

Evaluation of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Scheme at Bournemouth University 2007/2008

Hugh Fleming

**Learner Support Tutor & PAL Manager
Academic Services**

September 2008

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION TO PEER ASSISTED LEARNING	3
1. EVALUATING THE PAL SCHEME	3
2. FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS.....	3
2.1 WAYS PAL HELPED.....	3
2.1.1 <i>Quantitative results</i>	3
2.1.2 <i>Qualitative responses</i>	3
2.2 THE BEST THINGS ABOUT THE PAL SCHEME.....	3
2.3 THE WORST THINGS ABOUT THE PAL PROGRAMME.....	3
2.4 SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE PAL PROGRAMME.....	3
2.5 USE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA	3
3. PAL LEADERS	3
3.1 IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU THINK THE PAL PROGRAMME HELPED FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS	3
3.2 SKILLS DEVELOPED THROUGH BEING A PAL LEADER.....	3
3.3. PAL TRAINING PROGRAMME.....	3
3.3.1 <i>Initial training</i>	3
3.3.2 <i>Follow-up training</i>	3
3.4 HELP AND SUPPORT RECEIVED FROM STAFF	3
3.4.1 <i>Comments about the level of support from Hugh Fleming</i>	3
3.4.2. <i>Comments about the level of support from Course PAL Contacts</i>	3
3.4.3 <i>Comments on support received from other members of teaching and administrative staff in your School:</i>	3
3.5 THE BEST THINGS ABOUT BEING A PAL LEADER	3
3.6 THE WORST THINGS ABOUT BEING A PAL LEADER.....	3
3.7 EFFECTS OF PAL ON THE LEADERS' WORKLOAD.....	3
3.7.1 <i>Positive effects</i>	3
3.7.2 <i>Negative effects</i>	3
3.8 NEXT YEAR.....	3
3.8.1 <i>One piece of advice for future PAL leaders</i>	3
3.8.2 <i>Suggested improvements for the PAL programme</i>	3
4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS.....	3
4.1 BETTER AWARENESS OF ASSESSMENTS AND AREAS STUDENTS ARE CURRENTLY STUDYING.....	3
4.2 A PROPER INTRODUCTION TO PAL FOR NEW STUDENTS	3
4.3 INVOLVEMENT FROM OTHER MEMBERS OF THE TEACHING TEAM	3
4.4 TIMETABLING.....	3
4.5 DEVELOP A WEEKLY SCHEDULE FOR PAL SESSIONS	3
4.6 DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS.....	3
4.7 NON ATTENDANCE BY LEADERS AT THEIR PAL SESSIONS.....	3

Executive Summary

First-year students who took part in PAL and their PAL leaders were asked to complete a short online questionnaire. The questionnaires were created with the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) Tool and were available for students to complete from 10th March 2008 to 15th May 2008. 163 of 1297 (12.6%) first year students and 31 of 96 (32.2%) PAL leaders completed the questionnaire. Although the numbers responding are disappointingly low for first year students, the points both groups of students highlight about PAL are very encouraging and it would appear that, for the most part, the PAL scheme is operating very well indeed and significantly enhancing the experiences of first year students at Bournemouth University.

Responses from first year students

The quantitative responses from first year students continue to be very positive (2006/7 figures in brackets).

- 66% (68%) indicated that PAL had helped them integrate more quickly into University life;
- 78% (81%) PAL had helped them gain a clearer understanding of programme direction & expectations;
- 61% (66%) PAL had helped develop their learning & study skills;
- 73% (71%) PAL had helped their understanding of the subject matter of their programme through group discussions;
- 77% (82%) PAL had helped them prepare better for assessments and examinations

Qualitative feedback is equally positive. In addition to reinforcing the above aims, students indicated that:

- they had benefited from their Leader's advice and experience;
- PAL had aided group work and group dynamics;
- PAL had helped students get to know others and make friends;
- PAL had helped make the first year a more enjoyable experience;
- PAL provided a safe environment to ask questions;
- They benefited from the subject advice and new perspectives gained through small group discussions with other members of their seminar group.

Responses from PAL Leaders

PAL Leaders commented on:

- The high quality of the "PAL Student Leader Manual" and the training they had received;
- The excellent support Leaders had received from staff;
- The ways in which being a PAL Leader had enhanced their self confidence, leadership, team working, listening, questioning and communication skills.

Main Shortcomings:

- The unreliability of a few PAL Leaders;
- Inconvenient times for some PAL sessions.

Most important suggested improvements:

- Staff to provide a proper introduction to PAL for new students to explain the nature of the scheme and to encourage students to attend their PAL sessions;
- Staff to ensure that PAL Leaders have a better awareness of first year students' assignments and the topic/subject areas first years are currently studying.

Introduction to Peer Assisted Learning

Background

The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme has operated at Bournemouth University since 2001, after we obtained funding for 3 years from the Higher Education Funding Council for England under the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 3 (FDTL3). Over the past 8 years over 700 second year undergraduate students have been trained to become PAL Leaders, with nearly 8,000 first year students benefiting from the guidance and experience these Leaders can offer.

From 2008/9 the PAL scheme will operate on all full-time undergraduate programmes or frameworks in the Business School, Bournemouth Media School and Schools of Conservation Sciences and Services Management. It also operates on the majority of programmes or frameworks in the School of Design Engineering and Computing. PAL also operates at two Partner Institutions: Weymouth College (FdA Video Production) and Bournemouth and Poole College (FdA Tourism). Variations based upon the original PAL scheme now run in the Bournemouth Media School and on the Buddy Scheme, for Level H top-up degree students, in the School of Services Management.

Aims

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 co-operatively, in pairs or small groups, under the guidance of students from the year above whose main roles are to structure the sessions and facilitate discussions.

PAL has five main aims and is intended to help students:

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

The feedback on Pages 7 and 8 of this report indicates our success in achieving these aims.

Current developments

In 2005 we received further funding from the Higher Education Academy to guide and support the transfer to and implementation of PAL at two other Universities – the University of Plymouth and Buckinghamshire New University. The knowledge and experience we gained from this Transferability Project enabled us to recognise that the scheme developed here at Bournemouth could be implemented successfully at other universities. Over the past 15 months we have been engaged in consultancy activities to help 4 other universities implement PAL. We anticipate that this number will grow further over the forthcoming year.

This year we ran a very successful PAL workshop that was attended by staff from 27 different HEIs are considering implementing a National PAL Network based on Bournemouth University. We have also presented papers at 3 national or international conferences and at staff development workshops at 5 other universities. Other references to the Bournemouth PAL scheme appeared in the following publications:

SWAIN, H. (2007) Lend support to students: PAL. *The Times Higher*: August 17 2007, 38-39;
JAQUES, D. and SALMON, G. (2007) *Learning in Groups*. 4th ed., London, Routledge, 196-197);

BLACK, F. and MACKENZIE, J. (2008) Quality enhancement theme: the first year. Practice-focused development project: peer support. Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland) and Glasgow University, 41-44.

The PAL web site at www.peerlearning.ac.uk was also revised and updated earlier this year.

1. Evaluating the PAL scheme

The PAL programme for 2007/2008 was evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively. Feedback was requested from Leaders and first year undergraduate students studying in programmes in the Business School and Schools of Conservation Sciences, Design Engineering and Computing, and Services Management. The Bournemouth Media School operate their own scheme and did not form part of this evaluation.

First-year students who took part in PAL and PAL leaders were asked to complete a short online questionnaire. The questionnaires were created with the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) Tool. The questionnaires were available for students to complete from 10th March 2008 to 15th May 2008. First-year students and PAL leaders were contacted directly via email with a request to complete the questionnaire and a link to the questionnaire included in the email. Five follow-up emails were sent to students and Leaders to encourage students to fill in the questionnaire. All respondents were entered into a prize draw in which five £10 book tokens could be won.

163 of 1297 (12.6%) first year students and 31 of 96 (32.2%) PAL leaders completed the questionnaire. Notwithstanding the above inducements and the number of emails sent to students, these numbers are disappointingly low for both groups.

It should be noted that in the quotes selected spelling, grammar and punctuation have been corrected.

2. First-year students

163 first year students from 21 programmes or frameworks completed the questionnaire. Table 2.1 shows the number and percentage of respondents from each programme.

First Year Undergraduate Course or Programme (BA, BSc, LLB)	School	Number responding	Total number of 1 st year students on course	% of respondents from course	% of total respondents
Accounting and Business	BS	1	37	2.7	0.6
Accounting and Finance	BS	7	73	9.6	4.3
Accounting and Law	BS	2	11	18.1	1.2
Accounting and Tax	BS	2	9	22.2	1.2
Applied Biology	CS	2	13	15.4	1.2
Applied Geography	CS	1	30	3.3	0.6
Business Information Technology	DEC	11	57	19.3	6.7
Business Studies	BS	36	274	13.1	22.1
Computing Framework	DEC	8	85	9.4	4.9
Environment & Coastal Management	CS	1	10	10.0	0.6
Events Management	SM	16	108	14.8	9.8

Finance & Business	BS	5	36	13.9	3.1
Hospitality Management	SM	12	69	17.4	7.4
International Food & Hospitality Management	SM	1	16	6.3	0.6
Law/Law & Tax	BS	23	168	13.7	14.2
Leisure Marketing	SM	3	66	4.5	1.8
Multimedia Network Systems	DEC	7	38	18.4	4.3
Retail Management	SM	8	41	19.5	4.9
Sports Development & Coaching Sciences	SM	7	57	12.3	4.3
Sports Psychology & Coaching Sciences	SM	5	38	13.2	3.1
Tourism Management	SM	5	61	8.2	3.1
Totals		163	1297		100

Table 2.1 First-year student respondent numbers and percentages from each course and their schools

Table 2.2 shows the number of respondents from each school. The PAL scheme runs on all undergraduate courses in the Business School and Services Management which explains the high percentage of the total number of respondents from these Schools.

School	Number responding	% of total respondents
Business School	76	46.7
Conservation Sciences	4	2.5
Design Engineering and Computing	26	15.9
Services Management	57	34.9
Totals	163	100.00

Table 2.2 Distribution of first year student respondents from each school

2. How many of the PAL sessions have you attended?			
15 or more:		57.1%	93
10-14:		23.3%	38
4-9:		16.5%	27
3 or less:		3.1%	5
		100.00%	163

Table 2.3 Attendance of first-year student respondents at PAL sessions

Amongst respondents, attendance levels at PAL appear to be very good, with over 80% of indicating that they had attended 10 or more sessions (out of a possible 22). Only 5 students (of 163 respondents) attended three or fewer sessions.

Qualitative feedback indicates that attendance levels were highest during the Autumn Term. Nevertheless, those that continued to attend their PAL sessions during the Spring Term reported that they enjoyed productive sessions, especially where these focussed on exam revision.

2.1 Ways PAL helped

In order to evaluate the five stated aims of PAL, first-year PAL students were asked whether they thought that the PAL sessions helped them:

- integrate more quickly into university life
- get a clearer understanding of course direction and expectations
- develop their study and learning strategies
- improve their understanding of the subject matter of their course
- prepare themselves better for assessed work and examinations.

2.1.1 Quantitative results

Table 2.4 shows the number and percentages of students who felt that the PAL sessions helped and did not help, respectively, for each of the above aims. Percentages for 2006/7 and 2005/6 are also shown for comparative purposes.

Overall, the majority of students felt the PAL sessions helped them. In particular, students felt that PAL helped them gain a clearer understanding of the course direction and expectations, and helped them prepare better for their assessed work and examinations.

The figures appear to be relatively consistent over the years. However, it is gratifying to note that modifications to both the training Leaders receive and the contents of the "PAL Student Leader Manual" have resulted in a steady increase in positive responses to question "Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to improve your understanding of the subject matter of your course?"

How has the PAL Programme helped you?

Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to "integrate more quickly into university life?"			
Yes:		66.3%	108
No:		33.7%	55

2006/7: Yes 68%

2005/6: Yes 59%

Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to "get a clearer understanding of course direction and expectations?"			
Yes:		77.9%	127
No:		22.1%	36

2006/7: Yes 81%

2005/6: Yes 82%

Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to "develop your learning and study skills to meet the needs of your course?"			
Yes:		61.3%	100
No:		38.7%	63

2006/7: Yes 66%

2005/6: Yes 61%

Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to "improve your understanding of the subject matter of your course?"			
Yes:		73.0%	119

No:	27.0%	44
-----	-------	----

2006/7: Yes 71%

2005/6: Yes 66%

Do you think the PAL programme has helped you to "prepare yourself better for assessed work and examinations?"		
Yes:	77.3%	126
No:	22.7%	37

2006/7: Yes 82%

2005/6: Yes 77%

Figure 2.4 Number of first-year students who thought PAL helped them, or did not help them respectively, with each of the PAL aims

2.1.2 Qualitative responses

First year students were asked to comment on the ways in which they thought the PAL programme has helped them as a first-year students. Many of the students' responses linked directly with the aims of PAL:

Integrate more quickly with university life:

"PAL helped with getting used to University life and getting used to the difference in work level."

"PAL has given me a greater insight into university life from students that are a similar age to me and also the ways things are done at university. I am glad to have attended these sessions. They have been very beneficial to me because I am able to ask for advice and if stuck on any matter I would have been able to receive help or pointers in the right direction."

"PAL has helped me to understand uni life better and what is expected of me. Also it has allowed me to make new friends."

"PAL has made me feel more relaxed and eased me into life away from my family."

Get a clearer understanding of course direction and expectations

"PAL has helped me to know what to expect in my first year as it is all very new at the beginning. We were given tips on how to use the resources available and what is expected from us."

"... to know what to expect from lecturers, seminars and exams - what to do on assignments and presentations."

"Getting guidance on the course from the perspective of someone who has just done it is a great supplement to the support the lecturers provide."

"I have a better understanding of the work and effort that is expected while on the course and the way in which work is marked/should be presented."

"PAL has helped with my decision for the choices and options next year."

"PAL leaders have helped to inform me what is expected in all areas of work, from seminar work, personal study and assignments. The PAL sessions have also given a better view of what is expected in the course and the tutors' expectations of you."

Develop your learning and study skills to meet the needs of your course

"At the beginning it helped me to structure my work and made myself and my seminar group sort out and make big decisions in this time on group assignments we had."

"PAL has really helped with showing me things that I might not have had to do in previous school years, e.g. referencing, reports formats and academic writing."

"PAL helped me with my time management and helped me set a schedule for my work."

"It has helped by meeting new people who have already completed this first year of study. They have given us tips about revising and suggested tips for study which they wished they had done last year."

"PAL has helped inform me about how to tackle problems I have had and clearly explained solutions. I have had help on preparation techniques and also with how to handle with the amount of work I have been given. One of the main points I was helped on was referencing which has been great help to me."

"The PAL sessions were useful as we received help with assignments and lectures. Our PAL leader also encouraged us to start revision early and showing us the different methods that we can use. We also spent a lot of time doing presentations which I found very helpful."

Improve your understanding of the subject matter of your course

"Has helped me feel at ease about coursework which i have found difficulty with, and helped me whenever i have a query about anything to do with uni whether it's work, social life, accommodation etc."

"PAL helped me to understand the more challenging units in the course - Introduction to accounting and legal relationships. It has also helped with my decision for the choices and options next year."

"PAL helps with topics that are confusing. Other students could explain things in a way that I would understand."

"Its helped me developed my skills and given me guidance on assignments that the seminar group have struggled with understanding. Its also been a good social time for the seminar group and having debates has made everyone listen to each others opinion on a subject."

Prepare yourself better for assessed work and examinations

"PAL has been fantastic. Thanks to my PAL leader writing assignments was made easier. She has been very hands on and has gone out of her way to plan and carry out PAL sessions which have been remarkably helpful."

"PAL helped with understanding formats and content of assignments. Gives a chance to talk about things you haven't understood in lectures and seminars. A chance to reflect on work we've done and talk about up and coming assignments."

"It helped me both academically and socially. My PAL leader A. really helped whenever I was stuck, I emailed her and she emailed me back of how to help. PAL also helped when planning assignments, and working in groups for revision."

Other areas:

In addition to the 5 main aims of PAL, the scheme was clearly helpful to students in many other ways. Two comments sum up a wide range of benefits:

"My PAL leader this year G..... S..... [Events Management] has been so helpful in so many ways. She was there with advice and an ear to listen when we found it hard settling in, when we had problems with houses and housemates and when coursework got too difficult and too much. She always asked how we were getting on and was genuinely interested in what we had to say and any questions we had to ask. She came in on her own time to help us in our own revision classes before in-class exams. She made PAL fun to go to, and every week there was always a huge handful of us there, if not everyone. She organised socials that everyone could get involved in and was basically a great friend during the whole first year at uni. So when she asked for volunteers to help at her assessed event, we all jumped at the chance, everything she did for us this year had to be paid back in some way, and so more or less all of us volunteered to help at her event. She has been fantastic."

"The PAL system has been brilliant as we have been given a lot of help and advice on what to expect as first year students and also what is expected of us, which is sometimes not made very clear by tutors. My PAL leaders made me feel a lot more comfortable with the work I had to do and gave me the confidence I needed to be able to take on the tasks and achieve good results. The PAL scheme was a brilliant way to share ideas on

assignments with the rest of my seminar group in an organised way and also helped a lot with revision preparation. What is also good is the flexibility our PAL leaders had to prepare sessions especially to help us and therefore support us in the areas we needed most help with."

Leaders pass on experience:

"It is good to be able to talk to someone that has been in the position that we are in now. While lecturers are usually very helpful, PAL leaders are unique as they see potential problems from the view of a student and often see things from a different perspective than a lecturer might."

"I think the PAL has made me feel more relaxed with life at university. Question's I may not have wanted to ask lecturers, I can ask the PAL leaders as they have already done the first year. I enjoy hearing what the PAL leaders have to say and their own experience of the first year. I think PAL leader's make your first year more comfortable and any worries or queries you may have, they're always there to help."

"As a current student the PAL leader can relate to our studies and also lifestyle. They have studied the same course and therefore it was very beneficial when asking questions about the course requirements and assignment requirements. It provided time for the group to ask questions and talk about problems we had."

"Getting guidance on the course from the perspective of someone who has just done it is a great supplement to the support the lecturers provide".

Aids group work and group dynamics:

"Well it has helped build relationships with peers and therefore improved the ability to perform 'group worked assignments' with my seminar group. The fact that we get a whole lesson as a group together helps worries, queries with work to be brought to everyone's attention; here they are often solved with the help of the entire class, as those with more experience in certain fields of work can help mentor the class. Also it has helped with basic essentials like discovering the whereabouts of different buildings; where needs can be fulfilled like for instance photo copying or where and how to search for books etc. It gives us a chance to query someone who has lived and experienced the first year of university and can supply good advice and practice."

"In the beginning it helped the dynamics of our seminar group and encouraged us to get to know each other better."

"PAL allowed me to meet the people in my seminar group, and we were able to organise our SIG activities whilst in them because everyone was there."

"Helped with bonding our group together and encouraging team work."

"Firstly, our PAL Leader encouraged a group activity which helped the group to bond. Our PAL then continued to help group bonding through small group activities."

On being an international student:

"... being an international student I had a few difficulties adjusting in the new teaching environment but PAL helped me out by running sessions like how to revise, referencing, how to prepare a presentation etc."

On the first year experience

"PAL make the first year a much more enjoyable experience"

Answering "silly" questions

"Our PAL Leader was able to answer those questions we felt [were] too silly to ask staff."

Other areas mentioned by students included the benefits of sharing **news items**:

"By looking at relevant business news each week our PAL has also kept us up to date with current issues."

gaining **confidence**:

"It helped me to gain confidence so that whenever I was stuck I didn't need to be worried about asking a busy tutor, I could merely email a PAL leader and get a quick response."

acquiring an appropriate **life-work balance**:

"My Leaders taught me that you can have a social life and work hard at the same time. They were a friendly face who you could rely on to produce useful information when you need it."

and dealing with **home-sickness**:

"When feeling homesick, they gave me hope. They sympathised with my situation, and gave me advice on how to cope."

2.2 The best things about the PAL scheme

By far the most common "best thing about PAL", cited by over one third of respondents, was that PAL leaders were perceived as being on the **same level** and were **empathetic** to the concerns of first year students because they had been through the course the previous year. This meant that students could ask them about a wide range of problems they were experiencing, without feeling intimidated, and receive good advice:

"I think that the best thing about PAL is having a second year as your PAL leader who can give you help and advice because they have been through it all before, and who you can talk to easily because they are friendly."

"The guidance just before the Christmas break. Our PAL leaders told us what to expect the week we came back so I was able to use my Christmas break effectively and get on top of any assignments I had so that I wouldn't have a pile of assignments to get through a few weeks after getting back."

The second most common "best thing about PAL" was the help students received with analysing their **assignments**. This included both analysing the assignment question and discussing areas or topics for inclusion, and the process-orientated skills associated with researching the topics and structuring the assignment appropriately.

"Using the session to discuss assignments with the rest of the seminar group in an organised way with the added direction from the PAL leaders regarding what was expected of us from the assignment and what the question was asking for."

"Without PAL I would have struggled when planning and answering my assignments, as they are totally different to what work was like at college."

The third most common best thing about PAL" was the **subject advice** that was gained through **discussions with the rest of the group**:

"Getting other students' perspectives"

"Going through problem areas as a group"

"Group discussions on areas of concern"

First-year students also liked having the opportunity to **get to know** the other people in their seminar group better, as well as the opportunity to **make friends**:

"Enabling me to make friends quicker with my seminar group."

"Going on our social as I got to know my seminar group better."

Other benefits included help with various **study skills** (note taking, time management, presentation skills, referencing, revision), getting a clearer picture of **what to expect on the course**, and help with **settling in** to University life.

2.3 The worst things about the PAL programme

The most common complaints about PAL were related to **timetabling** issues.

“The timetable position, as it was during a break on our busiest day.”

“The timing of the session. Tuesday late afternoon after a very long day means that sometimes it is difficult to have the motivation to participate fully.”

“The PAL session is put right at the end of the day with a large wait beforehand, which is very inconvenient.”

The second most common complaint thing about PAL was the **poor attendance, late arrival and/or lack of commitment from the other students**.

“When no one turns up to PAL sessions, the work that our PAL leader had for us to do couldn't be carried out due to lack of numbers.”

“Having time wasted waiting around for certain members of the seminar group to either stroll in late or not attend at all.”

“During the second term we have been just sitting at PAL going through things all over again for the sake of those who have missed the previous sessions ... just because they had a hangover.”

It was also extremely disappointing to hear three respondents reporting that their PAL **Leaders did not turn up** regularly to run their PAL sessions and this issue will have to be addressed during training and by closer attention to attendance registers:

“He stopped attending and we didn't have one for half the year.”

“It was hardly ever on after the first few weeks.”

Some students felt that some of the sessions were not very **useful** for them personally.

“Didn't always feel necessary as we didn't have any assignments to go through, I feel we could have made it more productive even if it was for just fun, sociable reasons.”

However, it was encouraging to note however that **over one quarter of respondents felt that nothing** constituted the worst thing, and that **not much could be improved** in PAL:

“Nothing. My PAL sessions met all my needs”

“I really don't think there are any bad things about PAL. I think the worst thing is that not enough people benefit from it. Students are missing out if they don't attend or haven't got any PAL leaders for their course because I think it is a major help.”

Indeed some people would have liked more PAL sessions:

“Some weeks I think we could have benefited from more than one session a week when we had lots of assignments to do”

2.4 Suggested improvements for the PAL programme

There were a several suggestions for improvement. However, many of these either contradicted each other (more PAL sessions/fewer PAL sessions) or would prove to be impractical or prohibitively expensive to implement. Other suggestions indicated that, even though PAL Leaders are observed at least once during the year, some of the guidance given during their initial training had not been implemented in practice.

More positively, in view of the substantial rewriting of the section of the “PAL Student Leader Manual” which addressed ‘How to run your PAL sessions’ it was pleasing to note that, compared to previous years, there were very few comments made on poor preparation on the part of the PAL Leader.

The most frequent response was to suggest that having a **programme** for the PAL sessions for each term would be an improvement

"Have a worked out programme for each week."

"Have a timetable so that each session covers different things for example, one week could be on assignments and another week could be about work experience."

This programme planning occurs on at least one course and it is suggested that Course PAL Contacts may wish to consider discussing this matter with their Leaders during one of their meetings. This would help to give PAL a clearer focus and will be implemented on the "Buddy Scheme" which is aimed at helping top-up degree students settle in quickly.

Students also suggested that it would be helpful if PAL sessions were **scheduled** at a more **convenient time**. These are perennial issues and room availability and other constraints clearly make this a challenging issue to address. The main issues raised were:

- PAL sessions taking place during the only break during a busy day;
- PAL sessions taking place several hours after the final scheduled class of the day;
- PAL sessions scheduled as the only class for the day.

"Schedule PAL sessions at a time when more people will attend"

"The only thing that didn't work was the timetable so maybe to make sure that PAL sessions are in the appropriate place on timetables or if this is not possible explain to PAL Leaders that they can change the session to a time that suits both them and their group!"

The **unreliability of a few PAL Leaders** was clearly a source of annoyance for a few and those choosing PAL Leaders were urged to consider at their commitment and levels of knowledge:

"Look at how some PAL leaders are chosen and make sure they are qualified to carry out the task at hand. I was fortunate enough to have a great PAL leader - others I hear are not as fortunate."

"Check up on them to see how often they turn up."

Other improvements that were suggested were for PAL leaders to have **closer contact with other members of the year one teaching team**, so that PAL leaders had a better awareness of when assignments were due and what should be included in them.

"Better communication between our lecturers and the PAL Leaders would help them to know our subject assignments better".

The above suggestions are particularly important for units in programmes or frameworks whose content has been changed significantly from that which the PAL Leaders studied.

One student drew attention to the way in which staff can have a very significant effect upon attendance at PAL:

"At the beginning of the year our Course Leader [name supplied] said that we now had PAL on the course but that we didn't have to go to PAL if we didn't want to. I think this was a real shame because for our first PAL session only about half our group turned up and attendance was low all year. I got a lot out of PAL and I think he should have been much more enthusiastic and encouraging."

There is a certain irony here because the same Course Leader complained about the low levels of attendance at PAL and questioned whether or not the PAL scheme should continue to run on the course.

41 respondents had no suggestions and were happy with PAL, stating that it should continue as it is.

2.5 Use of electronic media

Students and Leaders use of electronic media was explored because we wanted to find out what media were being used for communication and the extent to which myBU was being used for online discussions. All Leaders had been half a day of training in the use of myBU as part of their initial training programme.

It is clear from the data provided below firstly, that email remains the most usual means of communication between a PAL Leader and their group and secondly that myBU was used very little for group discussions. Informal feedback from students indicated that they preferred to meet face-to-face and that, if they were to discuss things outside the PAL sessions, such discussions were most likely to be social rather than academic and, as a result, they preferred to use social networking tools such as Facebook or My Space.

12. Which of the following "types of technology" were used to communicate with you by your PAL leaders?			
Phone:		2.5%	4
Email:		48.5%	79
Text:		2.5%	4
MSN/My Space/Facebook:		19.0%	31
Virtual Learning Environment (e.g. myBU, Media4, Bubble, Web Crossing, Build):		27.6%	45

13. Which of the following "activities" did your PAL Leader use the "Virtual Learning Environment" for?			
Announcements:		51.5%	84
Provision of information (e.g. session notes, websites, reading lists):		17.2%	28
Discussion forum:		4.9%	8
None:		26.4%	43

3. PAL Leaders

31 PAL leaders took part in the questionnaire. In Table 3.1 the schools, courses, numbers and percentages of PAL leaders are shown.

First Year Undergraduate Course or Programme (BA, BSc, LLB)	School	Number of Leaders responding	Total number of Leaders on course	% of respondents from course	% of total respondents
Accounting and Business	BS	0	1	0	0.0
Accounting and Finance	BS	4	5	80.0	12.9
Accounting and Law	BS	0		0	0.0
Accounting and Tax	BS	0	1	0	0.0
Applied Biology	CS	1	1	100	3.2
Applied Geography	CS	0	2	0	0.0
Business Information Technology	DEC	2	7	28.5	6.5
Business Studies	BS	5	13	38.4	16.0
Computing Framework	DEC	2	11	18.2	6.5
Environment & Coastal Management	CS	2	2	100.0	6.5
Events Management	SM	2	7	28.5	6.5
Finance & Business	BS	1	3	33.3	3.2
Hospitality Management	SM	2	5	40.0	6.5
International Food & Hospitality Management	SM	0	1	0	0.0
Law/Law & Tax	BS	2	14	14.3	6.5
Leisure Marketing	SM	1	4	25.0	3.2
Multimedia Network Systems	DEC	0	2	0	0.0
Retail Management	SM	0	3	0	0.0
Sports Development & Coaching Sciences	SM	3	6	50.0	9.7
Sports Psychology & Coaching Sciences	SM	1	4	25.0	3.2
Tourism Management	SM	3	4	75.0	9.7
Totals		31	96		100.0

Table 3.1 PAL leader respondent numbers and percentages from each course and school

School	No. of Leaders in School	Number responding	% of total respondents
Business School	37	12	38.7
Conservation Sciences	5	3	9.6
Design Engineering and Computing	20	4	12.9
Services Management	34	12	38.7
Totals	96	31	100.00

Figure 3.2 Distribution of PAL leaders in each school

3.1 In what ways do you think the PAL programme helped first-year students

The most important way in which PAL Leaders thought that PAL had helped their students was with the **transition** from school or college to University, so that they **settled in** quickly to University life and **orientated** themselves with their surroundings:

"I hope PAL helps them in adjusting to university life and the new ways of studying and better understanding how they learn."

Secondly, PAL offered new students a **safe environment to ask questions** they would not necessarily wish to ask a lecturer, and **receive guidance** from a more experienced person who has just completed the first year:

"I think it was helpful for them to seek guidance for someone who has recently done what they are currently doing, but also someone who is similar age makes it easier to find common ground and make friends."

"I think having a 2nd year students to guide them in their learning has been helpful - normally new students don't know who to turn to when they first start university and are normally a bit negative about seeing a lecturer. I think PAL is most useful though outside academic studies - the support the PAL leader gives to his/her group. They can be someone a student comes to for advice or a bit of support from area such as homesickness or just someone they can talk to when they are not at their best."

Having an understanding of the requirements of **independent learning** and **study skills** were also considered important.

"I think it has helped them integrate more quickly into the self-learning attitude of University than they would have had there not been someone to point them in the right direction."

"I think it has helped first year students by gaining a deeper knowledge of referencing, report writing and essay skills. I have spent up to 4 weeks on each to ensure they are well prepared."

It was interesting to note that the **locus of control** was considered important:

"I feel it has given them the opportunity to take control of their learning in the first year as they suggest the topics covered in the sessions."

Leaders saw the benefits of PAL in **helping the seminar group to bond** so that they could work and socialise together and create a supportive environment.

"I believe that it has helped by bringing each group together. Having 2 groups I have seen how different groups interact with each other and that different methods work with different groups. The first years have learnt to work with their groups and to socialise with their groups on PAL outings."

"PAL provides a fantastic opportunity for the group to get together outside of formal lectures to discuss issues/brainstorm."

"It's an hour every week that they can attend without pressure and talk about fears, problems, worries they may have and so on. PAL also helps them ask questions about work they are not understanding and help each other to gain a better understanding."

Finally, Leaders noted the benefits of discussions about course content and assignments:

"It has helped them to engage in discussions and clarify the content of the unit. They got a much clearer view of what is expected in assignments since we have done in depth sessions to help them with clarifying assignment briefs."

3.2 Skills developed through being a PAL leader

Students were asked which skills they felt they had developed through being a PAL leader. The most important skill PAL leaders felt they had developed was **confidence** through being able to **present ideas** in front of others:.

"I developed my own self confidence dramatically through PAL and my ability to speak in front of others, and it increased my faith in myself and my own academic ability."

The second most important skill learned was the ability to **manage time** more effectively, become more organised and plan PAL sessions in advance

"I improved on my organisation and preparation skills. Being able to plan and complete a strong session. I was able to present information about topic areas i wasn't strong on and enable discussions to take place to help the students build their thoughts. "

Other skills which PAL leaders felt they had developed in their role as PAL leader were **listening skills** together with the importance of setting out and agreeing a set of **group norms** on how to get the best from their PAL sessions:

"I learned how to listen to my group when some of them came to me individually for advice or someone they needed to talk to when feeling down. I think this was because I made myself very easy for them to approach, but at the same time they worked hard during the PAL sessions because at the beginning of the year I set out some of the standards I wanted them to meet - Their learning can't be a one sided affair - the more input they have, the more they will learn and experience."

Developing **questioning skills** were also seen as important:

*"I think one of the most important things I learned was to ask questions and find out about the people who I was helping, the more I found out about them, the more effective I could be when it came to their learning."
"Deflecting [redirecting] questions back to the group to encourage independent thinking".*

Interpersonal communication skills were also felt to have been improved in PAL

"PAL helped me to learn how to communicate more effectively with people, especially with those from different backgrounds!"

Leadership skills were also developed,

"We were able to control the students when they started to talk off topic or not listen."

Some perceptive PAL leaders also felt that it enhanced their own understanding of the subject matter of their course:

"PAL has provided a great opportunity to develop my own understanding of the course, reinforcing knowledge learnt during the first year."

Assertiveness, social skills, team working and **study skills** were also mentioned as skills that had been developed through being a PAL leader.

3.3. PAL Training programme

3.3.1 Initial training

PAL leaders completed an initial 2-day training programme prior to their PAL sessions, which we wanted to evaluate. Students were asked to what extent they thought the 2-day training prepared them adequately for their jobs as PAL leaders, which aspects of the training they felt were particularly useful and whether there were any additional information or activities they felt would have been of benefit in preparing them to become a PAL Leader..

In terms of feeling prepared, feedback of the 2-day initial training was entirely positive with no negative comments:

“Superbly! Many of the exercises we did and guidance we gained during the training programme have been of invaluable help. Suggested ideas, how to deal with those quieter less inspired days and how to plan and get the most out of the sessions.”

“The training was priceless. Although it did not tell you exactly what it would be like it gave you a brilliant insight and chance to see how things worked in practice. Without it i think i would have found the experience quite daunting. The training gave me the confidence to go out and take the sessions. “

“The 2 day training was amazing, bonding with other PAL leaders and hearing each others ideas and expectations was useful, BAFA BAFA was really eye-opening, the small practice sessions were very good too.”

Most students thought the **simulated PAL sessions** that they had led during the training were the most useful part of the initial training:

“The simulated PAL session was helpful in that we had very limited info on what the students had just been watching and we had to run a session based on that. I had a few PAL sessions this year where i had to draw on my experience from the training and run a PAL session where i had little knowledge about the topic.”

“For me the best activity was actually simulating a PAL session ... It put everything we had learned over the two days in to perfect practice.”

The second most useful activity, which is closely related to the first, was the emphasis placed upon **preparation** and session **planning**:

“Session planning and how to undertake various activities using different methods such as poster work, summarizing work, and group skills.”

“The basic PAL planning outline. Formatting the session (e.g. show on the front screen what you plan to cover and then at the end review what you said you where going to cover).”

Several Leaders emphasised the usefulness of the **“PAL Student Leader Manual”** as a source of ideas:

“I felt that the Manual that we were given was fantastic as it gave us a point of reference for ideas if we where struggling with certain areas.”

“The support materials provided in the manual are fantastic and very user friendly.”

Other parts of the initial training that leaders particularly liked were meeting and talking to **former PAL leaders** and meeting and exchanging ideas with **current PAL leaders**.

“The most useful activity was talking to previous PAL leaders and asking them questions on what to expect and how to avoid mistakes.”

The BAFA BAFA activity run by staff from the International Office was also singled out for praise:

"I found the Bafa Bafa exercise particularly enlightening and I think I was much more prepared when dealing with the overseas students in my group. The rest of the training was very good too but the Bafa Bafa has stood out."

The DVD "How to run your PAL sessions" was also praised:

"The DVD created with last years PAL leaders gave a good insight into how the PAL scheme should be run and was useful in providing a visual aid into what the sessions were. This was particularly useful considering that my course did not have the benefit of attending PAL sessions in our first year."

There were very few suggestions made on how to improve training. However 4 respondents suggested **advice on how to deal with disruptive, noisy and disinterested students**. This has been addressed and incorporated into this year's 2-day initial training courses. The issue will be brought to the attention of Course PAL Contacts since their support, locally, is very important.

3.3.2 Follow-up training

During the Autumn term, PAL leaders had the opportunity to attend 12 follow-up training sessions which took place on Wednesday afternoons between 2-4pm. These follow-up training sessions were intended to:

- Consolidate and add to the skills Leaders have started to develop during their initial training.
- Provide Leaders with information and materials which should help to improve their own study skills
- Provide Leaders with resources to use to help them to improve their PAL Group's study skills and habits
- Provide the PAL Co-ordinator with an opportunity to keep in touch with Leaders and discuss how their PAL sessions are progressing
- Provide a working space in which Leaders can meet to discuss and share ideas with each other

These sessions cannot be compulsory because some Leaders have timetabled classes, sporting or other commitments. Nevertheless, as in previous years, Leaders were strongly advised to attend. However, in an attempt to reduce the costs of PAL to Schools, a decision had been taken not to pay PAL Leaders for their attendance at follow-up training during 2007/8. As a consequence attendance at follow-up training sessions was by far the lowest ever recorded and for 2008/9 payment for attendance has been reinstated. Figure 3.3.2 shows the responses from Leaders:

Section 5: Follow-up training sessions

7. Before Christmas a number of follow-up training sessions were provided for you.			
7.a. Introducing your group to university -- Session Title			
Very useful:		9.7%	3
Useful:		16.1%	5
Not useful:		0.0%	0
Did not attend:		74.2%	23
7.b. Improving your group's learning -- Session Title			
Very useful:		12.9%	4
Useful:		9.7%	3

Not useful:		0.0%	0
Did not attend:		77.4%	24
7.c. Improving your group's note taking techniques -- Session Title			
Very useful:		6.7%	2
Useful:		13.3%	4
Not useful:		3.3%	1
Did not attend:		76.7%	23
7.d. Helping your students give better presentations -- Session Title			
Very useful:		10.0%	3
Useful:		16.7%	5
Not useful:		0.0%	0
Did not attend:		73.3%	22
7.e. Guiding students with additional learning needs -- Session Title			
Very useful:		6.5%	2
Useful:		12.9%	4
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		77.4%	24
7.f. Improving your group's essay writing -- Session Title			
Very useful:		9.7%	3
Useful:		9.7%	3
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		77.4%	24
7.g. Exploring cultural differences -- Session Title			
Very useful:		9.7%	3
Useful:		16.1%	5
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		71.0%	22
7.h. Developing your assertiveness -- Session Title			
Very useful:		16.1%	5
Useful:		6.5%	2
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		74.2%	23
7.i. Guiding your students towards more productive group work -- Session Title			
Very useful:		3.2%	1
Useful:		9.7%	3
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		83.9%	26
7.j. Your CV: reflections on the skills you have developed as a PAL Leader -- Session Title			
Very useful:		3.2%	1

Useful:		9.7%	3
Not useful:		6.5%	2
Did not attend:		80.6%	25
7.k. Helping your students revise more effectively for their exams -- Session Title			
Very useful:		9.7%	3
Useful:		9.7%	3
Not useful:		3.2%	1
Did not attend:		77.4%	24
7.l. Visit of PAL Leaders from the University of the West of England -- Session Title			
Very useful:		3.2%	1
Useful:		3.2%	1
Not useful:		6.5%	2
Did not attend:		87.1%	27

Although most sessions were considered useful, or very useful, the numbers indicating that they did not attend makes it impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions from these responses.

The question which asked "What did you see as being the main benefits of attending these follow-up training sessions received similarly sketchy responses.

The next question asked Leaders "If you decided not to attend follow-up training, why did you decide not to come?"

By far the most common response was that this Wednesday afternoon training clashed with other commitments – sport, domestic, work, placement interviews, or course field trips.

3.4 Help and support received from staff

3.4.1 Comments about the level of support from Hugh Fleming

10. As a PAL leader what level of support were you provided with? From Hugh Fleming?			
I was given all the information and support I needed:		87.1%	27
I was provided with information and support but I felt that I needed more:		6.5%	2
I received little information and support:		3.2%	1
I received no information and support:		3.2%	1

Most respondents felt that the support received from **Hugh Fleming** was very helpful.

"Hugh is very encouraging and supportive. Any criticisms were aired constructively and he gave us valuable advice on ways to improve our sessions."

"It was good, I knew that I could contact him if I needed to and he was very helpful with everything."

One student commented that it would have been helpful to get all PAL Leaders back for one more training session 'half way through'. The follow-up training sessions were intended to address this.

3.4.2. Comments about the level of support from Course PAL Contacts

11. From the Course PAL Contact within your school?			
I was given all the information and support I needed:		77.4%	24
I was provided with information and support but I felt that I needed more:		12.9%	4
I received little information and support:		6.5%	2
I received no information and support:		3.2%	1

Course PAL Contacts fill an essential role in contextualising PAL to meet the requirements of the programme and needs of its first year students. It is clear that support from these PAL Contacts has excellent with the majority of responses being very positive:

"B... is fabulous and I think she deserves a medal for what she does."

"S... and H... were in regular contact with the PAL leaders so knew what was going on and provided support when it was asked for or needed."

One Leader acknowledged problems in setting up regular meetings:

"More frequent meetings would have been of benefit. However both the students and the Course Contact's timetable do not match so found it difficult to arrange times."

There were a couple of suggestions for improvement:

"Meetings were short and needed a little more structure like hints about what the 1st years were doing in each topic to spark discussion."

"More communication with course contact and greater guidance about what to do in sessions would be beneficial."

"I only met the course contact once. This may be due to the fact that [course name] is new to the PAL system but they must recognise in the future that we require support."

In one case no support had been forthcoming:

"I have had no contact and felt that my efforts were not appreciated."

3.4.3 Comments on support received from other members of teaching and administrative staff in your School:

12. From other members of teaching and administration staff in your school?			
I was given all the information and support I needed:		41.9%	13
I was provided with information and support but I felt that I needed more:		25.8%	8
I received little information and support:		25.8%	8
I received no information and support:		6.5%	2

Comments on the level of support from these groups were much more varied. Support from **administrative staff**, which focussed on room bookings, was reported to have been very good:

"Whenever I needed to book a room for extra/changed sessions I was always helped enormously!"

Views on the level of support offered by other members of the teaching team varied considerably. It is good to note that 7 respondents said that staff were very helpful:

"H.... was excellent in providing additional material for us which tied in with the groups seminars and lectures."

"On a few occasions i had to contact lecturers about some issues with students but that was fine, as i had a close link with the lecturers due to them teaching me last year."

However, on some programmes it is clear that improvements could be made:

"We were not given access to unit guides/lecture schedules etc until I chased up the other staff asking for them specifically."

"I think it would have been beneficial for us leaders to have a copy of the first years' assignment questions as and when they were given to the students. We often had to wait to get a copy from the students which gave us less time to prepare for the PAL sessions and therefore [these sessions] were not as productive as they could have been."

"Very few of the actual members of staff made any attempt to contact me and ask me to clarify anything with students about anything they had in mind. I guess they thought the students understood everything."

It is however disappointing to note that 10 of the 31 respondents answered "Little" or "None" to this question. One puts it concisely:

"There wasn't any [help] except a couple of lecturers said to go and pick up first year assignment briefs so that it would help me."

One programme (Law) attempted to address the above issues by getting the Leaders themselves to take responsibility for liaising with specified unit leaders and sharing the outcomes of their discussions with the other PAL Leaders for the programme. This is an excellent initiative ensuring that the workload is shared among several leaders while at the same time ensuring that staff do not become overburdened by requests for similar information from many different people. It is to be regretted that most of the Leaders failed to fulfil their responsibilities:

"In our group of Law PAL leaders, one Leader was assigned for each area of law and that Leader was supposed to converse with the subject tutor to find out what they expected to be included in the assignment and then they were to share it with the rest of the PAL leaders. This was only done by one of the 5 or 6 that were meant to do this. So, more focus on that would have been good as it leaves the other PAL leaders in the dark as to what is expected and puts their PAL groups at a disadvantage."

3.5 The best things about being a PAL Leader

PAL leaders were asked what they felt was the best thing about the PAL programme. 13 of 31 respondents indicated that working with the group and **making new friends** was the best thing about PAL:

"Meeting a whole new bunch of people who are as enthusiastic about the subject as I am."

Closely related to this was the pleasure several Leaders gained from **helping** first years and **watching these students develop**:

"The satisfaction of knowing I was helping others and also making new friends as I was blessed with a great group."

"Helping the other students learn. Having been there myself I know how much help was needed and where. I wish we had had the opportunity to seek help from PAL Leaders."

"Watching people learn and progress and really do well at university and know that as a PAL leader, you had helped them reach those goals."

Several students thought the best thing about PAL was that it helped them in their **development** as an individual:

"The personal experience I have had and the confidence I gained"

as well as their **communication** and **presentation skills**, and their **CV**:

"The chance at being able to improve my presenting/speaking skills"

"Developing my communication and delivery skills."

3.6 The worst things about being a PAL Leader

By far the most common "worst thing about PAL" related to **low levels of attendance**:

"Turning up for PAL and seeing that no one had turned up without letting you know or give you a reason. It's very disheartening."

"Only having 2 people in my class most of the time, was a blow to my confidence."

The second most common issue related to **timetabling** issues – both in terms of the timing for sessions, or because the timetable didn't allow sessions to run:

"Efforts should be made to make PAL at useful times - i.e. after another seminar and not at 9:00 in the morning!! Also not to be the only thing on a day or few hours after another seminar!! For PAL to be really effective, timings of PAL in the schedule has to be sorted out."

"During the second term there was no sessions as the timetable of both myself and my group did not allow it and I feel this undermined the importance of PAL."

A few Leaders said that the worst thing about the PAL programme was that it was **time-consuming**, especially during work intensive parts of their own courses

"It took quite a lot of time for planning etc (more than we were paid for) when I could have been studying for my course".

Several of the leaders said that they had **no negative experiences of PAL**.

3.7 Effects of PAL on the Leaders' workload

We had been concerned that the Leaders activities associated with planning and running PAL sessions may impact negatively on their studies. Leaders were asked to identify the positive and negative effects of their activities as a PAL Leader on their works and their workload. It should be noted that several Leaders indicated that there were no effects upon their work.

3.7.1 Positive effects

The most frequent response given was that their activities as PAL Leader had helped them to organise themselves better and had **improved their time management skills**:

"To be honest, no effect whatsoever. It's all about time management and an extra 1.5- 2.5 hours a week was not a problem."

"There were times that yes it was a case of trying to fit it all in, but it was good experience to juggle all these pressures."

"I sometimes worried more about my PAL on a Thursday than my seminar or lecture because I knew I wasn't just letting myself down it was my whole group! BUT as time went on I became more organised and it didn't affect my work as much. It's about prioritising."

The next most frequent response was that their PAL sessions helped them because they provided opportunities to revisit topics they themselves had covered in the first year:

"I found that reviewing some of my old lecture notes in preparation for PAL sessions helped by refreshing my memory on some issues which I later managed to use in this year's assignments."

Other positives included improvements in **presentation** skills, **team** work in placement **interviews** and on their **CV**.

3.7.2 Negative effects

There were few negative effects reported though, not surprisingly, some Leaders found that planning and running their PAL sessions proved to be stressful at times when their own workload was high..

The **timetabling** for PAL sessions was clearly one downside:

"The timetable made me wait 4 hours after my PAL session for my next lecture."

"The days were awkward, I had to come in [to University] on days when I had no scheduled classes."

Some first year students could also be very demanding outside PAL sessions even though they may not have been at the appropriate PAL session:

"It's annoying when students want help outside of the session and they can be quite demanding."

"At times it was a bit annoying getting text messages etc asking questions that had already been answered in PAL and the student would have known had they attended."

3.8 Next year

3.8.1 One piece of advice for future PAL leaders

The one piece of advice a lot of students would give future PAL leaders was to be **prepared** for the sessions whilst remaining **flexible** to students' needs. Preparation was considered particularly important at the beginning because it created a good and lasting impression

"Plan your sessions a few days before to give yourself time to research around what is going to be discussed in the sessions."

"Make sure you make the best impression possible in the first session then they'll keep coming."

One Leader advises that the focus of planning be on structure (and activities) rather than content:

"Manage your time well. Don't spend too much time planning - structure is far more important than content - that's what the students are meant to bring!!"

Another piece of advice leaders gave, was to ensure that you created an **appropriate relationship** with the students, got to know them and learned their **names**:

"To get to know the people you are leading and enjoy your sessions with them - after all everyone in the room are students! "

"Try and create a relationship with the students which is not too formal to avoid creating a lecturer like image but not too informal so they don't lose your respect."

"Learn the NAMES of your PAL group because this is every person's most favourite word. Talking to someone in your PAL group and using his/her name will make them feel important to you and you are going to be well respected and have good relations with your PAL group even if you mess something up:))."

Finally, there is advice about not taking low attendance personally:

"Don't be offended by low attendance or unruly behaviour, its not you, its the student's work load or motivation, just email them all and encourage."

3.8.2 Suggested improvements for the PAL programme

The most frequent suggestion focussed upon staff ensuring that **first year students had a better idea of what PAL is** and the potential benefits of PAL to these students. It is clear some leaders feel that support for PAL amongst the teaching team was half-hearted and, as seen in the suggestion made earlier in Section 2.4, such diffidence can have a negative impact upon student attendance. It was suggested that **proper promotion of PAL by a member of the teaching team during induction week** would be very helpful:

"I think PAL should be promoted more to the students at the very beginning of term. Lecturers should know more about it and understand the real potential in the scheme."

"Give a proper session to the students on what PAL is all about and not just mention it in passing."

Leaders also felt that they needed **access to resources** and **better awareness** of what the students were studying in order to fulfil their role effectively:

"It would be advisable to give Leaders not only the students' assignment timetable but the assignment briefs so that as PAL leaders we know exactly what is expected of them and therefore can plan our PAL sessions more appropriately."

"Get given booklets and syllabus for all 1st year's subjects. Helps to know where students are in their classes and what changes have been made compared to last year's syllabus."

Several PAL leaders felt that a better slot on the **timetable** would be an improvement on the PAL scheme

“Sort out the timetable so that PAL is after an important lecture so students in halls, etc. are not coming in just for PAL because they wont. I know its hard to sort out though!”

It was also clear that some students felt that either their meetings with their Course PAL Contacts could be **better structured**, or that these meetings should **take place more frequently**:

“Structured meetings - i.e. go through each module at least briefly, make sure the course contact is at least aware of what's going on at stages of the course by having a quick word with the tutors when they have a chance. This would give leaders a chance to be prepared for what their group might ask them about.”

“Have compulsory-PAL leader monthly meetings to share ideas and problems that PAL leaders experience.”

The recommended number of meetings per year is 8 – fortnightly initially gradually decreasing to one per month as the Leaders gain confidence in their role.

Finally a comment on using myBU for PAL:

“Do not change PAL and start trying to run sessions on myBU. Because, from talking to first years, it won't work. This would ruin the good programme that is already in place.”

4. Recommendations and actions

We have been delighted to read the many positive comments we have received on the PAL scheme from both students and Leaders. It is clear that, in most cases, the scheme is achieving its specified aims and we are delighted with the excellent support the PAL scheme has received from Schools and the Course PAL Contacts. There is much to be very pleased with. We would specifically like to thank the Course PAL Contacts for efforts and input – it is much appreciated not only by us but by the PAL Leaders as well.

There are however some issues that do need to be addressed and these are outlined below. Where we are able, we have made changes in response to student's comments and these are indicated on the next pages as 'Actions already taken'.

There are also some issues raised by students and Leaders that should be addressed by Course PAL Contacts and we would be most grateful if colleagues could give these issues their consideration.

4.1 Better awareness of assessments and areas students are currently studying

PAL Leaders have requested that they be better informed with regard to two areas:

- the topics areas their students are currently studying
- the assignments on which their students are currently working.

With the implementation of new frameworks during the forthcoming academic year, it is likely that some leaders will not have had the benefit of studying the same units as the students in their PAL group. Under these circumstances it will be important for Leaders to be provided with copies of teaching schemes, the assignment schedule and assignment briefs so that they are aware of the topics first years are currently studying and the assignments they are currently preparing. Additionally, Hugh Fleming is liaising with the myBU Team to improve Leaders access to First Year students' resources and announcements.

Actions: Hugh Fleming and PAL Contacts

4.2 A proper introduction to PAL for new students

It is clear that the way in which PAL is introduced to new students, together with the level of enthusiasm on the part of the presenter, can have a considerable effect upon first year students' attendance at their PAL sessions. It is suggested that some time is set aside during induction week for this activity to take place. Involving PAL Leaders in this activity is to be encouraged. It would be best to avoid stating that PAL is optional and that students don't have to turn up if they don't want to.

Action: PAL Contacts

4.3 Involvement from other members of the teaching team

Student feedback indicated that some staff have a poor awareness of, or misconceptions about, PAL and its purposes. Leaders felt that it was essential that Programme Leaders and other members of the teaching team know about the scheme and liaise with the PAL Contact so that PAL Leaders can support first year students more effectively. Hugh Fleming would be delighted to discuss PAL with teaching teams.

Actions: Hugh Fleming, PAL Contacts

4.4 Timetabling

Timetabling PAL effectively is a perennial challenge and we are well aware of, and grateful for, the many interventions colleagues make to try to smooth this process. There have clearly been improvements over the years and this is no longer the major area for complaint. Nevertheless, feedback in this evaluation indicates that colleagues still need to be vigilant. An inconvenient slot almost always leads to poor levels of attendance, which means poor value for money for Schools, and concerns for your Leaders who tend to take low attendance at their sessions very personally.

It would be helpful if colleagues could bear the following in mind when timetabling PAL:

- aim to timetable PAL sessions immediately before or after a lecture, when the students can use the PAL session either to prepare better for the lecture or to review the content of the lecture they have just attended. This can have a very positive impact on the more challenging areas of a programme or framework;
- avoid timetabling PAL sessions on a day when the group or the PAL Leader have no other classes;
- avoid timetabling PAL sessions more than 2 hours after the group's last timetabled class of the day.

Action: PAL Contacts.

4.5 Develop a weekly schedule for PAL sessions

It was suggested that a schedule for each term's PAL sessions could be devised in outline by PAL Leaders in association with their Course PAL Contacts. This could be structured around hand in dates for assignments i.e. a PAL session to discuss a particular assignment should take place 2 weeks before the assignment hand in date.

Action: Course PAL Contacts and PAL Leaders

4.6 Disruptive students

Some PAL Leaders are uncertain how best to handle boisterous or disruptive students. Please could colleagues be aware that this can cause a lot of concern for Leaders, and offer appropriate support if necessary.

Action: PAL Contacts

4.7 Non attendance by Leaders at their PAL sessions.

It was disappointing to note how often this issue was raised by first year students, though it isn't clear whether this was three students complaining frequently during their feedback or is indicative of something more widespread. Please could PAL Contacts be vigilant when checking attendance registers and PAY Claim Forms.

Action: PAL Contacts