

# The Student Rover Mentor Program: Inclusion, satisfaction and perceived impact

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Peer mentoring has recently emerged as a key approach in Academic Language and Learning. One such peer learning strategy established at Victoria University is the Student Rover program, where Rover mentors are employed to assist other students with basic technical and study queries in the Learning Commons. The Student Rover role has been theorized variously in terms of service provision models, peer learning pedagogies, and work integrated “turn to practice” learning frameworks. However, little research has been conducted on whether the program achieves the operational aims of offering inclusion and accessibility to a diverse student population; providing satisfactory assistance to students; and positively impacting on student success, both at university and towards employment. This paper is an exploration of these questions. Using demographic and study information; service quality performance; and four broad predictors of university and employability success as respective measures of the three operational aims, the study surveyed both Rovers and the students they assisted. Findings indicate that the program succeeds in meeting each of its operational aims according to the measures used. However, this paper argues that these findings are important not merely because they show that the program meets service provision accountability measures, but precisely because it transcends them: the program reiterates theorisations of Rovers as “learningful” peer mentors who possess the potential to be “institutionally disruptive and transformative” (Tout, Pancini, & McCormack, 2014, p. 599) and to counteract the maintenance and reproduction of social inequalities at university.

**Key Words:** student rovers, mentoring, peer learning, social inclusion and accessibility, service satisfaction, perceived impact.

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) has witnessed key reconceptualisations concerning the traditional forms of support it provides to students<sup>1</sup>. In addition to instruction workshops (whether adjunct or embedded) and individual appointments, calls have been made for the adoption of peer learning approaches where students support other students in their ALL development (e.g. Van der Meer & Scott, 2008). At Victoria University (VU), one such peer learning strategy is the Student Rover program which was initiated in 2006 by ALL lecturers “as an on-campus, workplace-learning program in which mobile peer mentors

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<sup>1</sup> See Skillen et al. (1998) and Chanock (2011) for useful reviews of the development of ALL support provision.

are employed to provide ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-in-place’ learning support to other students in the university’s Learning Commons” (Tout, Pancini, & McCormack, 2014, p. 595).

Student Rovers support VU students in the Learning Commons through (McCormack & Dixon, 2007):

- assisting with basic student queries related to using and locating core facilities, information resources, software and hardware
- helping students to clarify and articulate basic issues related to their learning strategies
- directing students to options or to further information that may assist them, or referring them to relevant [...] services. (pp. 351-2)

In 2012, the program operated on five campuses with 35 Student Rovers working under the aegis of the Student Rover Program Coordinator, an ALL lecturer. The number of student enquiries handled by Rovers is extensive, reaching approximately 31,000 in 2012 (Chahal, Ramasamy, & Gupta, 2012).

Student Rovers (Rovers for short) have been subject to significant theorization which frames their role variously in terms of service provision models; peer learning pedagogies (e.g. McCormack & Dixon, 2007; Kirkwood, Best, McCormack, & Tout, 2012; Van der Meer & Scott, 2008); and work integrated “turn to practice” learning frameworks (e.g. McCormack, Pancini, & Tout, 2010; Tout et al., 2014). An early, yet still dominant, framing of the Rover role, based on traditional ideas of learning as information transmission and resource sharing, has been as “first tier service workers” (McCormack & Dixon, 2007, p. 352). According to McCormack and Dixon (2007), in this model, and similarly to “Help-Desk” or “Information Kiosk” style employees, Rovers are conceived as front-facing service workers who manage the daily enquiries of students on a routine basis with little use of expert judgement or specialised understanding. Such judgements and understandings are expected to be relegated to professional Learning Commons staff who are assumed to possess the requisite specialised skills/knowledge.

From its outset, however, this view has been challenged by ALL lecturers as espousing deficiency models and limiting student learning scope. An alternative framing of Rovers, as proposed by McCormack and Dixon (2007), therefore considers them as “student mentors for communities of learning” (p. 352). According to the authors, as mentors, Rovers are conceptualised as representing a student body of learners who understand academic systems and requirements from a student’s perspective and who are positioned as peers in a horizontal approach to the dissemination of knowledge. Their authority and credibility is based on their successful experience of the university environment *as students*. Using Dreyfus’ (1992) skill level scale, the authors argue that, unlike in first tier service models where Rovers are viewed as unskilled novices, as mentors, Rovers are recognised for their competent knowledge of institutional systems and requirements.

This view places Rovers fundamentally in a peer learning pedagogy which is influenced by constructivism and cooperative/collaborative learning theories (e.g. Kirkwood et al., 2012; Van der Meer & Scott, 2008). Rovers construct their own learning, as well as aid in the construction of the learning of others, through drawing on their own experiences and processes of learning in the university context. They interact with other students in their capacity as students and share, model, and negotiate answers to learning enquiries based on their experiences. Rovers thus both exemplify and are conduits for learning and therefore epitomise Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation and Wray and Lewis’ (1997) definition of constructivist learning, which is built on principles of metacognitive, interactive, social and situated learning processes (Pritchard, 2008).

McCormack et al. (2010) extend the above peer learning conceptualisations of the Rover role to workplace learning frameworks. The authors argue that while workplace learning is dominated by “learning to work” approaches, which focus on the skills/knowledge required by employers, the Rover program offers a “learning to learn” environment which emphasises student learning and considers workplaces as a means of producing “graduates with learning demeanours and attributes that are attuned and responsive to a flexible world of change, complexity and contingency” (p. 41). This approach frames Rovers as “learningful” workers who are not merely sub-

ject to the “logic of productivity” (p. 41) and the performance of required duties, but who are open to learning and who exercise experiential-based judgement in contingent and complex organisational contexts.

Based on theorisations of modernity as “liquid” and “contingent”, and of contemporary teaching and learning as displaying a sharp “turn to practice” (replacing previous emphases on theoretical knowledge), Tout et al. (2014) expand the above “learningful work” positioning of Rovers to socio-cultural theory perspectives, arguing that the Rover role shows inherent “liminality and indeterminacy” (p. 599) and as such possesses “institutionally disruptive and transformative potential” (p. 599). The authors propose a conceptualisation of the Rover role as a “Third Space” (p. 599). This is an inherently ambiguous occupancy, which stands at the boundaries of the staff/student interface and which forms “a precursor to an emergent, institutionally recognised, educational role of students paid to support the learning of other students” (p. 595).

While the research cited above centres around the theorisation of the Student Rover role and involves limited qualitative analysis, to the knowledge of the author, no published study complements these theoretical/qualitative investigations by providing quantitative evaluation data examining how closely Rovers achieve their theorised role or carry out the operational program aims designated by the institution. At VU, these designated institutional goals include the program:

1. being inclusive of and accessible to a diverse student population, in line with VU’s mission of “empowering students from diverse countries and cultures, socio-economic and educational backgrounds” (Victoria University Strategic Plan, 2011)
2. providing a satisfactory service to the students it aims to support, in line with the still predominant service-desk conceptualization of Rovers.
3. positively impacting not only the employability of Rovers, but also the university success of both Rovers and the students who access their help.

This study will focus on how well the Rover mentor program achieves the specified institutional goals. As such, it reports on an evaluation of the inclusion/accessibility of the program, its provision of a satisfactory service, and its perceived impact on student success, at university and towards employment, and analyses the collected data quantitatively. In the Discussion and Conclusion, the paper relates the quantitative results back to theory and provides an indication as to what extent the collected data supports the above outlined theorisations of the Rover role.

## **2. Methodology**

To investigate the above research questions, in 2012, an overall Rover Program Evaluation Scheme was devised based on the principles outlined in Kemmis (1994). The Evaluation Scheme consisted of two questionnaires which investigated Rovers (24 questions) and the students who sought their help (Students for short; 18 questions) on a variety of topics related to the program and included both closed- and open-ended questions. The results of the closed-ended questions which are relevant to the issues of inclusion, satisfaction and perceived impact are reported on here.

The current study investigates the closed-ended evaluation data quantitatively.

### **2.1. Survey design**

#### *2.1.1. Inclusion /accessibility*

VU is reputed for its culturally, socially and educationally diverse student population. It specifically caters for non-traditional students who reside in Melbourne’s West (a region which is linked with social disadvantage); who come from non-English speaking backgrounds; and who are often first-in-family to attend university. The Rover program is expected to support this student body, particularly focusing on transitioning, first year students who are unlikely to be familiar with the University, its learning culture, and its organisational systems.

This section of the evaluation scheme evaluated whether the program is inclusive of and accessible to such a culturally, socially, and educationally diverse student population; whether this is

the population of the Rovers recruited in the program or that of the Students they aid. It gathered Rover and Student demographic data (such as the status of students as international or domestic, the main language spoken at home, and the residential post code); and study related information (such as the area, course level (e.g. TAFE, Undergraduate or Postgraduate), and length of study) as indicators of such diversity.

### 2.1.2. *Student satisfaction*

This section of the evaluation scheme investigated the degree of satisfaction that Students display towards the assistance provided by the Rovers. Based on service-model conceptualizations of Rover assistance, it used two standard measures of service satisfaction: Perceived Service Quality, and Behavioral Intention. Perceived Service Quality evaluates service satisfaction based on how closely the service is perceived to meet the widely adopted service quality scale (SERVQUAL; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). SERVQUAL measures service quality based on 10 fundamental determinants. Five of these determinants relevant to Rover work (corresponding to five survey questions) were explored: Understanding (demonstrated effort to understand customer needs); Communication (clear delivery of information/instructions); Responsiveness (timeliness of assistance); Reliability (dependability on consistent performance); and Competence (the required skills and knowledge, including referral to relevant personnel). Behavioral Intention complements service satisfaction by eliciting whether the service would be used again in the future and recommended to others (two questions).

### 2.1.3. *Perceived impact*

#### *University Success Predictors*

This section of the evaluation scheme explored whether the program is perceived to impact positively on certain Rover and Student university success predictors. The notion of student success forms a vast, complex, and multi-faceted area of enquiry and the measures used to demonstrate success are equally varied with the most traditional being academic achievement and graduation (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). However, such direct measures have been superseded by more sophisticated understandings of the varying contributors to student success. In a summary review of the literature, Kuh et al. (2006) propose a framework for understanding student success as largely determined by the university experience of students, itself an umbrella term encompassing student engagement, a “meta-construct” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) shaped by certain institutional conditions (e.g. learning support provision; campus environment) and student behaviours (e.g. study habits).

Student engagement has been researched widely based on its behavioural (academic conduct/participation), emotional (attitudes/interests/values), psycho-cognitive components (motivation/investment) (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and according to socio-cultural and holistic perspectives (Kahu, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. While behavioural indicators of engagement such as those used in Kuh (2009) have dominated the literature (Zepke, 2014), emotional factors such as belonging or connectedness (e.g. Kember, Lee, & Ni, 2001; Mann, 2001; Libbey, 2004; Bryson & Hand, 2007) and student confidence or self-belief (e.g. Zepke, 2013) have been increasingly recognized as key contributors to engagement.

Student engagement and positive university experience are intimately connected with certain university success outcomes such as academic achievement and graduation. A success outcome which has received particular recognition in recent years is student retention. As the work of researchers such as Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993, 2009) demonstrates, providing students with “needed academic and social support [...] and actively involv[ing] them with other students and teachers in learning” (Tinto, 2009, p. 5) constitute key engagement and positive university experience precursors that are critical in retaining students at university.

Despite the consensus that student engagement and positive university experience are critical predictors of student success (including success outcomes such as retention), how these con-

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<sup>2</sup> See also Zepke (2013) and (2014) for detailed reviews.

structs are defined and measured and what kind of relationships are established between them is still highly contested (e.g. Libbey, 2004; Price & Nicks Baker, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Zepke, 2014). Zepke (2013) recognises this complexity, acknowledging that “it is up to teachers and institutions to interpret and shape [engagement] for specific and unique contexts” (p. 12). Given that measuring student success constitutes an area of investigation in its own right and is not the sole focus of this study, examining the impact of the Rover program on student success at great length is beyond the scope of the current investigation. The exploration of this perceived impact was therefore restricted to (i) the two broad and widely agreed upon predictors of student success as relevant to the Rover context – engagement (exemplified by the parameters of connectedness and confidence) and overall university experience; and (ii) the general university success outcome of retention, defined here as the student’s intention to continue studying at university.

Four questions thus elicited Rover and Student judgments on these University Success predictors.

### *Rover Employability*

Student engagement and university experience are not only linked with student success at university, but also with distal, beyond-university outcomes such as employment success (e.g. Kahu, 2013). As such, a key expectation of the program is that it would provide Rovers with attributes which would prepare them well for employment.

As a measure of the perceived impact of the program on Rover employability, VU Graduate Capabilities (VUGCs) were used as indicators<sup>3</sup>. VUGCs are described as the skills and knowledge which the University assures it will foster in students throughout their study thus rendering them “work, career and future ready” (Victoria University, 2012). VUGCs align closely with the employability skills identified by The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Victoria University, 2012) and include the ability to problem-solve; communicate in a variety of modes; work autonomously and collaboratively; and effectively use written, numerical and electronic information. Eight questions, each linked with one or a combination of VUGCs, were thus designed, asking Rovers to what degree they perceive working in the program has impacted on these capabilities.

## **2.2. Procedure**

Following the design of the survey questions, the questionnaires were migrated to Google Docs to provide an online platform for their dissemination. This online pilot was pre-tested by six Rovers who had graduated from the program in previous years and an ALL staff member who is external to the program. The pre-testing participants were required to complete the online survey, record the completion time, and provide feedback regarding the content and clarity of the questions used. The pre-testing feedback was analysed and discussed, and necessary revisions made accordingly.

Once finalised, the Rover Survey was disseminated to the 35 Rovers employed in the program at the time while the Student Survey was advertised to VU students through a global email inviting participation in the questionnaire via following a web link. Two token draw prizes were also promoted as an incentive for Student participation.

The online surveys were conducted during a four week period in which a total of 35 Rovers and 353 students who had used Rover assistance partook and whose responses were automatically transcribed in the Google Docs spread sheet.

Following the survey deadline, participant responses were analysed and checked for completeness and consistency. This included screening for missing values, assessing the normality of

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<sup>3</sup> While direct measures of Rover employment are beyond the scope of the current study (as these require, amongst other things, longitudinal studies tracking Rover progress beyond university), anecdotally, out of the 35 Rovers who participated in this 2012 study, at least 8 have now been employed at VU on a full-time continuing basis and 2 externally to the institution. The various employers report participation in the Rover Program as a key determinant of the Rover’s application success.

data, and inspecting any outliers. The resultant dataset was then submitted for further analysis using SPSS (version 20). Basic descriptive statistical data was retrieved from the collected responses. This included the number, percentage, means, and standard deviation of responses.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Inclusion/Accessibility

This section of the evaluation scheme measured the extent the program is inclusive of and accessible to a culturally, socially, and educationally diverse student population (whether this population comprises the Rovers who are recruited in the program or the Students they assist).

Table 1 shows the Rover (a) and Student (b) responses to the demographic and study profile survey questions.

Table 1(a) indicates that, demographically, Rovers:

- are nearly equally distributed as domestic and international students (54.3% and 45.7%, respectively);
- largely speak a language other than English (65.9%); and
- predominantly live in Melbourne's Western regions (66.7% distributed across the West, North-West and Geelong sub-regions).

The table also shows that, in terms of their studies, Rovers:

- represent each of VU's three faculties (Business & Law; Health, Engineering & Science; Arts, Education & Human Development)<sup>4</sup>;
- reflect VU's undergraduate and postgraduate student number ratio (28.6% study at the postgraduate (Graduate Diploma; Masters; PhD) and 71.4% at the undergraduate level); and
- are in their second or third year of their course (31.4% + 42.9% = 74.3%), reflecting the requirement that Rovers are recruited as experienced university students.

Regarding Students, Table 1(b) indicates that, demographically, of the 353 Student survey respondents:

- 79.6% are domestic and 20.4% are international students
- 21.8% speak a language other than English at home
- 55.7% live in Melbourne's Western regions.

The table also shows that approximately 92.6% of these participants are Higher Education (HE) students whilst the remaining 7.4% study at TAFE. The TAFE respondents predominantly

- study at Diploma (38.5%) and Certificate (30.7%) levels; and
- have been enrolled for more than three semesters (46.1%).

As for the HE respondents:

- 85.9% study at the undergraduate level while 14.1% are postgraduates.
- They are approximately equally distributed
  - amongst VU's three faculties (37.9%; 33.6%; 28.5%); and
  - in terms of length of study, with 39.4% respondents being first year students, 30.3% second year, and 21.7% third year.

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<sup>4</sup> While there is a predominance of Rovers studying in Business and Law (68.6%), this figure is proportionate to the 2011-2012 student number ratios across faculties.

**Table 1.** Rover (a) and Student (b) profiles.

<b>(a) ROVER PROFILE (n*=35)</b>			
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION</b>		<b>fi**</b>	<b>%***</b>
<b>Study Status</b>	Domestic	19	54.3
	International	16	45.7
<b>Main Language Spoken at Home</b>	English	12	34.1
	Vietnamese	5	14.3
	Other	5	14.3
	Indonesian	4	11.5
	Arabic	3	8.6
	Chinese	3	8.6
	Spanish	3	8.6
	<i>Total Languages other than English</i>	23	65.9
	<b>Home Postcode (Sub-Regions) *****</b>	West	12
North West		9	25.7
Other		5	14.3
Inner City		4	11.4
North		3	8.6
Geelong		2	5.7
<i>Total Western Region (West, North West, Geelong)</i>		23	66.7
<b>STUDY INFORMATION</b>		<b>fi</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Study Level</b>	Under-Graduate	25	71.4
	Post-Graduate (Graduate Diploma; Masters; PhD)	10	28.6
<b>Length of Study</b>	First year	1	2.9
	Second year	11	31.4
	Third year	15	42.9
	Fourth year	8	22.9
<b>Area of Study (Faculty)</b>	Business & Law	24	68.6
	Health, Engineering & Science	6	17.1
	Arts, Education & Human Development	5	14.3

  

<b>(b) STUDENT PROFILE (n=353)</b>			
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION</b>		<b>fi</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Study Status</b>	Domestic	281	79.6
	International	72	20.4
<b>Main Language Spoken at Home</b>	English	230	65.2
	Other	38	10.8
	Mandarin	17	4.8
	Arabic	12	3.4
	Vietnamese	10	2.8
	<i>Total Languages other than English</i>	77	21.8
	<b>Home Postcode (Sub-Regions)</b>	North West	97
West		61	18.0
North East		37	10.9
North		32	9.4
Geelong		31	9.1
East		28	8.3
Other		53	15.7
<i>Total Western Regions (North West; West; Geelong)</i>		189	55.7

Table 1 cont'd

<b>STUDY INFORMATION</b>					
<b>TAFE (n= 26; 7.4%)</b>	<b>fi</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>HIGHER EDUCATION (n=327; 92.6%)</b>	<b>fi</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Study Level</b>			<b>Study Level</b>		
Diploma	10	38.5	Undergraduate	281	85.9
Certificate	8	30.7			
Advanced Diploma	4	15.4	Postgraduate	46	14.1
Other	4	15.4			
<b>Length of Study</b>					
Third semester	12	46.1	First year	129	39.4
Second semester	8	30.7	Second year	99	30.3
First semester	4	15.4	Third year	71	21.7
Other	2	7.8	Fourth year	28	8.6
			<b>Area of Study (Faculty)</b>		
			Art, Education & Human Development	124	37.9
			Health, Engineering & Science	110	33.6
			Business & Law	93	28.5

\*n: total number of participants

\*\*fi: number of responses for each question

\*\*\*%: responses expressed as a percentage

\*\*\*\*: Home postcodes classified according to sub-regions

In summary, Table 1(a) and (b) demonstrates that demographically, the Rover Program is inclusive of Rovers and is accessible to Students from widely ranging cultural and social backgrounds, as evidenced by the diversity of their local or international student status; the languages spoken at home; and the regions in which they live. The Study profile equally reflects this diversity, with both Rovers and Students displaying diverse disciplinary backgrounds and levels of study.

Two points are worth highlighting here. Firstly, while the Rover Program is mainly a HE initiative aimed at transitioning relatively new or inexperienced students, the Student Profile data shows that Rovers assist not only HE but also TAFE students; not only undergraduate but also postgraduate students (including PhD candidates); not only new students (first years) but also more experienced second and third year students. The Rovers thus not only assist transitioning first year students, as aimed for by the program, but exceed these aims as they extend support to students at all levels and with varying degrees of university experience. Secondly, the program's inclusion of Rovers who are international students, speakers of English as an additional language, and residents of socio-economically disadvantaged areas, provides critical representation of minority and under-privileged student groups in the program.

### 3.2. Student satisfaction

This section of the survey explores the level of satisfaction Students display towards Rover assistance, using Service Quality and Behavioural Intention measures (Table 2 a, b).

The seven questions investigating this parameter were phrased in terms of statements on which the respondents rate their level of agreement or disagreement using a 5-point Likert scale (1= SD: Strongly Disagree; 2= D: Disagree; 3= N: Neutral; 4= A: Agree; 5= SA: Strongly Agree).

Table 2(a, b) presents the following sets of measures:

- Level of agreement (%): For each statement, the percentage of responses obtained for each of the 5 Likert scale ratings (SD; D; N; A; SA).
- Mean: the average rating (out of 5) obtained for each statement.

- Standard Variation (Std. Dev.): the variation amongst participant responses for each statement.
- Overall Rating: the average of the Mean ratings obtained for all the statements combined (i.e. the average of all the ratings shown in the Mean column). This figure, highlighted in **bold**, summarizes the overall rating of the factor under investigation (that is, Service Quality and Behavioural Intention).

As can be seen from Table 2(a), Students generally exhibited substantial satisfaction with each of the five service quality determinants examined: Understanding, Communication, Responsiveness, Reliability, and Competence. All five statements showed good agreement ratings (above 4.0) and consistency across responses (as evidenced by Standard Deviation measures of <1). Understanding displayed the highest Mean (4.29) followed by Communication and Responsiveness (4.25 each). The Means yielded an Overall Rating of 4.19, indicating a high overall satisfaction with Rover service quality. Areas for improvement could target the “referral to relevant personnel” and “reliability to assist” as these included a small percentage of SD and D responses and Std. Dev. measures nearing 1.

**Table 2.** Student Satisfaction. (n=353).

<b>(a) SERVICE QUALITY</b>							
Statement:	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of agreement (%)				
<i>In my experience receiving assistance from Rovers, I have found that:</i>			SD	D	N	A	SA
Rovers tried to address my specific needs	4.29	0.79	1.1	1.7	8.5	43.9	44.8
Rovers communicated clearly with me	4.25	0.78	1.1	1.7	8.8	40.5	47.9
Rovers responded to my queries quickly	4.25	0.77	0.8	1.4	10.8	40.8	46.2
I can rely on Rovers to assist me with basic IT, technical, and study problems	4.09	0.92	1.7	4.0	15.6	37.7	41.1
When they didn't know the answer to my query, Rovers referred me to relevant personnel	4.06	0.94	2.3	3.1	17.8	36.8	39.9
<b>Overall Rating****</b>	<b>4.19</b>						
<b>(b) BEHAVIORAL INTENTION</b>							
Statement:	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of agreement (%)				
<i>In the future, I would:</i>			SD	D	N	A	SA
ask for Rover assistance when experiencing basic IT, technical, and study problems	4.29	0.85	1.4	2.3	10.5	37.7	48.2
recommend Rovers to my classmates and other VU students	4.27	0.86	1.7	2.0	10.2	39.4	46.7
<b>Overall Rating</b>	<b>4.28</b>						

Table 2(b) shows that out of the 353 respondents, the large majority of Students would not only approach Rovers for help in the future (total A + SA = 85.9%) but would also recommend the program to other students (total A + SA = 86.1%). This indicates a strong Behavioural Intention measure complementing the Rover Service Quality measure.

Together, the Service Quality and Behavioural Intention measures show an overall high level of satisfaction that Students display toward the Rover program, understood here in its conceptualization as a service.

### 3.3. Perceived impact

This section reports on the perceived impact of the program on Rover Employability; and Rover and Student University Success predictors. Similarly to Student Satisfaction, Perceived Impact questions were constituted of statements with which participants rated their agreement using a 5-point Likert scale.

#### 3.3.1. Rover employability predictors: Graduate Capabilities

Table 3 details Rover responses on the degree to which they perceive the program as impacting on eight graduate capabilities, taken here as predictors of future employability.

**Table 3.** Perceived impact on Rover graduate capabilities. (n=35).

Statement: <i>Being a Rover has helped me develop</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of Agreement (%)				
			SD	D	N	A	SA
library research skills	4.60	0.65	0	0	8.6	22.9	68.6
the ability to work in a team	4.51	0.66	0	0	8.6	31.4	60.0
social & cultural awareness	4.46	0.70	0	0	11.4	31.4	57.1
listening & speaking skills	4.43	0.66	0	0	8.6	40.0	51.4
IT skills	4.43	0.61	0	0	5.7	45.7	48.6
problem solving skills	4.37	0.65	0	0	8.6	45.7	45.7
personal values and ethics	4.37	0.77	0	0	17.1	28.6	54.3
writing skills	3.77	1.00	2.9	5.7	37.1	28.6	25.7
<b>Overall Rating</b>	<b>4.37</b>						

Table 3 shows that seven out of the eight Graduate Capabilities received a strong rating of above 4 and good consistency across responses (standard deviation measures of <1), while that of writing skills received a good rating of 3.77 with a standard deviation measure of 1.

The three highest agreement ratings are observed for statements relating to the development of:

- Library skills, with a mean rating of 4.60 and 91.4% of Rovers either strongly agreeing (68.6%) or agreeing (22.9%) on the program's contribution towards this graduate attribute;
- Team work, with a mean rating of 4.51 and 91.4% of Rovers either strongly agreeing (60.0%) or agreeing (31.4%) on this statement; and
- Social and cultural awareness, with a mean rating of 4.46 and 88.6% of Rovers either strongly agreeing (57.1%) or agreeing (31.4%) on this statement.

These are followed by IT; listening and speaking skills; problem-solving skills; and personal values/ethics.

The only statement which receives a mean rating of less than 4 under this category is developing writing skills (3.77). However, this result is not surprising since the Rover role mainly involves assisting students through oral communication channels (i.e. where speaking and listening are predominant). While writing skills are required in fortnightly reflective blogs shared within the Rover team, these are secondary to the oral communication skills indispensable to student assistance.

The generally high mean ratings for Graduate Capability statements yield an equally significant overall rating of 4.38. Together, the mean and overall rating scores show that Rovers not only perceive the program as impacting on this predictor of future employability generally, but also extensively, targeting each of the VU Graduate Capabilities relevant to their work.

### 3.3.2. University Success Predictors

Table 4 details the Rover and Student responses to statements exploring the degree to which they perceive the program as impacting on the broad university success predictors of Engagement (with Connectedness to the University and Confidence in Learning taken as key indicators); University Experience; and (the university success outcome of) Retention defined here as intended persistence in study.

**Table 4.** Perceived impact on University Success predictors: Rovers (n=35) and Students (n=353).

Rover Statement: <i>Being a Rover has helped me</i> Student Statement: <i>Rovers have helped me</i>	Partic.*	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level of Agreement (%)				
				SD	D	N	A	SA
feel connected to the university	R**	4.66	0.54	0	0	2.9	28.6	68.6
	S***	3.94	0.93	2.3	2.8	24.6	30.9	39.4
feel confident about my learning at university	R	4.60	0.65	0	0	8.6	22.9	68.6
	S	4.12	0.87	1.4	2.8	15.9	37.4	42.5
feel positive about my experience of being a student at university	R	4.77	0.43	0	0	0	22.9	77.1
	S	3.98	0.88	1.4	2.3	21.5	28.9	45.9
want to continue studying at VU	R	4.29	0.96	0	2.9	17.1	25.7	54.3
	S	3.81	1.01	3.1	4.2	29.5	30.9	32.3
<b>Overall Rating</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>4.58</b>						
	<b>S</b>	<b>3.96</b>						

\*Partic.: Type of survey participant.

\*\*R: Rover.

\*\*\*S: Student.

Table 4 shows that, for each of the four University Success Predictor statements, Rovers provided a significantly positive score, yielding a remarkable overall rating average of 4.58. University Experience registered the highest mean rating of 4.77, with 100% of the Rovers either strongly agreeing (77.1%) or agreeing (22.9%) that being a Rover has enhanced their experiences of being a student at the university. This is followed by the Engagement indicators of Connectedness to the University (4.66) and Confidence in Learning (4.60), for which 97.2% of the Rovers either strongly agreed (68.6%) or agreed (28.6%) that being a Rover helped them feel connected with the university and 91.5% reported that it improved their confidence in their

learning (SA: 68.9%; A: 22.9%). Results for the University Success outcome of retention yielded an equally strong mean rating of 4.29 with 80% of Rovers either strongly agreeing (54.3%) or agreeing (25.7%) that participating in the program helped them want to continue studying at VU. These significantly positive responses to the Engagement, University Experience, and Retention success predictors show that Rovers perceive the program as displaying a substantial impact on how they experience and engage with the university and their intention to remain at the institution.

The Persistence in Study result is particularly remarkable. It not only reiterates the close link assumed in the literature between engagement, university experience and retention, but also demonstrates the strong influence this work program has on Rover motivation to continue studying. Since participation in the program has the immediate advantage of providing Rovers with paid work, Rovers might be expected to rate highly the impact the program has on their employability (as shown in Sub-section 3.3.1 above), but not necessarily on wanting to continue *studying* at university, especially as a multitude of additional factors may influence this intention (see Tinto, 1993; and Thomas, 2002 for a review of factors affecting student attrition/retention)<sup>5</sup>. The result here, however, indicates that working in the program seems to allow Rovers to transcend these possible additional factors and to perceive the program as not only positively influencing their employability attributes but also as providing them with the motivation to remain at university and continue studying.

As for Student responses, Table 4 shows that for each of the four University Success Predictor statements, Students provided a positive mean score yielding an overall rating average nearing 4 (3.96). Confidence in Learning registered the highest mean rating of 4.12, with 79.9% of Students either strongly agreeing (42.5%) or agreeing (37.4%) that Rovers have contributed to this engagement indicator. This is followed by University Experience with a mean approximately equalling 4 (3.98) and 74.8% of Students either strongly agreeing (45.9%) or agreeing (28.9%) on the impact of the program on this university success predictor. Connectedness to University closely follows University Experience with a Mean rating of 3.94 and 70.3% of Students either strongly agreeing (39.4%) or agreeing (30.9%) on this engagement indicator while Intended Persistence in Study scores a mean rating of 3.81 with 63.2% of Students either strongly agreeing (32.3%) or agreeing (30.9%) on the impact of this success outcome.

While the Student responses to the University Success Predictors generally appear lower than those obtained for Rovers, these responses are nevertheless highly significant. A traditional reservation against the Rover program is that since it provides students primarily with *basic* technical, information technology, and library research support; and since, unlike other peer mentoring interventions, it does not deal directly with subject content, it may not be expected to impact greatly on student success. However, the current data shows not only that Students largely perceive the program as impacting on the university success predictors of Engagement (Confidence and Connectedness) and University Experience (with the percentage of students rating each of these predictors as SA or A exceeding 70%), but also that a significant proportion of them (63.2%) attribute their intention of continuing studying at university to the program. As discussed for Rovers above, since Student attrition can be the result of a host of factors, it is remarkable that a program, which tailors for basic assistance and is not directly linked with subject content, would score such considerable level of agreement percentages and mean ratings.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

This study explored to what degree the Rover program achieves the purported operational aims of offering inclusion and accessibility to a diverse student population; providing satisfactory assistance to this student body; and positively impacting on university and employment predictors of success. The findings show that the program meets these aims in each case: The demo-

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the lower mean ratings and higher standard deviations for the Retention responses may be indicative of precisely these additional factors which play a role in student retention/attrition (besides the presence of the Rover program).

graphic and study data indicates that the program is inclusive of Rovers and is accessible to Students representing the cultural, social and educational diversity of the university. The Student Satisfaction results show strong levels of satisfaction with Rover assistance in terms of both Service Quality and Behavioural Intention measures. The Perceived Impact results demonstrate significant ratings on the impact the program is perceived to have on Rover Employability attributes; as well as on the Rover and Student University Success predictors of Engagement (Connectedness and Confidence) and University Experience; and the University Success outcome of Retention (defined here as intended persistence in study).

The Student Satisfaction results are notable for a number of reasons. As discussed in Section 1. above, one of the persistently dominant conceptualizations of the Rover program, despite challenges from ALL lecturers, is as a service provider. Rather than dismissing this perception as inconsistent with the peer learning and mentoring role of Rovers, however, this study has investigated this service model perspective and adopted the standard measures used in the evaluation of the service sector: Service Quality and Behavioural Intention (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The results show that even in this strictly managerial conceptualisation, the Rovers receive high satisfaction ratings from the students they assist. At the basic level of service provision then, where performativity and accountability dominate, the program and the Rover role meet service performance standards at high levels and succeed in carrying out service work imperatives.

However, this study's findings are important not because they show that the program meets its service provision accountabilities, but precisely because they highlight that the Rover role transcends them. In terms of Rover Employability, for example, the current findings indicate that the Rovers perceive the program as providing them with the graduate capabilities central to employment requirements. However, the results also demonstrate that the program rates highly not merely on strict employability measures (such as communication and teamwork skills) but also on transformative attributes such as cross-cultural awareness, ethical values, and the ability to manage contingency (problem solving). This shows that the program is perceived to supersede the "logic of productivity" to provide students with the more "learningful" work environment theorized in McCormack et al. (2010), where Rovers gain "a deeper understanding of those three significant areas of informal learning [...]: mastery of organisational processes, negotiating the political, and dealing with the atypical" (p. 52), areas which constitute central features of the contingent and changing contemporary world.

The transcendence of service accountability measures is also reflected in the Perceived Impact results. The survey results demonstrate that the Students do not envisage the program merely as a service which delivers information and offers passing interactions between clients and service providers. The Student responses indicate that they perceive it as also significantly impacting on the more transformative attributes of connectedness to the institution, confidence in learning, and positive experiences of the University, thereby highlighting the collaborative and constructivist peer learning pedagogy conceptualisations of the Rover role (e.g. Kirkwood et al., 2012; Van der Meer & Scott, 2008). In addition, as discussed at length in Sub-section 3.3.2. above, the current Perceived Impact findings show that both Rovers and Students attribute being employed and assisted by Rovers respectively, as a contributor to their intended persistence to study at university. In other words, the program transcends its service operational aim of providing basic, mostly technical and non-content-specific, assistance to students and is perceived to impact the more transformative, albeit elusive, intention to persist in studying.

Finally, the program's high inclusivity of a diverse, non-traditional Rover population is significant, not only because it fulfils the program and university mission, but also because it constructs an "institutional habitus" (Thomas, 2002, based on Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) which is truly diverse. As discussed by Thomas (2002):

if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize or valorize one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference. [sic] Students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowl-

edge, and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in HE. (p. 431)

The inclusion of a truly diverse Rover population thus dispels common criticisms of educational institutions (and their sub-divisions, in this instance, mentoring programs) as privileging the “knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups (e.g. white, middle-class) to the detriment of other groups” (Thomas, 2002 p. 431). Rather, the Rover program employs students who precisely do not fit the dominant traditional student population, thus allowing the creation of a transformative space where the potential of unsettling institutional hegemonies can emerge. This point concurs with Tout et al.’s (2014) theorizations of the Rover role as an “institutionally disruptive” (p. 599) Third Space, and underscores the transformative potential of the program in counteracting the maintenance and reproduction of social inequalities at university.

ALL lecturers coordinating initiatives such as the Rover Program need not only to recognize this transformative potential but also to foster it by closely listening to and working with the Student Rovers on how this can be achieved. Future research aimed at enriching current conceptualisations of the Student Rover role may investigate precisely whether the transformative potential of the program is both recognized and acted upon by program coordinators and Rovers. This could perhaps be accomplished through conducting in-depth qualitative analyses of the Rover institutional habitus and whether it manifests itself as a significant counteracting force or whether this force is ultimately recuperated by dominant institutional discourses.

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