Peer Assisted Learning (PAL): Departmental Guide

What is Peer Assisted Learning?

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is:

“... a scheme that fosters cross year support between students on the same course. PAL encourages students to support each other and to learn cooperatively under the guidance of trained students, called PAL leaders, [often] from the year above” (Bournemouth University, www.peerlearning.ac.uk).

PAL sessions typically take place in small groups, with two or three PAL leaders and no staff presence. There is no new content introduced at the sessions; rather, they serve as an opportunity for students to discuss existing material and their approaches to learning.

Peer Assisted Learning has the potential to benefit new students’ transition into Higher Education and enrich their learning, by involving students who have relatively recently gone through the transition process themselves. For the PAL leaders, the experience provides not only the opportunity to refresh their subject knowledge, but also to develop employability skills such as leadership, facilitation, project-management, communication and inter-personal skills. As such, PAL leadership activities are eligible for accreditation via the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) and can be used as a basis for completing the Leicester Award for Employability (http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/careers-new/exp/la).

How do I set up a PAL scheme in my department?

There is no one-fits-all model of Peer Assisted Learning, and departments will want to take into account a number of factors including their students’ needs, the course structure and available resources when deciding on the design of their scheme. However, both our experiences and published research indicate that Peer Assisted Learning works best when it is an integral part of the department’s learning environment (Wadoodi and Crosby, 2002).
A number of options which departments might want to consider are outlined in Fig. 1.

**How can we create an effective PAL experience?**

- **Can PAL leaders work in pairs to co-run sessions?**
  
  *Co-run sessions have been shown to work well in our experience and in published evaluations.*

- **Can PAL Leaders be more senior students?**
  
  *Many students appreciate guidance from students who have "been through the same experience recently".*

- **Can sessions be linked to module content?**
  
  *A clear focus, ideally linked to assessed work, which is effectively communicated to the participants can raise attendance and motivation.*

- **Can students be assigned to a PAL leader/group?**
  
  *Assigning students is likely to lead to higher engagement with the scheme.*

- **Could sessions be timetabled and rooms booked?**
  
  *Various options exist here, including PAL leaders organising sessions independently, or staff booking a single venue for several groups concurrently. The ideal - booking seminar rooms for each discussion group, might not be achievable.*

- **Can we develop an expectation of attendance?**
  
  *Attendance is a challenge, and may be improved by endorsement by academics and students within the department.*

*Figure 1: Factors that affect the success of a PAL scheme*
Senior PAL leaders

Once the scheme has run once within a department, a number of past PAL leaders can be recruited to senior PAL leader positions, to ensure that previous experience, good practice and any developed resources are captured and passed on. Senior PAL leaders can also act to assist with coordination of the scheme, as a link between the Departmental Academic Contact and PAL leaders, and to take the lead in evaluating the scheme. Role specifications for liaising academics, Student Learning Development advisers, senior PAL leaders and PAL leaders are provided below.

HEAR and Leicester Award requirements

Students who take part in PAL can receive recognition on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), by attending training and debriefing sessions, and by facilitating a minimum number of sessions (Fig. 2). Students can also opt to complete the Leicester Award for Employability, which in addition to the HEAR criteria requires students to reflect on the skills they have developed through PAL, and relate them to a future career. The Leicester Award is assessed through a presentation and a portfolio, by the Career Development Service.

Many previous PAL leaders have found completing the Leicester Award to be a valuable experience, as it encourages them to consider their future career path and identify relevant employability skills:

“The Leicester Award is something that is regarded very highly and so I believe it is very valuable”. PAL leader
“The Leicester Award allowed me to acknowledge what skills I already have and also skills I have gained throughout the experience. As a result I feel more confident in applying for jobs”.  

PAL leader

An overview of the scheme

The scheme runs across the academic year, with significant milestones outlined below (Fig. 3):

![Figure 3: Milestones in the PAL scheme](image_url)

Role specifications

Departmental Academic Contact:

- Liaison with Student Learning Development (Leicester Learning Institute), departmental staff members and students to design a suitable and effective departmental PAL scheme
- Recruitment of PAL and senior PAL leaders
- Co-design and co-teaching of PAL leader training, in conjunction with Student Learning Development and senior PAL leaders (Student Learning Development can provide adaptable resources and lead on this)
- Ongoing liaison with departmental staff members, senior PAL leaders and PAL leaders to coordinate the scheme, including guidance in relation to content, relevance and feedback from sessions, and support with communication/publicity and attendance monitoring
- Running two debriefing sessions during the academic year (mid/end) in conjunction with senior PAL leaders
• Liaise with senior PAL leaders, PAL leaders and Student Learning Development to evaluate the scheme (it is envisaged that senior PAL leaders will lead on this)
• Verify scheme involvement and session attendance by PAL leaders and senior PAL leaders, to enable them to fulfil HEAR and Leicester Award experience criteria
• Lead on implementing any identified changes/improvements to the scheme

**Student Learning Development Contact:**

• Support for Departmental Academic Contact with design of the scheme (e.g. insight into existing schemes, materials and templates such as online application forms, contract for PAL leaders outlining boundaries and responsibilities etc.)
• Leading role on training for PAL and senior PAL leaders (in liaison with Departmental Academic Contact and senior PAL leaders)
• Ongoing support for Departmental Academic Contact for the scheme
• Support for senior PAL leaders, Departmental Academic Contact and PAL leaders with evaluation of the scheme
• Liaison with the Career Development Service to secure HEAR/Leicester Award accreditation for candidate students

**PAL leader:**

• Attend required training
• Work with other PAL leaders, senior PAL leaders, the Departmental Academic Contact and Student Learning Development Contact to plan a programme of PAL sessions
• Lead assigned PAL sessions
• Monitor participant attendance
• Attend debriefing sessions to reflect on progress and facilitation techniques
• Liaise with senior PAL leaders, Departmental Academic Contact and Student Learning Development Contact as appropriate to assist with the evaluation of the scheme

**Senior PAL leader:**

• Co-design and co-teaching of PAL leader training session
• Acting as a link between PAL leaders and Departmental Academic Contact, sharing resources and assisting with PAL leaders’ queries
• Co-facilitation of two debriefing sessions for PAL leaders
• Leading on the evaluation of the scheme and suggestions for future changes/improvements

**What do I do next?**

If you are interested in setting up a PAL scheme or would like to speak to us, please contact Marta Ulanicka ([marta.ulanicka@le.ac.uk](mailto:marta.ulanicka@le.ac.uk)) or Dr Alexandra Patel ([alexandra.patel@le.ac.uk](mailto:alexandra.patel@le.ac.uk)).
Reference
