# Peer Assisted Learning – A social justice issue for a transforming university

*'To teach is to learn twice' (Joubert, 1754-1824)*

Kgadi Mathabathe
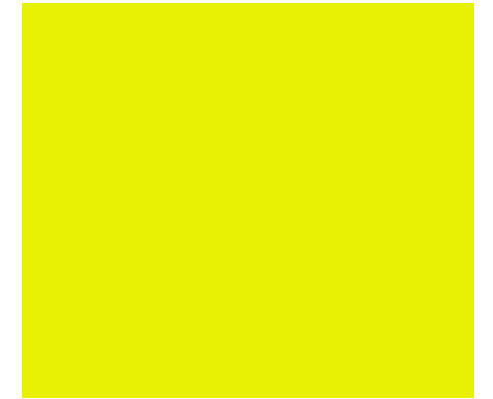Date: 26 June 2024

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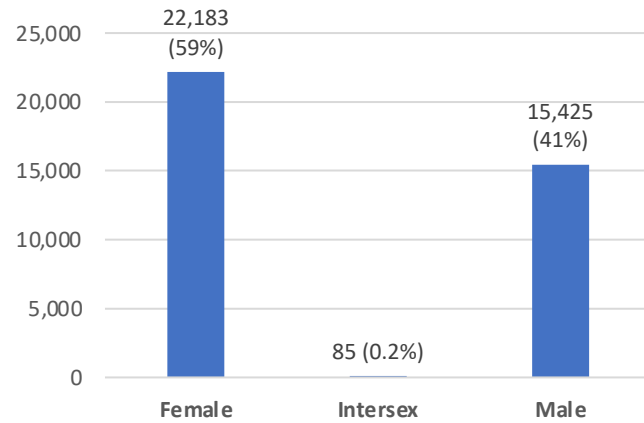
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# Student Success at UP

- UP has an **undergraduate student enrolment of 35,963** which is spread among nine faculties and the Mamelodi campus.

- Over the years the profile of the undergraduate student that enters UP has changed to include students from underrepresented groups, students from low-income households as well as first-generation students (2022 DIP data).

- The **percentage of black first-time entering undergraduate students increased from 44.8% in 2012 to 63.1% in 2021** (UP 5 year strategic plan 2022 – 2026).

- The throughput rate of first-generation students has increased across the three years: 57.25% in 2019; 68.30% in 2020 and 82.3% in 2021.
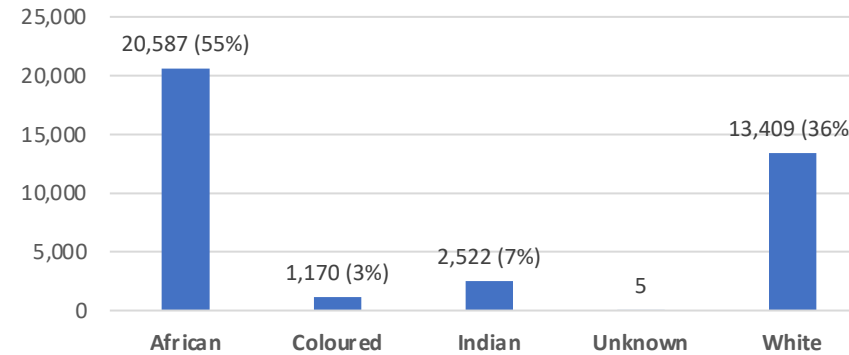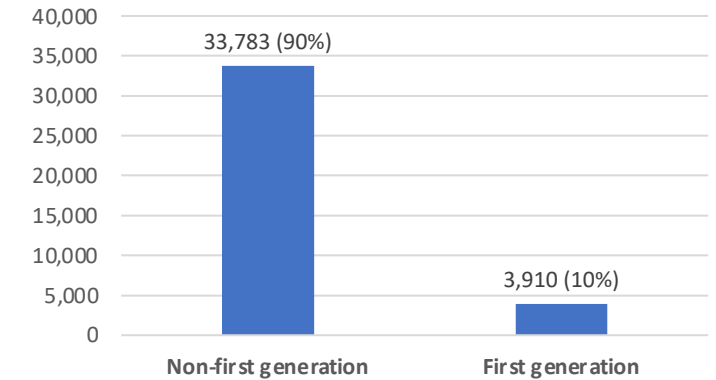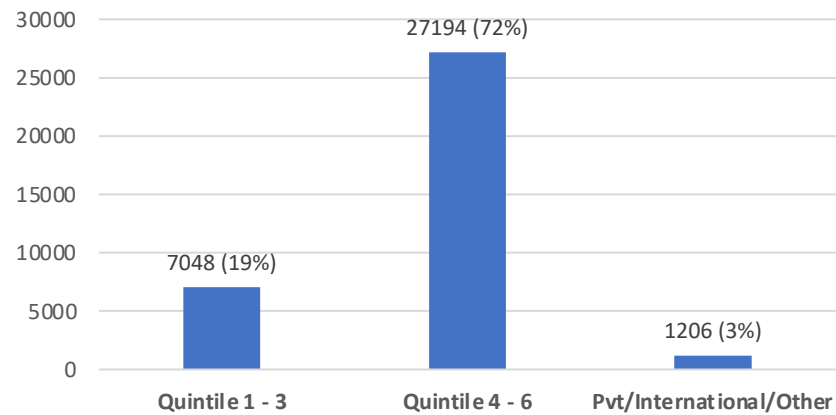
# Demographic Information



**Gender_2022 UG**
- Female: 22,183 (59%)
- Intersex: 85 (0.2%)
- Male: 15,425 (41%)

**Race**
- African: 20,587 (55%)
- Coloured: 1,170 (3%)
- Indian: 2,522 (7%)
- Unknown: 5
- White: 13,409 (36%)

**First Generation Status**
- Non-first generation: 33,783 (90%)
- First generation: 3,910 (10%)

**School Quintile**
- Quintile 1 - 3: 7048 (19%)
- Quintile 4 - 6: 27194 (72%)
- Pvt/International/Other: 1206 (3%)

**Residence Status**
- Day Students: 31,092 (82%)
- Resident Students: 6,601 (18%)
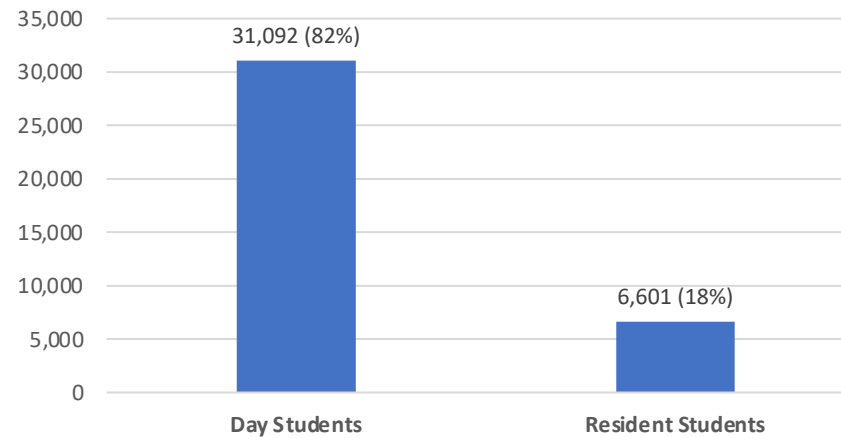
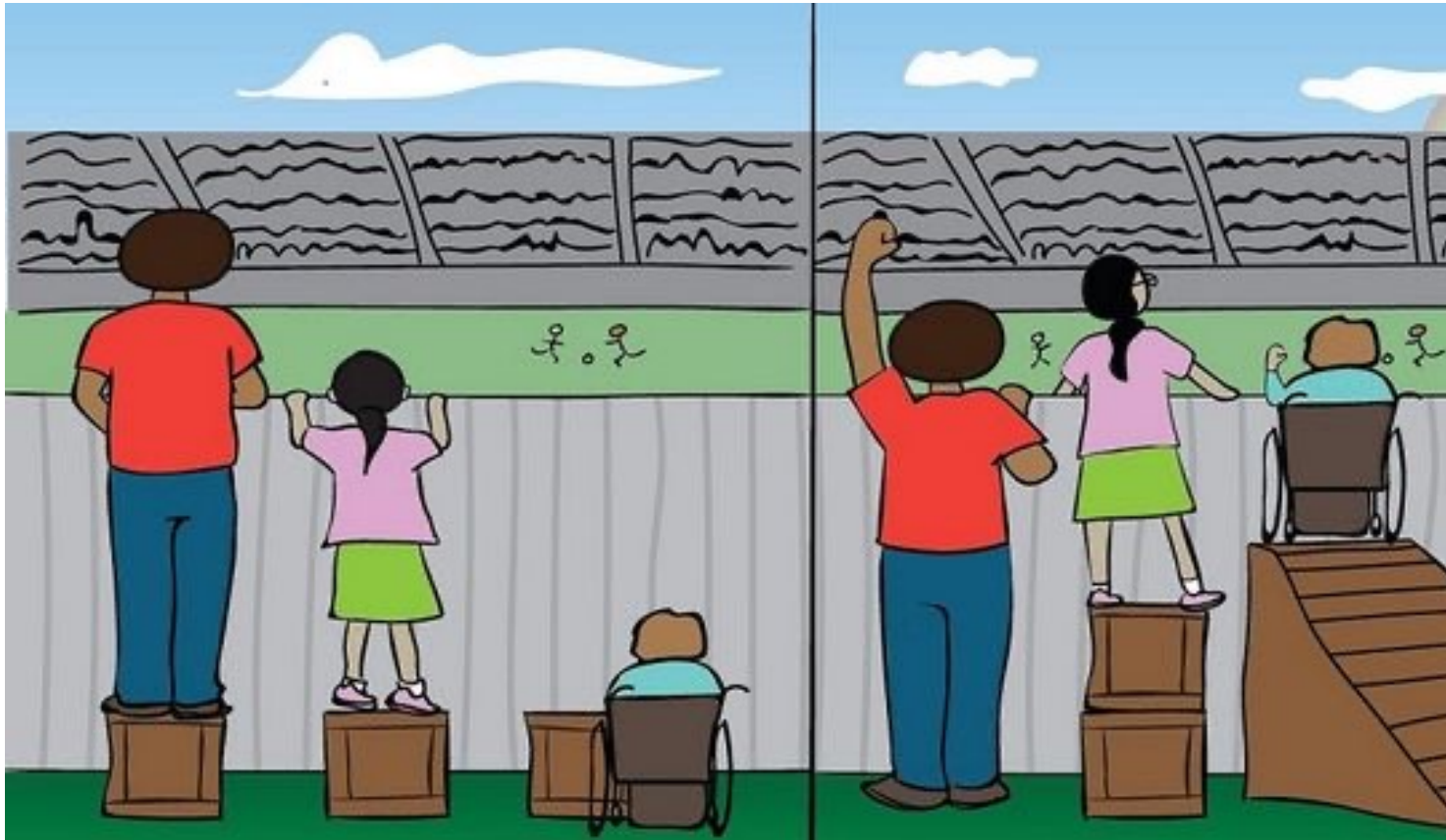**Special Needs**

1% of students have special needs

2022 DIP UG data

# Academic development



Whilst UP has made significant strides regarding student access and success, there remains challenges with the achievement gaps based on gender, race and socio-economic background (2022 – 2026 UP strategic plan).

The Department for Student Affairs is a driver of some of the strategic initiatives that the university relies on for **expanding inclusivity and equity of access and success**.

# PEER ASSISTED LEARNING

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) is an educational practice where senior or more experienced students assist incoming or less experienced students with their studies.

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) activities encompass *"People from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching"* (Topping, 1996).

**Objective:** To enhance learning through collaboration and peer support.

PAL is mutually beneficial both for student tutors and student learners

PAL supports student learners' **cognitive, psychomotor and affective development.** This results in an increase in **self-confidence, autonomy, reasoning, self-evaluation and peer collaboration.**

Student tutors also benefit from this program and are able to improve their individual knowledge, skills and attitudes, while practicing interaction and leadership competencies.

# PEER ASSISTED LEARNING

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Some studies have shown that so-called **'social and cognitive congruence'** between student tutors and student learners play an important role in PAL.

As student tutors and student learners have similar social roles, it is assumed that they are **'socially congruent'**.

This means that they share interpersonal qualities which facilitate informal and empathic communication as well as the establishment of a learning environment that encourages an open exchange of ideas and student learners' personal concerns.

# COGNITIVE CONGRUENCE

The term '**cognitive congruence**' refers to the assumption that student tutors and student learners are likely to share a similar knowledge base and similar learning experiences; they are on the same 'wavelength' (Bhat et al. 2022).

This could mean that student tutors think of explanations that are more likely to meet the student learners' needs and are therefore easier to understand.

Thus, cognitive congruence could compensate for the lack of knowledge and expertise of peer-teachers compared to more experienced teaching staff.

**Figure 2 |** Model of Communicative Leadership Congruence
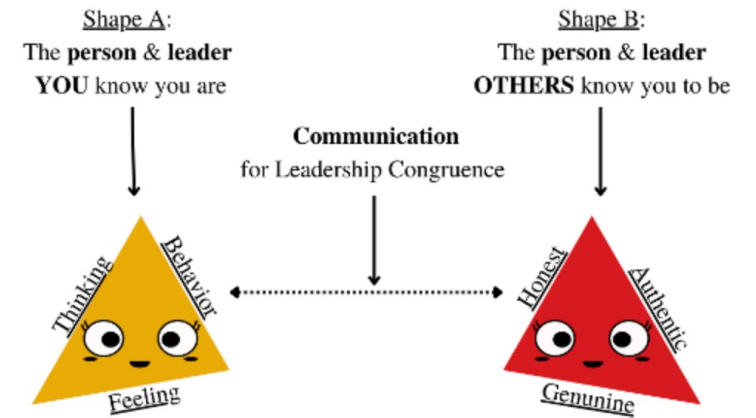
# THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Social justice in education refers to the **fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and treatment for all students.**

**Importance:** Ensures all students, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to succeed.

# THE ROLE OF PAL IN PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

**Leveling the Playing Field:** By empowering senior students to assist incoming students, PAL addresses various barriers that impede educational success.

**Targeted Support:** PAL provides additional support to those impacted by financial, personal, and systemic barriers.

# CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

The high failure rate in certain courses presents a significant challenge for many universities globally, including those in South Africa.

This qualitative study investigates peer-assisted learning (PAL) as a potential solution to this issue by examining the experiences of senior students who served as tutors in a PAL initiative.

# OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Tutors were specifically chosen based on their lived experience of overcoming academic struggles in a high-failure-rate course and successfully achieving good results.

Objective: to understand their perceptions and experiences of facilitating learning during tutorial sessions, provided valuable insights into how their personal academic journeys and teaching strategies influenced their role in helping other students.

# METHODOLOGY

**Semi-structured interview** with the tutors to capture their narratives, challenges, and reflections on their teaching practices.

The interview questions were designed to explore how their own academic struggles informed their approach to tutoring and to elicit insights into their interactions with students, as well as the perceived impact of the PAL program on the academic performance of tutees.

Data from these interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns.

# EMERGING THEMES

Improving student engagement and retention in a university course.

Implementing a new attendance tracking system for high-impact modules in a university.

Lack of support from lecturer and department for teaching module.

Improving student engagement in math modules.

Improving teaching methods for a challenging course.

Challenges in engineering modules, alignment issues, and student performance.

Improving student engagement and retention in a university setting.

Helping students overcome academic challenges through tutoring and mentorship.

# IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION IN A UNIVERSITY COURSE.

working with students to report their marks directly to the institution.

the importance of understanding the students' perspective and needs.

the importance of enhancing the training program to include innovative strategies, such as chatbots and frequently asked questions.

ways to improve study methods, communication, and feedback.

argues for locking students into a learning community to ensure throughput.

citing personal experience with understanding and applying work in subsequent modules.

# LACK OF SUPPORT FROM LECTURER AND DEPARTMENT FOR TEACHING MODULE.

Struggles with lack of support from lecturer side, leading to ineffective classes.

Lack of lecturer support and departmental support cited as major causes of issue.

Expresses concern about lack of buy-in from the lecturer, potentially impacting the module's success.

# IMPROVING TEACHING METHODS FOR A CHALLENGING COURSE

more time to spread out content throughout the semester

challenges in teaching a complex topic to students with different learning styles.

potential improvements to a university program, including tailored support for struggling students.

Students need help with alignment of high school and college modules.

Engineering students struggle with adapting to college teaching styles.

fine-tune expectations from tutors to avoid administrative burden.

# HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME ACADEMIC CHALLENGES THROUGH TUTORING AND MENTORSHIP

share experiences with academic struggles and mental health challenges.

Student's third attempt at a module passes after receiving personalized advice from mentors.

structuring the tutoring approach to make it easier for students to navigate.

proposes a flagging system to identify students who need intervention, and an app to streamline the process.

suggests providing catch-up interventions for late-registering students, including videos and chatbots.

making all sessions at 5pm to avoid conflicts with students' timetables.

Students prefer in-person tutoring for human interaction and trust-building.
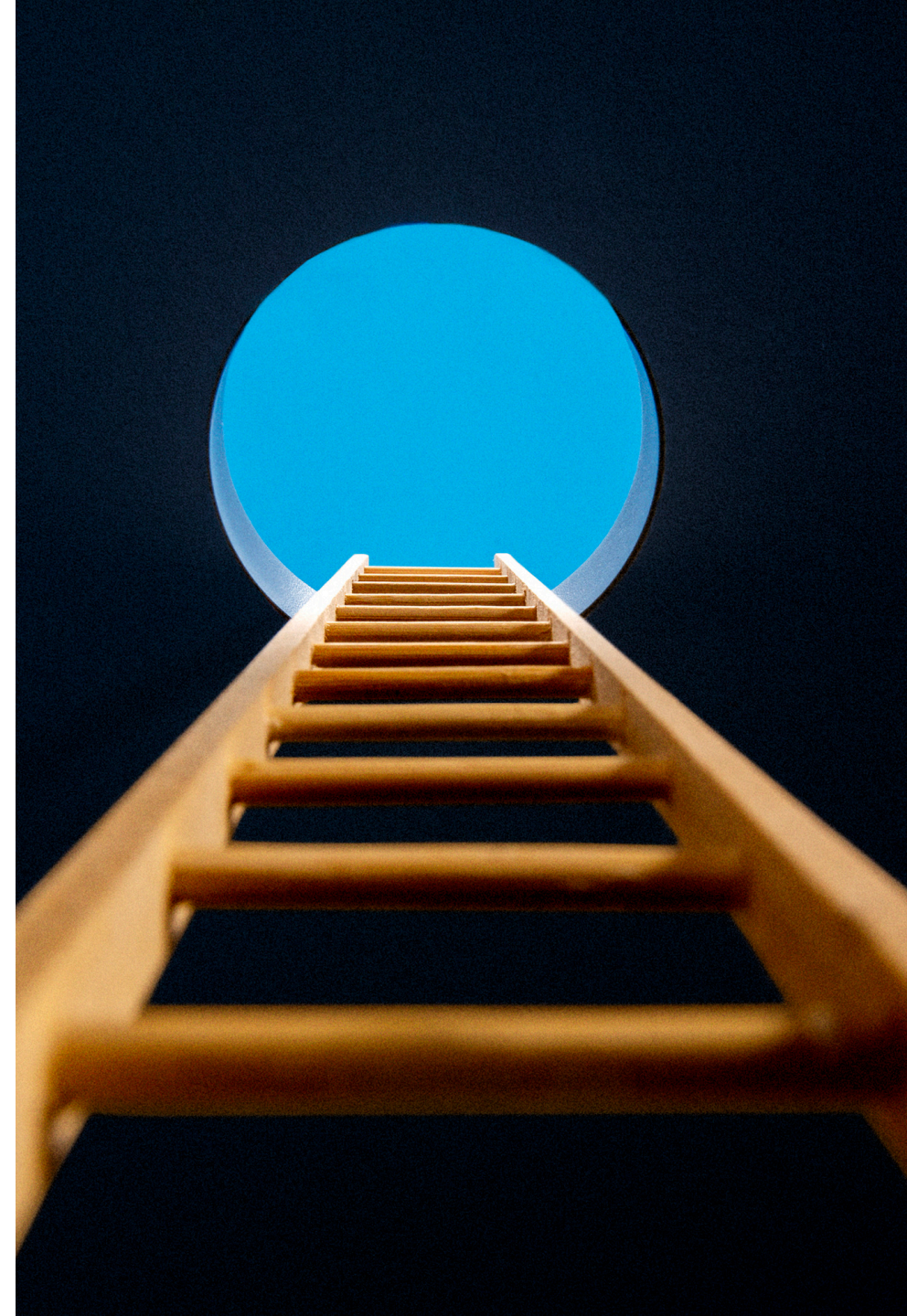
# IMPLEMENTING PAL PROGRAMS

Steps for Implementation:

- Identifying and training senior students as peer mentors.

- Establishing clear goals and structures for the program.

- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of program effectiveness.

Best Practices: Building a culture of collaboration and mutual respect between all stakeholders.

# CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Potential Challenges:

    - Ensuring consistency and quality of peer assistance.

    - Addressing potential power dynamics and ensuring inclusivity.

Strategies to Overcome: Regular training, feedback mechanisms, and fostering an inclusive environment.

The Peer tutoring program should be **a formal, student-led program, supported by administrative staff (e.g. emailing, room booking), and endorsed by faculty. Senior students (Years 3 and 4) tutor junior students (Years 1 and 2).**

# CONCLUSION

PAL is a powerful tool for promoting social justice in education by providing targeted support to students facing various barriers.

Higher Education institutions should adopt and invest in PAL programs to create a more equitable and supportive learning environment.