Peer Assisted Learning

SLT students' experience of PAL: undergraduates investigate PAL as a means of enhancing academic and professional development

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- 2015-16 student researchers: Marianne Buist, Megan Hayes, Isobel Moore and Becka Pitts

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Peer assisted learning

- Academic student-led support system for 1st year students (Capstick, 2004; Capstick & Fleming, 2004)

- Collaborative approach (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012; Laal & Laal, 2012)

- Students learn to 'inquire, share ideas, clarify differences, problem-solve and construct new understandings' (Hammer Chirac, 2014, p.2)

- PAL formalises the learning which occurs in naturally formed study groups of friends (Boud et al, 2001)

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Background to PAL at UEA

- Introduced in January 2013 (3-year pilot with 2-year extension)

- PAL part of SLT programme since September 2013

- Speech & Language Therapy (SLT): 3-year UG honours degree

- PAL attached to 1st year Foundations module

- Cohort 25 – weekly single group meetings with 3-4 mentors

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PAL on healthcare courses

- PAL contributes to academic and professional development (Field et al, 2000; Burke et al, 2007; Sole et al, 2012)

- Consistent with the move from concept-driven to concept application approaches (Institute of Medicine, 2010)

- Mentors provide 'expert scaffolding' (Falchikov, 2001, p.89)

- Mentors benefit from additional learning and gain transferable skills (Skalicky & Caney, 2010; Sultan et al, 2013)

- Current lack of research into the SLT experience of PAL

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Learning requirements of SLT students

- Work with children and adults with a range of communication and swallowing difficulties throughout the life course

- Requires a sound knowledge base and ability to apply theory to practice

- Graduates expected to become autonomous life-long learners in order to work independently and within a team
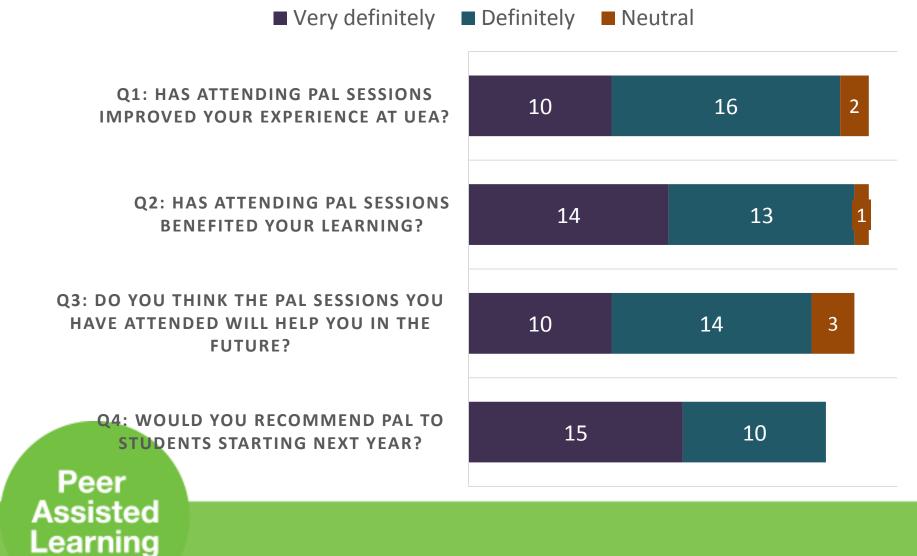
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PAL project – 2014-15

- All final year SLT students take part in an original research project supervised by members of SLT faculty
- PAL project contributed to evaluation of PAL + fulfilment of students' research requirement
- 4 students acted as student researchers (SRs) – no experience of PAL
- Fortnightly group supervision meetings throughout Autumn term (pre-placement)
- Individual meetings post-placement
- Write-up in the form of a journal article
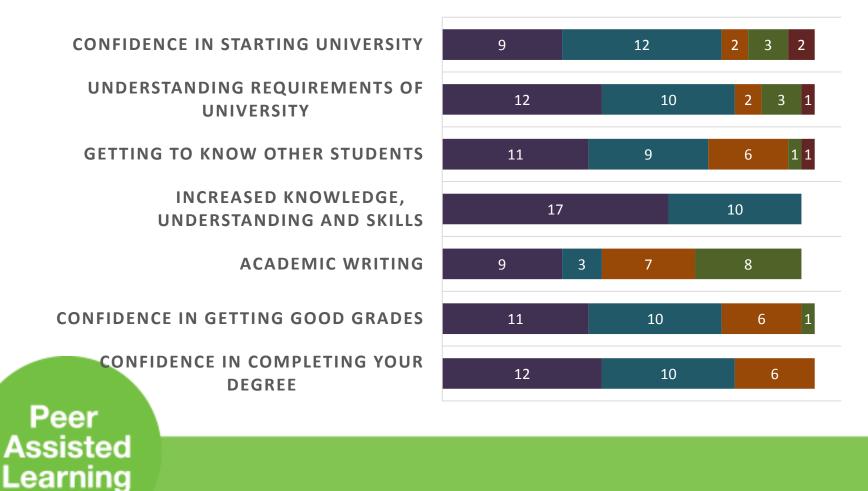
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Methodology

- Ethical approval received to conduct a study involving students as both researchers and participants
- Mixed methodology
  - Standard evaluation (2013-14 + 2014-15) – quantitative + qualitative data
  - Focus groups with mentees and mentors – qualitative data
- Focus groups conducted by student researchers
  - Participants more likely to be open with peers than faculty
- Analysis: thematic analysis (primary supervisor) + descriptive statistics (second supervisor)

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Quantitative results – overall benefits

Legend: ■ Very definitely ■ Definitely ■ Neutral

Q1: HAS ATTENDING PAL SESSIONS IMPROVED YOUR EXPERIENCE AT UEA?
Very definitely: 10, Definitely: 16, Neutral: 2

Q2: HAS ATTENDING PAL SESSIONS BENEFITED YOUR LEARNING?
Very definitely: 14, Definitely: 13, Neutral: 1

Q3: DO YOU THINK THE PAL SESSIONS YOU HAVE ATTENDED WILL HELP YOU IN THE FUTURE?
Very definitely: 10, Definitely: 14, Neutral: 3

Q4: WOULD YOU RECOMMEND PAL TO STUDENTS STARTING NEXT YEAR?
Very definitely: 15, Definitely: 10

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Quantitative results – specific benefits

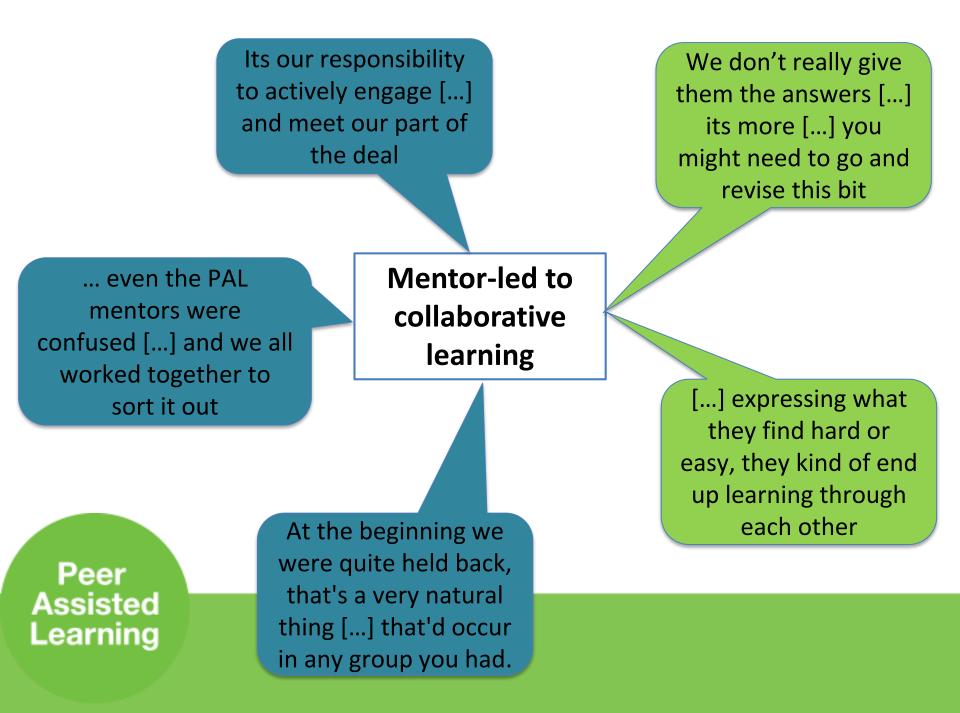Legend: ■ Definitely improved ■ Improved ■ No effect yet ■ Reduced ■ Definitely reduced

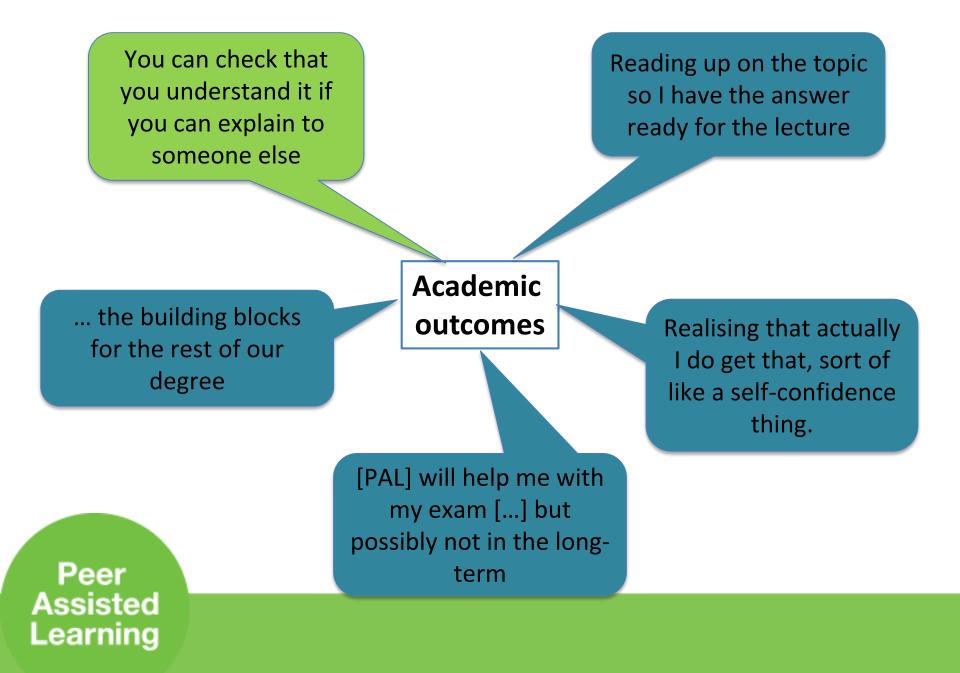| Benefit	Definitely improved	Improved	No effect yet	Reduced	Definitely reduced
CONFIDENCE IN STARTING UNIVERSITY	9	12	2	3	2
UNDERSTANDING REQUIREMENTS OF UNIVERSITY	12	10	2	3	1
GETTING TO KNOW OTHER STUDENTS	11	9	6	1	1
INCREASED KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND SKILLS	17	10			
ACADEMIC WRITING	9	3	7	8	
CONFIDENCE IN GETTING GOOD GRADES	11	10	6	1	
CONFIDENCE IN COMPLETING YOUR DEGREE	12	10	6		

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Qualitative findings

- Synthesised from 4 dissertations (3 x mentee + mentor experience; 1 x mentor experience)

- Key themes

  - Engagement with PAL

  - Mentor-led to collaborative learning

  - Academic and professional outcomes

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Conclusion

- Much of what the SRs found concurs with previous research

- This study added a perspective on PAL in SLT
  - The experience of a specific group of health students
  - PAL provides a vehicle for learning and professional development

- Students as researchers
  - Gained deeper insight into the student experience
  - Developed of research skills applicable to SLT practice
  - Worked as peers with supervising faculty, breaking down barriers

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PAL Project 2 – 2015-16

- Similar questions and methodology
- Access to data from 3 years of PAL evaluation
- Investigating experience of 2nd and 3rd year students
- Student researchers have participated in PAL

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