

AdvanceHE

+ Student-led peer learning and support

Part 4 - Case studies of practice

Edited by Carly Emsley-Jones



Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Transition into university	5
2.1	Peer Assisted Learning at Bradford: An institution-wide model for support student transition, employability and belonging	5
2.2	Building Belonging: The vital role of peer support in enhancing student retention	6
2.3	The Hello Project: Promoting and nurturing intercultural awareness	7
2.4	UWE Bristol's Peer Assisted Learning scheme: Empowering students to build self-efficacy	9
3	Collaboration through co-creation	10
3.1	Supporting new and existing schemes through a centralised peer mentoring structure	10
3.2	Peer to Peer Support at Edge Hill University: Student Advisors (UniSkills)	11
3.3	Peer-Led Team Learning in First Year Chemistry at the University of Texas at El Paso	12
3.4	Learning Development Mentor Initiative	14
4	Embedded in the curriculum	15
4.1	BSc Psychology Peer Mentoring: Peer Adviser Scheme (PAS)	15
4.2	Peer-led simulation-based learning within diagnostic imaging education	16
4.3	Supporting student achievement and experience through Student Learning Assistants at Middlesex University	17
4.4	Development of a Peer Assisted Learning scheme for first-year engineering students	18
5	Addressing attainment	20
5.1	The impact of Academic Peer Mentoring on Foundation Degree students at Kingston University	20
5.2	Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL)	21

5.3	The impact of peer learning on assessment literacy	22
6	Supporting diverse student populations	24
6.1	Enhancing Belonging and Success: A case study of the ethnic minority peer mentoring programme at the University of Exeter Medical School	24
6.2	Diversity within the new Signpost Peer Mentoring team	25
6.3	Cultivating student peer support at University of Southampton 2016-2023 and beyond.	26
6.4	Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) initiative for Access and International Foundation Programme students at Technological University (TU) Dublin.	27
6.5	Exeter's Disabled Student Peer Mentoring Scheme: A case study in co-creation and supporting marginalised student groups.	29
7	Enhancing employability skills	30
7.1	Accreditation for the Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) Leadership module at an Irish higher education institution	30
7.2	Student-Peer Trainer Project	31
7.3	The enhancement of employability skills through peer mentoring	32
7.4	Developing and recognising student leaders' skills – skills audits, coaching, digital badges and awards	34
8	References	36

Student led peer-learning and support – Case studies of practice

Carly Emsley-Jones

1 Introduction

This report detailing case studies following a sector-wide survey into peer learning and support practices constitutes part four of a wider compendium of evidence into student-led peer learning and support in higher education. An [executive summary document can be found here](#).

To understand current practice in the sector, a request for contributions in the form of a case study was shared with the 69 respondents who completed the mapping survey and various professional networks. These included The Association of Peer Learning and Support, The Staff and Educational Development Association, RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) Network, The Change Agents' Network, and The Learning Development in Higher Education Network. We encouraged submissions which could address specific themes including co-creation, retention, attainment, underrepresented student groups, wellbeing, and employability, although submissions outside of these themes were also welcomed and considered.

2 Transition into university

2.1 Peer Assisted Learning at Bradford: An institution-wide model for support student transition, employability and belonging

Ruth Lefever, University of Bradford

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) at Bradford is an example of a cross-institutional academic peer learning scheme that strives to enhance the student learning experience by utilising and enabling peer interaction and support. Our PAL model operates across a wide range of disciplines and is open to every programme, with key principles underpinning each scheme, with central management and evaluation shaping its development and impact.

PAL was initially established as a pilot using a National HE STEM funding grant in 2012 and now operates in each of our four faculties. Its design and ongoing development are shaped by sector evidence and best practice, and it connects and reports to the institution's Learning, Teaching & Student Experience Strategy, as well as having featured in other strategic level activity such as the Access & Participation Plan, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and programme-level accreditations.

PAL has two central aims: to aid student transition into and through HE study, and the development of key employability skills for the student peer leaders. Another key driver is to help develop a sense of community and belonging.

Students in higher levels are trained as PAL Leaders each year to facilitate student-led PAL sessions for new(er) students that are timetabled as part of the programme of study. Content is determined by the students themselves and is largely of academic focus. The

PAL Leader role is voluntary, and focus is given to the developmental opportunity that students stand to gain and University recognition for this via certification and inclusion on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

All evaluative activity is framed by the key aims of the scheme and ongoing evaluation is embedded into its design. This includes a debrief programme, mid-way and end of scheme evaluation sessions, recipient feedback questionnaire, and programme staff feedback. Uniquely we believe to Bradford, our Leaders submit an e-portfolio to record their achievements and development in the role. These include session plans, logs, skills audits and action planning, evidencing employability capabilities, and a final reflective statement. The portfolios therefore act as an employability record for the Leaders and a source of evaluative data for the managing team.

Our approach has continued to show the impact that PAL has for both new(er) students and PAL Leaders. Recipients have highlighted the opportunity to learn from the experiences of peers in higher levels, friendship development, and support with settling in. For Leaders, PAL offers a learning opportunity to develop key capabilities and graduate attributes and each year they report and demonstrate higher level personal and professional skills development (such as innovation, problem solving, and leadership). For both groups, important themes regarding employability and future goals, course/skills development or engagement with study have materialised, as well as how PAL can support a sense of belonging for those involved, and community development in their department. This is reinforced by the wider sector evidence on improved academic and social confidence, students taking greater ownership of their learning experience, and for supporting community/belonging and therefore retention and success (Thomas 2012, Keenan 2014, Ford *et al.*, 2015).

2.2 Building Belonging: The vital role of peer support in enhancing student retention

Carly Emsley-Jones, Cardiff University

The Student Mentor Scheme at Cardiff University was established in 2012 with the aim of supporting first-year undergraduate students with their transition into university. During this time we have trained over 5,000 student mentors (who are experienced undergraduate students) to provide academic and non-academic support to over 40,000 first-year students.

Student mentors help first-year students by offering impartial, up-to-date advice based on shared experiences, and are equipped to signpost students to many of the support services offered by the university. Every first-year student can connect with a student mentor from the same academic school and their student mentor will contact them before they arrive at university. Our evidence demonstrates that peer support can develop positive peer-to-peer relationships, create a sense of belonging, and even limit the potential of withdrawal.

Each student mentor is responsible for a group of first-year students to encourage social connections to be developed at course level. The 2022-23 feedback illustrates that 85% of students ($n = 342$) felt comfortable talking to their mentor about their university experiences and 69% of students ($n = 280$) said that the scheme helped them to develop positive student-to-student relationships. Feedback shared from a first-year student also reinforces this, “The mentor scheme is good because sometimes advice from another student is more reassuring; I also gained friends on my course through the mentor scheme” (2023).

According to Lizzio & Wilson (2010) developing connections with students and staff creates a strong sense of belonging. In 2022-23, 73% of students ($n = 293$) said that having a student mentor helped them settle into and feel part of Cardiff University. 78% was the highest percentage reported in 2016-17 ($n = 293$) and this decreased to an average of 65% during the Covid-19 pandemic. To help develop a sense of belonging, student mentors can support first-year students to navigate their way around campus and show them their nearest library and study spaces as well as inform them of events and support services available.

Student mentors can support with academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993) which is exemplified by the following student feedback, “It’s really helped me settle into university life. The new way of living/studying was overwhelming at first and the mentoring scheme has made it a lot easier. It has enabled my work to be as good as possible” (first-year student, 2023). For some students, the integration into university life can be challenging to navigate. In 2022-23, 28% ($n = 111$) of first-year students considered withdrawing from university and 44% ($n = 58$) of those reported that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay. Between 2016-2023, a total of 711 first-year students considered withdrawing, but 69% ($n = 491$) of those stated that having a student mentor influenced their decision to stay, which is significant.

To summarise, having positive relationships with peers contributes to a greater sense of belonging which, in turn, will support student retention. This demonstrates that peer support is powerful and contributes to a positive transition into university. We encourage a personalised experience as every first-year student has their own story, and this scheme presents an opportunity for them to share it.

2.3 The Hello Project: Promoting and nurturing intercultural awareness

Dr Helen Bowstead, University of Plymouth

The UK Council for International Student Affairs #WeAreInternational Student Charter states that host institutions should create a “welcoming, inclusive, and equitable environment for international students in the UK” (UKCISA, 2022, 5). It also recommends that targeted support should be made available in every area of the student experience, including

“assisting international students to navigate socially and culturally, by proactively facilitating the integration of domestic and international students” (UKCISA, 2022, 7).

In 2011, research into the experiences of international students studying at the University of Plymouth had found that many struggled with “non-academic aspects of their life in the UK, notably isolation from the body of home students” (McMahon, 2011, 412). In fact, disappointment in failing to develop meaningful relationships with domestic students emerged as a fundamental theme running through the international student experience. Launched in 2014, the Hello Project set out to address this specific issue. The key aim of the Hello Project is to facilitate a better integration between international students and students already studying at the university by matching newly arrived international students - particularly direct entry students joining programmes in the second or third year of study – with a more experienced student ‘buddy’. The Hello Project Buddies are recruited from the University of Plymouth’s pool of student ambassadors and receive supplementary training in intercultural awareness and cross-cultural communication to help foster the development of meaningful relationships and access to ‘everyday’ English language support.

In 2019, a UKCISA funded project into the impact of the Hello Project found that international students and their buddies both cited opportunities for friendship, socialising and meeting other students as the leading benefits of the scheme. The focus group discussions revealed numerous examples of how engagement in the Hello Project impacted positively on international students’ lives and integration to the UK. Alongside growing confidence to use English in everyday settings, the benefits mentioned by international students related to emotional wellbeing, the development of cultural and local knowledge, and gaining insights to the general structure/processes of UK higher education. In addition, although international students did not expect or report benefits to their academic performance stemming from participation, statistical analysis showed a significant association between participation in the Hello Project and higher marks (McMahon, Webb, and Schaefer, 2019, 25).

The Hello Project benefits a considerable number and variety of stakeholders. It has supported over 1,500 international students and more than 300 students have had the opportunity to train as a buddy. The blueprint for good practice provided by the Hello Project demonstrates how HE providers can address some of the core responsibilities towards international students outlined in UKCISA’s #WeAreInternational Student Charter. The Hello Project provides early, valuable information and reassurance about the support international students can access to facilitate the transition into life and study in the UK. It provides opportunities for all participants to develop the valuable skills and insights that contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the benefits of making connections across a rich and diverse student body.

2.4 UWE Bristol's Peer Assisted Learning scheme: Empowering students to build self-efficacy

Jo Lewis, University of the West of England

Since becoming part of Library Learning Services in 2016, the University of the West of England's Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme has supported students to build confidence and develop self-efficacy through coaching and mentoring approaches. From induction, PAL sessions afford new starters the opportunity to meet students in the years above – trained PAL Leaders - who have walked the walk, and benefit from their insider knowledge and lived experience of campus, University systems, processes, and services, and of being a UWE Bristol student.

During these initial peer-led group sessions, Foundation and Year 1 students on programmes with PAL are actively encouraged to consider their learning preferences and goals for the year, explore ways of engaging with the wider university community as well as consolidate what they have learned about their programme and tutor expectations at induction. Through ice breakers and pair/group activities, these new starters start to share tips, motivations and concerns, ask questions, and form friendship groups too.

Wearing their mentor, facilitator and role model 'hats', PAL Leaders facilitate scaffolded sessions or mentoring interactions throughout both terms, enabling their students to consolidate and stretch their understanding of their discipline and practise their programme-related and academic skills within a safe and collaborative environment. In short, by helping students to be resourceful and act as a resource to others, UWE Bristol's PAL provision supports student transition, academic confidence and wellbeing, progression, and a sense of belonging.

Longitudinal data analysis has shown that UWE Bristol's PAL provision is successful for both student participants and PAL Leaders in achieving objectives linked to personal and academic development, particularly in relation to boosting confidence and enhancing programme understanding, to creating employability opportunities and developing soft skills, and to fostering a sense of belonging to university and programme. This analysis also attests that the scheme supports inclusivity and widening access and participation.

PAL Leaders have provided feedback on the skills they have gained and the impact on their personal development: "Mentoring will be a huge part of desired teaching career. I was asked in an interview question recently how to engage people who were not responsive, so felt really comfortable answering that. Also, an understanding of contracting and boundaries has helped as this has come up in interview questions too" (Senior PAL Leader, 2021).

By complementing the other coaching approaches across UWE Bristol, PAL focuses on supporting incoming students' transition and adaptation to university life and on guiding them to the other coaching approaches to be found across the University, e.g., 1:1s with student experience coaches, specialist coaching for careers or personal tutors. Using coaching and

mentoring techniques to mentor students helps to empower students to seek their own solutions and encourages them to work together to support each other.

3 Collaboration through co-creation

3.1 Supporting new and existing schemes through a centralised peer mentoring structure

Lottricia Millett and Julia Pointon-Haas, King's College London

The Centralised Peer Mentoring Structure is the name of a supportive framework that aims to improve and maintain the quality and consistency of peer mentoring programmes across King's College London (King's) and King's College London Students' Union (KCLSU). It is delivered out of KCLSU by the Peer Support Coordinator and several student staff. The structure includes materials such as training, evaluation, and an award as well as resources for use during recruitment and at socials, plus a dedicated webpage for all schemes to be listed. The framework incorporates a Peer Support Community of Practice made up of student and staff leads of peer mentoring and peer assisted learning schemes, as well as those who don't lead a scheme but have an interest in peer support. The Peer Support Community of Practice is hosted on Teams and meets bi-monthly to discuss topics related to peer mentoring. The materials mentioned above are also shared via this Teams site. As of February 2024, the Peer Support Community of Practice has 55 members.

The Centralised Peer Mentoring Structure was launched under this name in September 2023 and began as a co-creation initiative called the Peer Support Development Project. This started in March 2022 and went through five phases: Mapping & Understanding, Building, Mid-Project Evaluation, Implementation, and End-of-Project Evaluation. Nine student staff worked with the Peer Support Coordinator on the first three phases, the first of which involved meeting with scheme leads across the university and students' union, then writing up short reports on the findings. The building phase saw the team apply the findings to the creation of supportive resources, collaborating with King's Careers & Employability on the award and offering scheme leads the opportunity to give feedback on the other drafts so that the finished product would continue to be informed by the needs of those running the programmes. The Mid-Project Evaluation summarised the data collected in the Mapping & Understanding phase.

Two student staff worked with the Peer Support Coordinator on the final two phases. In the Implementation phase, the team monitored the usage of the project resources through surveys, data insight tools and monthly meetings with the Peer Support Community of Practice. Towards the end of this phase, the student staff arranged and led on meetings with mentors, mentees, and scheme leads to collect additional qualitative data. The End-of-Project Evaluation summarised the findings from the Implementation phase and set out recommendations for the future. By the end of the 2022/23 academic year, 210 mentors had

successfully completed the training and 22 had finished the award with a pass. The three evaluations distributed at the start, middle, and end of the year had collectively received 41 responses.

The final report concluded that the role of the Peer Support Coordinator was critical to ensuring that King's and KCLSU harness the potential of peer mentoring to improve student transition, belonging, and wellbeing in a consistent way. Moving forward, we will use this structure to encourage new peer mentoring and peer learning programmes to start and improve existing programmes collaboratively.

3.2 Peer to Peer Support at Edge Hill University: Student Advisors (UniSkills)

Christine Anderton, Edge Hill University

The Library and Learning Services Student Engagement team (SET) are the centralised academic skills support service (collectively known as UniSkills) for all undergraduate (UG) and taught postgraduate (PGT) students. SET currently employ a team of six Student Advisors (SAs) who provide help, support, and guidance to other students on a peer-to-peer basis as part of the UniSkills offer.

The SA role was first introduced in 2011 to support students to develop a range of introductory academic skills and boost their confidence with using research tools to find resources, navigating the VLE, referencing, proofreading strategies, and assessment preparations. Pre-pandemic the SAs worked set shifts and were stationed at one of the Library Helpdesks to provide academic skills support alongside the academic Librarians. SAs also began assisting SET Academic Skills Advisors when delivering classroom induction sessions for new students and designing and delivering their own student led workshops.

In 2018 we relocated into a brand-new building on campus alongside Student Services and Careers, called Catalyst. This move saw additional adaptations introduced to the SA role as they began delivering student led Catalyst tours for new and prospective students, offering self-bookable 15-minute appointments and providing digital content during key campaigns for social media channels and blogs. When the pandemic hit in 2020, they provided support digitally, co-designing and co-delivering their own online workshops, supporting Academic Skills Advisors (ASAs) as chat buddies in UniSkills workshops, captioning recorded content and creating digital content for UniSkills campaigns. Since the return to campus, the SA role has further adapted and they now work in a hybrid capacity, supporting and conducting work remotely and on campus, as required.

In 2021 the SAs won Student Team of the Year at the University's Careers Awards. The nomination praised the SAs for how they had managed the transition to offering virtual

support, the positive impact to the students they had supported and quickly learning and adapting to new ways of delivering support.

At the end of each academic year all SAs are offered the opportunity to attend a bespoke support session facilitated by the University's Careers team, focussing on employability. The session is a chance for the SAs to reflect on their role, recognise the skills and experiences they developed and apply these to prospective graduate jobs. Many SAs have progressed into postgraduate study and secured graduate jobs before leaving the University. Careers also offer an additional employability award called 'Extra Edge', in which students can gain points through completion of key activities and being employed as an SA counts towards this scheme.

In 2022/2023 a bespoke high-level evaluation of student communications across Catalyst Services was conducted. The insights from the Student Communications Project identified a need for a robust review of peer support across the three services, and this will be undertaken in 2023/2024.

3.3 Peer-Led Team Learning in First Year Chemistry at the University of Texas at El Paso

Professor James E. Becvar, Associate Professor Geoffrey B. Saupe, Georgina Bugarini and Paulina Trevino, University of Texas at El Paso

The robust 24-year Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program at University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) now employs 60 undergraduate Peer Leaders (PLs) facilitating student learning in first-year chemistry. Because every PL in the UTEP program is trained as the only authority figure in each workshop session, PLs take chances as they try new ways to foster learner participation. Peer Leaders are encouraged to think 'What Will Be Their Contribution to the Literature on Learning'? The mature nature of the UTEP PLTL program results in PLs dealing with 'how to advance' the program rather than just 'grappling to understand' what they are supposed to be doing.

PLTL engenders life-long learners. Leaders deal with human idiosyncrasies, fears, foibles, reluctances, and psychological problems. Peer leading is human-to-human interaction, a good antidote for today's educationally isolating technologies and student marginalisations. The UTEP program optimises active learning strategies to deliver holistic outcomes. PLs develop skills in leadership, problem-solving, communication, entrepreneurship, social responsibility, confidence, teamwork, reflective practice, critical thinking, and degree completion. The program provides positive faculty-student interaction and co-development of successful learning approaches.

PLTL permeates the fabric of the students it impacts. For example:

Testimonials

“PLTL at UTEP is a big family. The relationship with the chemistry professors can lead to a letter of recommendation and they encourage us to “break the ice” to speak with other professors. This position has inspired me to eventually become a professor (and to earn a Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering). I am very grateful for the PLTL program at UTEP and highly encourage other universities to adopt this program to increase students' understanding.”

“As a Peer Leader, I have witnessed my students forming study groups, actively engaging in lecture discussions, explaining concepts to each other, and fostering a culture of competitive learning. Students come together to tackle problems, exchange study strategies, and articulate concepts. PLs form after-hours study groups in other courses, provide support within organisations, and enjoy social activities together. I have formed enduring friendships navigating the challenges of Organic Chemistry I and II, participating in pre-med organisations like the Minority Association of Pre-med Students at UTEP, and sharing leisure activities such as pickleball, table tennis, movies, and dining out; our bonds have deepened beyond the academic sphere.”

Five UTEP PLs (Marin, 2022; Martinez, 2022; Chavez Saenz, 2022; Torres, 2023; Carreon-Morales, 2023 [in addition to the 12 Peer Leader authors of essays in Love and Becvar (2021)]) tell their Stories (Becvar, 2023) as sole authors of their PL experiences in the online journal *Advances in Peer-Led Learning*, APLL. The UTEP PLTL Program is a creativity engine and leadership-proving ground.

Paramount among the accomplishments of the UTEP PLTL Program is using donated intellectual property (IP) to self-fund the PLTL Program. As described in Becvar and Saupe (2021), each semester PLs revise the two workbooks used in the workshops. This co-creation process provides over \$100,000 annually in support of facilitation of learning. PLs donate their IP to a non-profit organisation (Lead For America Corporation) so that the workbooks can be published and sold to fund PL salaries. Twice-annual revisions of the workbooks by PLs provides successive teams of PLs a renewing opportunity for authorship. This process can be exported to other institutions with undergraduate facilitators of learning.

3.4 Learning Development Mentor Initiative

Sheryl Mansfield, University of Northampton

In September 2021, the University of Northampton launched a Learning Development (LD) Mentor Initiative. The aim was to create a service providing a student perspective of study skills in an engaging and timely manner. The Student Learning Assistant Model (Price *et al.*, 2019) was adopted to support students from any subject discipline across the institution. This approach offered a peer led space based on parity and equality (Collier, 2015) and took on many different formats. Projects were co-created by LD Mentors and their Line Managers, and suitable training and guidance offered empowering the LD Mentors to feel part of the team.

Annually, nine LD Mentors are recruited using a model with built-in continuity and succession planning. It is hoped that the current second years will elect to continue the role into their third year, annually opening vacancies for new second year students to be recruited. All LD Mentors work around their studies for four hours a week for 40 weeks. They are employed as a member of staff and wear both their student and staff lanyard as well as a badge indicating their unique role as a fellow student. They are developed as individuals throughout their employment and treated as colleagues. This is powerful and makes each of the LD Mentors feel valued and instils from the outset that their voices are important to the role.

One of the key drivers for the initiative was to reach students who do not currently use Learning Development. The LD Mentors were offered the autonomy to create a project to support this goal. In the beginning, small suggestions from the LD Mentors were implemented and soon the LD Mentors understood that their voice created change within the organisation. The LD Mentors then created larger projects and co-created tasks and projects in the physical and digital spaces to widen the reach of the LD provision. LD Mentors embraced social media to push content on study skills and designed branding to market the initiative. Audiograms were created to offer a different output to study packs and video already available. LD Mentors reviewed resources and co-created the university's plagiarism awareness course making it the first resources designed by students for students. The LD Mentors created events showcasing their support in addition to offering formal ways to initiate dialogue with peers via tutorial and drop-ins. Their proactive push to promote awareness of the team has established an ongoing presence at open days to encourage recruitment. New projects this year include outreach in halls of residence, using social media to engage with males, and resources on academic integrity and the use of artificial intelligence. Each year the projects may change, but every year ideas are initiated by the LD Mentors and support is given to ensure its success.

4 Embedded in the curriculum

4.1 BSc Psychology Peer Mentoring: Peer Adviser Scheme (PAS)

Dr Elizabeth Freeman, Sheffield Hallam University

In BSc Psychology peer mentoring – the Peer Adviser Scheme (PAS) – has been developed and co-designed with students for several years to improve student experience, retention, continuation, progression, and wellbeing. Mentors are an integral part of the course and are involved in induction activity for level 4, level 5 and level 6 students and are linked to academic advising modules, course events, course enhancement activity (e.g. Writing Retreats and Booster Week – a co-designed academic, personal and professional support week for struggling students). Mentors also provide 1-1 and group support to students and design and provide bespoke student support resources, videos, and events/ sessions (e.g., study groups (PASS) and animal therapy sessions). Mentors also created a Peer Adviser Instagram to facilitate student voice, communication, and connection to students and to foster a sense of community. This has been very successful, and students engage with the posts. Each year, as new mentors come into the scheme, it evolves and improves.

Benefits are clear for both mentees and mentors. Mentees improve in confidence, motivation and engagement in studies and often become mentors which benefits them even more. For example, after support from Peer Advisers before, during and after a Booster Week intervention, level 5 students, who were previously barely attending university and had lost confidence due to challenges in their life, were attending over 90% of their classes in their final year and improved their grades from 2:2 to 2:1 and in some instances a 1st. Some students who were going to withdraw from university engaged with the scheme then became mentors. Both mentees and mentors state they feel part of a wider community of support than before they joined or participated. Mentors benefit through the experience of co-creation and co-designing interventions and events which are central to the mentoring scheme principles and delivery, instilling confidence, creative thinking, and teamwork. They also benefit from leadership opportunities that the scheme provides. Mentors can volunteer for lead roles (e.g., Mature Student Lead) and in their second year of being a mentor can become a Senior Peer Adviser, acknowledging and rewarding effort and dedication.

The scheme provides training and digital badges for LinkedIn to all mentors and endorsements are provided to those who show exceptional efforts in their contributions and innovations, all of which improves their CV, career readiness and employability. In 2021, during the Covid 19 pandemic, four mentors were supported to publish in the RAISE journal of Student Engagement, and many of our mentors have gone onto highly skilled employability, such as assistant psychologist positions and PhDs and use the peer adviser co-ordinator as their referee.

More broadly, mentors are a great way to gain and act on student voice throughout the year. The Peer Adviser Scheme has contributed to the department's TEF, and several courses have started to implement their own mentoring schemes in their courses, including MSc Developmental Psychology, and Humanities courses. I aim to continue supporting other courses and universities in implementing a co-designed mentoring scheme and to research its enablers, barriers, and benefits.

4.2 Peer-led simulation-based learning within diagnostic imaging education

Morgyn Sneddon, Glasgow Caledonian University

Whilst the implementation of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) for clinical training is relatively straightforward within most Allied Health Professions programmes, Diagnostic Imaging (DI) is an outlier. Due to the legislation surrounding the use of ionising radiation, most PAL formats are unsuitable, as a fully trained staff member (or operator under the regulatory nomenclature) must always be present. With the benefits of PAL widely accepted (Burgess *et al.* 2020), the programme team were keen to explore other ways in which to utilise this model.

Simulation activities were devised which would allow the students to take part in PAL opportunities within the lower stakes setting of the University x-ray suite. The activities designed reflected the learning outcomes of a level 3 clinical practice module and provided specific practice for a clinical based summative assessment.

Final year DI students were invited to act as tutors facilitating a scenario based on imaging the challenging patient. Three level 4 students volunteered to run the session, each role-playing the patient, the patient's relative/carer or a radiographer, taking direction from a semi-structured script but ultimately having the autonomy to direct the encounter. The students were given guidance on what types of challenges or behaviours should be encountered and were directed to let the junior students take responsibility during the activity and provide feedback at the end. A tutor observed from the anteroom but did not directly take part.

Four half hour sessions were offered to the level 3 students, with space in each session for three students. In total, eight students opted to attend. They were briefed on the session by the tutor, instructed that they should lead the examinations and only look to the level 4 student acting as radiographer for guidance if required. After the examination was complete, the peers provided insights on what the mentees did well and offered hints and tips on how to enhance their practice, drawing on their own experiences for context. A tutor was on hand to help scaffold the conversations if required.

The junior students described improved confidence after the session, as expected. They reported feeling more relaxed asking questions, as the senior students were perceived as being more accessible. They saw the encounter as less threatening and more relaxed overall.

Whilst this was a successful outcome, more surprising was the reaction of the peer students. The tutors who oversaw the session witnessed a growing confidence, reporting that they felt the session was in many ways more beneficial for them than the intended cohort. The students themselves described an increased confidence, which was particularly welcomed as they prepared for graduation and their preceptorship year:

Testimonials

“As I near qualification, I feel much more confident in my skill to become a successful practitioner, but these sessions have really furthered my trust in myself.”

“I have demonstrated that I can be an encouraging and engaging leader, and have genuinely loved sharing knowledge with others.”

Formal investigation of the benefits of this model of learning is proposed.

4.3 Supporting student achievement and experience through Student Learning Assistants at Middlesex University

Simbo Ajayi, Middlesex University

Middlesex University’s Student Learning Assistants (SLAs) scheme is embedded within the curriculum with approximately 250 SLAs co-facilitating learning with academics in taught sessions. This unique peer assisted learning model offers a progressive approach to student achievement and experience within the context of our widening participation institution. Internal data indicate that one third of our students are from deprived areas, 70% of our 18 year olds intake come from BAME backgrounds, 30% hold BTEC qualifications, 45% are first generation in their household to enter Higher Education and 28% classified as mature (Middlesex University, 2024). SLAs typically undertake an adjunct role in learning environments where the academic is teaching and the students are learning, thereby catering for some of the needs of our student demographics.

Supporting their peers primarily during taught sessions, SLAs reinforce learning in real time, facilitate timely interventions, lend insightful feedback to academics, and enhance students' experience. For instance, a Foundation Year Business Module Leader commented on the impact an SLA made in supporting a mature international student who achieved a borderline pass during her first assignment. The academic and SLA discussed intervention options and agreed that the SLA allocate some time in each class to work closely with this student to share tips and encouragement for completing tasks in class. The support provided resulted in the student building confidence, engaging more in class and achieving 62% in the second assignment. The student acknowledged the positive impact of the SLA's role on their progress. This view was echoed in our 10-year review of the SLA scheme where a student focus group observed that SLAs "make the seminars more interesting..., are a bridge between the students and the tutor...make it easier for us students to relate to the topic."

The impact on student outcomes is made possible by robust training and collaborating with academics before and during the tenure of their roles. This was particularly eminent during the Covid-19 pandemic where some SLAs employed reverse mentoring roles in supporting technology-enhanced teaching. In our review, one academic remarked that SLAs provide student perspectives on aspects of curriculum planning, teaching methods and tools. Another academic highlighted the essence of the student voice and relationships in planning and preparing to teach.

In our Science and Technology Faculty and certain creative disciplines, students are required to practise skills in labs, studios or skills workshops. The SLA role becomes an integral part of the academic team in some of these settings. For instance, in Computer Science programmes, our review reveals that as students practise the skills in the lab, SLAs, lecturers, technicians, and Graduate Academic Assistants are seen as equals by the students in providing support and guidance. This however presents issues regarding unclear SLA roles, power dynamics and role conflict.

Most importantly, our review highlighted SLAs benefit from the role by enhancing their graduate skills including communication, organisational, leadership, mentoring, and facilitation skills.

4.4 Development of a Peer Assisted Learning scheme for first-year engineering students

Dr Jonathan Cole, Queen's University Belfast

Students whose prior-educational and personal development as 16-18 year olds was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated isolation and alternative assessment arrangements, continue to need to adapt to the challenges of university study. Our Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme encourages engagement over struggling alone and aims to overcome the stigma of asking for help. PAL promotes collaboration and

communication, which encourages social confidence and more articulate interactions with others.

PAL has been embedded in the school culture since 2016. It was established to provide additional academic support for first-year students who may otherwise struggle with difficult subjects like mechanics of materials and thermodynamics along with the large class size restricting the extent of one-to-one attention. The format generally consists of two drop-in sessions per week in an open plan groupwork room. PAL sessions are marked on students' timetables, emphasising their place in the schedule, albeit attendance being voluntary. Mentors are second, third and final-year undergraduates and a new team is selected each year. Training has a general element (including communication, building rapport, group dynamics, guidelines) provided centrally plus a subject-specific element (decomposing engineering problems, School operational matters) provided by the academic coordinator. Advertising has been mainly through email and posters.

In 2017/18, 20% of first-year students used PAL at least once. Numbers peaked in 2018/19 with maximum attendance 31, a mean of 11, and often at least 20 students present. The pandemic caused a significant (but temporary) adjustment – use of MS Teams and graphics tablets. However, attendance in 2021/22 was poor. Recent mentors have been proactive and creative to recover engagement. Sessions with particular focus and specific to current needs (e.g. welcome event, thermodynamics revision quiz, SolidWorks support) were most popular. The nature of the class timetabled prior to the PAL session probably influences attendance at PAL. Our focus group research indicates good awareness of PAL and no barriers to attending. Some students simply prefer to work in their own small groups, commenting on the achievement of solving problems by themselves.

Testimonials demonstrate mentee development but in the context of independent learning:

Testimonials

"I liked how informal the sessions were, as I was able to work on whatever I needed to, with as little or as much help as I needed. I also liked how when I asked for help, I was still challenged to complete the question myself, rather than just being told the method and answer."

"I used the PAL mentors to help me understand what I was doing and learning throughout each process. This has proved invaluable helping me understand the key principles of various topics."

While the motivation for PAL was to support first-year students academically, additional benefits for mentors have included increased sense of community within the school, opportunity of an autonomous position of responsibility and reinforcement of own study skills and subject knowledge. The experience of going back to basics to help mentees rather than assuming knowledge, enabled one mentor to manage project teams more effectively by ensuring members understood the activities and deliverables. Conditions for a successful PAL scheme include invested and enthusiastic mentors, a suitable time and location for sessions, and effective advertising.

5 Addressing attainment

5.1 The impact of Academic Peer Mentoring on Foundation Degree students at Kingston University

Dr Mouhamad Khoder, Dr Hachemi Kadri and Rahila Mukhtar,
Kingston University London

The Pharmacy Department at Kingston University (KU), with its widening participation ethos, is committed to increasing access to higher education for everyone with the potential to succeed. In line with this, it offers a two-year Pharmaceutical and Chemical Sciences Foundation degree (FD) as an alternative and more accessible admission route to Pharmacy. Successful FD graduates progress to the second year Pharmacy. However, FD students often encounter challenges in pharmaceutical calculations and chemistry subjects impacting their attainment, retention, and overall progression rate.

The Academic Peer Mentoring programme at KU is a key component of the intervention strategies outlined in the KU Access and Participation Plan. This plan has been designed to reduce disparities in continuation, completion, and degree awards, particularly aiming to bridge the gaps in the outcomes of students from groups underrepresented in higher education. The programme pairs experienced students with less experienced ones, fostering a supportive learning community. This programme takes three forms: in-curricular/embedded, extra-curricular/mentor-led, and bespoke, allowing students to share experiences, concerns and advice while enhancing their subject knowledge and academic skills.

To address low attainment and retention in FD, in 2021-22, the mentor-led form of Academic Peer Mentoring was introduced to support FD students struggling in pharmaceutical calculations and chemistry. Early in the year, diagnostic tests were designed to help students gauge their need for additional learning support for these subjects. Approximately 20% of the cohort opted to join this programme. Higher-level pharmacy students were

recruited as Academic Peer Mentors and received the necessary training to deliver peer-led sessions. The peer-led sessions notably improved mentees' motivation and performance. In the first attempt of pharmaceutical calculations assessment, mentees' pass rate surpassed that of their non-mentee peers by 6.6%. Based on this promising outcome, the programme was expanded in 2022-23 to cover the chemistry subject. A more pronounced improvement was observed; the pass rate of the first sit of chemistry assessment increased by 15.2%.

Beyond academic success, a survey was conducted to collect feedback and has shown that the programme has positively impacted the personal growth of participating mentees, enhancing their crucial soft skills like communication and problem-solving. It has also boosted their confidence, teamwork abilities, and networking skills. Mentors have also benefited significantly, with improved leadership and coaching skills, effective communication, and motivation abilities.

Overall, this case study demonstrates that the mentor-led form of Academic Peer Mentoring proved beneficial in addressing disparities in retention and attainment, as well as in enhancing key soft skills for both mentees and mentors. It could serve as an effective model for other institutions seeking to create more accessible pathways to higher education and provide comprehensive support to students from groups underrepresented in higher education.

5.2 Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL)

Dr Lesley Ann Howell, Dr Sally Catherine Faulkner, Redwan Shahid and Professor Anthony Michael, Queen Mary University of London

Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) is an innovative pedagogical approach that has gained popularity in higher education settings due to its effectiveness in promoting student engagement, active learning, and improved academic outcomes. This case study explores the implementation of PLTL outside of the United States, specifically at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and its impact on student success.

PLTL is a structured educational approach that promotes collaborative learning in a group setting. In PLTL, students work together in small groups on a regular basis to actively engage with course material, solve problems and reinforce their understanding of the subject matter (Woodward *et al.*, 1993 and Gosser and Roth, 1998). A key feature of PLTL is the involvement of peer leaders; students who have successfully completed the module who facilitate group discussions. The overarching goal of PLTL is to create a student-centred learning environment that encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and a deeper understanding of the curriculum.

The PLTL program at QMUL (Shahid *et al.*, 2022) aims to boost retention rates, close awarding gaps, and enhance student belonging. Currently, it is integrated into seven degree programmes spanning two faculties. In the 2023/24 academic year, there are approximately 120 Peer Leaders guiding around 1000 undergraduate students. PLTL is mandatory and contributes up to 20% of the total module grade in most implementing modules. Each PLTL session comprises 8-12 students, assigned to specific groups for the module's duration, with attendance closely tracked. Groups meet biweekly for problem-solving activities and module-related discussions, led by Peer Leaders. Peer Leaders undergo comprehensive training at QMUL, including an in-person training day and an immersive online course with written materials, videos, and interactive content. This training concludes with a final online assessment for Peer Leader certification. Peer Leaders also receive ongoing support through biweekly 2-hour training sessions led by module organisers. Their role is officially recognised on students' HEAR transcripts.

The introduction of PLTL at QMUL has yielded several positive outcomes. Notably, there has been a significant increase in module averages, with Chemistry students experiencing a remarkable 6.26% rise compared to the previous year, demonstrating enhanced student performance in PLTL incorporated modules. Moreover, there has been a commendable reduction in awarding gaps, particularly among students identifying as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME), narrowing the gap to less than 2%.

Qualitative analysis has revealed elevated self-efficacy, confidence, and a heightened sense of belonging among students engaged in PLTL workshops. These findings underscore the efficacy of PLTL in cultivating a supportive learning environment, fostering collaborative problem-solving, sharing knowledge, and receiving feedback from their peers. Additionally, the PLTL programme has proven instrumental in the development of various graduate attributes and skills for participating students, encompassing communication, problem-solving, facilitation, and leadership skills. The implementation of PLTL at QMUL has had a positive impact on student outcomes. It fosters a sense of community among our students and has provided them with opportunities for active learning and engagement.

5.3 The impact of peer learning on assessment literacy

Neil Ford, University of Southampton

This case study explores the outcomes of Office for Students (OfS) funded research undertaken as part of the Catalyst B project 'Maximising student success through the development of self-regulation' (Evans *et al.*, 2019). The case researched the impact of attending structured peer learning sessions (based on SI-PASS) on the development of students' assessment literacy and feedback orientation and investigated whether peer learning could help to reduce attainment gaps for underrepresented student groups.

The research was undertaken at the University of Southampton and spanned two consecutive cohorts of first-year Business School students during the academic years 2017-18 (n=95) and 2018-19 (n=157). A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating validated pre and post-intervention psychometric scales for assessment literacy (Smith *et al.*, 2013) and feedback orientation (Linderbaum and Levy, 2010). Qualitative data was gathered through post-it note surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Student data in the form of historical attainment data for two large modules of study was also analysed. Overall, high attendance at peer learning sessions was found to have a positive effect on attainment: students with high peer learning session attendance consistently showed 5-10% improvement in performance compared to those with average or low attendance. It is important to note that whilst prior attainment was controlled, motivation or achievement bias were not explicitly controlled for.

Analysis of pre and-post intervention assessment literacy surveys showed some evidence that high engagement with peer learning led to greater gains in assessment understanding (students understanding of what they need to do to complete the assessment task) and assessment judgement (students' perception of how well their work met the assessment standards) (Evans *et al.* 2019). Specifically, analysis showed a statistically significant positive correlation between attendance and 'assessment understanding'. Students who attended more peer learning sessions reported stronger improvements in understanding what they needed to do to successfully meet the assessment requirements.

In the second year of the study, students also demonstrated improvements to assessment judgement. Before the intervention, students whose parents had attended university showed significantly higher scores for assessment judgement than first-generation students. Interestingly, first-generation students showed significantly higher improvements in assessment judgement after the intervention, effectively 'closing the gap' in assessment judgement. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews gave some insight into the mechanisms by which attending peer learning may help develop assessment literacy. Comments highlighted that Peer Leaders facilitated activities that aided first years in understanding assessment briefs and criteria. Respondents also reported Peer Leaders sharing experiences of assessment from their first year and peer learning sessions offered an informal, safe environment for discussing and benchmarking individual performance within the group.

This case study concludes that structured peer learning can significantly enhance assessment literacy. Attendees benefited from exploring their understanding of assignments with peers, sharing scholastic capital related to interpreting assessment briefs, and benchmarking their performance against the group. The findings suggest that peer learning is potentially valuable in addressing attainment gaps by facilitating the exchange of cultural and scholastic capital among students. This underscores the importance of integrating peer learning strategies to enhance the overall academic experience and success of students in higher education.

6 Supporting diverse student populations

6.1 Enhancing Belonging and Success: A case study of the ethnic minority peer mentoring programme at the University of Exeter Medical School

Dr Musarrat Maisha Reza, Dr Iveren Winifred Nyinoh, Dr Shaline Dhayal and Dr Vrinda Nayak, University of Exeter

In the UK, the persistent and concerning challenge of the awarding and progression gap between ethnic minority students and their white counterparts within higher education institutes has been well-documented. This gap is influenced by various factors, including a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging experienced by minority students. To address this pressing issue, our team at the Medical School devised an innovative and bespoke peer mentoring programme tailored to ethnic minority students. Our intervention seeks to develop a stronger sense of belonging among ethnic minority students by increasing communication and integration. This is especially critical in a context where diversity is still limited, such as in the case of the University of Exeter.

The Ethnic Minority Peer Mentoring Programme pairs ethnic minority students with seniors from their respective programmes for an entire academic year and we aim to match mentors and mentees based on ethnicity and gender according to their preference. Prospective mentors are recruited through the 'My Career Zone system' and receive annual training through the Peer Support team. To ensure mentors feel consistently supported, mentors are invited to participate in termly peer mentor meetings where they can share best practices, discuss mentorship challenges, and collaborate with academics to develop solutions for these challenges. This support system ensures that mentors can deliver the best possible guidance and assistance to their mentees.

The feedback from students who have participated in the program is overwhelmingly positive.

Testimonials

“As a member of the BAME community and having been a mentee, I have valued the great importance of having someone like a mentor that I can go to.”

“I participated in the mentee programme in my first year which really helped me with regards to my expectations on placement as well as standing my ground and being confident in the face of microaggressions.”

“I have volunteered as a peer mentor for juniors...thoroughly enjoyed the experience as not only was I able to reflect on my experiences when I was at their stage, but I was able to start developing a genuine connection with people from a similar background as me.”

In 2023, the scheme was nominated for the Peer Mentoring Awards and won the Best Programme of the Year Award out of 38 peer mentoring schemes at the University, in recognition of a programme that has made a significant impact on students by creating a supportive environment where everyone feels welcomed and valued, demonstrated through the innovative and effective approach.

The Ethnic Minority Peer Mentoring Programme within the Medical School stands as a fantastic example of how peer mentorship can address the unique challenges faced by ethnic minority students in higher education. By fostering a sense of belonging, offering tailored support, and providing a safe space for discussions of lived experiences, this program has made a profound difference in the lives of many students.

6.2 Diversity within the new Signpost Peer Mentoring team Marion Thomson, Aberystwyth University

Our Signpost Peer Mentoring scheme provides peer mentors to marginalised student groups; these can include care leavers, young adult carers or estranged students. In addition to these groups, we also offer a Signpost Mentor to International exchange students, students who are neurodiverse or gender diverse.

Aberystwyth University has always accepted applications from a wide variety of students who wish to become a Signpost Mentor. When recruiting for 2023-24 Signpost Mentors, we wanted to find out if applicants had experience or understanding of hard-to-reach or vulnerable people (e.g. overseas, care leavers, neurodiverse, gender diverse).

We had excellent responses within their application forms which showed the range of diversity within the new Signpost Mentoring team. Signpost Mentors receive in-person training which includes background on the diverse range of mentees/students; the use of open questions, active listening and confidentiality. Some Signpost Mentors had experience

as an overseas student, others had been on a year abroad so they knew what difficulties being a student in another country could present. They felt that they were able to relate to students who have come from overseas and help them navigate the new country they are studying in. Mentees appreciated practical day-to-day suggestions to immerse themselves in speaking English to enhance their learning of the language.

Some applicants identified as being neurodiverse and had reported that they needed support themselves when they arrived at university. As a Signpost Mentor, they felt they were able to offer alternative ways of working. Feedback we have had from mentees confirms that peer support from neurodiverse students has been very positive.

From a survey that we carried out with mentees, 88% confirmed that interactions they had with their Signpost Mentor were useful; they felt that they were well matched with them and felt that the level of support they were offered was appropriate for their needs. Signpost Mentors spoke about how their own experiences helped them to support a diverse range of students. One of the Signpost Mentors started university with a student who was a care leaver. They felt that this experience gave them a strong understanding and sympathy for those coming out of the care system and going into higher education.

When matching the Signpost Mentor and mentee, the special characteristics of both mentor and mentee were considered to be able to provide an ideal match. Our Signpost Mentors can signpost their mentees to various networks that are set up for gender diverse or neurodiverse students.

Carrying out a review on the diverse nature of our Signpost Mentors and mentees has shown how successful it was to include Mentors who have many different life experiences, characteristics, and skills to support mentees who are from marginalised student groups, care leavers, young adult carers or estranged students, international exchange students, and students who are neurodiverse or gender diverse.

6.3 Cultivating student peer support at University of Southampton 2016-2023 and beyond.

Emma Mansfield, University of Southampton

Peer Learning was first piloted at the University of Southampton by our Business School (SBS) in 2016. Available to new undergraduates, the aims of the scheme were to address first year failure and to encourage sense of community and belonging among new students. Business School students in their second/third/final year were recruited and trained to provide timetabled learning sessions. These were both academic and non-academic in nature but driven by student priorities. Group sizes aimed to be between 25 and 30 students per pair of Leaders, however this has increased with the rise in student numbers, without losing quality and engagement.

In 2022, the model that had such success in the Business School was applied within the department of Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM). Using institutional data, subjects were targeted for a Peer Learning pilot linked with our Access and Participation Plan (APP) objectives. This scheme received positive feedback from students and Leaders. This was not a targeted intervention and was available to students on the select subjects regardless of background. This scheme is running again for 2023/24 with an extended set of subjects, with plans to expand provision sustainably.

In evaluating both schemes, students have told us that Peer Learning provides support that is tangible, timely, and trustworthy. Students say Peer Learning sessions allow them to build social networks faster; some reflected that they met their closest friends through Peer Learning. Students also valued Peer Learning sessions as a safe space to ask questions, distinct from any of their taught sessions, allowing them to explore broader student experience issues, making university life seem less daunting.

With regards to Peer Leaders, the biggest benefits of being a Leader are employability and skills development e.g. communication, facilitation, and public speaking. The latter is something we witness develop over the 12 weeks they work with us. This positively influences students' self-efficacy and can be pivotal for students who perhaps discounted themselves from succeeding in their programme or as a Peer Leader. Leaders report valuing the opportunity to mentor others and connect with Peer Leaders from other programmes. Moreover, they value the role being a low number of hours for more substantial hourly pay (in context of the cost of living crisis) and the chance to gain meaningful work experience. Both schemes allow the sharing of good practice via staff development workshops and the university's student peer support network.

The challenge for our WPSM Peer Learning scheme will be in ensuring any expansion of the scheme is done while maintaining the positives we have outlined above. We also need to explore funding of the scheme and continue to nurture the link between the SBS and WPSM schemes. The key to success of schemes that are managed independently (i.e. no centrally managed scheme) is for us to continue to share our knowledge. This has manifested as support with training delivery and events which facilitate the coming together of all our Peer Leaders, allowing them to see they are part of a wider community of practice.

6.4 Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) initiative for Access and International Foundation Programme students at Technological University (TU) Dublin.

Dr Nevan Bermingham, Technological University Dublin

The TU Dublin Access Foundation Programme (AFP) is designed to encourage greater participation in tertiary education by under-represented socioeconomic groups, including mature adults with low prior educational attainment, and prepare them for undergraduate

programmes. Similarly, our International Foundation Students (IFP) on this Programme tend to have language difficulties that can inhibit their learning and social interactions. Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) has been running since 2015 with weekly tutorial sessions that aim to support these learners through social engagement.

PAL is currently being provided on these programmes for the Computer Science, Math and Engineering modules, which are viewed as “traditionally difficult” and have a poor progression rate. Studies with this cohort each year clearly demonstrate that PAL offers students a valued support structure that aids transition and acculturation into tertiary education whilst simultaneously improving their subject-matter comprehension and confidence (Bermingham *et al.*, 2022; 2023).

Typically, PAL covers a total of 150 students who are enrolled each year on the two TU Dublin Foundation Programmes. We involve 15 to 20 PAL Leaders and four to six PAL Supervisors each academic year. In our model, PAL Supervisors are former PAL Leaders.

PAL Leaders who are former AFP/IFP students undertake a collaborative approach with the lecturers of the Access & International Programmes. Ten PAL sessions are run per week over the year in Mechanical Engineering, Electronic Engineering, Computer Science Programming, Computer Science Networking, Fundamental Math, Intermediate Math and Advanced Math modules. These are done with the lecturer’s guidance, but the lecturer is not part of the delivery. We equip all PAL Leaders with assistive technology (Android Tablets with Stylus and/or MS Surface Pro Laptops with Stylus), so the PAL sessions can be fully inclusive spaces for those with sensory impairment and learning disabilities. We have demonstrated through research (Bermingham *et al.*, 2022, 2023) that such assistive technology is essential for improved PAL Leader productivity and planning, whilst allowing audio/visually impaired students to engage better with the PALs and run their own PAL session. The technology can be reused year-on-year to ensure that we get maximum benefit from any expenditure. PAL Leaders maintain a community of practice through MS Teams and grow a digital cloud repository of tasks and material that is re-used each year. Students participate in collaborative training based on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model to help them create safe spaces for student learning that encourages the voice of the student and continuous improvement.

Unlike traditional SI, in our model the PAL leaders adopt the role of PAL Supervisor in subsequent years to assist in the delivery of the PAL programme and training of the next cohort of PAL Leaders. PAL Supervisors have their own bespoke training created by TU Dublin, separate from the SI training, that focuses on leadership skills, communication, motivation, and group management techniques. Promoting some PAL Leaders to the role of Supervisor increases the year-on-year viability and cost effectiveness of PAL. Both PAL Leaders and PAL Supervisors are unpaid.

6.5 Exeter's Disabled Student Peer Mentoring Scheme: A case study in co-creation and supporting marginalised student groups.

Emma Norman, Fatuma Mohamud and Tom Allars, University of Exeter

In January 2021, a student group approached our Peer Support team about a buddy-up scheme for disabled students. These conversations began the co-creation of our successful Disabled Student Peer Mentoring scheme.

The scheme was born from a recognition of the need for support within the disabled student community. The percentage of Exeter students declaring a disability rose from 13.1% in 2012/13 to 17.4% in 2017/18 (University of Exeter, 2021, 6). To ensure we addressed these students' needs, co-designing was key. Over nine months, we closely collaborated with the original student group, our Wellbeing teams, and other staff stakeholders to shape the scheme.

The scheme was initially offered to undergraduates on Streatham and St Luke's campuses. Mentors were recruited in July 2021 for Term 1 (2021/22). Some organised pre-entry events for prospective mentees, who were recruited after A-level results day and matched with Mentors before Fresher's Week (late September). This pre-arrival matching method was already used with our Mature Student Peer Mentoring scheme, and the student stakeholders agreed this would help ease transition anxieties for mentees.

In 2021, we developed different Mentor training resources for this scheme to recognise its sensitivities and ensure accessibility. We pre-recorded videos which could be accessed asynchronously and on platforms (YouTube, Stream) which offered accessible options such as transcripts. This made the training more available to these students, which was especially important during the pandemic as many Mentors were shielding and distance learners.

In 2021/22, we recruited 56 Mentors and 142 mentees. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with the asynchronous training and pre-arrival matching particularly praised. Mentors noted that the matching should take place earlier to allow more time with mentees who settled quickly once at university, so valued the pre-arrival support. Since then, matching has taken place two weeks before Fresher's Week.

The scheme is growing, with 57 Mentors and 204 mentees in 2022/23, and 71 Mentors and 194 mentees in 2023/24. Crucially, students return: 21 mentees from 2021-22 became Mentors in 2022-23 or 2023-24; and nine mentees in 2022/23 became Mentors this year. Post-COVID, we have continued encouraging digital communication between Mentors and mentees to ensure inclusivity and maximise their options. Online platforms remain the most popular form of communication between Mentors and mentees because of their flexibility and informal nature. Our pre-arrival Mentor-led events remain online to ensure all prospective mentees can access them.

This year, for the first time, we received numerous Mentor applications from Penryn campus, leading to us offering the scheme to undergraduates there. Take-up was higher than expected; over 11% of this year's Mentees are Penryn-based.

Currently, we are focused on Term 2 support for students who missed initial recruitment. We aim to maintain student involvement in our delivery while collaborating with internal stakeholders to increase this scheme's visibility across campuses. At the core of this scheme is our shared commitment with students to support marginalised student groups and build a community where no one feels excluded; values which we continue to honour.

7 Enhancing employability skills

7.1 Accreditation for the Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) Leadership module at an Irish higher education institution

Aoife Walsh, Technological University of the Shannon

Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) has been operating at Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) since 2009. It was introduced to support first-year students in their transition to higher education (Walsh, 2021). PASS sessions are timetabled and typically run for six to eight weeks during the first semester. Second year students undergo two days of comprehensive and interactive training to become PASS Leaders. They are unpaid volunteers, who provide roughly 2.5 hours per week to plan, facilitate and review sessions.

In 2010, a 5-credit stand-alone module was developed which PASS Leaders can complete, in addition to their engagement in the peer assisted learning process (Ginty & Harding, 2014). The module is taught through a blended series of face-to-face, technology-enhanced, and online interactive sessions. It is assessed both formatively and summatively. There are rubrics for each assessment element, and timely feedback is provided in advance of final submission dates. Leaders engage in session planning, subsequent debriefing, and reflection with PASS Supervisors throughout their PASS journey. They compile records of attendance, staff logs, observations, and classroom assessment techniques. Once their sessions have finished, they reflect on their time as Leaders and complete a 1,000 word assignment, culminating in a reflective journal. At the date of publication, 250 students have completed the PASS Leadership module.

The PASS Leadership module was created with the aim of developing students' leadership, communication, and professional development skills. Learning outcomes include the ability to identify the principles and practices of peer assisted learning, the role of a PASS Leader, and the ability to apply the facilitation techniques required of a PASS Leader. Module participants learn how to establish and sustain supportive relationships with first year students and guide and support them through a range of learning activities during PASS

sessions. They also engage with academic staff and demonstrate professionalism as required by the PASS Leader role. Students evaluate and reflect on the impact of their experience as a PASS Leader and delineate the development of their transversal skills in-line with the TUS graduate attributes of adaptability, self-awareness, reflection and emotional intelligence (Technological University of the Shannon, 2022).

Testimonial

“Since taking on the role in the PASS programme, I've seen a significant improvement in my leadership and communication skills. The opportunity to mentor and support peers has not only been fulfilling but has also enhanced my understanding of the subject matter, making me a more confident and effective leader.”

TUS seeks to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate teamwork, professionalism, and leadership readiness during the course of their studies, and their experience on the PASS Leadership module is an exemplar in real-world authentic assessment. Leaders engaging in PASS can practice and develop their creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, in-line with the university's vision to develop graduates who can enable sustainable change and transform lives, the region, and the world (Technological University of the Shannon, 2023). Students might change the world – a worthwhile ambition for the PASS Leadership module at the Technological University of the Shannon.

7.2 Student-Peer Trainer Project

John Steele, Cardiff University Students' Union

One of the main features of the Cardiff University Students' Union Skills Development Service - a programme of employability and soft skills available to students - was the involvement each academic year of a team of student-peer trainers.

Students undertake a “train the trainer” course ready to assist full time staff to deliver sessions to the students at this university. Over the last 11 years we have seen around 50 trained students deliver full training in often complex subjects such as leadership, problem solving, motivation, and assertiveness. The students who then attend these sessions are motivated to complete units counting towards certificates of personal development in three areas: Communication, Personal Effectiveness, and Leadership, all of which are captured on their graduation transcripts.

During the aforementioned subjects, as with many of the others, students are led to develop multiple skills that touch base with not only knowledge, but soft skills, employability, and confidence.

Within the content, students are taken through some important aspects and learn key concepts such as Situational Leadership, Force-Field Analysis, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation, and the John Crawley behavioural model. Thus, they have been exposed to essential areas that employees themselves would likely learn about in typical organisational development programmes. Student-peer trainers give their peers a head start in acquiring essential knowledge and skills before they graduate and achieve that ideal graduate job. In delivering the sessions, peer trainers use a variety of teaching methods to incorporate variety and enlightenment into the processes. These include group discussions, use of IT assisted resources such as Mentimeter and Kahoot, relevant professional videos and YouTube clips, question and answer, and presentations. Every session contains learning styles to suit everyone so that no student attending should feel excluded.

The number of combined certificated awards over the last five years whereby student-peer trainers have contributed to the learning, amounts to 425. Such is the success of the scheme that many attendees apply for positions for the following year, and indeed we have appointed new members of the team based upon the fact that they attended and wanted to emulate the work that they experienced from their peers. Feedback from student attendees has often cited the help and inspiration afforded especially from their peer trainers and below is merely one example of such complementary comments, based upon the effectiveness of the delivery: "X and XX were excellent trainers!! They have knowledge about problem-solving other than what is in slides, and more application and examples."

In summary, this scheme has enabled those delivering to have been directly involved in helping to grow confidence of their fellow students, to increase their participation in sessions, and their ability to network with like-minded people. As students' progress through these programmes, there is a noticeable improvement in such areas which keeps them wanting to come back for more and thus achieve not just the one certificate of personal development, but all three.

7.3 The enhancement of employability skills through peer mentoring

Jo Kelleher, The University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) sessions at The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) facilitate learning through discussion and interaction with peers. The PAL programme aims to ease the transition to university, enhance students' learning community, improve retention, and develop graduate attributes in both mentors and participants. Evidence from PAL activity at UWTSD suggests that 'non-traditional students' are the most likely to attend sessions and become mentors themselves, enhancing their 'cultural capital'

as well as developing skills for the workplace (Dicks, 2022, p.51). This case study explores how employability skills are developed through student-to-student interaction in PAL sessions, drawing on testimonials from PAL mentors.

PAL mentors plan and lead sessions to facilitate group discussion and design activities to enhance attendees' understanding of course content requiring leadership and communication skills, particularly around the use of questions to stimulate independent thinking and encourage participation (Bloom, 1987). Testimonials note that running sessions has been instrumental in developing confidence, enhancing academic skills, and consolidating subject knowledge. One mentor noted the confidence she had developed to 'guide group work' and use questions effectively to 'help people find a solution on their own'.

PAL mentors are tasked with creating an environment to suit diverse learning styles and needs which requires preparing activities which are challenging and inclusive. PAL mentors use their initiative and respond to questions spontaneously which demands the ability to think critically and anticipate how learning can be enriched, and these are key graduate attributes in workplace settings. One mentor noted how learning to 'select appropriate methods to engage and support peers' individual learning styles' had contributed to an improved understanding of diversity and inclusion.

Peer mentoring is underpinned by the co-constructivist model of learning, whereby knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and collaboration (Vespono, 2023). This model of learning is also relatable to the workplace, where newly 'constructed' understandings through social interaction and discussion occur, and collaboration forges the development of new ideas. This embodies teamwork and collaboration through emphasising and valuing individual contributions, creating a shared learning experience. PAL mentors note that 'working as part of a team, overcoming obstacles, and fostering empathy and interpersonal relationships are key' to delivering successful sessions.

PAL mentors plan and organise sessions whilst managing other commitments, which is good preparation for the workplace where they will have to prioritise and manage workloads, meet deadlines, and fulfil obligations specific to their role. PAL mentors at UWTSD have utilised this experience in preparation for interviews for jobs, internships, and postgraduate study as it demonstrates a commitment to 'learning new skills' as well as 'helping people'.

This case study has drawn on student testimonials to exemplify how peer mentoring roles can significantly enhance students' employability. PAL mentors state that they have developed 'skills in planning, time management and leadership'; they also recognise that these are 'transferable skills' required in professional roles. In developing these skills, PAL mentors are well equipped for success in a range of career paths. This underscores the value of programmes that empower students to take on leadership roles in a range of sectors, ultimately contributing to their personal and professional growth.

7.4 Developing and recognising student leaders' skills – skills audits, coaching, digital badges and awards

Amber Walsh-Olesen and Órla O'Donoghue, University of Galway Students' Union

The CÉIM peer learning (SI-PASS) programme at University of Galway Ireland was initiated by University of Galway Students' Union in 2013 and is run as a partnership between students, academic staff, and the Students' Union. The programme is referred to as 'CÉIM', which means 'step' or 'degree' in the Irish language. CÉIM offers weekly peer learning sessions to approximately 2,000 first-year students in the disciplines of Engineering, Law, Science, and Arts to support them to transition successfully to higher education, meet fellow students, succeed academically, and progress to their second year. CÉIM has around 115 student leaders annually. The organisation and running of the programme is managed by the 'CÉIM team' of four coordination staff based at the Students' Union.

Leader skills development has always been a central element of the CÉIM programme. Key skills focused on in CÉIM include leadership, facilitation, teamwork, communication, organisation, creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability. These skills form the basis for CÉIM leader training and are referred to consistently in programme documents and at debrief meetings.

The CÉIM team has developed materials to explicitly show CÉIM leaders how they can develop and practise University of Galway graduate attributes by being a leader. These materials are colour-coded in a rubric-style format to make scanning easy. A comprehensive skills development framework was also created for leaders in collaboration with the Library and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. Leaders complete a short personal skills audit at the start of both semester one and two. The audit asks them to rate their skills in specific areas, outline three skills they want to develop further, and give examples of how they can work on these skills during their time as a leader. Personal development and taking responsibility for lifelong learning are emphasised, as opposed to just focusing on employability. Group coaching is provided to all leaders to support their skills development in debrief meetings. Targeted support and coaching are also provided by the CÉIM team to individual leaders and groups of leaders.

Leaders are recognised for their efforts in several ways. All CÉIM leaders obtain a CÉIM leadership digital badge and certificate at the end of the academic year. The University of Galway Employability Award has been an integrated part of the CÉIM leader experience for many years. CÉIM leaders can use their leadership training and work experience to partially complete the award and a dedicated employability workshop is held for CÉIM leaders. Leaders also fulfil all the requirements to obtain the University's Presidential Award for Volunteering.

Strategically developing CÉIM leader skills via training, debrief meetings, personal audits and coaching, and recognising leaders' efforts via the CÉIM awards and various University awards, has considerably strengthened CÉIM leader recruitment and retention. With artificial intelligence (AI) in the spotlight, going forward increased attention will be given to skills such as critical thinking, academic integrity, and using AI constructively where applicable.

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