



PERSPECTIVES ON: A CASE FOR PEER ASSISTED LEARNING

Closing the attainment gap and enhancing student retention through fostering academic socialisation

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The '**Perspectives On**' series has been developed as an online resource to promote dissemination and discussion of contemporary issues in the business school sector.

The rationale is to provide an online resource which academics can access to find an informal overview of and informed discussion pertaining to a topical issue affecting learning and teaching at an international, national, university, faculty, department or module level. Although not 'research' papers, 'Perspectives On' submissions will be independently reviewed by the editorial team to assist with writing submissions.

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INTRODUCTION

Evolving into cosmopolitan learning communities has, in recent years, become a norm across business schools, challenging them to innovate, anticipate, and cater for the requirements of heterogeneous student cohorts, with diverse learning needs and expectations (Zhang *et al.*, 2016). To facilitate integration, learning, and development of its diverse student population, Brunel Business School engaged with the development and piloting of a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme, aiming to foster academic socialisation. Whilst there is no universally accepted definition for PAL (also known as supplemental instruction or peer assisted study) it can broadly be seen as a form of academic support intervention. It typically involves senior students known as PAL leaders facilitating peer learning amongst early years undergraduates (Dawson *et al.*, 2014). In this article we present our reflections and experience of organising and developing a PAL programme for a period of three years, as well as the impact of this initiative on student attainment and retention.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF STUDENT COHORT DIVERSITY

Diversity is a feature of cohorts that alludes to differences like gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, physical ableness, etc., that contribute to a cultural identity which evolves by membership in socio-culturally distinct demographic groups. Whilst diversity is supposed to facilitate knowledge exchange processes within learning environments, contemporary studies indicate certain conditions that need to be met for learning to take place effectively. Examples of these conditions include overcoming or integrating students' preconceptions/misconceptions of learning contexts, enabling transfer of inter-disciplinary skills from one learning context to another, and oscillating between assertive and cooperative knowledge exchange processes (Young, 1944; Antonio, 2004; Hajro, Gibson and Pudelko, 2017; Dean *et al.*, 2018).

Following a number of years of healthy growth in student numbers, Brunel Business School has evolved into a considerably diverse learning environment. Just under 30 per cent of undergraduates are international students and the remaining home students represent many ethnic minority groups. A high proportion are second-generation immigrants, with some coming from less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds. In conjunction with an increasing number of entrants holding non-traditional entry qualifications, such as BTECs, the new levels of cohort diversity challenged the school's pedagogic approach that constituted an ever-increasing level of scaffolding support, underpinned by a skills deficit philosophy.

A cohort diagnostic survey, student feedback surveys at module level, and data on student attainment and attrition, revealed a number of areas requiring intervention to the concerned faculty members of the school. In summary, the identified issues could be classified into the following categories:

- The school's approach to student support enabled the traditional entry students to achieve even higher marks, whilst the 'weaker' students did not seem to engage meaningfully with any of the initiatives or the additional learning resources in place.
- International students, and those with non-traditional entry qualifications, such as BTECs, were less likely to achieve a good degree and had higher rates of attrition.
- Many students tended to identify with university and non-university-based groups with similar norms of beliefs and behaviours, often to their own detriment, as the information about university life, assessment standards, regulations, and available opportunities, shared within some of these groups, were misleading.
- Some social media groups, where students looked for support, had a disruptive role on their learning process due to communicating false information and developing wrong expectations, e.g. *"universities never fail you out because they want your money"*, *"I only need to learn what is on the lecture slides to pass"*, etc.
- A number of students were discouraged by friends and family from engaging with on campus extracurricular activities. This included some from less advantageous socioeconomic backgrounds, those living with family, and those needing to work whilst studying. These students appeared to be unaware of the learning resources and developmental opportunities available to them.

These findings led us to the realisation that the school's substantial investment in, both campus based and distance oriented, learning resources was predominantly helpful for the traditional entry, better engaged, and generally stronger performing students. On the other hand, those coming from less advantageous socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds appeared unable to utilise these resources for enhancing their development and in a number of cases were unaware of their existence. Aiming to close the gap between the two groups by facilitating integration, and homogenising learning and development of our student population, the school engaged with the development and piloting of a Peer Assisted Learning scheme, initiated by Brunel University.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING OF OUR INTERVENTION (OR ELSE WHY ACADEMIC SOCIALISATION?)

"Socialisation will mean the process of inducting the individual into the social and cultural world; of making him a particular member in society and its various groups and inducing him to accept the norms and values of that society... Socialisation is definitely a matter of learning and not of biological inheritance" (Young, 1944)

For the purpose of our intervention, academic socialisation is seen as the process through which one learns to adopt values, skills, attitudes, norms and knowledge needed for success in higher education and is mainly rooted on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and on Weidman's conceptual framework for undergraduate socialisation of 1989. Bandura (1977) suggests that individuals learn behaviours through identification with role models, sharing similar characteristics, by means of observation, modelling, and verbal instruction. Weidman (1989) considers the joint socialising impacts of student background, normative influences exerted by colleagues, and the mediating influences of parents and other external groups. Socialisation is not only considered in terms of cognitive impact, but in terms of affective aspects of development such as: aspiration, vision, career choices, and engagement with the academic community.

By understanding the importance of the normative contexts experienced by university students when they enter higher education, and the effects that can have on exerting lasting influences on students' academic, social, and personal development, we can develop effective learning environments for students from different academic backgrounds. Antonio (2004) found that students in diverse friendship groups had higher degree aspirations than students in homogenous friendship groups. Padgett et al. (2010) found that early interaction with academics and early socialisation experiences are especially important for students who do not have a strong sense of belonging to the higher education environment. For such students, early socialisation into the norms of academic relationships is essential for their subsequent ability to accept and form mentoring relationships in later years at university.

ORGANISING AND DEVELOPING OUR PAL SCHEME

Peer Assisted Learning is a well-established model of student-to-student learning, that offers a wide range of potential benefits in the areas of employability, transition, retention, and attainment (Keenan, 2014). However, its effectiveness in helping students to realise those benefits has been subject to debate, with empirical studies often reporting controversial findings (Dawson *et al.*, 2014). To ensure success of our scheme we decided to invest considerable time and adequate resources on the selection and training of PAL leaders to enable them to act as role models for the students in their groups. We also provided PAL leaders with follow on support through regular debrief sessions with the academic coordinators of the respective student cohorts.

The selection process, of application form and interview, produced an initial group of leaders, approximately 60% of which met Widening Participation criteria and had demonstrated strong academic performance and engagement with a wide range of university led initiatives and student societies. This helped to ensure that PAL leaders had already developed robust awareness of the resources and opportunities for learning and academic socialisation available within the university. In turn this was beneficial for their training process by allowing more emphasis to be placed on the development of their communication and leadership skills.

The training provided to PAL leaders helped them develop competencies in communication techniques, organisation of informal in class activities, team based learning techniques, setting up and handling of social media groups, resilience to emotionally demanding situations, reflective practice, and time management to ensure that they would not overly commit to being helpful whilst neglecting their own studies. This training took place before the start of the academic year and was provided by a specialist university team and academic coordinators to secure adequate time for practice and reflection.

For our level 4 cohort we established 10 groups of around thirty, first year students. Each group was led by two leaders from the year above. They met 4 times per term on a bi-weekly basis for an hour, and in the intervening weeks the leaders met for a '*debrief*' with an academic co-ordinator. Facilitating transition from secondary to higher education is the main objective of the PAL scheme at this level. Emphasis was placed on activities that enable students to evolve into independent learners, become familiar with learning resources and university services, and to provide them with a forum for informal discussion where questions can be raised frequently and answered promptly. The latter was also reinforced by the use of social media groups, set up and managed by the PAL leaders.

For our level 5 international, direct entry students we adopted a similar approach but the groups were organised based on their specific programme of studies. To alleviate the impact of deficiencies in language fluency and cultural barriers, the sessions were scheduled to last for two hours but less frequently. Additionally, the PAL leaders were advised to adopt a more instructive approach on issues related to advice on accessing university services, professional development, and engagement with students' union societies. Emphasis at this level was placed on integration of international students to the school/university and the cohort of their programme of studies, rather than to facilitate transition from secondary to higher education.

PAL leaders also made substantial use of social media to communicate with their groups, responding to ad hoc questions in a timely fashion, resolving issues requiring clarification e.g. advice on the university's policy on assessment and feedback, providing non-attending students with an opportunity to stay engaged from a distance, sending reminders of milestone deadlines, and identifying early, issues that could have a potentially hazardous impact on the learning experience of students in their groups.

An academic coordinator per level of study and the school's student support team were in close contact with the PAL leaders to provide advice and support on more complicated issues e.g. additional help for distressed students or handling of misconduct cases. To ensure consistency of provision the scheme became available to all new year 1 and year 2 (direct entry) undergraduate students, avoiding to explicitly define a target audience on the basis of risk profiles at entry.

OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS

Three academic years after introducing our PAL scheme in 2016/17 and with the corresponding student cohort graduating in 2018/19, we now have adequate information to enable an in-depth reflection on its outcomes and benefits for our students' learning experience, attainment, and retention. Acknowledging that the sophistication of an empirical study in terms of data collection and analysis would be beyond the scope of our discussion, we base our commentary on feedback received from students, PAL leaders' comments during the debrief sessions, and on published university data on retention and attainment per level of study. A limitation, due to data availability, relates to potential enhancements of the students' employability and longer-term career development prospects. This may be a concern for future research of robust empirical nature which could also evaluate, or control, for the impact of non-PAL related factors that may have influenced retention and attainment.

Attendance on campus-based PAL sessions has been at around 45 per cent, but information provided by the PAL leaders during the debrief sessions, indicates that a larger percentage of students engaged with PAL via social media. This reassured the academic coordinators that actions taken to motivate attendance have been effective. Specifically, PAL sessions were timetabled around the times of lectures in core modules with high attendance rates, to ensure that the majority of students would be on campus, promoting participation in PAL sessions as a convenient break between lectures and seminars. The PAL leaders have been largely involved in promoting their campus-based sessions and social media groups from the very early stages, e.g. during induction events or at the beginning of the first lectures in popular modules. Continuous promotion in the form of providing summaries of the key issues discussed during campus-based sessions were then circulated via email and social media to foster engagement with more students. Additionally, a number of raffles and prizes, made available to participants of campus-based sessions, may have also motivated some students to spend part of their break time attending a PAL session.

Considering the students' motivation to attend and their expectations from engaging, feedback provided shows that many students are attracted to PAL sessions to gain an insight in how to be successful in assessment. Developing awareness of the university's socialisation opportunities has only been a moderate motivating factor in the early stages of their engagement with the scheme. Nevertheless, when asked for feedback at later stages of engagement, students reported that their expectations in areas such as understanding the university, increased confidence, insight into future years, and socialisation, were considerably exceeded.

In relation to improving retention PAL seems to be positively associated with considerably lower numbers of students leaving the university. By the end of the first year of its implementation, 2016/17, the decrease in attrition was 7.5 percent, demonstrating a reverse to an upwards trend in 2015/16. More emphatically on the second year of implementing PAL, 2017/18, attrition fell by 40

per cent. Further analysis of retention data demonstrated that the groups of students with non-A-level and mixed entry qualifications, were those reporting the largest percentages of reduction in attrition rates. By comparison, the decrease of attrition amongst the group of traditional A-level entry students was very moderate.

Similarly, engaging with PAL seems to be positively associated with improving the attainment of students. Specifically, comparing the awards profile of the 2016/17 entry cohort, which graduated in 2018/19, to those of previous years we have found a considerable increase of 12 per cent in the number of students awarded first class and 2.1 degrees. As per the case of attrition our analysis of award data demonstrated that the groups of students with non-A-level and mixed entry qualifications, were those reporting the largest percentages of improvement, whilst the attainment of the group of traditional A-level entry students only improved moderately. These findings clearly indicate that academic socialisation initiatives are much more successful in addressing the needs of student groups perceived as weaker at entry point, in comparison to provision of scaffolding support initiatives.

Whilst the aforementioned improvements on attainment and retention have been very encouraging, we were still left with questions in terms of the extent these were achieved due to our PAL scheme or due to the scaffolding support provided through prior initiatives. Feedback from students indicated towards a combination of both, with PAL still being highlighted as the key ingredient of the school's support strategy. This is because it enabled a larger number of students to become familiar with university resources and engage with on campus extracurricular activities at an earlier stage of their studies. These in turn fostered academic socialisation and developed a sense of community amongst students that mitigated disadvantages related to their background from hindering their progress. There is still, however, room for a future empirical study that could identify and control for a larger number of factors affecting attainment and retention.

The role of social media in distracting or facilitating students' learning experience was also highlighted during the debrief sessions with our PAL leaders. Modern students rely on social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp to communicate and socialise. These channels were not open to academics but PAL leaders could be integrated and communicate instances of 'fake' news, misinformation and student concerns, either by communicating directly with students or by establishing appropriate responses with an academic. The academic co-ordinator could also mediate with other academics to highlight student concerns and needs in specific modules so that appropriate actions were taken promptly. PAL transformed disruptive social media into peer-monitored useful communication channels whilst maintaining student privacy.

In addition to the positive outcomes for participating students, reflecting on the feedback and comments we received from our PAL leaders during the debrief sessions, helped us identify a range of transferable skills they perceived as having developed during their training and engagement with

the school's initiative. Firstly, their training improved their confidence in communicating and socialising, made them aware of university resources that they had not engaged with before, and helped them develop a sense of responsibility in relation to the role they were prepared to take on. Whilst delivering their sessions they developed practical experience in team leadership, confidence in handling social media within a quasi-formal setting, as well as self-discipline and time management skills. They also claimed that acting as PAL leaders helped them to develop better understanding of concepts taught to them in previous years, as they were often asked to assist their tutees with questions related to actual module content.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, reflection on student feedback reveals a range of areas where PAL was perceived as highly beneficial for both members of the PAL groups and their leaders. This form of academic socialisation provided students with the opportunity to work together and further understand and solve queries that arose during their studies. In-session activities were perceived as creative in nature and encouraging of a collaborative approach to learning and problem solving. For students, PAL provided a safe place to discuss difficult topics whilst developing friendships and enhancing skills and study habits. For PAL leaders, it was an enjoyable way to support students on the same course and to further their own development, particularly because at Brunel University PAL is an accredited Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) activity for PAL leaders, and hours also contribute towards the Brunel Volunteers Award. Having developed considerable experience as PAL academic coordinators, we would be pleased to hear from colleagues who are engaged in similar work or would like to know more practical details in terms of our training and materials.

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