



# PEER MENTORING IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT



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## - Priority Focus and explanation of PATS variation

The focus was Quality Improvement for a Postgraduate Studies program in the School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Health. PATS was customised for casually employed staff of specialist postgraduate nursing units located away from the physical university campus. All units are taught fully online.

The Postgraduate Nursing Studies Course Coordinator organised and supported more experienced casual teachers to provide peer mentoring to less experienced teachers and also provided opportunities for professional development. Teaching staff in peer partnerships engaged in a variety of joint activities to improve their teaching and the quality of their units.

### Why

It is difficult to identify and reward good teaching for those working casually, particularly when situated remotely from any physical campus. For the Course Coordinator, it is difficult to build sustained connections between teaching staff and provide networking opportunities to reduce feelings of isolation by connecting with other academics facing similar problems or with more experienced academic staff. Also, casual academics are often overlooked in terms of access to professional development and leadership opportunities. Formal peer relationships can provide a safe context in which good teaching practices can be shared, celebrated and improved.

Peer mentoring in the virtual environment was introduced as a way to reduce high reliance on the Postgraduate Studies Course Coordinator. It also enables non-casually employed teaching academics a context in which they can meet the University's Teaching Performance Expectations, which include peer engagement activities focused on curriculum and teaching quality.

A longer term goal is to embed a shared leadership model (through establishing and supporting active mentoring relationships) that could be sustained across the years of casual employment.

### People

The people participating in peer mentoring partnerships were specialist hospital nurses (located at distance from the university's physical campuses) employed casually to teach in a fully online learning environment.



### Timeframe

Originally single semester (first trialled in 2013) and subsequently ongoing

### Scope: Unit

The scope was supporting individual teachers to improve their unit in a post-graduate specialist nursing studies course.

## - Key Outcomes

### PATS variation – outputs and outcomes

Four peer partnerships were completed in 2013 and continued into 2014. In 2015 ten teachers are involved in PATS, of which four of the ten are original partners. Two people in the group of ten have formed a partnership; the rest work as a group. Peer mentoring for quality improvement projects included enhance teaching and student feedback, a research project to review the curriculum to enhance student engagement in person centered care and generation of assessment rubrics embedded in the Learning Management System. Student survey unit evaluations showed improved student satisfaction. Professional development occurred to build opportunity for scholarship of teaching and learning.

### System level impacts

Within the University of Tasmania, this PATS variation aimed to have impact at IMPEL Levels 1, 2 and 3.

1. **Team members:** collegial culture supports professional development, meeting TPE's, engaging in peer mentoring.
2. **Immediate students:** Student experiences were improved in units using PATS. Unit evaluations showed improved student experiences.
3. **Spreading the word:** the Each activity generated interest beyond the PATS collaborations with increased expressions of interest received to participate in the course peer mentoring program 2015 and new partnerships forming. Nationally, this variation of PATS (peer mentoring in the virtual environment) was presented at University of Tasmania Teaching Matters conference and the OLT National Senior Teaching Fellowship Symposium (Dec 4, 2013).

## - Learning

### 1. Barriers and opportunities

Generating interest in a climate of limited resources proved a barrier. Changes for this PATS variation needed to address the virtual nature of peer mentoring. This included adapting peer partnership meetings and being flexible in rewarding participation. The concept of a 'reward' was a novel concept for those participating, which proved popular. The simple gesture of providing a thank you lunch for those who could physically attend a campus was much appreciated. Chocolates were sent to those who were located too far away to travel.

### 2. What worked well

Various digital technologies were used to create opportunities for teachers to connect with others and also enabled professional development to be provided. This took the form of invited speakers who shared their experiences of teaching scholarship and recognition as leaders in university teaching.

## CASE STORY

Our experience is that the student journey is usually positive as the specialist hospital nurses teaching are experts in their field and actively build strong connections to students. The use of technology to connect staff was successful and the partnerships enabled sharing and promotion of ideas. There was enthusiasm, sustained engagement and dedication to quality improvement promoted across the varied partnerships.

### 3. What didn't work well

The time factor for the Postgraduate Studies Course Coordinator was considerable in terms of coordinating a widely distributed group and needs to be taken into consideration.

### 4. What was learnt

A shared leadership model fits well with supporting quality teaching, gathering and promoting teaching excellence and providing opportunities for professional development. The peer partnerships were sustainable and also it was possible mix academics from postgraduate and undergraduate studies and also across levels of experience. Casual academics are an untapped resource for a university and their participation in PATS highlighted examples of teaching excellence and emerging leadership attributes.

### 5. National System Impact

IMPEL Level 3: Spreading the word: Contributions to knowledge in the field; growth or spread of disseminated ideas; serendipitous adoption/adaptation by people beyond the project's intended reach.

