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**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT
MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORK
PROGRAM EVALUATION**

“I felt like they were ready to help”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an evaluation of the International Student Mental Health Peer Work Program, an initiative developed by Orygen with support from Study Melbourne. The program aims to address the critical mental health needs of international students within tertiary education by employing international student peer workers with lived experience of mental health challenges. This evaluation assesses the program's impact, feasibility, and potential for broader implementation based on feedback from peer workers, institutional staff, and international students accessing the service. The evaluation findings for service users showed that the program:

Enhanced accessibility and cultural safety:

The program serves as a culturally safe entry point for international students, effectively reducing barriers to traditional mental health services by employing peer workers who share similar backgrounds.

Is adaptable and acceptable: The program flexibly meets students' evolving needs throughout the semester, with peer workers addressing a broad range of issues. Students found the program useful and would recommend it to others.

Improved mental health literacy and sense of belonging: Students noted that peer workers boosted their mental health literacy and sense of belonging, with most becoming more likely to seek help and recommend help to others after engagement.

Key strengths of the Orygen model include:

Effective training and supervision: Peer workers and institutional staff reported that the Orygen training and supervision effectively prepared students for their role, particularly in combination with institutional training and support.

Personal and professional growth for peer workers: The peer workers reported developing new knowledge, skills, and capacities while finding their roles highly rewarding.

Filling service provision gap: The program's lived experience and peer aspects filled key gaps in services, better engaging international students while enhancing the impact of the information provided.

Despite these successes, the program faced challenges that offer opportunities for improvement:

1. **Enhancing awareness and engagement:** There is a need for increased awareness of the program among potential users and stakeholders. Developing clear, targeted marketing and communication strategies may improve understanding and engagement with the program, addressing one of the critical barriers to its success.
2. **Fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing:** Establishing networks for sharing best practices and experiences among peer workers across institutions and Orygen may facilitate improvements in service provision and enhance the overall quality of peer support.

In conclusion, the International Student Mental Health Peer Work Program is an effective resource for enhancing mental health outcomes among international students. It addresses critical gaps in service provision and offers a scalable model for culturally adapted mental health support within higher education. Ongoing refinement and more proactive engagement strategies are recommended to help fully realise its potential and ensure its long-term effectiveness.



INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the critical issue of mental health among international students within tertiary education environments, exploring the transformative potential of international student mental health peer work to tackle this issue. With high rates of mental ill-health, low rates of help-seeking, and limited accessible and culturally appropriate or safe services available, many international students are isolated in their mental health struggles. Left untreated, poor mental health can negatively impact educational experiences and attainment, and in severe cases, has been implicated in international student suicides. These outcomes not only affect the students personally but can have wide reaching negative consequences for students' communities and the broader education sector. To address this problem, novel and culturally appropriate interventions are needed to support better mental health outcomes for international students.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Concerns about the mental wellbeing of students in higher education are increasing, with significant numbers of students reporting distress. The majority of people attending higher education are also at the age when they are most susceptible to developing mental health issues, with 75 per cent of mental health and substance use disorders first emerging before the age of 24.(1) Higher education institutions provide tertiary education programs leading to an academic degree award. Over a quarter (25.6 per cent in 2021) of higher education students in Australia are international,(2) and they contribute significantly to Australia's economy (more than \$26 billion in 2022).(3) Evidence suggests that mental health problems are common amongst international students in Australia, with approximately 15 per cent experiencing depression, 24 per cent experiencing anxiety, and 18 per cent experiencing poor wellbeing at any one time. (4) While research around suicidal thoughts

and behaviours for international students in Australia is limited, internationally, the evidence suggests suicidal thoughts and behaviours are also common. Indeed, a recent systematic review found that 5-18 per cent of international students had suicidal thoughts, and 1.2-2.2 per cent attempted suicide in the past year.(5)

A variety of risk factors for poor mental health in international students have been identified. Among the most significant and commonly reported challenges are acculturation difficulties, struggles with the English language, experiences of perceived discrimination, feelings of loneliness, and academic pressures. Individual-level factors can also play a significant role(6). For instance, ineffective or problematic coping strategies, pre-existing, and comorbid mental health diagnoses, and unrealistic or unattainable expectations around academic performance can also negatively impact international students' mental health. Complicating matters, this group often have poor mental health literacy (7), which can limit symptom recognition or awareness that a mental health issue may be occurring.

HELP-SEEKING AMONGST INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Despite the high rates of mental health disorders in higher education students, only around 25 per cent of students with a disorder receive treatment.(8) Concerningly, international students tend to have more negative attitudes towards help-seeking in general and lower intentions to seek help.(7) These attitudes result in lower service utilisation rates, with an Australian study revealing that only 17 per cent of international students had accessed a mental health service, compared to 55 per cent of domestic students.(9)

Common barriers to help-seeking in international students include poor symptom recognition, thinking their problem is not severe enough, and not being aware of the available treatment services.(10) High levels of stigmatising

attitudes toward mental illness and fear of negative perceptions from friends, family, or the community can also hinder help-seeking. (11) Furthermore, practical concerns such as cost, lack of time, potential visa loss, academic repercussions and long wait times can reduce service engagement. (11) Similarly, concerns around language barriers, misunderstanding, and potential embarrassment can reduce willingness to seek help. (10) Lastly, international students also report a preference for informal support. (12)

Even when international students do engage, they are more likely to drop out of treatment than domestic students. (13) This may be because traditional Western mental health treatment approaches are unfamiliar and, in some cases, not culturally adapted to international student needs. In combination, the evidence shows that international students underutilise existing mental health supports and services for a variety of reasons and that alternative approaches may be required to better address growing mental health issues within this cohort.

MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORK

Mental health peer work has a long history in informal settings and is increasingly recognised within the global mental health service provision landscape. Peer support involves assistance offered by and for individuals with shared conditions, problems, or experiences. (14) Mental health peer support focuses specifically on those who have their own experiences with mental health challenges, trained to offer support to others facing similar issues. (11) These peer support workers collaborate with professional mental health practitioners to deliver a comprehensive suite of services. Peer support can take different forms, such as one-to-one peer mentoring, peer-led support groups, and peer learning. (15)

There is promising, albeit early, evidence of the efficacy of peer support programs. These initiatives demonstrate beneficial results for

individuals facing mental health difficulties across diverse groups, including those in university settings. (14) For instance, such programs have been shown to reduce loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress in young people (16–18). Beyond delivering vital assistance to those seeking help, these programs also confer significant advantages to the peer support workers involved. Working in a peer support role can foster personal development, encourage positive changes in behaviours, and bolster self-esteem. (19)

A crucial advantage of mental health peer work that is particularly relevant to international students is that such programs may be viewed as more acceptable than traditional mental health services. (11) This may increase students' willingness to seek support and engage with such services. Specifically, peer support offered by fellow international students may have less stigma attached compared to traditional mental health services while also increasing students' sense that they will be understood through their shared experiences and, in some cases, cultural backgrounds. Peer support can act as an informal bridge to professional help, simplifying referrals. It also allows students to initially seek assistance for non-mental health issues, gradually fostering openness to discussing mental wellbeing as trust develops. This approach leverages peer support's informal nature and social benefits, creating a comfortable environment for international students to address and manage their mental health concerns.

Despite the promising advantages, incorporating peer support programs into mental health strategies for international students is still in its early stages. Introducing peer support programs tailored for international students could improve mental health outcomes by offering culturally sensitive support that acknowledges and addresses their specific needs. Nonetheless, further research is essential to ascertain if these potential benefits are realised in practice.

ORYGEN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORK PROGRAM

The International Student Mental Health Peer Work was developed by Orygen with support from Study Melbourne in 2021 and 2022. Through the program, international students with lived experience of mental ill health are employed by education providers and trained by Orygen to support international students with their mental health challenges and provide an experiential perspective to navigating mental health and wellbeing services within the education provider and the community. The program was first piloted in 2021, with 94 per cent of participants reporting that they were very satisfied with the service.

The International Student Mental Health Peer Work program was designed to address the need for Student Mental Health and Wellbeing teams to engage with international students who have historically underutilised these services. The program aims to reduce the barriers for students to receiving support by providing a relatable, culturally responsive, and accessible means of exploring their experiences with mental ill-health. The service is designed to be less daunting than traditional mental health supports, which are often perceived as culturally incongruent or not adapted to international student experiences.

International student mental health peer workers employed in student wellbeing teams as part of this program are trained and receive supervision from Orygen. The peer work training package was developed in collaboration with peer workers, education providers, education provider staff members, and international students. This training is delivered over two days (14 hours) and focuses on culturally responsive peer support that recognises how a person's culture may influence their understanding of mental health and wellbeing. Peer workers receive formal supervision from Orygen two-four times per month.

International Student Mental Health Peer Workers provide one-on-one peer support and run informative group sessions exploring mental health, wellbeing, and inclusion within the community. The sessions are confidential and can be one-off or ongoing; and the embedding of these roles within student support and wellbeing teams means that students can be supported to seek additional support if required. The peer workers also organise social meet ups to encourage students to create their own peer networks within the campus and in their communities.

For this evaluation, the program was delivered by two peer workers at RMIT and one at Melbourne Polytechnic from July 2023 to March 2024.



AIMS AND METHOD

AIMS AND SCOPE

The primary aim of this evaluation was to understand the impact of the peer work program on help-seeking, mental health, and wellbeing of international students.

A secondary aim was to assess the implementation of the program training, supervision, and support to evaluate the feasibility of a larger-scale program rollout.

The evaluation was broken into three components focused on key program stakeholders. The first addresses experiences and outcomes for international students accessing the services, the second captures the peer worker experiences, and the third assesses education institution staff perspectives on the program. The combined findings provide a comprehensive summary of the program's impact, outcomes, and feasibility.

MEASURES

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

International students accessing the mental health peer workers were offered the opportunity to complete a brief online survey (see Appendix A for the full survey) assessing their satisfaction with the program along with changes in mental health literacy and sense of belonging and being valued. Participants also had an opportunity to provide written responses to questions regarding what they found most and least helpful about the service and any other feedback they had. At the end, a space was included for participants to indicate interest in completing an interview in the surveys. If a participant indicated an interest in completing an interview, they were contacted via email and followed up a maximum of three times. The interview questions (see Appendix B) assessed participants' motivations for accessing the peer worker and explored whether the service met their expectations, changed their perspectives

on mental health or help-seeking, impacted their mental health or wellbeing, or influenced their willingness to discuss mental health. Participants who completed the survey were entered into a draw to win one of three \$50 vouchers, and interview participants were provided \$30 for their participation.

MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORKER INTERVIEWS

As there were only a total of three international student peer workers in the current program iteration, and an additional three previous peer workers, only qualitative data could be collected. The interview questions (see Appendix C) were based on the Kirkpatrick Model of Training, a widely used evaluation framework for evaluating training and identifies the following outcomes: reaction, learning, impact and results.(20)

INSTITUTIONAL STAFF INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with institutional staff involved in the peer work program. The interview questions (see Appendix D) explored staff perceptions of the program, including challenges, benefits, and opportunities for improvement. Questions also addressed their perceptions of the program's feasibility both at scale and long term.

ANALYTIC METHODS

Quantitative data for this report were analysed in SPSS 29 where descriptive statistics and group comparisons via t-tests were conducted. Open survey question responses were included as examples to illustrate key findings, and no formal analytic method was used due to the small number of responses. The interview data from students, peer workers, and institutional staff were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The thematic analysis took a dual deductive/ inductive approach, including existing codes from the Kirkpatrick model where applicable while also allowing new codes and themes to be developed based on participants' responses.

PARTICIPANTS

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ACCESSING PEER WORKERS

International students accessing individual or group sessions provided by the peer workers were offered the survey at the end of each session they attended. At RMIT, more than 470 students attended group sessions, 67 attended the individual sessions, and 34 surveys were completed (3.2 per cent of group session attendees and 26.9 per cent of individual session attendees). At Melbourne Polytechnic, 74 students attended the group sessions, 23 attended the individual sessions, and 14 surveys were completed (9.5 per cent of group session attendees and 30.4 per cent of individual session attendees), providing 47 survey respondents, representing 7.4 per cent of individuals accessing the services. Participants were aged 18 to 37

years ($M = 25.00$, $SD = 4.52$), and the gender of participants was 66 per cent female, 31.9 per cent male, with 2.1 per cent preferring not to report their gender. Participants were from a variety of countries, primarily in Asia, such as India (25.6 per cent) China (14.9 per cent), Sri Lanka (10.6 per cent), Philippines (8.5 per cent), Vietnam (8.5 per cent), and Bangladesh (4.3 per cent). The majority of participants had lived in Australia for less than a year (70.2 per cent), with the remaining living in Australia for one-two years (14.9 per cent), three-five years (8.5 per cent) and more than five years (6.4 per cent). There was an even split between individual (53.2 per cent) and group (46.8 per cent) session participants who completed the survey. Independent sample t-tests showed no significant differences in the outcome variables by session type (two side p-value less than .05 per cent), and therefore, results were aggregated for all survey responses.

Thirteen survey participants indicated an interest in completing an interview, but of these, only two responded to the follow-up invitations and completed an interview.

PEER WORKERS

All three current peer workers completed interviews about the program. Two past peer workers also completed interviews to provide a broader overview of peer worker experiences.

INSTITUTIONAL STAFF

Three institutional staff members completed interviews about the program. Two directly managed the peer work program, and another oversaw the institution's larger suite of wellbeing programs.



RESULTS

The results are broken into two main sections. The first addresses the impact of the program on international students accessing the services. The second section covers the feasibility of the program, exploring institutional staff and peer worker perspectives on the Orygen training, supervision, and support, as well as overall impact and implementation of the program.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORK PROGRAM IMPACT

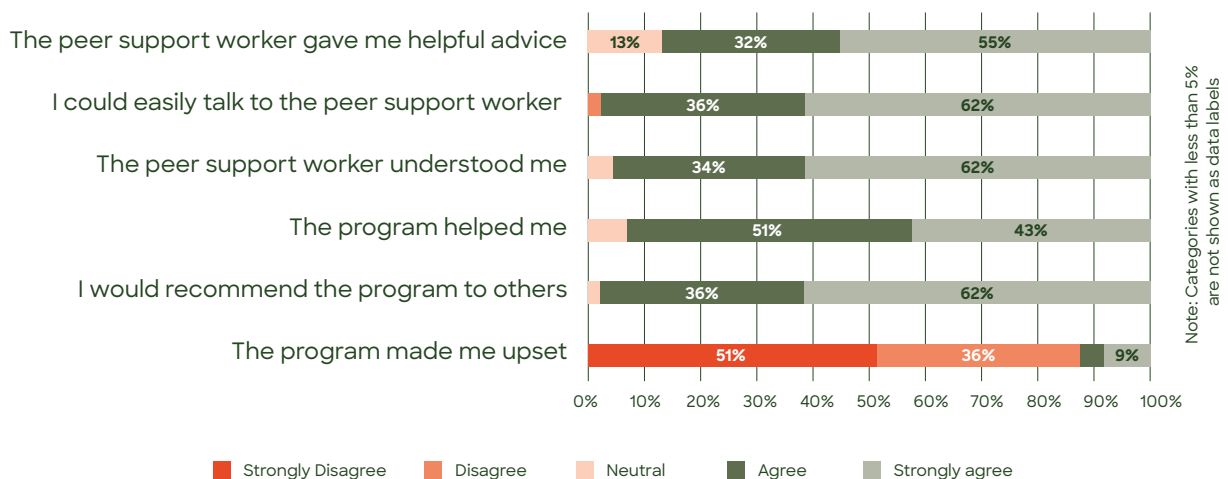
PROGRAM ACCEPTABILITY AND IMPACT ON SERVICE USERS

The primary results for international students accessing the mental health peer work program are drawn from the survey results. Where applicable, quotes from the open-ended survey questions and the interviews are included to expand and contextualise the quantitative data.

PROGRAM SATISFACTION AND ACCEPTABILITY

Program satisfaction is an important marker of a service's quality and acceptability. The main quantitative findings are shown in Figure 1 below. Most international students accessing the peer workers were satisfied with the program (55 per cent very satisfied, 38 per cent satisfied). In line with this, most students felt that the peer workers provided helpful advice (87 per cent strongly agree/agree), were easy to talk to (98 per cent strongly agree/agree) and understood them (96 per cent strongly agree/agree). Similarly, the majority of students said the program helped them (94 per cent strongly agree/agree) and that they would recommend the program to others (98 per cent strongly agree/agree). Most students also did not find the program upsetting (87 per cent strongly disagree/disagree that it was upsetting). In response to the open question of what students found most helpful, students reported that they appreciated "being understood" (female, 37 years, from Uganda) and interacting with "friendly peers with useful advice" (female, 26 years, from China).

FIGURE 1. PROGRAM SATISFACTION & ACCEPTABILITY RESULTS



In the interviews, students described the peer workers as approachable and easy to talk to. As one student said, “[the peer worker] is so approachable and [they] would initiate, little talk or small talk. So you would feel comfortable speaking and talking.” - Student 2

They also appreciated that the peer workers were students before and felt understood because of that. “I’m sure with that [the peer worker] was a student before. So I think that’s also a great connection ‘cause [they] know where we are coming from and knows the struggle and all that.” - Student 2

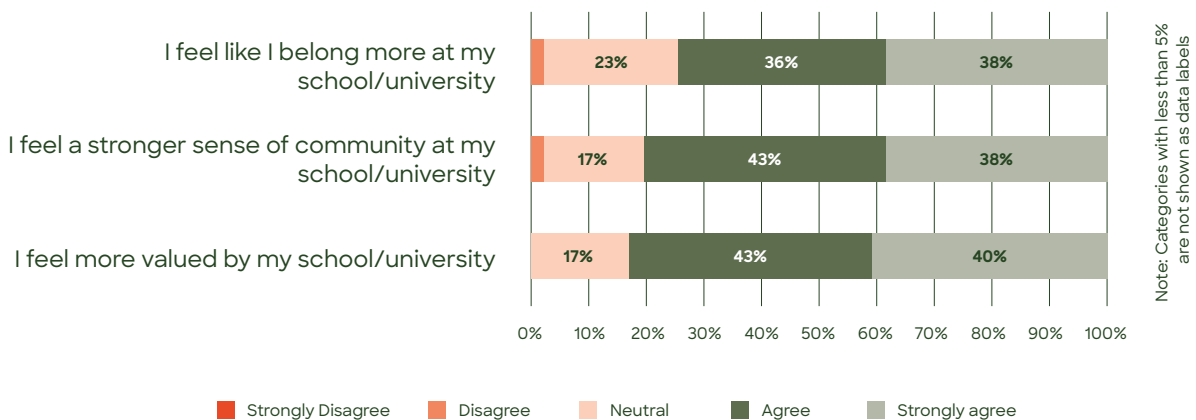
Students felt that the peer workers were available and ready to help when they engaged with them. This contributed to a sense of satisfaction. One student said, “In the whole conversation, I felt like they were ready to help me ... so that was very good of them. I felt good overall.” - Student 1

Combined, the results suggest that the international student peer work program is highly acceptable and does not produce iatrogenic effects for service users.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY, BELONGING, AND BEING VALUED

Sense of belonging is a key predictor of mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, high campus connectedness has been shown to buffer the relationship between stress and suicidal ideation in international students in Australia. (21) As can be seen in Figure 2 below, students accessing a peer worker reported that the services led to them feel more like they belonged (70 per cent agreed/strongly agreed), have a stronger sense of community (79 per cent agreed/strongly agreed), and feel more valued by their institution (82 per cent agreed/strongly agreed).

FIGURE 2. COMMUNITY, BELONGING, AND BEING VALUED



Participants’ responses to the open-ended questions supported this:

WHAT WAS MOST USEFUL ABOUT THE PEER WORK PROGRAM?

“The chance to connect with others” - Female, 24yrs from India.

“The availability of the team to help international students feel more integrated” - Female, 24yrs from Mexico.

“Feeling valued and receiving useful advice” - Female, 20yrs from Vietnam.

Similar sentiments were echoed in the interviews. Students who accessed the one-on-one sessions reported feeling valued through being supported and heard:

“...I really felt comfortable... They were very concerned about my queries, and they were very much ready to help. They were repeatedly asking ... if there is anything that we really need. So I told them whatever I had in my mind, and I really felt good after that.” - Student 1

Another student appreciated group events and experiences as an alternative to one-on-one sessions, noting that it facilitates new connections and opportunities to socialise, which can have a positive impact on wellbeing in a more casual environment:

“Like I said, you don’t know what we are going through. Even though we don’t book a one-in-one session with you guys. Maybe we’re shy. Maybe other people are shy... but it’s because you guys are doing that we are able to express ourselves in a way not like in a one-on-one session, but in a way that we can actually socialise with other people. And that’s a big deal. Like mentally, even if it’s not like this one-on-one session... it’s really a big thing.” - Student 2

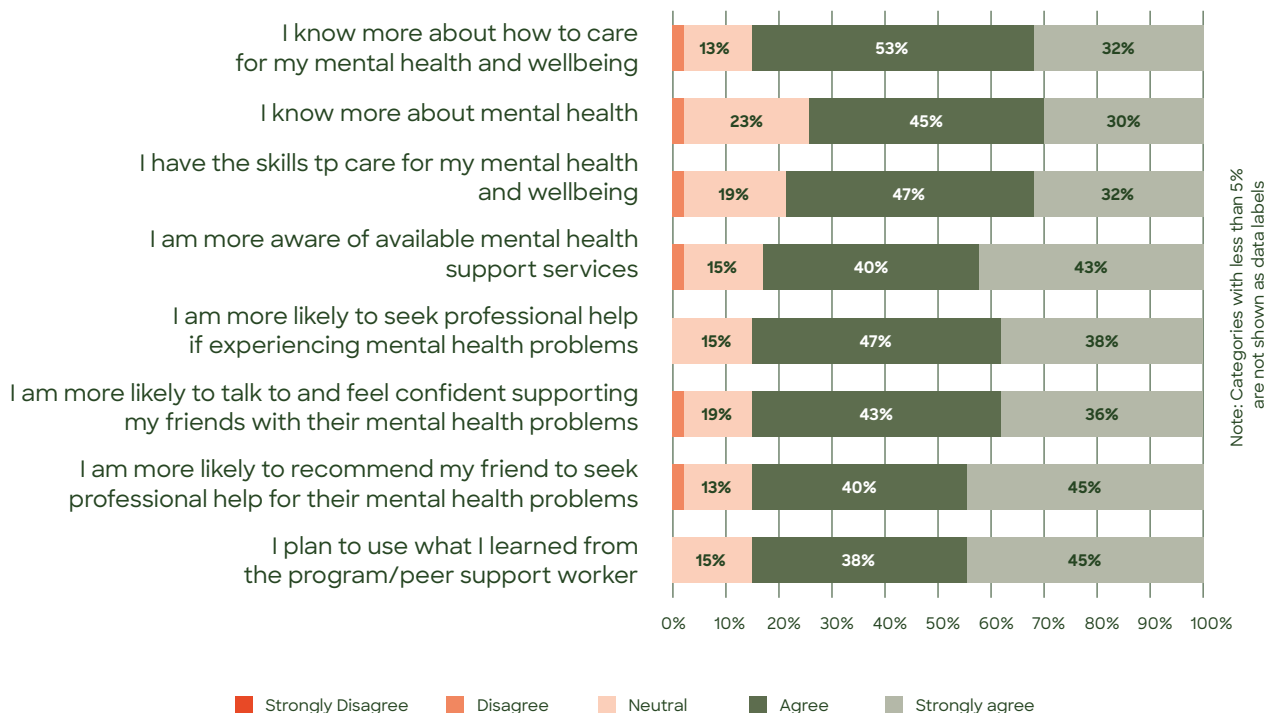
In combination, the findings suggest that most international students who access the peer work service feel an increased sense of community, belonging, and value at their institution.

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

Mental health literacy represents the “knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention”. (22) Practically, this can include recognising symptoms and disorders, knowing how and

when to seek help, and how to help others (23). As shown in Figure 3, most participants reported that as a result of the peer work program, they had the skills to care for their mental health and wellbeing (75 per cent strongly agree/agree), knew more about how to care for their mental health and wellbeing (85 per cent strongly agree/agree), knew more about mental health (73 per cent strongly agree/agree), and planned to use what they had learned from the peer worker (84 per cent). Similarly, most students said they were more likely to seek professional help if experiencing mental health problems (84 per cent strongly agree/agree) and were more aware of available mental health support services (82 per cent strongly agree/agree) after accessing the mental health peer work program. Finally, students were also more likely to talk to their friends about mental health (77 per cent strongly agree/agree) and recommend their friends seek professional help for their mental health problems (84 per cent strongly agree/agree) after meeting with the international student peer workers. Students appreciated this service aspect, as illustrated by students saying they found the “friendship and mental health advice” (male, 34yrs, from Ethiopia) most useful. The students also reported that they intended to use these new skills (82 per cent strongly agree/agree).

FIGURE 3. MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY RESULTS



These outcomes were highlighted by one participant's reflection on the value of the program:

"I think the awareness of such a programme existing is one of the best ways, like even if few of the students who are not comfortable, they would definitely approach their friends in their first place. So if their friends would have known such a programme existed, they would recommend them, and you know, that one push would help them." - *Student 1*

As this shows, the positive experiences of engaging with the program combined with a preference for informal help-seeking appear to make the lived experience peer work particularly well suited to the support needs of international students.

Bringing these findings together, students reported that the program increased their mental health literacy by improving their capacity to manage their own mental health and wellbeing, knowledge of where to seek help when needed, and ability to support others in seeking help.



INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORK PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

This section presents the evaluation findings related to the implementation and feasibility of the peer work program, as informed by interviews with institutional staff and peer workers. We examine the training, support, and supervision provided by Orygen and the participating institutions, identifying key strengths and areas for improvement. This analysis highlights already effective practices and outlines recommendations for future implementation efforts. Additionally, we discuss the program benefits as experienced by peer workers and institutions, providing a more comprehensive view of its impact.

TRAINING, SUPPORT, SUPERVISION, AND DEVELOPMENT

The training, support, and supervision provided by Orygen and the educational institutions play central and complementary roles in equipping international student peer workers for their duties and responsibilities.

The Orygen training program provides a broad overview of peer work for international students, introducing them to key topics, including:

- Safe disclosure of lived experience to their peers,
- Strategic storytelling,
- Building safe peer relationships for both themselves and their peers,
- Self-care and boundary setting in the workplace and their peer relationships,
- Confidentiality and duty of care, and
- Effective use of supervision.

The institutional training addressed the role of peer workers within the larger service, including referral pathways and additional support services, along with general systems and processes necessary for undertaking their roles. Similarly, the ongoing supervision from Orygen provides peer workers with a second point of support to help them with issues as they arise as part of their roles. The links and complementary nature of the support was highlighted by one of the institutional staff:

"At the start, we had training for the peer workers through Rafi and the Orygen team, but also internally with the teams we have here. In addition, we set up a contact point, a key contact person from our counselling team so that our peer workers had someone they could go to if they had specific questions or if anything came up." - *Institutional staff 1*

Considering the complementary nature of the training and ongoing support, we reported on the integrated process while highlighting relevant contributions from different organisations.

BENEFITS OF THE ORYGEN PEER WORK MODEL

Our findings highlight several key aspects of Orygen's training and support that peer workers and institutional staff found effective and beneficial.

- **Structured training program:** Peer workers valued the structured approach, starting with initial training followed by ongoing supervision, ensuring comprehensive guidance throughout their involvement.
- **Clarity and preparation:** The initial training was crucial for clarifying the role of peer workers and setting expectations, enhancing their understanding and confidence in supporting students.
- **Skill development:** The program focused on developing essential skills like active listening and empathy, which improved peer workers' ability to engage with students meaningfully.
- **Mental health literacy:** Training equipped peer workers with knowledge about various mental health issues, support services, and ways to assist students, fostering informed and empathetic support.
- **Ongoing support and feedback:** Continuous support and regular feedback sessions helped peer workers enhance their skills, gain confidence, and effectively navigate challenges and boundaries with students.

INITIAL TRAINING

Participants reported that the initial training they received from Orygen was helpful and effective and prepared them for their role: "The training was great, I mean, it's been very, very helpful... Five out of five" - Peer worker 5.

In line with the goals of the Orygen training, peer workers expressed satisfaction with the clarity provided by their initial training, which facilitated personal growth and skill development. This training enhanced their confidence and taught them how to navigate boundaries when interacting with students, leading to a deeper understanding of their role.

"It helped me understand more in depth what a peer worker is and understand my boundaries on what I can do with students, where I have to stop, and what I can share with students."
- Peer worker 2

They also felt that the training improved key skills relevant to their roles, such as listening and empathy, enabling them to better connect with and support students. One peer worker (1) shared, "I learned to be more empathic ... And apart from that, also listening better."

Similarly, it prepared peer workers by introducing them types of issues students might present, equipping them with strategies to effectively support individuals facing various challenges. Additionally, peer workers learned about the importance of prioritising self-care and mental health, recognising that their own wellbeing is essential for effectively helping others.

"I think both the training from Orygen and RMIT helped me understand that in this peer worker role, my mental health is also very important and if I'm not feeling OK, I can't help other people. So that was very important." - Peer worker 2

The training helped expanded peer workers mental health literacy. The peer workers reported that learning about the supports and services available for international students was helpful for the students they supported and themselves:

"I also learned more about the supports and services that's available within the university and outside the university as well. So which can be helpful not for just the students, but for me as well. In case need those supports."
- Peer worker 1

ONGOING SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION

After the initial training, all peer workers received ongoing support and supervision from Orygen and their institutions, and this was again complementary. The support played a vital role in peer workers' development:

"Everything we had that we didn't know, which was very often in the beginning, we would bring into supervision and would be like, what do we do with this?" - Peer worker 4

The support not only built the peer workers' confidence but also facilitated their work, with the peer workers acknowledging the supportive environment fostered by their managers and Orygen:

"I think the program has been pretty good, especially with [manager name] as the manager. She has been really supportive in terms of us implementing our ideas in the program."
- Peer worker 1

Peer workers found daily support from their manager beneficial for gradually clarifying role expectations. One peer worker mentioned, "I think it was also about getting advice on what should be done from my manager."

Conversely, ongoing support from Orygen primarily focused on areas of improvement and sharing personal experiences related to the role. Another peer worker emphasized, "The support that I got made me more confident... the constant feedback... helped me understand this role more." Similarly, another student said:

"I get to share problems that I was experiencing or the challenges that I was experiencing on a weekly basis or fortnightly basis, whatever the things that I was experiencing at that time. And he was a very good soundboard and mentor in that space." - Peer worker, 5

The support was also crucial for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of peer workers. Built-in support systems within the institution, such as access to counselling services and welfare teams, provided additional resources and assistance when needed beyond that provided by the Orygen supervision.

"Obviously, if there was anything serious that needed to be escalated. I was always there to assist with that, so there wasn't ever really a case where there was something significant that the peer workers felt like they weren't supported in being able to handle." - Institutional staff 1

Similar to the training, while the feedback on the provided support was overwhelmingly positive, a small number of opportunities for improvement were identified:

LEARNING ON THE JOB AND THE BROADER BENEFITS FOR PEER WORKERS

While the training and support provided the essential knowledge and skills needed to begin as a peer worker, substantial learning and development also occurred on the job. For instance, peer workers initially reported nervousness in their roles but grew more confident as they developed their skills through service provision. Similarly, they gained more nuanced perspectives on help-seeking behaviours, particularly realising that international students often need time to understand that seeking help is acceptable.

"Like I think back in our country mental health is something, "Ohh it's something bad". We don't wanna seek that help, but obviously coming into Australia's open minded and something very spoken about, so it's sometimes takes time for students to understand that it's OK to seek help and yeah, I understand that." - Peer worker 2

Peer workers valued the opportunity to meet new people, finding the sessions as enriching for themselves as they were for the students they assisted. They appreciated hearing diverse experiences, which broadened their own perspectives and deepened their understanding of different life situations.

"...benefits of peer work is I get to meet new people. I get to listen to different experiences of different people and I think that makes me very grateful as a person as well because sometimes when I hear it, see all the people going through a lot... I'm like, ohh so okay, a lot of people also going through problems. It's not just me." - Peer worker 2

The experience also helped peer workers develop new insights into culture and cultural diversity, benefiting them personally as well as professionally.

"I was looking at the difference in how people were raised from one culture to another, and I thought it was very interesting to compare the two and then give me a perspective that benefited myself... I think those one-to-one sessions were pretty impactful on me as well." - Peer worker 3



More generally, the peer workers expressed fulfilment and joy in providing friendly emotional support to students and sharing their lived experiences:

"I feel like this one thing that anybody who becomes a peer worker, I think it's a very rewarding space, thing to do to come and help people. That's something that I really enjoyed."
- Peer worker 1

Overall, working as a peer worker proved highly rewarding for international students with lived experience, as it helped them build new skills and competencies, increased their confidence, and provided valuable professional life experiences that were rewarding and valued.

THE ROLE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE PEER WORK AT INSTITUTIONS

The lived experience program was found to play a key role within the broader set of wellbeing service services offered to international students. Specifically, the program acts as a culturally safe entry point, facilitating access to services, breaking down power barriers, and enhancing engagement. Institutional staff have noted the significant positive impact of peer workers on student engagement, attributed to their unique perspectives as international students with lived experiences. Staff emphasized the invaluable support that peer workers provide, offering a relatable connection and serving as a source of guidance for fellow students facing similar challenges.

"It had a really positive impact... I think they really appreciate having that added layer of support and particularly when it does come from a fellow student who's kind of been through similar things. I think it's... a good opportunity for them to be able to feel like they're not alone in this journey and to also, get a little bit of advice and tips from... students who've been through it themselves before. It's had a really positive impact on students' level of engagement with the university." - Institutional staff 1

"I guess it makes the whole relationship a bit more like a homely little community of, you know, international students and the institute... To some extent, it does break a bit of that help-seeking behaviour in that... they could ask [peer worker] and myself certain questions."
- Institutional staff 2

Peer workers help balance power dynamics and foster flexible avenues for student-staff interaction. They often serve as the initial informal point of contact for students and offer a familiar face and a sense of belonging, especially for those who may feel isolated in a new environment. Staff members highlighted the significance of peer workers' roles in addressing the initial stages of adjustment for international students. They serve as a trusted resource, particularly during the transitional phase when students feel overwhelmed or uncertain.

"If you think about it for international students, particularly those students who've just recently arrived... there are so many different support services and lots of things available for international students. ... but I think because a lot of it is led by staff and they're not peers necessarily ... I think having at least one safe person you know is also a peer and someone you can trust. I think it does help." - Institutional staff 1

"I think it allows the students to identify with the person and I think it breaks down certain barriers." - Institutional staff 2

They also acknowledged the unique impact of peer workers in delivering information and supporting students. They note that students often prefer seeking assistance from their peers, as it offers a more approachable and relatable experience compared to traditional staff-student interactions.

"I think a lot of students, because of sometimes the stigma of counselling, would rather get in touch with [the peer worker]."
- Institutional staff 2

"I think it always helps. I could say the same information to students, but it hits differently because it's coming from a staff member or someone who's not a student."
- Institutional staff 1

This is especially true if students want to address sensitive or challenging issues.

"I think having that peer that that was good in filling that gap in terms of I think for some students you know they might not feel comfortable speaking to a staff member ... maybe it is about things that are a bit sensitive like you know they've been failing a lot."
- Institutional staff 1

Peer workers can also advocate for international students, bridging the gaps in access to resources and services. They play an important role in connecting students with the necessary support systems and assisting in navigating complex issues, such as working and housing rights.

"I think something really helpful with the peer support role is when students have issues with, say, a landlord, or want to seek legal advice, and they need someone to tag along and accompany them to give them a bit of moral support or interpreting. They could get our peer support worker along. Whereas that's not possible with our counsellors." - *Institutional staff 2*

In addition to practical support, peer workers enhanced the student community's social connections through organised activities and events. This often served as a bridge to future help-seeking.

"Some students came along to speed friending and had a lot of fun, but then reached out to [peer worker] for an appointment." - *Institutional staff 3*

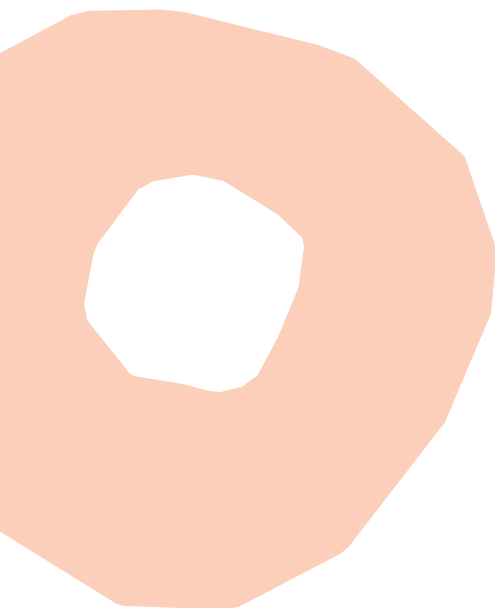
Overall, the institutional staff suggested that the lived experience peer work program can enhance the wellbeing of international students by offering a culturally sensitive, accessible and adapted services and supports. These addressed key issues for students. Through the program, peer workers not only improved student engagement and balanced institutional dynamics but also provided a crucial sense of community and belonging for students in transition.

PROGRAM FEASIBILITY

This section evaluates the feasibility, sustainability, effectiveness, and scalability of the lived experience peer work program. It draws on feedback from peer workers, institutional staff, and students to highlight the program's strengths and identify areas for improvement.

WHAT WORKS WELL?

1. **Comprehensive training and support:** The training, support, and supervision mechanisms equip peer workers with the necessary skills and tools for their roles. Programs provided by Orygen and the institution ensure peer workers are well-prepared for various scenarios. The supervision process allows for significant skill development and learning, complemented by institutional support services such as counselling and wellbeing teams.
2. **Flexible service delivery:** The program adopts a flexible approach that meets students' needs effectively. Peer workers enhance accessibility and engagement through group social events, which have proven more effective than one-on-one sessions in fostering connections and introducing help-seeking behaviours.
3. **Directly benefits students:** The program improves international students' sense of belonging and mental health literacy, addressing crucial aspects of student wellbeing within educational settings.
4. **Professional development for peer workers:** Peer workers gain valuable knowledge and skills, finding their roles both rewarding and satisfying. This development is valuable both within the role and for future professional opportunities.
5. **Filling institutional gaps:** The program successfully addresses gaps in service provision for international students by creating culturally safe support pathways, thereby improving help-seeking behaviours among this group.
6. **Cost-effectiveness:** The employment of peer workers is more economical compared to many other mental health support roles, allowing them to provide essential first-line support at a reduced cost.



WHAT WORKS LESS WELL?

1. **Limited awareness and engagement:** Challenges include raising awareness about the program and the nature of peer work, with persistent issues across stakeholder groups leading to lower than desired engagement and in some cases, no-shows for individual sessions.
2. **Inter-program engagement:** There is limited interaction between new and past peer workers and between different peer work programs at Orygen, hindering knowledge transfer and institutional engagement.
3. **Supervision structure:** Some peer workers feel the supervision process lacks structure, limiting the potential benefits of these sessions.
4. **Role clarity issues:** The diversity in roles and responsibilities sometimes leads to unclear definitions, affecting how services are communicated and delivered. Peer workers also felt that the terminology used to describe peer workers, such as "Wellbeing Peer Worker", can be confusing for students as it implied a counselling service rather than peer support. Clearer terminology could enhance understanding and accessibility.
5. **Financial and employment constraints:** Limited financial resourcing for the peer work program reduces the number of hours peer workers can work and the services they can provide. Similarly, visa-related restrictions can limit the number of allowable work hours and contract durations for peer workers.



OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PEER WORK

1. **Enhanced promotion and communication:** Develop clear, targeted marketing strategies for both students and university staff that define peer work, highlight its benefits, and promote engagement.
2. **Cross-institutional collaboration:** Facilitate knowledge sharing and best practices across institutions to enhance service provision and engagement.
3. **Training enhancements:** Integrate real-world experiences of former peer workers into training sessions to boost new workers' confidence and facilitate cross-institutional learning.
4. **Structured supervision and support:** Implement structured supervision sessions with clear goals to maximise learning and support for peer workers and establish networks to foster collaboration and support among peer workers across different institutions.

FEASIBILITY SUMMARY

The evaluation indicates that the international student peer work program is feasible and has the potential for sustainable scaling with identified opportunities for refinement and process streamlining. The comprehensive training and supervision from Orygen lay a solid foundation for peer workers. Enhancements in the integration into the broader Orygen peer work ecosystem could further improve outcomes. The peer work service is cost-effective and addresses the unique needs of international students, positively impacting peer workers and service users while also being flexible to fulfil diverse institutional requirements. However, this also comes with challenges in defining and maintaining clear roles and boundaries. A greater focus on this may be necessary in future program iterations. Engagement issues are also a major hurdle to the program. Clear marketing and engagement strategies are required to maximise potential impact, and cross-institutional communication may facilitate the development of more effective strategies and service provision.

CONCLUSION

The International Student Lived Experience Peer Work Program plays a pivotal role in the provision of mental health and support services for international students, bridging significant gaps in current service offerings. This program serves as a culturally safe entry point for international students seeking help, making it an acceptable and non-threatening first step. The similarities between peer workers and users improve the uptake of the program's messages, while the program's design fosters trust with student services and provides a gentle introduction to the help-seeking process, particularly when initially focusing on practical issues. This approach not only eases students into the system but also enhances their willingness to be referred to additional services when needed.

The approach appears to positively impact students, as the program effectively delivers useful and accessible information, significantly enhancing students' sense of belonging, value, and mental health literacy. Importantly, it addresses risk factors associated with suicidality, such as feelings of disconnection and low mental health literacy, which are particularly prevalent among international students.

The flexibility of the program is particularly helpful. It can be adapted to the dynamic needs of international students throughout the academic semester, addressing everything from initial adjustments and social isolation to

academic stress and mental health concerns. This adaptability ensures that the program remains relevant and responsive to the evolving contexts of students' lives.

The Orygen model, with its independent training and supervision, complements institutional support well, reinforcing the program's efficacy. However, several challenges impede its full potential. These include funding and resource constraints, issues around defining the role and communicating about the service, and generally low engagement with the program, potentially resulting from stigma or a lack of awareness about mental health issues.

Looking forward, there are opportunities to enhance the program's impact. More thorough integration of international student peer work within Orygen's broader lived experience and peer work ecosystem could enhance consistency and extend its reach. Improving the language used to describe and promote the program could also boost engagement rates. Further, sharing insights and strategies through a collaborative network of institutions could amplify benefits across the sector. By tackling these challenges, the International Student Lived Experience Peer Work Program is well-positioned to further enhance the already very positive program outcomes for international students, making a meaningful difference in their academic and personal lives.

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APPENDIX A:

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PEER WORKER PROGRAM EVALUATION FORM

How many times have you engaged in the peer work program (e.g., 1, 2 etc)?

Type of session attended today (e.g., individual, group, etc.):

Age:

Gender:

Home country:

Time in Australia:

1. Please answer the following questions about the International Student Mental Health Peer Worker Program by choosing the best option for you:

See back of form for definitions of these terms →	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would recommend the program to others					
The program helped me					
The program made me upset					
I could easily talk to the peer support worker					
The peer support worker understood me					
The peer support worker gave me helpful advice					
I plan to use what I learned from the program/peer support worker					

2. As a result of the Mental Health Peer Worker Program...

See back of form for definitions of these terms →	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know more about mental health					
I know more about how to care for my mental health and wellbeing					
I have the skills to care for my mental health and wellbeing					
I am more aware of available mental health support services					
I am more likely to seek professional help if experiencing mental health problems					

Table continued on next page

See back of form for definitions of these terms →	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am more likely to talk to my friends about their mental health					
I am more likely to recommend my friends seek professional help for their mental health problems					
I feel like I belong more at my school/university					
I feel a stronger sense of a community at my school/university					
I feel more valued by my school/university					
What did you find most useful about the program?					
What did you find least useful in the program?					
Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the program or your experience?					
If you are willing to do an interview about the program, please provide your email address:					

KEY TERMS DEFINITIONS

Mental Health: Mental health is how we think and feel. It is about our emotions, our thoughts, and how we deal with problems. Good mental health helps us enjoy life, cope with stress, and connect with others.

Help-seeking: Help-seeking means asking for assistance or support when you have a problem or feel bad. Professional help seeking means reaching out to trained individuals, like doctors, psychologists, counsellors, or social workers, when you have a problem or feel bad.

Strongly Disagree: You think the statement is completely false for you. You're very sure it doesn't describe you at all.

Disagree: You think the statement is not really true for you, but you're not very sure. You can see why it might be true for others, but it doesn't apply to you.

Neutral: You don't know if the statement is true or false for you. This might be because you need to think more about it or because you feel it's somewhat true and somewhat false for you.

Agree: You think the statement is mostly true for you, but there might be small parts you're unsure about. In general, it describes you quite well.

Strongly Agree: You fully believe the statement is true for you. You have no doubts it perfectly describes you.

APPENDIX B:

PEER WORK EVALUATION INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

General introduction to interview:

My name is [interviewer name] and I am a researcher from [university name]. For this research we are evaluating students' experiences of the international student peer work program. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your experience. It's important to note that there is no right or wrong answer to my questions. What will be the most helpful for me is if you can tell your stories with as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing with me. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in an hour or less and I will take handwritten notes to remind me of important ideas.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What motivated you to come to the Peer Worker program/event?
 - Were there things that made you hesitant to come?
 - What did you expect from the program before you came?
 2. Did the program meet your expectations?
 - If yes, how so, if not, why not?
 3. How many times have you seen the peer worker?
 - What type of sessions did you attend (e.g., one on one, group based)?
 4. What type of support did you receive from the peer work program?
 - e.g., practical, study, emotional, advocacy, engagement, or another type of support
 5. What did you enjoy most about the program?
 6. What did you enjoy least about the program?
 7. Do you feel that the peer support worker's approach was adapted to your needs?
 - E.g., cultural, language, etc.
 8. Did you use other support services in addition to the peer support worker?
 - If yes, did you use these services based on the peer worker's recommendation?
 9. What impact did the program have on your mental health and wellbeing?
 10. Did the program change your views of mental health or help seeking for mental health concerns?
 - If yes, how so, if not, why not?
 11. Did the program change your willingness to discuss mental health with your friends or suggest they seek help?
 - If yes, how so, if not, why not?
 12. In your opinion, how did the peer work program impact the relationships between peer workers, international students, and others involved in the program? How did these relationships influence the impact of the program?
 13. If you had to describe the program in a few words, what would they be?
 14. Do you have any suggestions for ways the program could be improved?
 15. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the peer support program before we finish up?
 16. What was the most important thing that you shared with me today?
 17. Would you be happy to send me information about the findings that you can check to see whether it matches what we have discussed today?
-

APPENDIX C:

PEER WORK EVALUATION INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PEER WORKERS

General introduction to interview:

My name is [interviewer name] and I am a researcher from [university name]. For this research we are evaluating peer workers experiences of the international student peer work program. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your experience. It's important to note that there is no right or wrong answer to my questions. What will be the most helpful for me is if you can tell your stories with as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing with me. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in an hour or less and I will take handwritten notes to remind me of important ideas.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What motivated you to become a peer worker? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there things that made you hesitant to take on the role? • What did you expect from the program before you came? 2. How satisfied were you with the training/support you received? 3. What elements of the training/support worked well? What could have been improved? 4. What were your biggest learnings from the training and support provided by Orygen and your institution? 5. Do you think the training and support you received were applicable and covered the key skills you needed to perform your role effectively? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up prompts regarding relationships with peers and institutional staff and issues such as boundary setting/non-judgemental attitude, role clarity, and co-production. 6. Did the training, support, and broader experience of being a peer worker meet your expectations? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why/why not? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Did your behaviour change after the training? How so? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For instance, did you change the way you discussed mental health with your peers or the regularity you referred your peers to potential support services? Without the training you received, do you think you would have behaved in the same way when providing support? 8. Have your skills or behaviour changed throughout the program? 9. How do you view your own identity as a peer worker, and how does this impact your ability to provide support to international students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up regarding whether training supported identity transition to role. 10. What were the key types of support that you provided to international students accessing the program? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up prompts to explore key potential support types including engagement, emotional support, navigating and planning, advocacy, research or educational roles. 11. Which activities or supports that you provided had the greatest impact for international students? |
|--|---|

Appendix C continued on next page

-
12. Do you think the peer work model is acceptable to international students seeking support?
 13. How could the peer work program be improved from the perspective of a peer worker?
 14. How could the peer work program be improved from the perspective of the international students who accessed your support?
 15. In your opinion, how did the peer work program impact the relationships between peer workers, international students, and others involved in the program? How did these relationships influence the impact of the program?
 16. What do you think the greatest benefits of being a peer worker are?
 17. What are the biggest challenges of being a peer worker?
 18. Do you think the model is feasible as an ongoing program?
 19. What barriers might stop this program continuing effectively?
 - Role clarity,
 20. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the peer support program before we finish up?
 21. What was the most important thing that you shared with me today?
 22. Would you be happy to send me information about the findings that you can check to see whether it matches what we have discussed today?

Follow up prompts for topics not covered:

- **Emotions:** How do you manage your emotions when providing support to international students?
 - **Environmental context:** How does the institutional environment impact your ability to provide effective peer support?
 - **Social influences:** How do your interactions with other peer workers or institutional staff impact your work as a peer worker?
 - **Behavioural regulation:** How do you maintain boundaries as a peer worker?
-

APPENDIX D:

PEER WORK EVALUATION INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INSTITUTIONAL STAFF

General introduction to interview: My name is [focus group facilitators name] and I am a researcher from [university name]. For this research we are evaluating education providers' staff perspectives of the international student peer work program. During this focus group, I will ask you questions about your experience. It's important to note that there is no right or wrong answer to my questions. What will be the most helpful for me is if you can tell your stories with as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing with the group. I will guide you all through the focus group so that we finish it all in an hour or less and I will take handwritten notes to remind me of important ideas. **Do you have any questions before we get started?**

1. How has the peer work program impacted international students at your institution?
 2. What worked well in the peer work program?
 3. What did not work well in the peer work program?
 4. What gaps do you think the peer work programs fills in international student support?
 5. What were the key types of support that were provided to international students accessing the program?
 - Follow up prompts to explore key potential support types including engagement, emotional support , navigating and planning, advocacy, research or educational roles.
 6. Were there particular students who did not engage in the program from your perspective?
 - If so, who?
 7. What are the barriers and facilitators of the program?

After initial responses, cover following topics have not been discussed:

 - Environmental context: How did funding or other resources (e.g., staff availability, support for peer workers, etc.) impact the program?
 - Beliefs about capabilities: Were there any concerns about the effectiveness of the program or the capacity of the peer workers to provide adequate support to international students?
 - Social influences: Was there any issues with staff buy-in for the program at different levels of the organisation?
 - Beliefs about consequences: Were any concerns raised about potential risks, such as confidentiality or boundary issues, related to peer workers providing support and advice to international students?"
 - Emotion: Was there any concerns raised regarding working with individuals with lived experiences?
 8. In your opinion, how did the peer work program impact the relationships between peer workers, international students, and others involved in the program? How did these relationships influence the impact of the program?
 9. Did you feel that the peer workers were adequately supported by Orygen?
 10. Can you describe any safety concerns that you had during the project?
 11. Do you think it would be feasible to expand the program in its current form?
 12. If you were in charge of running the program again, what specific changes would you make based on the feedback you received, and the lessons learned from the initial implementation?
 13. Is there anything else we should know about the program or your experience?
 14. What was the most important thing that you shared with us today?
-



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