



## **National HE STEM Programme Project – *Peer Assisted Learning: In and beyond the classroom***

# **A Report on Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) to support Higher Education Institutions which are considering the implementation of PAL**

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## Peer Assisted Learning Report

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## **Summary**

PAL is a student-to-student support scheme for both academic and personal development. Senior student volunteers are trained to facilitate the learning of students on the same course. These trained student 'PAL Leaders' meet regularly with small groups of students to help them improve their understanding of the subject matter of their course and develop their study and learning strategies.

PAL was introduced into the UK in 1990 and since then has been adopted by many HE institutions; Aston University has identified at least 34 universities across the UK that are successfully providing PAL schemes for their students at this present time. I have been in contact with many of the universities identified by the Aston University to gather information about starting up and running a PAL scheme.

This report provides an information base for the peer assisted learning (PAL) pilot that will be running in three departments across the University of Bath during the next academic year and provides information about the resources needed to ensure that PAL can become a sustainable and effective tool for improving the learning experience of students across the institution.

## **1. Aims**

1.1 The aim of this report is to explore how peer assisted learning (PAL) schemes are run in universities across the UK with a view to highlighting how PAL can be successfully implemented at the University of Bath.

1.2 The method for gathering information for this report has included communication with universities that are at various stages of running PAL, from pilot studies to well established schemes, a list of which can be found in Appendix A. Websites, journal articles and Aston University's 'Peer Mentoring and Peer Learning Directory'<sup>1</sup> have also been used to compile information about PAL.

## **2. What PAL is and its potential benefits**

2.1 Peer-assisted learning allows more advanced students to give less advanced peers extra help in adjusting to university life and developing the study skills necessary to successfully complete the first year of university.

2.2 PAL has many possible benefits for the university (e.g. increased retention), for the department/course (e.g. better results), the lecturers (e.g. feedback from the students), for PAL leaders (e.g. increased employability) and most importantly for the students (e.g. increased academic support.). A larger list of the benefits can be found in Appendix B.

## **3. How schemes start**

3.1 PAL schemes vary little in their core values; however, the motivation for starting a scheme can be driven by different ideas and needs:

### *3.2 Student demand/Need*

Student demand often comes in the form of identifying a need for extra support through student surveys, feedback forms and lecturer's observations. In the accounts of schemes looked at in this report, it is rare for students to identify a need for PAL if it is not already being run within the university. In universities where PAL is being successfully run on some course/modules students may then directly request PAL if it is not already available on their course.

### 3.3 Case study Nottingham Trent University

The Peer Mentoring Scheme at NTU is a cross year scheme that started in response to research into student transition from FE to HE. The research suggested that students were more likely to stay at university if they there were given opportunities to talk to/make friends with other students. Based on the transition research an internal bid was made for funding from the Widening Participation budget.

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<sup>1</sup> This can be found on the General Drive → PAL folder → PM/PAL Directory

### 3.4 Individual course/module need

In some individual courses and modules PAL is implemented in response to a specific problem, often by a lecturer with no or little funding in an attempt to improve grades, increase retention or cut down on the number of students repeating the module.

### 3.5 Case study the University of Ulster

Dr Joan Condell implemented PASS to provide support for students on the modules she teaches (Mathematics and Advanced HCI for Computer Sciences) and to improve exam results for these modules. She now gets regular funding from the university and has recruited a full time placement student to the PASS team this year.

### 3.6 University wide strategic initiatives

Out of the institutions I have contacted that run PAL schemes, the majority have been borne out of university wide strategic initiatives such as Widening Participation, improving the Student Experience, and Education and Teaching Enhancement. The schemes that form part of a strategic initiative sometimes have the benefit of access to internal funding streams, usually in the form of a small project grant for a pilot scheme. Successful PAL schemes that start as a part of a project or in an individual course are often rolled to other courses and departments.

### 3.7 Case study Queen Mary, University of London

“PASS at Queen Mary was first run as a grant-funded pilot in one School in 2002/3 and has had mainstream funding since 2004/5, with a (part-time) central co-ordinator on a fixed-term basis until 2007. A permanent (part-time) co-ordinator post was created within Widening Participation (part of Educational Liaison) in January 2008 and that is when I joined... When I joined, Maths, Computer Science and Electronic Engineering were all running PASS successfully. They have since been joined by Engineering, Biological and Chemical Sciences, Physics, Langs, Linguistics and Film, Dentistry, History and Economics and Finance.”

Dr Debbie Andrews, Peer Mentoring Coordinator

## 4. Funding

4.1 Over half of the universities contacted received their initial PAL start up funding from internal sources; directly from their department, left funding from a different project or from bidding for internal project money. Several universities started up their PAL schemes with external funding from bodies such as HEFCE, CETL, HEA or TQEF, however, in all of these cases this funding stream has been short term and the financial responsibility for the PAL project has been taken over by the university or the department.

### 4.2 Start up costs

The main start up costs involved in setting up a scheme are:

- Developing resources
- Research and development
  - Researching schemes
  - Travel to other universities
- Other

- Developing and setting up a website
- Publicity materials (e.g. posters, hoodies, flyers)

#### 4.3 Case study the University of Leeds

“The main cost is time in researching other schemes and designing the programme (with training). There are some costs for consumables (pens, photocopying, etc) but these are small. There are a lot of useful resources and advice available on the web from other institutions. We are not paying the PAL mentors, but we are paying a Postgrad student to do some of the co-ordination and to hold some debriefing meetings with the mentors.”

Dr Margit Messmer, Director of Learning and Teaching  
School of Mathematics

#### 4.4 *Running costs*

##### Staff

- Paying for staff time
- Paying for staff training

##### Other

- Publicity materials

##### PAL leaders

- Some schemes pay for session time, some also pay for time spent preparing sessions (starting at £8.50 ph)
- Conferences – paying for attendance and transport
- Training – some internal but some external and catering
- Materials (photocopying, stationary...)

#### 4.5 Case study the University of West England

PAL has been running at UWE for 8 years and runs in seven departments supporting thirty-two modules. The main running costs of PAL are the salaries of the PAL Director and the PAL Co-ordinator (£26,000 pa), both full time members of staff. They run the PAL courses, deliver most of the PAL leader training, provide support to PAL leaders, monitor the success of the PAL schemes and assist departments in setting up and running new schemes.

The second largest cost of PAL at UWE is paying the PAL leaders (£8.50 per hour). Originally the PAL leaders were paid for the session time and the preparation time. As the scheme has grown this has become unsustainable and now they are no longer paid for the preparation.

Materials are the next largest cost along with occasional trips for PAL leaders to conferences in Bournemouth or Manchester.

Very little is spent on publicising PAL at UWE as it is very well established and relies upon the PAL website and ‘word of mouth’ as means providing people information about the scheme.

#### *4.6 Voluntary Vs Paid PAL leaders*

4.7 The payment of PAL leaders varies across the institutions that, in some like UWE, PAL leaders are paid for each session they take. In others, like the University of Bournemouth, the students are paid for the session preparation time (half an hour per session) and for the session itself. The benefits of paying the PAL leaders is that for some leaders they would be unable to participate in PAL if it were not paid as fills the role of a part time job. Also it may encourage more students to become PAL leaders and may help to ensure the PAL leaders commitment.

4.8 The possible drawbacks to paying the PAL leaders are that it may become unsustainable if the scheme grows. There is a large amount of administrative work that comes with processing work forms and payments. Many universities run successful PAL schemes with unpaid PAL leaders. It is felt that those leaders who are drawn to the scheme with no financial incentive may be participating for better reasons. Also the PAL leaders gain enough through the scheme (e.g. training, attending conferences, gaining employability skills), to make it worth participating without pay. The universities who do not pay their PAL leaders do not have problems recruiting volunteers.

### **5. How the schemes function**

5.1 Whilst there is no one model for implementing PAL<sup>2</sup> there are common features that can be identified which apply across all PAL schemes regardless of the organisational structure of the scheme or the motivation behind implementing PAL within a department or university.

#### *5.2 Common features of PAL schemes:*

- PAL provides a safe and welcoming environment for open discussion
- PAL is course specific
- The PAL leaders receive training and support
- PAL is not aimed at problem students.
- PAL needs investment from academics, the university and students to be successful.

#### *5.3 PAL organisational structure*

The responsibility for PAL schemes varies from university to university and depends upon the number of schemes running, how evolved the schemes are and what level of funding is available. Whilst PAL is partially student led it still requires a large amount of staff management and support – more so than peer mentoring as it is more structured and the PAL leaders require more training. Below are descriptions of possible PAL organisational structures and a diagram depicting the most favourable option can be found in Appendix C.

#### *5.4 Academic giving up time – senior mentors – PAL leaders*

When PAL is running for just one course or module it is often the responsibility the academic that runs the course/module. Initially this may be a voluntary add on to the academic's normal work load. Should the scheme receive additional departmental

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<sup>2</sup> Capstick, S., Fleming, H., and Hurne, J. (2004 ) [Implementing Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education: The experience of a new university and a model for the achievement of a mainstream programme](#)

support or funding it can become an official part of the academic's role. This model may or may not include the use of senior mentors/student co-ordinators. These are usually 3<sup>rd</sup> year students who assist with running the scheme.

#### 5.5 Case study the University of West England

PAL was originally started by a Mechanical Engineering lecturer as a response to his students struggling to pass the more difficult modules on his course.

#### 5.6 Member of staff – senior mentors – PAL leaders

In many institutions the PAL schemes fall under the remit of an existing member of staff e.g. a widening participation officer, if PAL is part of a widening participation initiative. In some situations a member of staff will act as the administrator for PAL alongside their normal duties or they may have extra funding to assign a portion of their time to officially running the scheme. Again this model may also include the use of senior mentors/student co-ordinators. There will also be a link between the person running the scheme and academics from the courses that are implementing PAL.

#### 5.7 Case study the University of Liverpool

"I am the Departmental Administrator in the Department of Mathematical Sciences and have been running the peer assisted study sessions since 2005 when I started working in Liverpool. I am not sure how it originally started but prior to my arrival it was organised by the Senior Tutor but it has grown in success over the last few years. The Peer Assisted Study Session scheme did not grow from a funding initiative as it is run on an entirely voluntary basis on the part of the students and it is simply one of the roles that I carry out so is covered by my usual salary."

Lisbeth Ann Baron

Department Administrator, the Department of Mathematical Sciences

#### 5.8 PAL Co-ordinator – Senior mentors – PAL leaders

In some institutions funding is provided for a PAL co-ordinator (approximately £26,000 pa) who assists in running PAL across several different departments, an example of a PAL co-ordinators role can be found in Appendix D. This role involves helping departments to set up PAL schemes, running existing schemes, organising and delivering some PAL leader training and providing support for PAL leaders. This model may also include the use of senior mentors/student co-ordinators. There will be a link between the PAL co-ordinator and academics running the courses that are implementing PAL. This approach is usually part of an organisation wide strategic initiative.

#### 5.9 Case study Loughborough University

"There are certain staff costs, but that normally comes in the shape of the hours worked by a individual member of staff supporting a specific module or School-wide scheme; there are inherent dangers here, as reliance upon the willingness of a member – or members – of staff to put in time without necessarily receiving reward or recognition means that an initiative may not be sustainable beyond that champion's efforts. This is why arguments have been made that, with oversight/support/input from a centrally-located member of staff supporting all peer support projects across campus would be a real step forward; our calculation is that a 0.5 FTE post holder would be able to effect this level of support, but the argument for the creation of such a post has yet to receive the required support."



Dr Maurice FitzGerald Quality Enhancement Officer
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## **6. Publicising PAL/Encouraging participation**

6.1 The table below shows some of the different ways universities have approached publicising PAL and encouraging students to attend PAL sessions:

University of Leeds	In the Mathematics Department PAL sessions were made timetabled and made compulsory. The consequence for non-attendance is a meeting with the Director of Learning and Teaching.
University of Liverpool	Weekly emails are sent to students to inform them of the time, date and location of the PAL sessions. Subject tutors are also given this information and encourage students to attend.
Goldsmiths University of London	Posters and emails are used to publicise PAL.
University of Birmingham	The university created a PASS logo and PASS leaders were given headed pads to assist in creating a recognisable 'PASS Brand'. Also they are testing running their scheme on an 'opt out' basis where students are automatically signed up to a PASS group.
University of Ulster	In Ulster Pal has been made a part of the module, although attendance is still optional.
Queen Mary, University of London	There is a film on the university website in which PASS leaders explain what PASS is and the benefits of it. They also have a regular online PASS newsletter.
Birmingham City University	One of the methods used is to have PAL ambassadors promoting PAL at open days.
University of West England	UWE do not advertise during Freshers' week or use posters. Instead they rely on word of mouth, support from academics in publicising PAL and on embedding PAL into the curriculum. PAL is embedded into the curriculum by timetabling and through inclusion in module handbooks.

6.2 A combination of the approaches above can be used to publicise PAL. As a PAL scheme evolves less time and funds are required for publicising it and a combination of an informative website and word of mouth become the main sources of spreading information about the scheme.

## **7. Impact analysis of PAL**

7.1 Monitoring and evaluation are also necessary to shape future developments and improvements. Methods for evaluating PAL schemes as suggested in the University of Glasgow Co-ordinator Pack are:

- Questionnaires for Facilitators – all of the PAL schemes at Glasgow have benefited from questionnaires asking Facilitators to reflect on their PAL

experiences from their experience of training through to facilitating sessions and the general running of the PAL scheme (see examples below).

- Focus groups and discussion – in some senses the ongoing feedback meetings for a PAL scheme allow for some informal evaluation. Feedback meetings are vital for monitoring progress.
- Questionnaires for client/potential client students – whole class questionnaires provide information from those students who have attended PAL sessions and those students who have not attended PAL sessions (see example below).
- Exam/assessment marks – these can be used to measure whether students who attend PAL have benefited in terms of their understanding of a subject.
- Student records can show whether retention and/or progression rates can be seen to have improved after the introduction of PAL.

## **8. Different approaches to PAL**

8.1 The method used is based on the needs of the students and the suitability for the course rather than a specific approach to PAL and in many cases several different types of PAL will be running across one institution. The University of Glasgow has formulated a set of questions<sup>3</sup> that should be worked through by the person administering PAL and an academic responsible for the course/department hoping to implement PAL.

### 8.2 Case study the University of Glasgow

In Computing Science, PAL sessions were structured to give Level 1 students the opportunity to work through their course study pack and to gain insight and experience from Level 2 & 3 students.

In Psychology, PAL sessions ran for students at all levels. These sessions covered various topics and discussion areas related to that particular level of study.

In the School of Law, a PAL scheme was integrated into the Level 2 European Union (EU) Law course. From 2004 onwards, PAL will also run for all Level 1 Law students

8.3 There are three main ways in which PAL sessions are structured: Set groups, Drop in centres, Sign up sessions. This may be for one module or for a whole year of a course. E-mentoring also implemented in a few organisations for peer mentoring and is being explored for PAL.

### 8.4 *Set groups*

For some PAL schemes students are assigned to PAL groups that mirror their tutor groups, this is seen as improving the cohesion within the group. They meet regularly with the same PAL leader(s) throughout the course of the PAL life cycle. Set groups may also contain mixed groups of students from different tutor groups but still within the same subject, this has the benefit of encouraging the students to socialise outside of the tutor group.

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<sup>3</sup> These can be found on the General Drive →PAL → ‘Set up PAL Qs’

### 8.5 *Drop in centres*

Drop in centres are subject specific study support sessions. They may be open to people who study a specific course or students off other courses that require assistance with the subject covered in the drop in centre e.g. Maths. The drop in centre will usually be held in one or two regular locations at set times. There will be two to three student tutors and possibly an academic who will assist students with their queries and facilitate group discussions.

### 8.6 *Drop in PAL sessions*

These sessions are module specific. The times, dates and locations of the modules are publicised by email or the PAL website along with the PAL leaders' contact details so that students can go to sessions which correspond with modules that they want support for and/or to sessions that fit in with their schedule.

### 8.7 *E-mentoring*

E-mentoring is also a possible way of organising PAL although it is less common. It involves using on-line discussion forums where students can discuss problems. The benefits are that it cuts down the time burden on PAL leaders, side-steps the problem of room booking and allows for students with concerns to remain anonymous. However, it may miss out on developing group work skills and may become a question and answer session.

## **9. PAL leaders**

### 9.1 *Recruitment*

PAL leaders are recruited from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year. They are recruited through two different methods: larger schemes often follow a formal recruitment process starting with a job description, application form and an interview. For smaller schemes the recruitment process often involves an academic identifying suitable candidates from within their course. Students are alerted to the possibility of becoming a PAL leader via emails, short talks at the beginning of lectures and/or information on the PAL website.

### 9.2 *Training*

PAL leader training is exceptionally important. Initial training is done before the summer holidays and will usually be two days long. Leaders experience on-going training intended to help them develop strategies to strengthen interpersonal skills.

### 9.3 *Areas PAL leader training covers:*

Planning the PAL Session

Theories of learning

Equal opportunity and sensitivity training

Group Discussion

Assertiveness: Dealing with challenging behaviour

Understanding Self-esteem and Building Learning Confidence

Presentation skills

### 9.4 *PAL sessions*

PAL leaders are expected to pre-plan their sessions aims and outcomes, activities planned and materials needed. These should then be handed into the person running the scheme. Some schemes also encourage PAL leaders to fill out reflexive forms after the session; this is a good way of gathering feedback and helps the PAL leaders to learn from these sessions.

9.5 The sessions, whilst structured, are flexible in what can be covered and are meant to provide an informal discussion space. However, clear aims and structure have been found to be very important as found by Bournemouth University in their first round of PAL.

9.6 Most PAL sessions are run by 1 or two PAL leaders and tend to last around an hour. They may be weekly, fortnightly or even monthly depending on the PAL leaders' availability and the student demand.

## **10 Conclusion**

10.1 Successful PAL schemes, if supported by a university, can evolve from a small project to a university wide scheme that adds a value to the courses that run it. PAL has a many potential benefits for the students who attend the sessions, the PAL leaders, and the departments, Faculties and university as a whole. Recent policy changes in HE there will be a new focus on teaching and learning standards and the student experience. PAL can play a valuable role in providing students with more support and helps to build better partnerships between students and the university.

## **11 Recommendations**

### *11.1 Setting up PAL*

Rather than limiting PAL to a set model or aiming it at one specific issue (e.g. retention) both academics and students should be consulted on the way in which PAL is run in their department. This should be done in two ways:

1. At the start of the scheme academics in departments that wish to run PAL should work through the set up questions<sup>4</sup> with the Peer Learning Administrator and decide what their students needs are and how PAL would best serve them.
2. An action research model should be implemented once the scheme is running in which students' ideas and feedback are gathered and feed into the how the scheme is run.

### *11.2 Managing PAL*

If the PAL is to be successful across the university a dedicated PAL co-ordinator is essential. Having someone in this post allows PAL schemes to evolve and lessens the administrative burden on individual departments as well as making PAL a more sustainable scheme.

### *11.3 PAL Leaders*

Comprehensive training must be planned before the pilots start running. The Students' Union already has many training resources available and it is possible that the 'Train the trainer' course may be suitable if amended to fit PAL.

11.4 The benefits of participation for PAL leaders should be linked it to employability and learning progression rather than payment. If the scheme becomes successful PAL leader wages may become unsustainable.

### *11.4 Generating Interest*

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<sup>4</sup> These can be found on the General Drive →PAL → 'Set up PAL Qs'

It is important to develop an informative and understandable PAL website that can be used by PAL leaders and those interested in attending PAL.

11.5 When starting PAL, student involvement is key so utilising the University's media (video screens, flyers, posters, the student paper...) to let students know about PAL is important. Information about PAL should be available on participating departments' websites.

#### 11.6 *Embedding PAL*

Academic involvement in PAL is crucial to its success and for increasing the scheme credibility. It is important to try and officially timetable PAL. Lecturers can assist in generating interest in PAL by mentioning it in lectures and information about PAL can be put in the course handbook.

## ***Appendix A***

### **Universities communicated with to assemble the report:**

The University of Surrey  
The University of West England  
The University of Leeds  
The University of Birmingham  
The University of Liverpool  
University College London  
The University of Bournemouth  
Goldsmiths, University of London  
Birmingham City University  
The University of Ulster  
The University of Huddersfield  
Loughborough University  
Nottingham Trent University  
Queen Mary, University of London  
The University of Bristol

## ***Appendix B***

### **Benefits of PAL**

#### For mentors

- Develops personal skills such as leadership, teamwork, interpersonal communication, facilitation and coaching skills
- Enables Leaders to gain confidence especially in situations when teamwork is required to attain a goal
- Provides experience to enhance their CV and increase their employability
- Enables Leaders to revise and practice their subject, and gain a deeper understanding of it
- Possible opportunity to attend PAL Conferences and share experiences with PAL leaders from other institutions.
- May lead to an accredited qualification
- May be a paid role

#### For mentees

- Helps new students adjust to higher education
- Improves ability to master course concepts by providing students with an opportunity to discuss or practice their subject in a safe place
- Gives students a chance to get to know other people on their course
- Helps build confidence and self esteem
- Develops enhanced study habits
- Gives discreet support to those who need help
- Leaders provide a clear view of course direction and expectations
- Get to know about university procedures, systems and services
- It's free to attend

#### For lecturers/the department

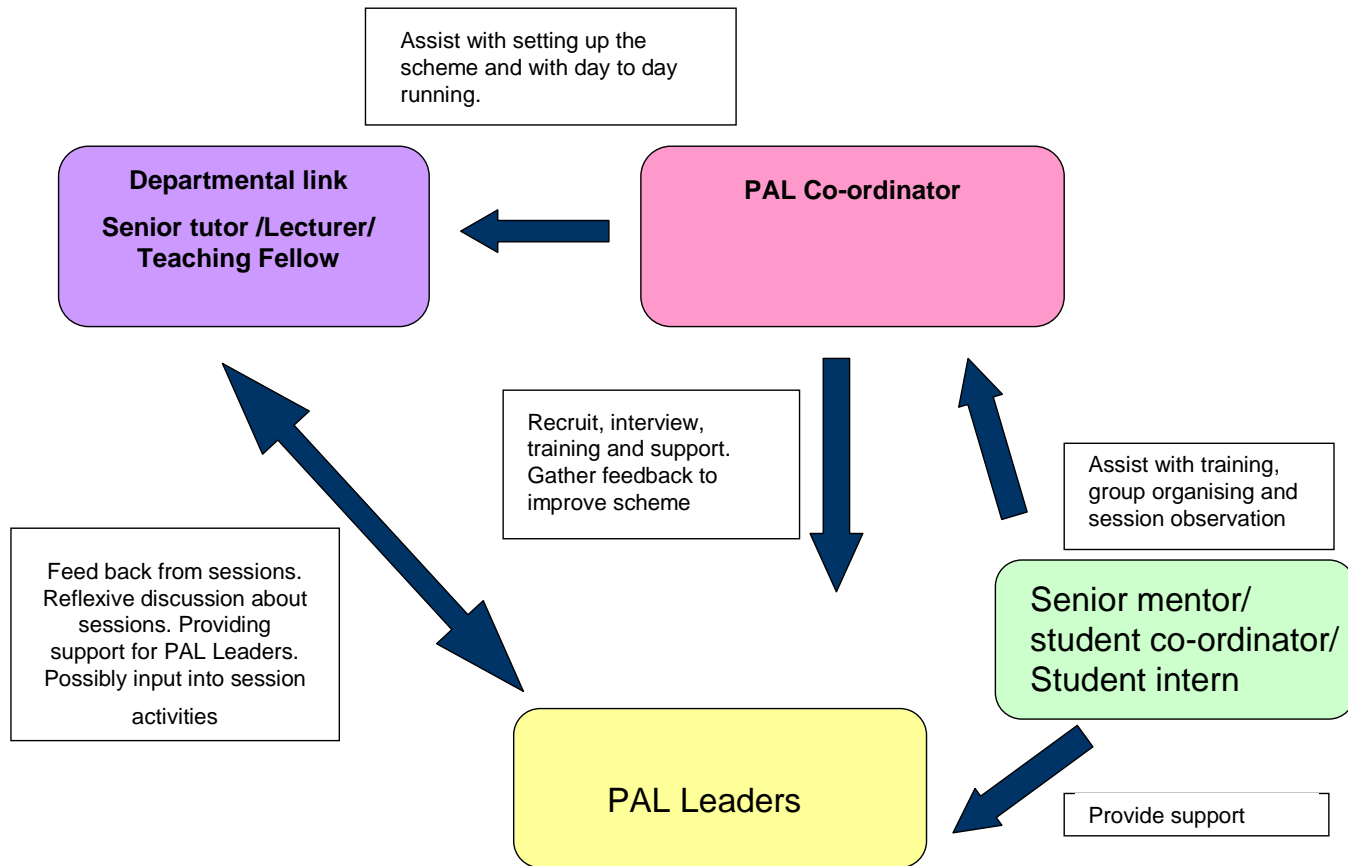
- Improves student retention, grades and performance for those who attend regularly
- Helps students to become better prepared for classes and to keep up with course material
- Leaders give regular feedback on how course content is being received by first year students
- PAL can be targeted at courses or units which are seen as difficult or high risk
- Support can be targeted at specific areas of a programme which students find particularly challenging with an aim to improve student understanding;
- Increases student support, involvement and ownership of learning
- Helps students to learn to work more effectively in a peer-based group
- Helps create more independent learners
- Evidence of cost-effective additional student support

- Creates links between year groups which can help develop a more cohesive culture within the department
- Increases the level of student involvement in and ownership of learning
- Through their PAL Leaders, the course gains altruistic and committed students who can help promote the programme
- Cuts down the number of 'minor' requests from students (they are dealt with by Leaders)



### Appendix C

### PAL Organisational Structure



PAL Organisational Structure

## ***Appendix D***

### **UWE PAL Co-ordinator job description**

#### Main duties and responsibilities

- a) To be responsible for the day to day administration of the Peer Assisted Learning Scheme.
- b) To lead , develop and ensure timely completion of small projects
- c) To evaluate and advise solutions to academic staff and PAL Leaders for low attendance in PAL sessions
- d) To contribute towards the ongoing development of educational and quality enhancement initiatives relating to the PAL scheme.
- e) To organise and manage the recruitment process of PAL Leaders and PAL interns.
- f) To coordinate the organisation and delivery of initial and follow-up training programme for PAL Leaders.
- g) To provide support and guidance to PAL Leaders as required, in order to support them in their role as facilitators
- h) To set up and maintain databases as necessary in order to support the PAL scheme, including a database to record and process payroll costs
- i) To organise key events for the PAL scheme
- j) To work closely with the PAL Director on all issues relating to the scheme, including marketing activities and initiatives and open days. This will include the creation of marketing and website material.
- k) To collect, organise and present data as necessary, in order to provide an accurate evaluation of the scheme, and to monitor the quality of PAL sessions.
- l) To manage, lead, train and motivate the group of PAL interns in their roles providing quality assurance of the PAL scheme through group and peer observations.
- m) To attend meetings which are relevant to the PAL Scheme, including National network meetings. This may involve the taking and distribution of formal minutes.