Students Helping Students Good Practice Principles

Connect, engage, achieve

Deakin’s Students Helping Students Good Practice Principles have been developed by professional and academic Deakin staff involved in various Students Helping Students programs, and Deakin students in a variety of learning, social and practical Students Helping Students roles.

1. Learning is not just academic; it happens everywhere

Learning can involve remembering facts, understanding how to write an assignment or knowing how to solve an accounting problem. However, it is also about figuring out how to work with others to resolve issues, interpret others’ ideas, listen and really hear what is being said. In other words, we are all learning all the time, so a social learning space can be created in any circumstance, and our leadership as mentors can be exercised anywhere, anytime.

2. We help new students gain confidence to learn

University can be overwhelming for new students. No one automatically knows how to be a university student; we all had to learn—how to write, how to use CloudDeakin, how to reference, how to research, how to sit exams, how to better understand expectations. As peer mentors, students can relate to our stories about the challenges we faced and how we overcame them, and this can reassure them and build their confidence.

3. We help students build on what they bring

For new students there is so much to know and work out. How can anyone know it all? We need to work together with students to understand where they are at: What do they know? What experiences are they bringing? We can then work together to build on their knowledge to help them become better students and more independent learners.

4. What a student says may not be the only item for discussion

What is the student asking for help with? What a student needs may be different from what they are asking. One way to help the student understand more about what they need/want is to talk to them and ask questions if appropriate. We can try to get students to think more deeply about what they are after to help us recognise what help we can give them.

5. Student diversity opens up our own learning

Students have many different backgrounds and experiences. Some are from different cultures, many have a first language that is not English, others live in remote areas, some have a disability, some have not studied for years, others must work full time to survive. This is why we ask questions—the answers often surprise us, and we can learn more than we ever imagined we would from our mentor role.
6. We help students become independent learners

Our role is to help students find their own answers by engaging with them in discussions, listening carefully, asking questions and rephrasing to check meaning, while in some instances it may be appropriate to answer a question directly. We continually make decisions about the depth and style of our interactions to determine how much—or how little—engagement will help the student become a more independent learner.

7. It’s about creating and holding a social learning space

In a social learning space, the curriculum is primarily driven by the challenges of the whole group (including a pair in a one-to-one interaction) rather than by the perspective of the person who ‘knows’, like us as mentors. However, being enthusiastic and knowledgeable can sometimes make it hard to keep the focus on everyone in the group rather than on us and the topic we love. Asking questions is a great way to ensure that everyone can talk and be engaged.

8. We let students keep control of their own issues

In our role, it is important not to take on any student issues, problems or worries. We can choose language that helps students stay in control by asking questions or using uncertain language: This appears to be... This may... Is it possible that...? Have you thought about...? What if...? What I do is...

9. The students own their successes

Students are responsible for their own successes and therefore ‘own’ any successes (or failures) they make. Our role is to help them discover their challenges and work together to help them see the possibilities. It is important to stress that the shape of a session needs to be primarily driven by the challenges of the whole group (which includes us) rather than only by us as mentors, and it is each student’s responsibility to make their own decisions and to take (or not take) any action.

10. We celebrate uncertainty

Things change all the time, so yesterday’s answer may not be accurate today. Even if we are certain we know the answer, we could be wrong. This shows the importance of operating in a true social learning space, ensuring the curriculum is shaped by all those interacting rather than just by us. We work with students to help them find their answer; we do not give them ours.

11. We know when and where to refer students

Part of celebrating uncertainty involves knowing when to direct students to another source. It’s not about handballing; it’s about helping students find the appropriate person, place or materials to help them find what they need. We must stay informed about referral points, and if unsure, we can ask someone or help the student try to find out where to get the information.

12. We know our boundaries

We are students, but we are also leaders and role models, and this can create boundary issues. In our mentor role we represent Deakin, so it is important to maintain a professional demeanour. It is also important to remember we are not teachers or tutors, and sometimes students may need to be reminded of this. Nor are we the students’ friends, so an appropriate distance should be maintained.

13. We are a resource because we are students

We are role models. Who we are, how we behave and the way we do things is going to be as influential as what we say or as any advice we give. We should be aware of this and use our position responsibly and wisely. Students often seek out peers as a primary resource because they are in the same situation, so we need never hesitate to share our experiences about our own challenges and how we overcame them; this is what makes us such a valuable a resource for students.