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# A qualitative evaluation of SMU's peer helpers programme

Loon Beng Angela KOH
*Singapore Management University*, angelakoh@smu.edu.sg

Michelle LF CHEONG
*Singapore Management University*, michcheong@smu.edu.sg

## Citation

**Reflections from the Field**

# A Qualitative Evaluation of SMU's Peer Helpers Programme

Angela Koh ✉ (Singapore Management University)
Michelle Cheong (Singapore Management University)

## Abstract

This study examines the impact of peer helper training in Singapore Management University (SMU) from personal interviews with 11 alumni peer helpers. The aims are to find a) new evidence of benefits and innovative practice that support peer helper learning, university life and employability and b) to enhance curriculum and training. All opinions in the sentiment analysis were positive. The content analysis revealed developing external partnerships, exploring certification and engaging in internationalisation to enhance curriculum, training and practice at the organisational level. At the programme level, the suggestions were to better relate peer helping to future readiness.

# Introduction

The Singapore Management University (SMU) set up in 2000 has 10,000 students. There are six schools, the School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law and School of Social Sciences, in addition to over 30 institutes, centres, labs and initiatives (Singapore Management University, 2018).

The SMU Peer Helping Initiative started in 2003 and was Singapore's first and only formal peer helping programme for the education sector. Two hundred students are trained every year. There are 1,200 qualified peer helpers to date. Fifty peer helpers serve the student community at any point. A book, "A Basic Guide on Peer Helping", authored by four SMU counsellors was unveiled on 18 January 2013 (Singapore Management University, 2017). On 5 April 2013, SMU launched the Mrs Wong Kwok Leong Student Wellness Centre upon a SGD1.6 million endowment pledge.

The two levels of peer helping training focused on basic helping skills, Egan's model of problem solving, advanced helping skills (reframing and confrontation), mental health first aid and suicide

prevention. From 2009, a third level included supplementary training on crisis management and hypnotherapy/art therapy. Role play was introduced for skills practice during scheduled 10-week duty in the wellness centre. Peer helpers undertake voluntary community service and organise up to four mental health events per year spanning half a day to three days.

Besides two papers in 2005 and 2007 on the development of a peer helping program in SMU and the impact of SMU's Peer Helpers Programme respectively, there had been little research on the effectiveness of the training programme from 2009. Though peer helping had been implemented widely in North America, there was scarce research on the subject in Asia, a critical observation made by SMU staff, Tan and Hsi (2005) that stands to date.

With this background, the qualitative study complemented Tan and Hsi's (2007) quantitative research, by examining SMU's Peer Helping Training Programme from the perspective of the graduate peer helper, in an attempt to find new evidence of benefits and innovative practice that may support peer helper learning, university life and employability. The results would be used to improve curriculum and training with the goals of increasing counselling effectiveness, garnering more credibility, generating further support and upholding accountability to the helpees (Rockwell & Dustin, 1979).

# Literature Review

The term "peer helping" was described as "help provided formally and informally by 'lay' people who often are not of adult age, nor who have professional credentials" (Varenhorst, 1992, p. 10). Other terms included peer counsellors, paraprofessionals, student paraprofessional helpers, counsellor aides and peer advisors (Lawson, 1989). Racz and Lacko (2008) categorised two kinds of peer helpers. Age-based peers were students while way-of-life-based peers referred to those sharing comparable social and life experiences. Newton and Ender (2010, p. 7) proclaimed "a helping relationship implies that there is value added as a result of the encounter".

Interest in peer helping had been linked to its usefulness as a prevention or intervention strategy in the context of social problems within a school setting (Froh, 2004). In the mental health arena, Bulanda, Bruhn, Byro-Johnson and Zentmyer (2014) discussed the effectiveness of peers with compatible communication styles helping those stigmatised. When Amarasuriya, Reavley, Rossetto and Jorm (2017) studied the helping intentions of undergraduates in Sri Lanka towards their depressed peers, they found the most common helping intention was to listen/talk and support. The past two decades had also seen peer educators used in academic and student services across multiple delivery methods, to developing safer and supportive campus communities through active involvement in nonviolence and safety procedures for reducing trauma (Newton & Ender, 2010).

In medical, academic, mental health, counselling and wellness settings, the growth of peer helping was attributed to supplementing professional resources and assuaging the preference for first-line comfort or assistance from peers. A peer helper defined as one who was trained and supervised by professional counsellors to help peers experiencing personal issues, would establish a supportive relationship by offering social and emotional support in a non-judgmental and non-directive way. In so doing, the peer helper helped peers clarify their thoughts and feelings, explore alternatives and define their own solutions (Mrs Wong Kwok Leong Student Wellness Centre, n.d.). Cox (1999) declared that peer counselling did not compete with professional therapy as peer counsellors met with clients on a short-term basis whereas professional therapists attended to clients indefinitely.

In interpersonal skills training and counselling, Bohart, Landeros, Hewitt and Heilman (1979) found the person-centredness (warmth, empathy and genuineness) of a helping person more effective than skills or techniques. In an early study on a peer helping curriculum model implemented in American public schools, Kealy, McDermott and Wasser (1982) concluded that students' energies

could be tapped. They were complementary participants in the educational process that contributed to a more caring institution. Varenhorst (1992) stated that peer helpers were given quality and task-oriented training, appropriate service activities to perform, were supervised and evaluated to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the total programme and resultant outcomes.

Dougherty and Taylor (1983) examined the need for appraising peer helper programmes and proposed several methods - pre-post method, comparison group method, self-report assessment method and case study method. They reasoned that counsellors should assess to determine impact of the programme, build support, assist in improvement and fulfil an ethical obligation to the recipients. Morrill et al. (1987) cautioned that despite the optimism surrounding peer helping, the programme would need proof of effectiveness for credibility. Evaluation was challenging due to difficulties in data collection and the number of variables.

Tan and Hsi (2005) had examined the theoretical foundations of peer helping and the development of a peer helping program in SMU. They explained the evolvement of focus from paraprofessional student counsellors helping peers to "Total Wellness" that encompassed the spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional, occupational and physical. The latter concept was broader and more acceptable to students as the stigma of counselling was removed. When Tan and Hsi (2007) investigated the impact of SMU's Peer Helpers Programme in a quantitative study, they found benefits to both the client and the helper. The peer helpers showed enhanced self-awareness, emotional awareness of others and organisation-based self-esteem. In addition, counselling skills (reflecting feeling and asking probing questions) and practical life skills (interpersonal effectiveness and emotion management), were acquired. As for helpees, 93.3% would recommend the programme to others.

Other studies too found positive effects on the peer helpers themselves across fields and initiatives (Froh, 2004; Eryilmaz, 2017; Andre, Deerin & Leykum, 2017). Aladağ and Tezer (2009) studied the development of a peer helping training program for university students in Turkey examining effectiveness from personal growth and helping skills. They conveyed that "the success of peer helping programs and peer helpers largely depends on the skills that peer helpers develop through the training programs" (Aladağ & Tezer, 2009, p. 256). However, critics focused on two weaknesses - the procedures in developing and implementing the programmes and the research methods used in assessing them. Hsi and Chung (2010) concurred that many studies focused on the benefits derived by participants of peer helping and suggested exploring the impact on helpees and the building of a nurturing community within the university. Eryilmaz (2017) had appraised the short and long term effectiveness of a peer helping programme on clients and uncovered significant increases in positive affect and life satisfaction in the intervention group as compared to the control group. The programme consisted of three stages, training in helping skills, implementation and facilitating supervising sessions, increased helpees' subjective well-being.

# Methodology

The aim of the qualitative study was to provide a rich and contextualised understanding of the experiences of graduate peer helpers by gathering depth information and uncovering personal feelings through semi-structured interviews. Besides observing verbal and non-verbal communication, engagement with data included note-taking during interviews, memoing after the interviews and during transcription that helped in the evaluation of meanings during the text analysis. As findings and analysis were embedded within contexts, the thick descriptions were used to comprehend circumstances, discover inferences and interpret intentions amidst the socio-cultural background of peer helping during undergraduate years and the impact on careers.

Word-based techniques were used and primarily word repetition, indigenous words identification and key words in context association. The content analysis and data linking of the text data that comprised 46,419 words from the 11 personal interviews were investigated by counting the word

frequency and observing word association. The frequency of words was analysed by question word frequency and by candidate word frequency. The association of words or collocation examined word pairs, by candidate word pairs and by question word pairs. A word pair is two words that need not be adjacent. If the same word pair were to appear in the same sentence, it would be counted once. A five-word window size was used to search for the word pairs as with common practice. The process was to extract all the word pairs that might surface for relatedness. After selection of the most relevant and frequent word pairs, the sentences that contained the word pairs were examined. For somewhat similar word pairs from different questions, the sentences and context were compared and studied for relatedness, re-statements or re-assertions of the same topic or meaning deemed useful in furthering understanding. The contents were inspected iteratively and line-by-line. Relevant words and sentences were reviewed for underlying reasons, motivations, opinions, connections, relationships and patterns. After meticulous combing, key words, interesting phrases and relevant insights were noted and highlighted. Connecting clusters of words by frequency and expressions, the opinions were grouped into categories and emerging themes identified. The generation of themes were inductive and from secondary literature as well as researchers' background in learning.

To complement the text analysis, a sentiment analysis was applied on the text data of the respondents by question to determine the emotional tone of opinions expressed. The compound score ranged from -1 to +1, with < -0.05 considered negative sentiment, while > +0.05 deemed positive sentiment. The compound score was computed by summing the valence scores of each word, adjusted according to the established rules, and then normalized between -1 and +1 (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014).

An adaptation of open-ended survey questions in Keenan's (2014) research on mapping student-led peer learning in the United Kingdom was employed for the personal interviews. Keenan's (2014) investigation focused on peer-led academic learning targeted at staff point of view for the purpose of the country-wide report. We established the questions in the section on evaluation particularly helpful as we felt that they could be applied to both staff and peer helpers. Furthermore, we viewed learning occurring in both the curricular and co-curricular spheres as structured and intentional along with knowledge and skills acquisition in and out of class as dynamic and supporting. Also, for the purpose of improving the training curriculum and to discover if peer helping aided career preparedness, probes and prompts were used especially in Questions 4 and 6. The questions with minor modifications were:

1. What do you personally believe is the main benefit for students who lead peer helping sessions?
2. What do you personally believe is the main benefit for peer helpees?
3. What do you believe is the main benefit of peer helping activities in SMU?
4. Please share with us an example of an exciting or innovative approach to peer helping learning taking place in SMU that could have benefitted you.
5. If you were advising others who are not yet engaged with peer helping to engage, what would be your main argument for doing so?
6. What do you think is the main challenge for new adopters i.e. those considering peer helping?

All research procedures were approved by SMU's Institutional Review Board. The alumni office sent an introductory email in October 2018 to graduate peer helpers providing information on research aims, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Those willing were contacted by the investigators. The respondents did not receive compensation for participation.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted from end 2018 to mid 2019. There were three female and eight male interviewees (Table 1). Four graduated from Business Management, four Economics and three Social Sciences. Their graduating years were from 2008 to 2018. Despite the relatively small number of respondents, the investigators proceeded with the research since it was

the first time a formal attempt, and through qualitative study, was undertaken to reach out to alumni peer helpers for their insights into improving the university's peer helping training. Also, the respondents were employed and mature to contribute materially. Transferability was not compromised as robust accounts of their deeply personal experiences provided connections and evidence applicable to other socio-cultural contexts.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Demographic profile of the 11 respondents.

| Year of graduation | Gender | Degree |
|---|---|---|
| 2008 | F | BBM |
| 2009 | M | BBM |
| 2011 | M | BSocSc |
| 2011 | M | BSocSc |
| 2012 | F | BBM |
| 2012 | M | BBM |
| 2013 | M | BSc (Econ) |
| 2014 | M | BSc (Econ) |
| 2016 | M | BSc (Econ) |
| 2018 | F | BSc (Econ) |
| 2018 | M | BSocSc |

Summary:

- There were three female and eight male respondents, totalling 11 respondents
- Their year of graduation was from 2008 to 2018, spanning 10 years
- Four graduated from the School of Business, four from the School of Economics and three from the School of Social Sciences. The 11 respondents were from three of the six schools in SMU

Eight interviews were face-to-face and three over the telephone, lasting an average of sixty minutes each. While a face-to-face session was preferred for building rapport, clarifying answers and observing body language, the telephone interview was a contingency as one respondent was working overseas and the other two were subjected to exigencies of duty and could not meet in person.

All respondents were assured confidentiality, informed participation was voluntary and that they could opt out anytime or choose not to answer specific questions. Only amalgamated findings would be revealed. Agreement for participation and audio recording was sought through signed consent forms. Interviews were transcribed. All respondents graduated from the same university where English was the medium of instruction and also their first language, reducing the variability in usage of words and interpretation of meanings resulting in consistent understanding of intent.

# Findings

## Sentiment Analysis

All sentiment scores in the opinion mining were positive. There was no distinguishable opinion polarity. The scores ranged from 0.08 (lowest positive) to 0.43 (highest positive). The positive sentiment orientation was not surprising due to the demographic and psychographic profile of the respondents and the nature of peer support. All respondents had undergone the required formal training in the same institution, though with some variation in instructional formats and were experienced peer helpers. They shared the common wish to do good by befriending, supporting and attending. Consequently, their sentiments did not exhibit magnitudes of cognitive dissonance.

## Text Analysis

The summative content analysis techniques used were frequency count, exploration of keyword in context and interpretation of underlying content focusing on meaning, intent and implications. The decoding process was aimed to evaluate the responses and explore usage within content. The iterative text analysis required judgement on words to be analysed or excluded and topics viewed as significant. When the word pairs were identical across questions or somewhat similar within or across questions, the words, sentences and context were carefully re-read and analysed for clues of themes (e.g. "health, mental" in Q3, Q4, Q5 and Q6; "academic, module" in Q4, Q6; "soft, skills", "listening, active", "listening, skills", "use, skills", "set, skill", "skills, listening", "skills, learnt" in Q1 and Q6; "module, cu", "cu, graded", "module, weeks", "academic, module", "academic, rigour" in Q3, Q4 and Q6). After scrutinising key words and phrases and reviewing thoroughly how they were used in context throughout the transcripts, constructs were identified based on previous work and researchers' values and pedagogical backgrounds. The highest keyword frequency count by question is shown in Table 2, the most frequent word pairs associated with the key word in Table 3 and the main and sub themes in Table 4 below:

**Table 2: Highest keyword absolute frequency count by question**

| Keyword | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *skills* | 32 | | | | 33 | 27 |
| *friends* | | 28 | | | | |
| *events* | | | 51 | | | |
| *class; modules* | | | | 40; 40 | | |

**Table 3: Most frequent and relevant word pairs**

| Keyword | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *skills* | soft, skills; listening, active; questions, ask; listening, skills; support, service; use, skills; set, skill | | | | give, advice; general, wellbeing; different, everyone; skills, facilitation; health, mental | health, mental; role, play; one, reach; open, mind; cv, put; academic, module; skills, listening; skills, learnt; development, personal; outreach, commitment |
| *friends* | | give, advice; listening, ear; telltale, signs; face, online; approached, friends | | | | |
| *events* | | | internal, bonding; packs, stress; module, cu; overseas, retreat; cu, graded; formal, sessions; bring, friends; wellness, centre; module, weeks; weekly, session; Friday, training; bring, awareness; health, mental; network, support | | | |
| *class; modules* | | | | academic, module; role, play; life, personal; Friday, sessions; speakers, external; academic, rigour; wellness, centre; health, mental | | |

**Table 4: Main themes and sub-themes**

| Keyword - Question | Main Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|---|
| *skills* - Q1 | 1. Acquisition of psychological skills | 1.1 Development of self-agency |
| *friends* - Q2 | 2. Social support and acceptance<br>3. Friendship and affiliation<br>4. Guidance and accountability | 2.1 Free of stigmatisation and partiality |
| *events* - Q3 | *Retreats*<br>5. Belongingness and sense of community<br>*Weekly training*<br>6. Access to relationships and repose<br>7. Confidence from subject matter and competency-based learning<br>*Outreach events*<br>8. Building community cohesion through unity of purpose<br>9. Deepening engagement through touch points | 5.1 Introduction to self-care<br>6.1 Mutual aid and extended support<br>7.1 Community of practice through resource sharing and creation |
| *class; modules* - Q4 | 10. Marrying academic learning with social assistance<br>11. Exploring possibilities of learning<br>12. Delivering learning outcomes through external partners | 11.1 Learning through collaboration and shared experience |
| *skills* - Q5 | 13. Acquisition of lifelong learning skills<br>14. Supporting professional development | 13.1 Responding to sense of duty |
| *skills* - Q6 | 15. Recruitment for desired personality traits<br>16. Curriculum enhancement<br>17. Appropriate and purposeful deployment<br>18. Extending the value of peer supporting to the workplace | 17.1 Expectation management |

## Main benefits for peer helpers

**1. Acquisition of psychosocial skills:** The primary benefit for peer helpers was the acquisition of psychosocial skills namely active listening, asking questions, engagement, showing empathy, perspective taking and conversational/language skills. The respondents affirmed:

> It is about active listening being able to hear people's concerns and being able to support others when they are going through a difficult time. (P04)

> It is more of improving your soft skills, nonverbal communication skills like body language and silence. (P10)

> I think one of the most important things I learnt was the skill set of asking questions and the skill set of being able to empathise with people. (P09)

**1.1. Development of self-agency (sub-theme):** A secondary benefit was the discovery of their personal paradigms. The sense of agency led them to believe that with the skills acquired, they could act, to influence themselves and others effectively amidst changing circumstances or conflict:

> I needed the support and used the service myself. That made me want to contribute back so it is a very individual sort of context. (P05)

> We actually use a lot of skills like how to engage with each other especially when we get into conflicts sometimes because of different ideals. (P05)

> I could use the skills in the relevant context. They are useful in relationships with friends and family. (P08)

Thus, the key benefit for peer helpers was personal growth while acquiring supporting skills. Through introspection, increasing the well-being of others also equipped them with overarching life skills that improved interpersonal relationships beyond university and academic life.

## Main benefits for peer helpees

**2. Social support and acceptance:** It was unanimous that the main benefit for helpees was having an avenue to approach friends who offered a listening ear, friendship and support in times of difficulties as well as empathy and the assurance of just being there:

> I think the main benefit for helpees was they were able to get a listening ear from someone who would not judge them at the first instance. (P07)

> A lot of times we are there to provide a listening ear and to bring clarity to the situation. (P08)

> An additional listening ear … befriending those who were not part of a clique. (P02)

**2.1. Free of stigmatisation and partiality (sub-theme):** Next, approaching friends made the helpees feel less judged and observed under an official radar. Seeking help from a friend did not carry the stigma that seeing a university counsellor might:

> They feel more comfortable talking about their issues to friends … gave them an avenue to share, to offload any emotions they feel for whatever reasons they were going through. (P01)

**3. Friendship and affiliation:** Also, helpees confided in peer helpers because they were friends first. A personal relationship had to exist before the helpee opened up to trusted acquaintances:

> Personally, I didn't have friends who approached me directly because I was a peer helper. (P05)

> If I know my friend has some issues, my friend will open up more to me because I learned how to listen and how to be sensitive about their feelings. I can talk to them better and help. (P11)

Interestingly, if the peer helper tag featured too prominently, the same stigma that discouraged students from going to counsellors would also emerge (P09).

**4. Guidance and accountability:** While helpees perceived that they could seek advice, the peer helpers' training limited advising. Instead, the helpees were guided to clarify thoughts, explore options and be accountable. The training of facilitating an exchange was underscored where helpees were steered to consider a potential range of actions and consequences by the use of open-ended questions:

> If they are facing some problems, I would naturally ask them more 'what they think of doing' or 'have they considered?' I would try to help them think but not to give advice. (P03)

The attending skills without solutions-directedness but guidance for deconstruction led to the secondary benefit of helpees feeling more responsible for the outcomes:

> We are there to provide a listening ear and to bring clarity to the situation. People I have helped benefitted from the emotional support. They needed someone to listen to them, to better understand what they are going through. Peer helping is a long journey. After one or two sessions, you may not get to the crux of the matter. It may take a couple more meet ups but eventually most of them would see the light. (P08)

Sometimes refraining from advising was not as indubitable on the field, especially if the helpee was aware of the peer helper's personal and professional background and looking for advice based on that context. Despite applying the 'if I were you I would …' technique, "there are a lot of different kinds of skills in peer helping and many different models but sometimes, in the right context, offering advice may be the way. It is the judgement of the peer helper" (P08).

In summary, the view that peer helpers were a group of allies or uncertified counsellors who could be depended upon, first for unconditional friendship and next support through presence, listening and enablement, without stigmatisation, offered the main benefit for helpees.

## Main benefits of peer helping activities

The three activities cited were outreach events, weekly training sessions and retreats. The benefit associated with all three was internal bonding among the peer helping community and increased awareness among the university student population for outreach efforts.

### Retreats

**5. Belongingness and sense of community:** Camaraderie during retreats was identified. Particularly during overseas retreats, new peer helpers discovered more about peer support through a community of like-minded people. Two main takeaways from the bonding were highlighted. One, they were advised to get to know themselves before attempting to brace others:

> We were informed that this is the peer helpers' family. We have to know each other well before we get to help other people … team building, bonding, that was the main part of the retreat. (P04)

**5.1. Introduction to self-care (sub-theme):** Two, the peer helpers discovered the concept of self-care. They learnt that they too had to ensure their own mental health and physical well-being. It was reassuring that the community reminded them of care amidst fellowship as "there are people here to support you no matter what" (P05).

### Weekly training

**6. Access to relationships and repose:** Activities during Friday training developed internal bonding expressed by analogies of a close-knit group and illustrated by metaphors of 'family' (P04, P08, P10 & P11), 'community' (P01, P02, P04, P08, P09 & P10) and 'network' (P08 & P10). Besides, the wellness centre provided tranquillity and respite from the humdrum of studies:

> To take our mind off school work and basically an environment for people to either take a nap or just to get things out of their heads, refresh their minds. (P04)

**6.1. Mutual aid and extended support:** Also on the affective level, the weekly training provided an avenue for peer helpers to look out for one other as it was described as a microcosm within a macrocosm:

> Like a support network for a support network. We will be helping other people but there needs to be a group that we can reach out to as well. (P07)

The resultant mutual support helped sustain interest and enhanced their coping abilities. The undergirding in the centre offered a contrasting ambience from the go-getting classroom. The rapport built from a gathering of volunteers, far from the madding crowd and concerned about common good, was echoed in a quote on solace:

> When people meet on Fridays, despite the busy schedule, to talk about non-work and non-school matters and are emotionally related, I think the friendship and bond is very different. In SMU, everybody is so competitive. You will not find many who will come on a Friday to talk about how we can help the rest of the school or how we can become better people. So, on Friday you will see people who are committed and know these people are different. They just want to do something good. (P07)

**7. Confidence from subject matter and competency-based learning:** The internal bonding during the weekly training was achieved on two levels. The training was eagerly anticipated and deemed important. Firstly, on the cognitive and skills levels, topics, approaches, tools and therapy were learnt formally giving the helpers confidence as "lessons were the most useful as we learnt the hard skills of peer helping (P05).

**7.1. Community of practice through resource sharing and creation (sub-theme):** Next, the platform allowed the peer helpers to tap on one another for general advice and additional resources even when they could not disclose presenting problems in detail because of confidentiality. Described as "ears for the school" (P11), sharing general personal experiences and discussing approaches in congenial and safe surroundings resulted in respondents feeling they were better supported and more equipped to deal with cases.

Hence, the weekly training session was perceived as a combined package infused with elements of fun, resources, games and interaction with people comfortable and engaged with one another. The amalgamation had the advantage of strengthening bonds and enhancing instruction. A respondent described the self-help energy as a shot in the arm: "an extra boost in getting us trained" (P08).

**Outreach events**

**8. Building community cohesion through unity of purpose:** The outreach events led to an increased awareness that there was a circle of social and mental well-being supporters "apart from the school counsellors or teachers or their professors" (P001). The main benefit was to alert students that they could count on a community ready to be significant others:

> A group of fellow students who care to listen to them and happy to support them in whatever they are going through. I think outreach events is the main way people find out about peer helping. It helps to let people know there is a community of peer helpers and their role. (P04)

Furthermore, the event programming was a symbolic gesture of reaching out to spread positivity:

> Whether direct or indirect, there was something positive going on. It was a measured and concerted effort to spread positivity in school, to alleviate the stress that people had and to promote wellness. (P09)

Besides, forming bonds during event organisation and being part of a band of peers with the same values also meant common understanding and meaningful participation in roles that contributed to others as "peer helping trained me to be more aware of society and built up my compassion levels" (P02).

**9. Deepening engagement through touch points:** Event marketing raised awareness of specific mental health issues such as depression and suicide as students dropped by. Handing out booklets, cards, pamphlets and balloons was cathartic for both the giver and the recipient. The paraphernalia heightened inner sensitivity and increased recognition of personal wellness:

> Apart from the fluff, balloons, there was something deeper in giving out the cards, books and pamphlets that might have touched someone, made them aware that there was something that they wanted to talk about. (P01)

The random encounters and incidental conversations were fruitful for increasing visibility and growing understanding of "the hard truths" (P01) revealed by students' sharing their personal predicaments or about their friends who had mental health problems.

Beyond upsides such as awareness and access, outreach event organisation was described as "the most stressful event that peer helpers can go through" (P006). The last minute changes and

the academic workload increased in tandem adding to the stress felt and the perception that the executive committee might be inward looking with "too much focused on bonding when they could be reaching out to more helpees" (P02).

Hence, the key benefits of peer helping activities in SMU were internal bonding, increased awareness of peer support and sharing knowledge, competency-based learning and best practices through a community of practice. However, a balance between spending an extensive amount of time on outreach vs peer helping was advised.

## Innovative approaches to peer helping learning

**10. Marrying academic learning with social assistance:** When sharing examples of exciting approaches to peer helping learning, the responses correlated 'module' with 'academic', 'role play' and 'Friday session' in descending order. The co-occurrences were evident of the positive and long-term impact of the Peer Mentoring & Facilitation academic course, offered by the university from 2012 to 2015 and completed by the majority of the respondents:

> The most impactful moments were during the academic module where there was a lot of role play … I don't know if it is possible to revert to the academic module under General Education because I would say it shaped me. It was probably the most important thing that led me to become a peer helper. Having an actual module where we go through a structured 13-week class and incorporating all the important models e.g. Egan's model, into a curriculum and be evaluated, I would say, was the most important thing that started me on the peer helping journey. (P08)

The course began as a six-week half-credit non-examinable pass/fail elective and progressed to a one-credit unit module over 12 teaching weeks. The co-instructors were a faculty member and the head of the wellness centre then. The module was a pre-requisite for those who wished to be involved in the peer helping programme and recognised for experiential learning from actual cases and role play. The instructors' familiarity with the domain knowledge and real world experiences in supporting people impressed as "you are a student and you have not had the experience before, so you learn a lot from what people had experienced before you" (P06).

**11. Exploring possibilities of learning:** The module left an indelible impression for two reasons. One, structuring it as a pass/fail module was an innovative approach for innocuous exposure to peer helping. There was little barrier to entry and low risk of failing. Therefore, it took the pressure off learning. Furthermore, the humanistic approach to psychology and the social sciences oriented contents were a welcome relief from technical modules:

> The module was a good way to open up (peer helping) to the general population. The course looked interesting and there was no harm in trying it out since I knew that I would likely pass. It was something that I could learn. It took away the monotony of finance or economics. It was completely different from business and technical modules. Even though it was a short four months of learning, I think it still made a difference. (P07)

**11.1. Learning through collaboration and shared experiences (sub-theme):** Two, instructional strategies contributed to innovative learning, in particular, scripted role play. The link between theory and practice was discernible as respondents engaged in direct application of skills through re-enactment. The facilitation of role play was powerful in re-presenting and reinforcing behaviour as the professor closed the loop with commentary and recovery. Students also chipped in to elicit "real emotions or questions that were relevant to everybody" (P08) during the discourse.

Rotational role playing allowed students to take turns being an imaginary "perpetrator/client/person in distress, a peer helper or just an observer" (P04). The pedagogy was appreciated for usefulness

and practicality with the re-creation of situations and the resultant intensification of learning considered most influential. The cruciality of the vital developmental segment was expressed to new peer helpers as "an Oscar winning segment" (P10).

Another teaching technique recounted was storytelling. The instructors' narratives captivated students with insights into "the real cases that they handled either in SMU or in their previous jobs" (P04). The teaching method allowed students to connect across cognitive and affective domains while deepening their understanding of supporting based on the foundations of respect and accountability even in times of crises.

The role play scenarios were circumstances anyone could have confronted. The facilitation offered insights into how similar real-life scenarios could be attended to. Importantly, the professional reviews and peer inputs offered discussion on competencies (strengths and weakness) while the social and communal platform encouraged peer-to-peer learning, mutual information exchange and guidance on rendering hypothetical emotional and psychological support.

**12. Delivering learning outcomes through external partners:** Lastly, external speakers were esteemed for adding novelty to the training as well as discipline-relatedness to the helping service:

> They would invite guest speakers on art therapy and hypnotherapy. It was fun because it was something new and related to counselling work. At the same time, it was something people did not get to experience often. (P03)

Collaboration between the university and external practitioners beyond the peer helping community enriched learning. The behind-the-scenes discussions provided opportunities for participants to ask and receive answers not normally found in standard texts or training curriculum. Over and above, the plenaries allowed them to review their personal interests and evaluate fit:

> I remember an engaging guest speaker from SOS. I had positive feelings about the speaker as I was interested in being a SOS volunteer and the work they were doing. I think I also found out that I wasn't a good fit or was too young and inexperienced then. (P04)

Hence, the innovative approaches to peer helping learning centred on teaching methods where participants were able to explore realistic situations by trialling different approaches in a safe environment. While adopting various roles that might have polar perspectives, the competency-based learning strategies built confidence in peer supporting and enriched understanding of diverse issues. Guest facilitators bridged learning in the classroom to field and complemented the training by university personnel.

## Main arguments for engagement in peer helping

**13. Acquisition of lifelong learning skills:** The main argument for engaging in peer helping was the emphasis on psychosocial skills and abilities that enabled the development of personal agency, to help themselves and support others in dealing with everyday challenges, including general and mental wellness. The practical peer helping skills (namely facilitation, listening and counselling) could be applied to their personal lives and active vocations and were described as "life skills that were very useful and might be needed in the future" (P05).

**13.1. Responding to sense of duty (sub-theme):** Furthermore, motivation for peer helping was attributed to an inner urge to perform a service. The respondents believed that intrinsic motivation was necessary and referred to the driving force as "a calling on the part of individuals who want to contribute to common good and community wellness" (P06).

**14. Supporting professional development:** Others saw the worth of facilitation and person-centredness from reaping better workplace and relationship outcomes. Peer helping raised sensitivity, allowing for deeper interaction through augmented communication skills:

> Facilitation is a core skill as it is a key enabler for interpersonal and workplace relationships … being able to work in a team and achieving key outcomes … awareness of how people are feeling and responding. It teaches you how to ask the right questions to get the responses you need. (P09)

The application of skills in meaningful supporting roles with positive outcomes could encourage more to become peer helpers. Inspired by personal experiences and circumstances, engaging in peer helping was also recognised as being in a state of agency that too developed and supported lifelong learning.

## Main challenges for those considering peer helping and suggested solutions

While acknowledging the benefits and application of psychosocial skills, several challenges centred on:

- innate 'personality' and being able to adopt a flexible 'approach' (P01, P03 & P07);
- disposition to 'learn' and having an 'open mind' (P02, P04, P06 & P10);
- being 'aware' of what peer helping entailed (P02 & P11);
- prioritising 'time' and 'commitment' (P03, P05, P06, P08, P09 & P11); and
- understanding 'mental health' (P02, P04, P06, P09 & P11)

The respondents were confident the challenges could be met. They suggested key ideas for recruitment and selection, curriculum enhancement, training enhancement, expectation management and extending peer helping to the workplace.

**15. Recruitment for desired personality traits:** To address the first three aforementioned challenges, a proposal was for potential candidates to first know themselves before attempting to understand others. Another recommendation to ensure the right qualities for peer helping was by "testing for the right skills sets through personality tests" (P01). Thirdly, taster sessions were encouraged for candidates to top up pre-existing knowledge. The orientation sessions, where the skinny of actual cases could be experienced, could show how role play and reframing skills were applied and how different types of mental health problems were being handled (P02, P10 & P11).

**16. Curriculum enhancement through certification:** To generate buy-in, respondents advocated certification (P01, P02, P09 & P11) that could incentivise more to join peer helping that enhance the CV with transferable skills:

> Outsource for a certification programme to help peer helpers be formally certified. (P02)

> At the end of programme, become a certified coach or counsellor. The skill sets can be put in the CV. Maybe that might motivate more to be part of the programme in a professional capacity, rather than a student group. (P01)

In addition, certification could address the challenges of 'time' and 'commitment'. Previously, the academic module "was always fully subscribed" (P08) as completion contributed to graduation requirements. It was described as a "funnel" that provided a constant supply of potential peer helpers aiding recruitment even without outreach events (P08). As a CCA now, fence-sitters delayed commitment as they were spoiled for choice from a slew of diverse activities. The

proposed certification could overcome procrastination and offer equivalent advantages of the academic module.

Without certification, the usefulness of listing peer helping in the CV for a competitive advantage during job interviews was questioned candidly:

> It gave me the chance to talk about the things I have learnt. I am not sure of the relevance to employability or the skill sets that employers are looking for. I don't know if it is a plus point in the corporate world or if it will advantage me. (P012)

Others focused on peer helping having some bearing on employment in services and less on commerce (P01, P03, P06 & P11). The uncertainty of peer helping having a direct impact on recruitment or industry preparedness was expressed:

> Whether it helped me get a job, I am not sure as there could be many different factors. But, I was definitely not those star basketballers or swimmers, so peer helping played a part may be. (P07)

Peer helping as a CCA and its influence on hiring depended on "whether the potential employer valued skills such as active listening or mediation, which in HR would be more helpful" (P03). However, contrasting peer helping as a CCA vs attestation, the credentials might be a game-changer for "if it was formal certification, it would be different" (P02).

**17. Appropriate and purposeful deployment:** With regard to prioritising 'time' and 'commitment', two challenges were observed. Firstly, from anecdotal evidence, students regretted joining the CCA when they could not manage their peer helping commitments with academics. Secondly, outreach event planning was singled out as most time-consuming as there was no principled process. During a semester, there could be four hours of training and duty weekly and another four hours set aside for outreach totalling eight hours per week:

> Two thirds (of time) will be involved in outreach. We cannot anticipate how much time we need to put in and there is no structure to the planning process because it varies from team to team. (P05)

**17.1. Expectation management (sub-theme):** A solution to address the time spent on outreach was to manage expectations and scale the event down. Organising through structure, controlling for efficiency and levelling commitment for equity were suggested:

> I would think that putting structure to the outreach would help in reducing the number of hours that they have to put in and having an event template that could be replicated every year. We are sorted into different teams such as outreach, internal bonding, internal processes and community service. It would be helpful if the commitment levels of all the four teams were the same. If not, some might dread going to outreach. (P05)

**18. Extending the value of peer supporting to the workplace:** As for mental health, opinions pertained to extending peer helping in the university to the workplace. One training recommendation was to go beyond school-based scenarios, suicide prevention and mental health first aid to gambling, addiction and finance where family members and colleagues might be facing. The second was to organise a course or half day workshop on peer helping at work, for example, how to detect mental wellness issues at work where people were formal and less inclined to show their vulnerabilities. Topics such as mental health support for depression, abnormal stress behaviour, violent behaviour or violent tendencies and multiple personalities at work were suggested (P11). Another advocated training in "recovery, building resilience and supporting crises" (P07) that were portable skills useful for employability.

# Discussion

## Enabling personal and professional competencies that contribute to university life

The *appreciation* opinions expressed were positive reactions to specific helping skills acquisition and the influence of the acclaimed academic module. The chief benefit of the psychosocial skills development during peer helper training was self-growth and awareness in personal or professional capacities consistent with extant literature (Varenhorst, 1992; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Froh, 2004; Tan & Hsi, 2007; Aladağ & Tezer, 2009; Riggall, 2016; Eryilmaz, 2017; Andre, Deerin & Leykum, 2017). The quality facilitation, instructional adaptation and practical application were viewed as innovative approaches to collaborative and experiential peer helping learning. Varenhorst (1992, p. 13) had attested that "you teach by example and by providing opportunities to experience these values (of cooperation, acceptance of diversity, commitment, responsibility and service to others) in relationship to others in a context that is relevant".

Another significant impact of the module was that it kick-started many on their peer helping journey of affiliation and support. Also, the criteria for selection of peer helpers was deemed a critical success factor as openness to behavioural learning and peer assisting besides pro-social characteristics were advantageous to the university community in the near term and workplaces in the long run (Lawson, 1989; Sharp, 1998; Tan & Hsi, 2005) .

Besides, the positive effects of peer helping activities (outreach events, weekly training sessions and retreats) were internal bonding and proliferating mental wellness among the student population. The basis for engaging in peer helping was the supportive life skills learnt that developed deeper self-awareness, leading to doing more for individual and community wellbeing (Varenhorst, 1992; Egan, 2006; Tan & Hsi, 2007)

## Expanding organisational capacities to enhance curriculum, training and employability

The *judgement* opinions concentrated on human capacity development to augment the peer helping programme. At the organisational level, suggestions to enhance curriculum and training include external partnerships, certification and internationalisation. Inviting supplementary external trainers and introducing varied and current topics add diversity and depth to peer helping education. While the introduction to the various forms of therapy by visiting affiliates were interesting, mediation was discovered to be particularly helpful for its extended application during employment (P03 & P05). Hence, peer helping knowledge, skills and competencies that could see through careers would be dually beneficial. The request for certification is supported by previous research that unveiled a motivation for being an age-based peer helper was an aspiration for a related helping career (Racz & Lacko, 2008) even though self-oriented and social support reasons might be primary. If the process of certification is not justifiable for organisational reasons, then recognition of prior learning leading to some form of affiliation, articulation or accreditation may bridge the gap. Another advocation was for an online course to complement the existing curriculum that could lead to certification or a part of (P11). Next, connecting with peer helping communities not just locally but overseas to extend reach and promote exchange across geography was a recommendation for sharing practice and acquiring new learning in multicultural contexts (P04).

There is general acknowledgement of the existence of informal helping relationships online and physically in organisations. At the programme level, this presents an opportunity for the university to develop skills and expertise in online detection and peer helping in the age of new media. The trigger for a respondent was recognising patterns in "the written language and symbols" online that led to "a start of a conversation by text first and seeking an opportunity to meet face to face in

school to check out on him/her" (P10). Another looked out for "expression of negative thoughts on social media (Facebook and Instagram) … and colour scheme" and used private messaging to inquire after and continued with the interaction offline eventually (P05). Respondents felt that being taught how to support peers online was useful as social media was a common avenue people used to express their distress. In addition, the curriculum could be expanded to include relevant behavioural strategies to resolve stress, tension, conflicts while promoting emotional health at the workplace (Burke, Weir & Duncan, 1976).

Other opinions concentrated on how peer helping skills training in SMU could be enriched in terms of future readiness and "how they can use the skills when facing career crises" (P02). Adopting relevant training material from career services, understanding models of engagement under exceptional situations at work and leveraging on the employability experiences of alumni peer helpers as mentors and facilitators were notions to relate peer helping to industry preparedness effectively.

On the ground, a proposal on improving the university peer support system included disclosure on the specialism and theoretical orientation of each university counsellor so that peer helpers could consult the counsellor most helpful to their cases (P08). This is consistent with university personnel contributing to establishing an ethos of caring (Naylor & Cowie, 1999) and cultivating a nurturing culture for peer helping to thrive (Tan & Hsi, 2005).

# Conclusion

While the benefits to peer helpers and helpees are favourable and well-studied, the link between peer helping training to graduate well-being is less distinct and the correlation to employability less clear. Hence, the extension of supporting skills training to future readiness and workplace peer helping are recommended for curriculum enhancement. The significance of this study is that it adds to the scarce research on peer helping in Asia and contributes to qualitative work on the subject viewed through the experiences of alumni peer helpers.

# Acknowledgements

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# About the authors

**Angela Koh** is a Co-curriculum Developer in the Office of Dean of Students, Singapore Management University.

**Michelle Cheong** is Professor of Information Systems (Education), Singapore Management University – School of Information Systems, and Associate Dean of Postgraduate Professional Education