

Peer Assisted Learning Project (Bournemouth University):

Evaluation report – April 2004

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The PAL project was one of 33 funded under HEFCE's FDTL3 Programme. The effective start date of the project was March 2001, running over three years until March 2004. An interim external evaluation report was provided in January 2003, somewhat over halfway through the project. This final report draws upon the interim evaluation and adds to it both in terms of developments since January 2003 and in terms of some more general comments.
- 1.2 My involvement as external evaluator needs to be distinguished from evaluative work undertaken by the project officer and other members of the team. I have not seen my task as evaluating the impact of peer assisted learning as evidenced by the Bournemouth project. Rather I have seen my task as evaluating the effectiveness of the project as a piece of learning and teaching development work.
- 1.3 I have attended steering group meetings and a variety of other ad hoc meetings, some of these including staff and students engaged in PAL activity in the various subject areas. My direct observation of PAL activity has been limited but useful, and the final conference organised by the project team provided considerable additional evidence. Committee papers, updates and progress reports, together with draft publications, have supplemented the materials available to me in shaping my evaluation report. I will organise my remarks under the headings of (i) planning and organisation, (ii) achievement and (iii) research dissemination outputs and value for money.

2 Planning and organisation

- 2.1 It took a little while to get the steering group fully established but it proved an effective body with an appropriate membership. Its meetings, particularly between late 2001 and early 2003, were excellently chaired and well attended, with additional expert input from other institutions involved in supplemental instruction/peer assisted learning. The chairing of the Steering Group by a Head of School was an important indication that the University took the project seriously. The meetings were provided with clear papers and, despite a full agenda, afforded ample time for full and open discussion. They were also well-minuted. The flow of paperwork to steering group members reduced in the latter stages of the projects, and steering group meetings were perhaps somewhat less well attended. The early departure of the project officer was doubtless a significant factor in this. Nonetheless the project did not fall apart in the later stages as it could easily have been allowed to do. This is a considerable testament to the energies of Hugh Fleming and other members of the project team.
- 2.2 Obviously the early stage of planning was concerned with the bid itself, and I had little or no involvement in that. The initial start date was deferred by some months due to staffing difficulties, but the appointment of Stuart Capstick as project officer proved to be a very good one. The first twelve months or so of the project involved a great deal of external networking and internal preparatory activity. This was accompanied by a small scale pilot

between March and May 2001 followed by a limited and not altogether successful attempt to get peer assisted learning off the ground in 2001/02.

- 2.3 Paul Martin (TQF national co-ordination team), in his response to the first annual report on the project, referred to Hugh Fleming becoming Chair of the UK Supplemental Instruction Forum as a 'masterstroke'. It certainly provided a very strong bridge between the Bournemouth project and the national SI network, itself an extension of the original US network. This linkage was reflected in the involvement of the University of Missouri-Kansas in the provision and certification of training for staff co-ordinators at Bournemouth, attended by staff from eleven UK institutions. The project website is also to some extent a national PAL/SI resource and the national PAL/SI network meetings have provided valuable opportunities for the sharing of experience and good practice between institutions.
- 2.4 There seemed to me to be an underlying tension at the outset between the project at Bournemouth and the Supplemental Instruction tradition. There is a sense in which SI is a 'proprietary product' which originated at Missouri-Kansas and over which Missouri-Kansas and the associated US network sought to maintain some degree of control. Against this, UK universities now have a lot of experience of applying peer assisted learning in their own rather different environments. There was thus a background sense of 'unilateral declaration of independence' going on across the first year of the project. The Supplemental Instruction terminology has been used less and less as the project has proceeded. While 'supplemental instruction' might be considered to refer to a specific and well-defined approach, 'peer assisted learning' does not.
- 2.5 This issue is reflected 'on the ground' in a gradual shift of discourse from implementation of a well-articulated pedagogic approach, proven to be effective elsewhere, towards a pragmatic and open-minded R&D project, fostering cross-year undergraduate student support in whatever ways proved to be effective. The openness of the project staff to make this kind of shift in the course of the project is again a mark of the resilience and strength of the team.
- 2.6 The real challenge of 2001/02 was to get enough participation from first year students who engaged only in limited and intermittent ways with the projects, often reflected in attendance levels close to or at zero. Whatever the reasons for this it was obvious that the project could not succeed unless it could overcome this fundamental difficulty. In addressing this problem the team were open to the perspectives of the first year students themselves, and of the student leaders. They recognised that the issue of timetabling of sessions was critical, and that there needed to be a good deal closer relationship between course team staff and the PAL process.
- 2.7 The team also recognised that there was a need for a closer engagement between the PAL leaders and the course itself; the PAL leaders needed to be present at course induction for the first years and they needed to receive assignment briefs and teaching schemes so that they were adequately appraised of what is happening in the course itself. In addition, it was recognised that course team staff could with advantage suggest specific content to be discussed in PAL sessions or even set an early assignment which required attendance at least one PAL session.

2.8 Taken together, these and similar ‘adjustments’ actually marked a significant shift in the relationship between PAL and the regular curriculum, and trespassed over some sensitivities in relation to the orthodox Supplemental Instruction approach. However, it is doubtful whether the project would ever really have got off the ground had it not been for the team’s willingness to undertake these creative adjustments in the light of initial failure.

3 Achievement

3.1 By October 2002 PAL sessions were up and running on courses catering for some 600 first year students. Attendance figures were far better than had been achieved at any stage in the previous year. Of 138 sessions held in the first five weeks of the 2002/03 academic year 60% were attended by at least half of the potential student group. Group maximum sizes were generally 15-20, with groups matched directly to the seminar groups established within the regular curriculum. Training for student leaders had been provided at the outset on the basis of a very full and excellent training manual. The initial training for 2002/03 was systematically and formally evaluated, producing useful tips for improvement. Student leaders’ self-reflections were gathered on an ongoing basis and structured evaluation questionnaires were being used with first years to provide feedback to student leaders.

3.2 Early topics for PAL sessions were as much about settling into university as about the course itself, but increasingly course staff were suggesting structured course-related content for PAL. In one case (Business Information Technology) this went as far as handing out the first assignment in a PAL session. Another tutor encouraged students to take their programming questions to PAL sessions in the first instance.

3.3 From the outset in 2002/03, PAL was successfully established on six courses ranging across the Schools of Design, Engineering & Computing, Finance & Law, Conservation Sciences, and the Business School. In the Business Law LLB course, for example, PAL sessions were built into the timetable and referred to in unit guides and student workbooks. All staff were supportive. In Environmental Protection/Applied Geography courses, PAL was introduced in relation to a common course element in science. Sessions focused on chemistry worksheets and practical work write-ups.

3.4 In these and a range of other courses, members of the course teams supported the student leaders, both at the outset and on a continuing basis, making suggestions for suitable session topics. The project team encouraged course staff to meet with PAL leaders, where possible weekly. The project team also pulled together staff across various courses through a staff network, which contributed to a sense of shared engagement to the project. The business of securing ownership of PAL at course team level is perhaps even more important than securing its ownership at institutional level, and the project seems to have been particularly effective in this regard.

3.5 In 2003/4 uptake of PAL proved even stronger than in 2002/3. By the time of the January 2004 Conference, the team were able to report that there were 84 active PAL leaders, providing for some 1400 students spread across 29 courses covering all but one of the University’s Schools.

- 3.6 For 2002/03 and 2003/04 a colour-printed brochure was produced for first year students setting out what peer assisted learning is and is not, what benefits can accrue for students and for staff, and the conditions for success. This clear and well set out document also serves to highlight a key research question for the project, namely whether the listed potential benefits are actually realisable.
- 3.7 The benefits claimed are at a number of levels. At the level of the course they include improving both the retention and grades outcomes of students who attend regularly. This is in many respects a key claim, and the numbers attending in 2002/03 and 2003/04 were sufficient to allow it to be tested. Towards the end of the 02/03 year it was recognised that decent individualised records of PAL session attendance were vital to quantitative impact analysis, and it was agreed that this should be given high priority in 03/04. However other than in the Business Information Technology course this was not achieved, which greatly limited opportunities for correlation with, for example, entry grades or attainment levels. Thus only in respect of one this course did it prove possible to examine grade outcome as a function of attendance at PAL sessions.
- 3.8 An obvious control issue concerns the comparability of strong attenders and weak attenders at PAL in terms of their prior educational qualifications. Analysis suggested that students engaging actively and persistently with the PAL sessions tend to be very slightly better qualified at entry than those who show lower levels of engagement. This is an interesting observation in itself, to which I shall return.
- 3.9 In terms of grade outcomes in relation to initial entry qualification, the overall analysis across five PAL groups suggested no significant difference between those who attended regularly and those who did not. However, three of the five groups were judged to have been relatively unsuccessful in terms of attendance levels and in terms of the reported views of students as to the quality and usefulness of the groups. The other two had run well throughout the year, with relatively good levels of attendance and positive 'user feedback'. If only these two groups were considered, the 'value added' (grade achieved in relation to entry qualification level) was indeed strongly correlated with PAL attendance. This finding, though not a particularly robust one methodologically, does lend some credence to the claim that successful PAL sessions can lead to an enhancement of grades.
- 3.10 In terms of retention, there is evidence that certain of the courses using PAL were subject to substantially lower levels of drop-out in the years following the successful establishment of PAL than in previous years. As the course team recognise, there are a number of uncontrolled variables in such a comparison which make attribution of cause problematic. However, here again there is some supportive evidence for the claim regarding improved retention.
- 3.11 Neither in respect of grades nor of retention would the evidence deriving from this project meet the requirements of any leading empirical research journal. However it must be recognised that this project was not primarily set up to research these questions. Moreover there are alternative glosses on the educational benefits of PAL. For example, it might equally well be argued that the greatest benefits lie not in retention and grades but rather in the transferable skills associated with learning to work effectively in a peer-based group. The ability to work effectively in self-supporting groups of this kind may confer benefits both in terms of personal development and subsequent employment, as well as in terms of study.

- 3.12 The brochure produced for students on the benefits of PAL more specifically claims increases in confidence and self-esteem. In 2003/04 fairly full questionnaire returns are available from participating first years which throw some light on this. However standard psychometric measures might be considered necessary to allow definitive judgement on this, and these have not been used.
- 3.13 The benefits claimed for student leaders include enabling them to revise and practise their subjects and gain a deeper understanding of them. The underlying argument is that one way to be sure you understand something is to try to teach it to somebody else. As the Student Leaders Training Manual puts it, 'to teach is to learn twice over'. The numbers of PAL leaders (ca. 80 in 2003/04) would have been sufficient to allow examination of grade progression from year 1 to year 2 amongst PAL leaders compared to a control group of non PAL leaders with comparable year 1 grades. However this analysis was not attempted.
- 3.14 Benefits claimed for academic staff included cutting down the number of minor requests from students. There was some anecdotal support for this claim but no systematic comparisons between comparable courses with and without PAL were attempted.
- 3.15 The benefits claimed for Schools included breaking down barriers between year groups and thus helping to develop a more cohesive course culture. Levels of cross-year contact amongst undergraduates are indeed often low, and breaking down barriers of this kind is therefore an interesting and worthwhile ambition. However there is little evidence, apart from the direct contact of PAL leaders and their student groups, to indicate any wider penetration of the barriers between years as a result of PAL. There was little indication, for example, that PAL contacts spilled over to any noticeable extent to other course-related or non course-related contexts. The PAL sessions included a good deal of 'social chat' about what students and leaders were up to in their daily lives beyond the course, but it doesn't seem to have gone much beyond this.
- 3.16 There are thus a considerable number of research questions which could be asked, and not all of them have been asked, let alone answered in this project. The significance of this might bear a little reflection. How far will the effective implementation and embedding of PAL actually depend on documentable evidence as to its effectiveness in these various regards? Will individual members of staff, or course teams, or institutions decide to adopt and sustain PAL on the basis of 'journal paper' evidence, or are other factors more significant?
- 3.17 The staff in the current project appeared to form their own personal judgements as to whether PAL was 'working' or not, though of course they may hold rather different views as to what 'working' means. We should recognise that these somewhat intuitive judgements about what works and what doesn't are in no sense peculiar to PAL; they apply in the case of nearly all the teaching methods adopted by lecturers. It may be that the sustainability of PAL depends more on these personal/intuitive judgements (on whether PAL can become 'a comfortable piece of the course furniture', in other words) than on quantified and statistically significant evidence to back up specific effectiveness claims.

3.18 One of the concerns which ran along in the background of the project from the outset was the issue of the extent to which student leaders should avoid actually ‘teaching’ anything. There can obviously be legitimate concerns over the quality or reliability of teaching provided by second year students for first years, especially where this is effectively unmonitored. Likewise there might be concerns amongst teaching staff that allowing this kind of teaching input would undermine their own positions. On the other hand, to debar student leaders from answering any factual questions relating to the subject matter introduces a constraint which seems artificial and unreasonable – not least because the students might well ask the same questions of one another outwith the PAL sessions and would have no hesitation about answering them. The solution adopted by the team was to train and encourage student leaders where possible to reflect questions back to the group or direct questioners to sources of answers. Nonetheless a good deal of teaching does in fact take place. Some of this is teaching course content, but as two of the PAL leaders themselves suggested, most of it is ‘teaching how to pass the unit’ or ‘how to get by’. There was no indication of continuing concern about this from the staff side, though questionnaire responses from the first years did signal that the ‘non-authoritative’ position of student leaders as teachers was an issue for some.

3.19 Another issue identified earlier was the extent to which the PAL sessions should be seen as part of the official curriculum. The original intention was to keep them quite distinct, not least so that students could feel that they ‘owned’ the sessions and that their conversations in those sessions would not be fed back to their tutors, possibly affecting the way their tutors saw them. Students, it was supposed, would thus feel able to ask questions which they might feel too embarrassed to ask of their tutors. In practice, as we have seen, attendance was initially so limited that it was progressively found more and more necessary to integrate PAL with the official curriculum. This produced no noticeable opposition from the teaching staff concerned, and the students appeared to be content to see the PAL sessions as timetabled parts of the education available to them.

4 Research/dissemination outputs and value for money

4.1 The substantial involvement of the project team with the UK Supplemental Instruction Network, noted earlier, provided a strong context for dissemination activity from the outset of the project. Specific dissemination activities are well-documented in the Annual Reports to the TQEF national co-ordination team and will not be rehearsed here. They include a well-used website and a considerable number of conference contributions.

4.2 A PAL Co-ordinators’ Manual, a PAL Student Leader Manual and Student Leader training materials have all been developed to a high standard of context and presentation, and have been widely disseminated. They represent an excellent resource for the project at Bournemouth and, more importantly, for those developing related projects elsewhere.

4.3 Two conferences were held for staff and students involved in PAL activities at other institutions. One of these was at Ambleside and the other at Winchester, and both were clearly successful, with many participants feeling inspired to greater efforts in light of one another’s experiences.

4.4 The final conference at Bournemouth was more strongly (though not exclusively) focused on dissemination of project outcomes. It attracted some 80 participants from over 20 HEIs, together with HEFCE and the LSC. The HEIs were an interesting mix of old and

new universities, showing that PAL is not 'typecast' for any particular part of the sector. Materials developed at Bournemouth, including Leader and Co-ordinator manuals, were provided to all participants.

- 4.5 Presentations at the conference set out the conditions for success of PAL at Bournemouth, including the key role of central staff in recruiting student leaders, planning and delivering initial and follow-up training, providing operational support day-to-day, monitoring PAL sessions, meeting with course teaching teams, providing advice for staff and assessing/ accrediting student leaders' performance.
- 4.6 The course team presentations stimulated many questions and much debate. For example, there was much discussion as to how groups should be selected. The use of existing seminar groups has practical advantages, but some saw advantages in self-selected groups, or groups designed to mix particular strengths and weaknesses. And while the Bournemouth experience was that PAL was relatively course- and discipline-independent, some saw the relationship between PAL and the pedagogical style of the course as an important issue.
- 4.7 Predictably, the issue of how far PAL should be seen as part of the 'official' curriculum was much debated. There was some surprise at the extent to which PAL at Bournemouth had been assimilated to the timetabled curriculum, even to the extent that on one course students would get letters if their monitored attendance at PAL sessions fell below a certain level. The surprise did not seem to be motivated by concern about this being out of keeping with the spirit of PAL. Rather, staff from many of the other universities seemed to feel that such official 'adoption' of PAL would be unachievable in their own institutions.
- 4.8 The Bournemouth Conference in many ways marked the end of the PAL project, with the Project Officer leaving shortly afterwards. This left the rest of the project team to support the residue of the 2003/04 PAL cycle and to take forward a number of publications which were in draft form at the time of the conference. Three in particular represent important overviews of different aspects of the project.
- 4.9 'Implement Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education' uses the Bournemouth experience to describe in practical terms how PAL can be implemented and cultivated across an institution. Recognising that PAL can mean many things, it advocates flexibility rather than dogmatism. It notes that the initial intention was to target 'high risk' courses (in terms of retention or success criteria). However it is not clear whether in the end the project has sustained or justified this focus. Insofar as there is evidence of benefits from PAL, there is little evidence that these are specific to weaker students or more challenging courses. Indeed the evidence, such as it is from this project, is that the students who engage most effectively with the regular elements of the course also engage most effectively with PAL. (Irritating though it may be, PAL may thus prove most effective with the strongest, rather than the weakest students, and the same may apply at course level; it would be useful to see this explored more fully at some point.) The paper explores the lessons of early failures to secure student engagement at Bournemouth, and the shifts of emphasis required to overcome these. Greater course involvement, timetabling and better initial and continuing training of PAL leaders are seen as critical success factors. Residual problems and the challenge of sustainability are explored. The key to sustainability is seen as ownership at course team level.

- 4.10 A second paper, 'Benefits and Shortcomings of PAL' draws mainly on student views of PAL in the 2002/03 implementation phase at Bournemouth, when 34 student leaders and 620 first year students were involved. Arguing the benefits of qualitative as against quantitative analysis, the paper draws upon questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These explored the views of both student leaders and first year participants (and non-participants) as to the strengths and weaknesses of PAL. The 'top two' benefits, aggregated across a number of courses, were the opportunity to clarify basic concepts and the opportunity to air concerns away from teaching staff. Downsides included lack of structure and concern over the expertise of PAL leaders. In general, PAL got a very positive press from the first year students, and PAL leaders felt that they gained confidence and personal/presentational skills through their PAL experience. Since most were on sandwich courses, they had already used their PAL 'credentials' in placement interviews with employers, often to good effect. Feeding this positive employer perspective back into the PAL process at course team level could be particularly valuable.
- 4.11 Though not covered by the above paper, in the following (03/04) session 494 students from 15 groups (spanning 15 courses) completed a questionnaire. These students had on average attended nine PAL sessions at the time they filled in the questionnaire. Examination of UCAS entry points in relation to PAL attendance gives a significant but small positive correlation between these (c. +0.2). There was a similarly weak but positive relationship between PAL attendance and assignment grades. In terms of students' views of benefits of PAL there was a high degree of communicating across courses. 'Opportunity to clarify basic concepts' was the most widely perceived benefit, with 'opportunity to air concerns away from teaching staff' next and 'obtaining a second year's perspective on the course' third. Interestingly, issues of factual information, reassurance and confidence were at the bottom of the list.
- 4.12 The last of these three draft papers, 'The Learning Environment of Peer Assisted Learning', attempts to model the patterns of interaction and learning observed in PAL sessions in the course of the project. A distinction is made between meaning-oriented approaches (focused on understanding) and strategic-oriented approaches (focused on 'how to get by'). This resonates with a nice distinction referred to earlier between 'learning about the course' as against 'learning how to pass the unit'. The 2002/03 questionnaire material is drawn upon, together with direct observation data, and the paper is well-grounded in the relevant published literature. Though the empirical analysis is circumscribed, the paper offers a good language for characterising the interactions and learning potentials of PAL. It suggests a trend through the academic year moving from didactic to more discursive interactions, with the focus of the sessions shifting between 'meaning' and 'strategic' orientation depending on students' needs. This paper offers a useful reminder that what actually goes on in PAL sessions may not necessarily reflect the preconceptions or predilections of those who promote and manage the programme. The willingness of the project team to recognise and learn from the ways in which reality and rhetoric diverge is a mark of (and possibly a reason for) their success.
- 4.13 In addition to these papers authored by members of the central project team, a paper on 'PAL in Business Education' was co-authored with three PAL Student Leaders. This will have given another dimension of 'added value' to the students concerned, and adds to what has been a strong dissemination profile for the project.

- 4.14 The question of value for money can be considered at a number of levels. One of these is whether PAL itself offers value for money. This has been an important issue in relation to the embedding of PAL at Bournemouth. Now that project funding has finished, a key sustainability issue is what does it cost to deliver PAL alongside the established curriculum, and what cost-benefit analysis can be offered. It would not be fair to have all the costs of this project set against the volume of PAL provision the project has supported, because much of the project resource has gone into development work, evaluation and dissemination activities.
- 4.15 The PAL project team have put forward a strong case to the University for continuation of PAL at Bournemouth. The team can make a convincing case that the project has been a success in its own terms and that it has attracted good publicity for the University. They can realistically show that PAL could become a major mainstream student support process. They can show positive attitudes across a wide range of academic staff as well as students. But the costs are non-trivial. To continue the project with 80 PAL leaders would cost about £24K in direct costs and require some £33 in PAL team staff costs. On this basis, cost for first years potentially participating would be approximately £45 per head. The outcome remains uncertain, but the case looks a good one.
- 4.16 In addition, the team have given creative thought to ways in which the PAL approach could be adapted to support HE in FE, and progression from this to the University's own programmes. This might be supported by Aimhigher funds, or indeed form part of a CETL bid. Thus in one way or another there seems a good prospect that the project will find continuing support, as it richly deserves to do.
- 4.17 An argument often voiced is that benefits in terms of retention can easily justify this cost, since a single student retained for their full course is worth perhaps £10-20K to the university. This type of argument ignores the subtleties of the funding of UK full time undergraduates, and in most institutions would be difficult to sustain. However, in a range of ways, retention is indeed important to institutions. So too are success rates and standards of achievement more generally. And PAL may offer a useful marketing 'USP' for courses.
- 4.18 Any judgement of the 'value for money' offered by PAL rather begs the question of 'relative to what?' The same money could be used in a range of other ways, for example to support more course contact hours. Beyond the end of project funding, these will be the sorts of choices being made – and it remains to be seen which way those choices will go.
- 4.19 But value for money can be considered in another and more straightforward way – did this project offer value for money to the funders? I think here there can be no doubt – the project team have delivered what they set out to deliver in an exemplary fashion and I suspect that this will prove to have been one of the most successful of the 33 projects funded nationally under FDTL3.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The initial challenge for this project was 'can we make PAL run at Bournemouth?' This has clearly been achieved, though not without difficulty and a great deal of effort from all concerned. A second challenge has been 'can we show that it helps?' This has been

achieved only to a limited degree in terms of quantitative evidence, though the qualitative evidence is rather stronger and the acceptance by course teams ‘that it works’ has been impressive. This links to the final challenges; ‘can we embed PAL at Bournemouth and increase its uptake elsewhere?’ The right time to evaluate this is perhaps in another three years’ time, but the indications at this stage are positive.

- 5.2 At the final conference in January 2004, Paul Martin described the rate of development and level of achievement of the PAL project at Bournemouth as ‘awesome’. To adapt another over-used contemporary cliché, the project has certainly ‘done what it said on the tin’. Both the funders and the University should feel considerable pride in what has been achieved. Peer assisted learning is a considerably stronger force in UK higher education as a result of it.