it to be effective for support but recognized that in principle it may be useful:

***Participant 2**: Well, there is, but like it's clear that they're trying to make a support system but I'm just not sure how effective it actually is.*

***Facilitator**: What about for you, do you feel that it is a support system for you?*

***Participant 2**: Like I wouldn't go to my cluster if I had an issue, but I mean it's always there so … I don't know, probably not.*

Therefore, there appears to be some evidence of effectiveness but only for those students who were particularly motivated to engage. Participant 16 in particular, was very supportive of the scheme, suggesting they may have represented a student of this nature:

***Participant 16**: With the cluster groups I feel they are good as they are at the moment, 'cos you've obviously got the diverse of the different courses on there. So I wouldn't really change nothing of them 'cos they're good, structured, the group sizes aren't too big, not too small.*

***Facilitator**: Okay. So I was going to say would you make any changes, but you think it's good as it is?*

***Participant 16**: Yeah, the sessions are quite frequent, much as I try and turn up to them, it's not often that I do but I do try to get there.*

***Facilitator**: Is there anything that happens in them that you wouldn't do?*

***Participant 16**: {Pause} I wouldn't say so, no.*

Similarly, Participant 12 believed the scheme was well implemented when asked a question specifically in this regard, which may suggest they used it effectively:

Yeah, yeah; I would say so. (Participant 12)

However, further to this, any disadvantages of the scheme were discussed in reference to attendance or engagement from their peers rather than as a perceived failure of the scheme itself:

Not any downsides of it, I just don't think it was used as well as it could have been, 'cos there were a few people

that didn't go to them 'cos they were a bit more optional. (Participant 17)

From the perspective of understanding the various domains or components of social identity, there are perhaps some distinctions to be made here. That is, there was little evidence of affective commitment or engagement to the ILC scheme, whereby participants did not appear to experience emotional connection to their cluster or share a collective identity with all their cluster members. However, on a cognitive level, there are some interesting nuances to explore which may suggest some effectiveness of the scheme. That is, simply the knowledge that the scheme existed as a support mechanism (even if it was not used it in this way) appeared to be sufficient for participants in reporting that they thought it was useful and effective. The *perception* of available support was sufficient to suggest the effectiveness of the scheme, at least for some students. This may suggest therefore that developments of the scheme should be targeted around knowledge appraisal processes rather than more exclusively focused on the utility for peer support groups to develop social capital (Haslam et al., 2003). This may include an equivalent structure of support, but which operates on an opt-in basis rather than as a compulsory basis.

3 | CONCLUSION

The current research represented the process evaluation of a wider intervention initiative, designed to ascertain the applicability of SIT to a university-based peer support scheme. Specifically, it aimed to establish the extent to which the delivery of the SIT strategies were effective. This was framed in response to Higher Education concerns surrounding retention in light of the forthcoming subject-level TEF proposals. Of specific relevance is the application of the ASPIRe model which has not yet, to date, been applied to this context therefore the current research also provides a theoretical contribution in this regard. The main findings and implications are discussed in the subsequent sections.

In respect of the success of SIT as a theoretical basis, although this did not appear to strongly foster the collective psychological experience it intended, the practical nature of the ILC scheme did result in one highly positive tangible outcome. That is, it served as a platform for organizing activity around a new student-led Psychology Society. That is, the collective goal-setting strategy supported the formation of the Psychology Society, whereby the particularly engaged students were able to develop agency in forming a Society committee as a core platform to develop the workings of the Society further. This should not be overlooked as a highly favorable outcome from the SIT strategies, although arguably was not successful for capturing engagement for all students. As such the ILC scheme served as a platform for structuring collective activity to develop a "superordinate" community. This was particularly useful for drawing together the very keen and motivated students who could represent their respective clusters through being a representative in the core community. In moving forward, it is recommended that this core community provides the structure for any collective activity and tasks rather than a top-down structured framework which was experienced in rather divergent ways and did not appear to serve its primary purpose for all students. Therefore, efforts to maintain and extend this Psychology Society community should be the focus in moving forward. This should be undertaken concurrently with ongoing evaluation activity whereby understanding the nature of this community identity and its impact will be a core endeavor.

Additional research is needed to identity the antecedents and processes of university identities and how these impacts upon university engagement, community, and behaviors. That is, identity at university can be a multidimensional facet, ranging from that of being a "student", to one's subject domain, or to one's institution, or indeed others. As such, understanding identity and community in universities can complex. Therefore, more is needed to establish issues such as what are the range of identities students hold, what are the antecedents of these developing, how do these change across a university lifetime, and how do these relate to university experiences and outcomes. This would help better establish educational impacts associated with university-related identities.

As with all research, this study is not without its limitations. One key limitation was that no specific measure of identity was obtained, rather the current focus was more exclusively on the efficacy of the practical strategies and students' experiences of the ILC scheme. As such, it is not fully determined the extent to which cluster identity was actually established and indeed, whether this was related to the practical initiatives outlined in this paper. It is important to note that the current research represents one part of a wider intervention project, therefore evidence of this effect may be better determined from other aspects of our evaluation efforts (some of which are more quantitative in nature). This is also the case for evaluating how these initiatives are related to retention, specifically across the first full year of a student's university course. This represents one of a number of retention efforts, and while it may not be the sole attributing factor for retention success, it may support ongoing efforts in this regard. Therefore, it was beyond the scope of the current process evaluation to specifically measure these factors, and instead was more exclusively focused on how relevant the initiative was to the context of the target Department and the effectiveness and student responses to the delivery of this.

A further limitation is of course the self-selecting nature of the sample from a cohort exceeding 200 students. That is, the views of those students who were willing to come forward as part of the research evaluation are likely to be those most motivated or engaged in their university experience and the ILC scheme, thus their views may be disproportionate relative to their full cohort. This has implications to the wider issue of how schemes such as those designed around retention, often fail to capture those who may benefit most from them. The findings and practical implications from the current evaluation therefore need to be considered with these issues in mind.

One of the key features to the effectiveness of peer support schemes is the leadership and implementation of these by staff

tasked with this role. Our scheme consisted academic staff who were assigned as leaders to their respective clusters. However, despite staff training and resources, it is not always possible to ensure equal implementation of the collective goal-setting strategies. In moving forward, we aim to address this by proposing our Student-led-Society as a platform for communication and collaborative peer activities. Also, such collaborative activities we propose to be encouraged throughout their study programe starting with our first year Essential Skills module and continuing through their degree with a view of obtaining a certificate of group skills among other 21st Century skills (e.g., Coaching & Counseling; Collaboration & Teamwork; Critical Thinking & Problem Solving; Creativity & Innovation; Communication & Persuasion; Careers & Self Actualization). From this perspective, we propose a peer scheme that offers psychosocial support through the student-led Psychology Society and career-related function through engagement with group activities.

In summary, although our ILC initiative did not appear to promote collective identity processes for all those students who experienced it, it did form an organizational and operational framework from which a superordinate community could develop. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, the ASPIRe model formed a useful basis for the development of our initiative and applied this model in an organizational context which has not to date, received empirical attention. The current findings highlight that our ILC was experienced in diverse ways by our students and on a perceptual level, was viewed favorably as a support provision for most. However, we contend that the development of our newly formed Psychology Society, as a tangible outcome of our ILC scheme, has the greatest potential to be the platform for our collective community activities in moving forward. We therefore intend to use this as the basis for further collective activities, as a mechanism to encourage our students to fully integrate into a learning community in an effort to support our retention efforts.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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