Guidelines for setting up Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) in Higher Education Institutions based on the findings of the National HE STEM Programme's Project, *Peer Assisted Learning: in and beyond the classroom*

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The final report, and the PAL leader focus group paper, of the *Peer Assisted Learning: in and beyond the classroom* project, provide the rationale and evidence of impact of PAL. The report and paper are available at: http://www.hestem-sw.org.uk/project?1d=13.

These guidelines are built out of reflections on the learning points of the project outputs, including:

- the regional seminars based on PAL
- the experiences of universities that were supported in implementing PAL during the course of the project
- interviews with PAL leaders and project officers

The guidelines are organised into 10 sections aimed at supporting those who would like to implement PAL in their own institution.

Section 1. Making a case for PAL within your own institution

There is already much evidence to suggest that PAL makes a difference to students in helping them to:

- adjust to university life,
- understand their course content,
- be reassured and gain confidence that success is achievable.

PAL has a social element, but the focus is academic in nature and aims to reinforce learning taking place in the curriculum. PAL leaders are trained to facilitate discussion on topics identified by the first year students, and also offer their advice around learning, for example managing time, revision for exams, etc.

At Bournemouth University PAL has been well established and embedded since 2002 and sustained evaluation of our model of PAL demonstrates that there is a positive impact on student retention where PAL is offered within programmes. Work undertaken for the National HE STEM Programme's project: *Peer Assisted Learning: in and beyond the classroom*, and its partner project looking at transition to HE STEM programmes also identified a range of benefits for both PAL leaders and PAL students. Also, research undertaken for the Higher Education Retention and Engagement project found that providing opportunities for peer learning is of major benefit to friendship development and social integration.

Summary for making an argument for PAL within your own institution

- PAL provides social learning opportunities with peers
- PAL provides opportunities for creating smaller social spaces within large cohorts where students can explore their learning
- PAL provides opportunities for students to learn from others similar to them about the academic practices that help develop independent learning
- PAL provides reassurance of knowing that you are not on your own and that more experienced students have survived
- PAL develops a sense of community that supports cohort cohesion
- PAL demonstrates the importance of social integration across the cohort and with higher level students
- PAL leaders can play an important role in providing transition and induction support for new students

If you're planning to introduce a PAL scheme into your institution, we recommend that you:

Learn from the experience of others who are running successful schemes. There are two main centres for Peer Assisted Learning (sometimes referred to as Supplemental Instruction after the US model) in the UK: Bournemouth University
- http://pal.bournemouth.ac.uk and, the University of Manchester http://www.pass.manchester.ac.uk/

- Look at the reports and outcomes of the *Peer Assisted Learning: in and beyond the classroom* project at: http://www.hestem-sw.org.uk/project?id=13&pp=250

- Look at the reports and outcomes of projects on the National HE STEM website for examples of peer learning, (eg MoreMathsGrads http://www.hestem.ac.uk)

- Make your case relevant to your institution. Try to provide evidence and examples of how PAL has worked in similar institutions to your own and focus on areas that are relevant to your HEI e.g. if you do not struggle with retention, focus on the improvements to the student experience. Also alongside case studies there is a growing amount of research into the impact of PAL that can support your case.

Section 2. Aims and Benefits of PAL

At Bournemouth University http://pal.bournemouth.ac.uk PAL has five main aims helping students to:

- adjust quickly to university life;
- acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- develop independent learning and study skills to meet the requirements of higher education;
- enhance understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative group discussion;
- prepare better for assessed work and examinations.

Benefits for PAL leaders

- reinforces learning, gain additional skills for the future
- development of leadership skills, confidence building, employability skills
- improves communication skills
- improves listening skills and devising solutions to problems
- sense of achievement
- relationship building through working with tutors

Benefits for first year students

- improved results
- improved social interactions
- confidence building in development of study skills
- opportunity to put learning into practice
- explore different ways of solving problems
- learning how to learn

Benefits for institutions

- PAL provides additional support for subject areas
- Good for student retention
- Improved results, retention and student satisfaction at relatively low cost

Intangible benefits

- increased cohesion of the student group
- reassurance about study concerns
- increased confidence

It provides an environment where they can feel comfortable and confident in challenging the material and in asking questions cos in a lecture I'm sure everyone's had this where a lecturer will ask a question and rarely anyone will answer with their hand up. I think they're scared of getting it wrong or being judged but in the PAL group cos of the size and the relaxed style and it's more cooperative rather than competitive. A lot of people feel more comfortable challenging and asking questions and speaking which is a key thing in a lot of learning, sharing ideas and collaborating, so that's a definite benefit for me. (PAL Leader, 2012)

Section 3. Models of PAL

During the course of the *Peer Assisted Learning: in and beyond the classroom* project we identified a number of models of PAL (see http://hestem-sw.org.uk/project?id=13&pp=78). For example:

- At Bournemouth University, PAL is associated with the first year curriculum and PAL leaders are trained to facilitate study sessions on any aspect of first year curriculum
- In contrast, our project's PAL leader participants are associated with particular modules
- Those universities that established PAL schemes during the course of the project identified a range of models including:

  - PAL alternating with Personal Academic Tutor sessions - one week students will meet with their Personal Academic Tutor, the next with their PAL group
  - PAL starting from induction week and consisting of 1 hour, fortnightly timetabled sessions

- The PAL groups will be groups of about 15
- PAL sessions will be timetabled in large rooms which will have several groups within them
- Leaders will be 2nd or 3rd year students
- Leaders will be volunteers and will not be paid
- Leaders will also meet the first years in induction week via a session to be built into induction week timetable

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We recommend:

- Talking to staff and students involved in your course to figure out the model that best suits the course, what are the 'at risk' areas of the course?

- Learning from others with experience of setting up PAL, training PAL leaders and operating PAL schemes – a good source of expertise can be found on jiscmail networks such as www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ldhen where learning developers will share and collaborate.

- Contacting either the PAL team at Bournemouth University or the PASS team at the University of Manchester.

Section 4. Partnership and networking

One of the participants that introduced PAL into their institution during the course of the project, commented that the network of support for PAL was the "most significant resource in developing PAL". This network of support included colleagues within the institution, colleagues already operating PAL in the sector, and the Students as Partners team at the University of Manchester (PASS). Below are some quotes from other participants who introduced PAL with regards to the value of internal and external networking:

- *The most important lesson has been to use existing expertise and enthusiasm, particularly in our case our Learning Development team*

- *Discussing the pros and cons with somebody at the same stage enhanced my confidence and opened up new ideas to me*

- *Talking with coordinators of other schemes has been really useful too as its raised things we hadn't thought of and it's been reassuring to know I have the same questions or issues as others*

- *Speaking with others has been an important part of the process for me as I've felt that I wasn't alone and could share my experiences and ideas with someone in the same boat*

- *Networking with academic staff offered a different perspective from my own, which helped me to see the importance of having them involved as they were able to see students regularly and offer the course context for PAL*

We recommend:

Learning from the experience of others to:

- Frame what PAL is about

- Open up the debate around paying PAL leaders

- Think about organisation, for example the importance of timetabling PAL sessions

- Think and plan the training of PAL leaders

- Identify ways of marketing PAL to first year students, Leaders and, the Institution

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Section 5. Recruitment of PAL leaders

A number of ways of generating interest in becoming a PAL leader were identified by those who established PAL during the course of the project:

- Presentation to first-years and follow-on correspondence
- Presentation information sent to current second-year students who had been through the first year of the programme
- Application form submitted by interested students
- Afternoon 'Expectations' workshops for groups of interested students
- Through lecture shout outs and via email
- Information emailed to all current first, second and placement year students
- Posters put up across the Department and on the Student Support reception plasma screen
- Notices placed in School newsletter
- Short talks delivered in first and second year lectures (interest sign-up sheet circulated /collected by tutors)
- Emails sent to all those who registered their interest
- Letters posted to those who registered their interest
- Emails sent to current student reps individually to encourage them specifically
- Letters sent to students currently on placement to encourage them specifically
- Tutor recommended students who were then emailed individually
- Initial recruitment was done through sending out information and recruitment forms via email. This had a low response rate and was followed up with PAL introductory lectures by the academic staff in charge of the PAL scheme and one senior

undergraduate student. This method was successful and resulted in three times the number of required number of PAL leaders putting themselves forward

- In class talks to students were the most effective in generating interest and therefore in the future these will be the first stage of the recruitment activity and followed up by emails / letters as needed

Top Tip

"I would have started the process of recruiting PAL leaders with proper introductory lectures in order to introduce the scheme to students. I shouldn't have relied on emails to inform students of a new scheme. Students need to be informed in detail of what the scheme is about, what they are expected to do, and what advantages the scheme has for them"

We recommend:

- Working with the programme academics to establish a recruitment programme that works in your context. For example, one programme at Bournemouth University has so many applicants each year that a sophisticated recruitment process has been established modelling HR processes.

- Use existing PAL leaders to promote the benefits of being a PAL leader to first years

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From *the PAL Leader perspectives case study* undertaken as part of the project, the following motivations for being a PAL leader were identified:

- *Had good experience of being a PAL mentee*
- *It was useful to help me understand subjects*
- *Planning to go on into teaching*
- *Fun to do*
- *Deepens understanding*
- *I just enjoyed helping people and I like the subject as well so it was kind of a win-win really, it's fun to do*
- *Develops self awareness*
- *Good for developing employability skills*

  For me, it's really the thing of saying um 'yeah, I've got the feeling I achieved something, the students enjoyed it, and that's what I get out of it' (PAL leader, 2012)

  Something I enjoy about being a PAL leader is the challenge that you can sometimes get (PAL leader, 2012)

Time students spend in PAL training and preparing and running PAL sessions can also count towards skills development/volunteering awards your institution runs and towards the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Section 6. PAL Leader training

The success of your PAL scheme will rely to a large extent on the training that is provided for new PAL leaders.

At Bournemouth, the PAL leader training is provided by a team from within Library & Learning Support. Training comprises an initial, compulsory two day course which takes place before the start of the autumn term. This is followed up with further training sessions to provide additional resources, share experiences and consolidate skills.

All resources for PAL leaders are held within a Virtual Learning Environment (MyBU PAL CENTRAL community) and each PAL leader receives a set of student leader guidelines.

The training ensures that PAL leaders :
- plan and run their PAL sessions effectively
- encourage participation through structured group discussions
- engage their students in purposeful learning activities
- encourage students to verbalise
- ask appropriate questions and redirect questions back to the group
- monitor student understanding
- encourage students to refer back to their notes, course materials, etc
- ensure that key points are recorded on the white board
- summarise information regularly and at the end of the session (or ask one of their students to summarise)
- request ideas and agree what will be covered in the next PAL session

Roles and boundaries

The PAL leader training supports leaders in carrying out their roles, but also helps to identify their boundaries.

Leaders are trained to avoid dominating discussion or providing too much guidance for example, providing content for assessment or agreeing to proof read drafts. Plagiarism is also discussed during the leaders' initial training course.

> *I'm there to facilitate the students' learning within the session (PAL Leader 2012)*

It is not about teaching them the subject itself, more about how to work and how to study in the group (PAL leader 2012)

The content is based around what they want to do, they tell me what modules and what particular problems they are having and my group seems very focused on exams so they like to practice exam questions so we tend to do a lot of exam questions (PAL Leader 2012)

PAL Leader monitoring

At Bournemouth University, PAL Leaders are observed at least once whilst running a PAL session and formative feedback is given afterwards.

Other models of PAL use previous PAL leaders to undertake the observations, this provides benefit in providing genuine peer review, but also provides a resource solution when dealing with large numbers.

We recommend:

- Contact the PAL training team at Bournemouth University for more guidance on developing PAL leader training programmes

- Investigate the support offered by the PASS team at University of Manchester including sending PAL leaders to their annual Student Leader Conference

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Section 7. Timing

A key lesson learned concerned the timing of various stages including:

- Undertaking PAL coordinator training (National Centre at University of Manchester) much earlier in the process
- Feedback from staff has also suggested beginning the recruitment process much earlier so that it doesn't clash with the end of teaching and assessments

Top Tip
"I would start the recruitment process for Leaders much sooner. Information first went out in March to current students via email and posters. I naively assumed students would respond to emails but this was not the case and other activities had to be devised and carried out which lengthened the process considerable."

Section 8. Logistics of PAL

There are a number of things which need to be thought through when deciding to set up PAL and determining a model that works in a given context:

- What are your drivers for introducing PAL, is it a bottom up or a top down initiative?
- Importance of timetabling – if sessions are not carefully timetabled the scheme is less likely to work well
- Reward for leaders – there is debate about whether leaders should be paid, or whether they can receive other forms of credit for example through student awards, leadership schemes
- How much the scheme will cost – training of PAL leaders, provision of course contact time, etc
- Selecting a model of PAL appropriate for context, (eg associating PAL with problematic subjects, for example, maths)
- Different models
- Value of PAL for giving feedback to academic staff in real time
- Beneficial role of PAL in supporting transition to HE
- Getting academic buy-in, persuading academics that PAL leaders facilitate learning but do not teach
- Quality assurance n relation to the sessions
- Relationship between leaders and academic tutors
- How will the scheme be embedded, organised and promoted in order to ensure sustainability

Top Tips

We have found that PAL works well as a partnership between the course teaching team and central support services.

Meetings between a course PAL contact and leaders every 2-4 weeks provides a good opportunity for ongoing communications between the leaders and a programme academic. This also provides a significant opportunity for real-time feedback between the students and the programme team.

PAL works well when it appears to be a normal part of course activities and is timetabled at times students will find convenient, for example, immediately after a lecture.

Section 9. Learning from those institutions that have recently adopted PAL

Recent adopters have offered their insights into the key learning points they gained whilst introducing and setting up PAL schemes:

- The impact of senior students' talking about PAL to lower year students
- That students' support of the scheme will attract academic staff to get involved

- That different universities have various requirements which result in different PAL models
- That undergraduates work to the highest standards when involved in setting up the scheme
- The importance of investigating PAL models at other institutions
- Finding out what does and does not work – for instance the importance of having an "Expectations Workshop" for PAL leaders to ensure that leaders are clear about their obligations (and our obligations to them) *before* beginning the programme
- The importance of a team approach, for example, drawing on experience and enthusiasm of others within the institution including the learning development team, year tutors and admissions tutors (eg Foundation Year)
- The importance of staff support, value of advocates, and the enthusiasm of year tutors
- Start early! Talk directly to students about the scheme
- Have as much information as possible ready early (eg overview of benefits of PAL) so you are prepared to discuss the scheme with staff and students
- The value of having others to discuss ideas and issues with – whether this is staff from other universities, colleagues from your team or others across the institution
- When course staff became more involved in recruitment we had much greater success recruiting leaders

Unexpected learning

- The close linkages to careers and employability:

    Initially PAL was focused mainly to our student experience and learning and teaching strategies, but an additional focus has been how the scheme can support and development employability capacity for the leaders and therefore also contributes to our Employability Strategy

- We had not anticipated the number of students applying to become PAL leaders with 22 good applications received for 12 positions. Potential leaders comments:

    I believe PALS will be a very successful method of enhancing learning, and I would love to be a part of it

    PAL will be a great way for any first year student to ask questions and get advice in a less formal situation so they can settle in more readily and enjoy their Maths

    I feel that as I have learnt so much from this year that I should pass on what I have learnt to next year's first years

    I would have liked to have had PAL when I started the beginning of the year as I personally found it difficult to make the transition from A level learning to University learning.

Section 10. Critical success factors

When making a case for introducing PAL into your institution or programme, it is useful to be able to provide evidence of impact from other schemes. Below, is a summary of impact at institutions where PAL was adopted during the course of this project.

- Locally, key staff are fully engaged with the PAL idea
- We have a good number of motivated and enthused students eager to begin working as PAL leaders
- We intend to publicise our work fully once we have students in the system and can evaluate its impact on the experience of both new students and their PAL leaders
- We will contribute to the Vice Chancellor's Teaching and Learning conference
- PAL is being introduced into the first year of a number of other degree programmes across the university
- It will be embedded with the personal tutor system for the first year maths group and within a module for the foundation group
- There is a commitment by the university to provide funding for PAL leaders for 2012/13
- The scheme was described in a STEM 'show and tell' event
- The scheme has received positive responses and support from both the pilot school and the wider university
- Our regional HE STEM coordinator has expressed an interest in developing the scheme based on its progress and evaluation in 12/13
- The pilot has been discussed with our regional HE STEM coordinator and possible future funding support raised
- The Dean of students is fully supportive of the scheme and is highlighting it in relation to our student engagement and student experience related strategies and plans
- A highlight so far as been how enthusiastic staff have been about developing the scheme
- Careers too have welcomed and supported the initiative in terms of building employability capacity and opportunities for students to gain valuable skills and experience
- Incorporating peer learning and support into curriculum and offering this as a feature of the student experience available to all new first year students from 2013
- Reports from the scheme will be fed into relevant university committees and through the regular school student experience meetings held with Schools and the Dean of Students
- Incoming first years will receive information via the welcome pack
- We will advertise PAL in our promotional materials and website
- There is support from the Director of Education and there is already uptake of PAL and similar schemes in other disciplines
- PAL is allocated time and space in timetables

- Employing PAL leaders to help with setting up the scheme has had a very good impact on students to take the scheme seriously. They have come up with constructive ideas at every stage of the project
- The end of term evaluation forms from the first year maths module showed the interest of students without A level maths to attend PAL sessions
- Students' focus groups show students' interest in the scheme
- The scheme will be reviewed regularly at the Staff Students Liaison Committee

And, finally:

This guide sets out some of the key principles around the benefits of PAL, setting up, managing and monitoring PAL schemes, and outlines some of the logistical issues that need to be thought through.

A key message is not to try and do it on your own, use your institutional contacts, departmental champions, and learn from the experiences of others who already run PAL schemes.

If you have any further questions you can contact either Chris or Lisa as below – if we cannot answer them, we will know someone who can!

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