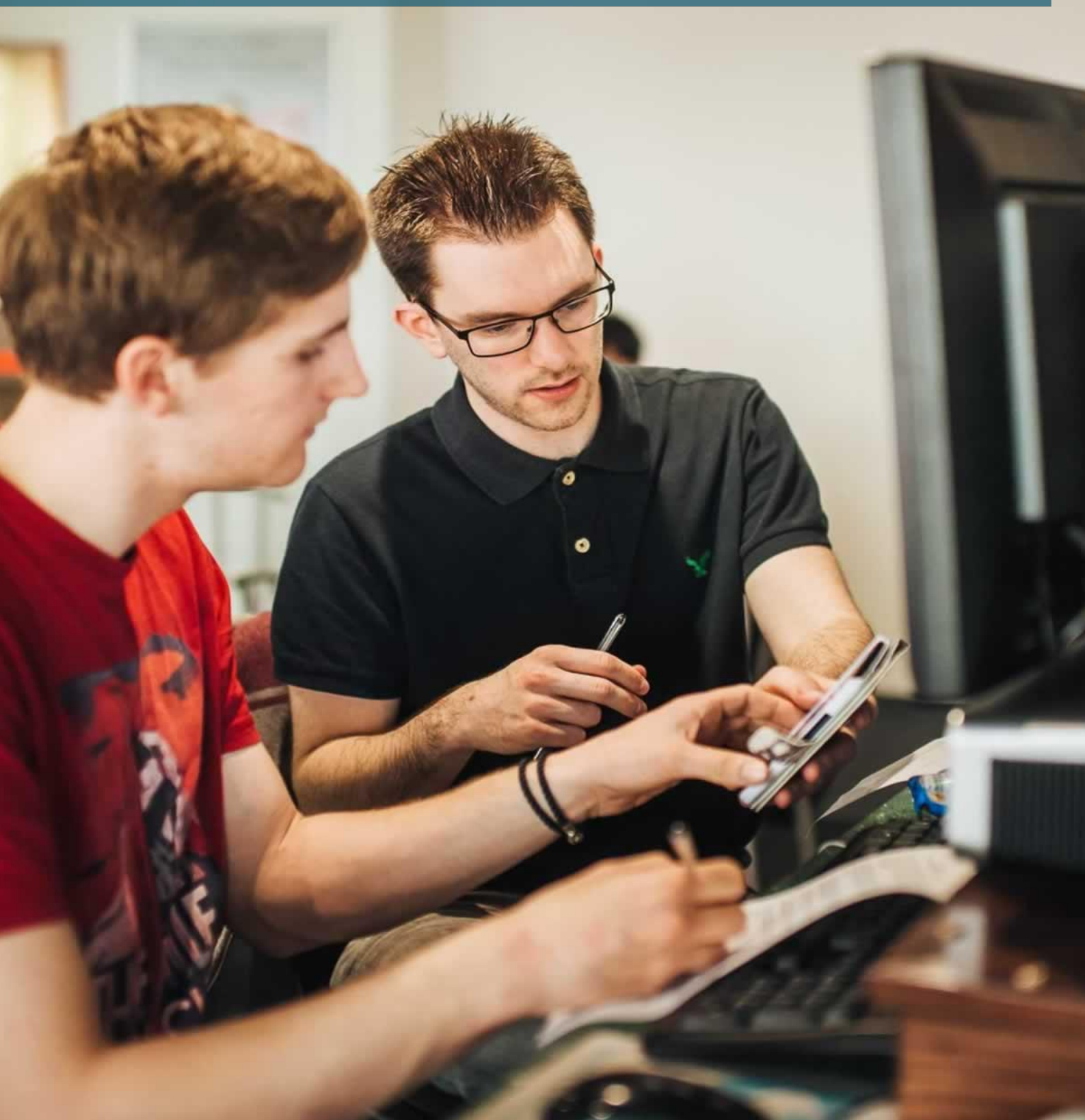


Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK

Chris Keenan



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Foreword

Findings from the *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey represent a significant step in the Higher Education Academy's (HEA's) work to engage students as partners in learning. Our approach to date has been premised on the view that everyone benefits from building active partnerships between staff and students, institutions and students' unions and among students themselves. Peer-led learning is an important element in this support spectrum and one that warrants close examination. A plethora of approaches to peer learning exist, prevalent in schools for over six decades, with a convincing research base evidencing numerous advantages for all participants. Although adoption into higher education (HE) has been relatively recent, it is exciting that some UK approaches are now quite mature, having been in existence since the early 1990s.

It is encouraging to observe how peer-led academic learning is gaining momentum, both nationally and internationally. The report illustrates its growth in the UK, the subsequent spread across a broad range of disciplines and groups. The many case studies contained within the report offer comprehensive illustration of the versatility of peer-led approaches, including innovative use with international students, those who have differing abilities, schemes that support students on placement, and those that utilise online peer support. The inclusion of international perspectives is informative in offering a global mirror in which we can observe and compare our national progress.

This report is especially important in its exploration of the benefits of peer-led learning for students and the associated enthusiasm of colleagues. Students progress in new and sometimes unanticipated ways through structured opportunities to facilitate and lead learning among their fellows. Evidence is accumulating that peer learning creates greater confidence and independence in learning, deeper understanding and improved grades for both peer leaders and their students. Enhanced transition into HE and greater belonging are precious gains for individuals, while enhanced student satisfaction, progression and retention are highly treasured prizes for those institutions who may claim them, particularly when measured against such modest investment during times of budgetary constraint.

Clearly there is a great deal more to be done, especially in the field of pedagogic research. It is essential that we continue to explore the benefits of peer-led academic learning and to illuminate more of these participative pedagogies. We are particularly proud to have undertaken this work at a time when realisation of the gains is gathering momentum in the US, in Scandinavia, South Africa, Canada and Australasia – indeed across all continents. I am excited that the Higher Education Academy is able to offer leadership and to continue to support institutions as they embed and evaluate the impact of such dynamic learning opportunities.

Professor Stephanie Marshall

Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy
November 2014

Executive summary

1. The practice of more experienced students being trained to guide and facilitate the learning of less experienced students in an organised and supported way is gaining momentum as a global phenomenon; peer-learning schemes now exist on all continents and hold relevance for students of all cultures. Since some UK schemes have been in existence since the early 1990s, it is timely to reflect on progress and identify opportunities for future developments.
2. Primary data gathered through the *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey (2014), conducted by the author for the Higher Education Academy, identify a range of social and academic benefits for students and institutions. Additional perspectives are also offered in case studies drawn from seven other countries.
3. Reported benefits for students who undertake the role of 'peer leader' include: the acquisition of higher-level personal and professional skills (including empathy, communication, organisation, leadership, decision-making and teamwork skills). Their own subject learning is deepened, grades improve, relationships and inter-cultural awareness are enhanced, and employability prospects are greater.
4. Similar benefits are reported for students who participate in peer-led learning sessions: they experience reduced anxiety associated with transition into higher education, have a greater sense of belonging and improved academic confidence. They have enhanced friendship development, greater confidence in social integration and participate more fully in the community. Academically, students take greater ownership of their learning experience, show fuller engagement, improved grades, and demonstrate better retention.
5. Reported benefits for institutions suggest improvements may be found in progression and retention, employability and satisfaction data. For a relatively low-cost investment peer-led learning schemes offer substantial reputational opportunities that demonstrate commitment to building student engagement in stronger, more integrated communities. They offer potential for multi-layered partnerships: between students, between tutors and peer leaders, and between the leaders and their wider learning community.
6. Peer-led learning schemes are diverse and versatile. There are a wide variety of peer education approaches including peer tutoring, mentoring and counselling, however, this report took peer-academic learning as its focus. Survey data found two main formally-organised approaches in use in the UK: peer-assisted learning (PAL) and peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), which together offer the focus of this report. Both derive from the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model, share common characteristics and are used within a broad range of disciplines across the sciences, arts, and professional/vocational programmes. Schemes are predominantly set up with second year student leaders supporting first year students, although some adopt a broader scope by offering online options and supporting more experienced students and those on placement, specific groups such as international students and even to provide outreach to secondary schools.
7. While survey data indicated respondents were unanimously positive regarding the benefits of peer learning, challenges were reported. These include gaining high-level, strategic support, achieving commitment and buy-in from academics and students, negotiating timetable hurdles, financial and administrative issues, ensuring appropriate training and development for staff and students, and embedding peer learning into institutional culture.

Recommendations

The report offers eight recommendations for the sector and for individual institutions:

- i. The Higher Education Academy, the UK National Centre for PASS and other key stakeholders will work together to decide next steps arising from the report.
- ii. The national and international peer-learning community should promote the sharing of practice, undertake pooling of data and collaborative research into the participative pedagogies, and build a bank of impact studies.
- iii. Participate in nationally recognised training and development, ensuring consistent and quality-assured approaches are adopted prior to implementing schemes.
- iv. Articulate the purpose and focus of each scheme, identifying the associated evaluation strategy, quality and performance measures.
- v. Ensure executive leadership and support, evidencing the presence of schemes in strategic documentation.
- vi. Mainstream peer-led academic learning schemes within the curriculum.
- vii. Implement schemes early in the student's life cycle.
- viii. Engage a broad group of stakeholders for each scheme that will include students, academic staff, employers and other interested parties.

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Introduction

This report aims to provide:

- a picture of the scope and range of peer-led academic learning activity in the UK;
- examples of innovative practice;
- a global perspective of peer-led learning activity;
- recommendations for future developments in the field for the sector and institutions.

The data underpinning this report were gathered from the results of a survey entitled *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK*, which was designed by the report author and distributed in April 2014. A full list of the questions may be found in the appendix to this report.

A growing focus on a more personalised higher education (HE) learning experience that enhances student satisfaction, retention and success, makes this report timely. Since some schemes in the UK have now been established since the early 1990s, it is appropriate to reflect on progress to date and identify opportunities for future developments. Publication of this report provides an opportunity to draw together a community around this important and exciting area of student experience.

This section provides an overview of:

- key findings within the report;
- background, definition and objectives of peer-led academic learning.

Summary of key findings

Key findings emerging from survey data and associated case studies may be summarised as:

- i. The prevalence of peer-led learning schemes is increasing across disciplines and institutions in the UK and internationally.
- ii. Collaborative learning is at the heart of peer-led learning.
- iii. Peer-learning schemes promote and empower autonomous learning, enhance engagement and improve grades.
- iv. Peer leaders gain a range of personal and professional skills, deeper subject learning, increased inter-cultural awareness and enhanced employability skills.
- v. Students participating in peer-led sessions experience easier transition into HE with greater belonging and participation, more academic confidence and better retention.
- vi. Transition to HE is supported when peer leaders use their experience to decode university practices and help new students build confidence.
- vii. Partnership is built between students, peer leaders, tutors and the wider community.
- viii. Peer-learning schemes help manage student expectations, support workload, build community cohesion and encourage cross-cultural integration.
- ix. Institutions gain substantial reputational opportunities that demonstrate commitment to building student engagement, community, partnerships, progression and retention.
- x. Investments are relatively low-cost, though challenges relate especially to resourcing, commitment, time tabling and clear communication.
- xi. Strategic high-level support and central co-ordination, structure and organisation enhance success and sustainability.
- xii. Participation in national networks, collaborative practice and research is invaluable.

Background, definition and objectives

This report aims to provide an overview of student-led peer academic learning activity in UK higher education (HE). It takes the subject of more experienced or 'higher-level' student leaders supporting the academic learning of newer learners as its focus. This can be viewed as part of a suite of peer-learning *and* peer-support approaches, for example: student counsellors and coaches (Ody *et al.* 2013) and peer mentoring (Andrews

2011). This might include mentors who assist with “settling in and finding out how things work”, others who support study skills, and those who help with learning disciplinary material in the context of a module. A broader overview of effective student support approaches is available in the *What works: student retention and success final report* (Thomas 2012). Clearly there is some potential for confusion, particularly since the various definitions sometimes overlap and are not always uniformly applied.

For the purposes of this report, the focus will be on peer-led learning approaches that use structured schemes such as peer-assisted learning (PAL) and peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), the two chief examples cited in the 2014 survey responses.

PAL and PASS derive from the ‘Supplemental Instruction’ (SI) model developed in 1973 in the US by Dr Deana Martin. Other schemes have different histories and have emerged from separate but related models. Hilsdon (2013, p. 4) takes a learning development approach introducing the concept of PAL as a “socially focused approach to learning” informed by theories of legitimate participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, in Hilsdon 2013) and academic literacies (Lea and Street 1998 and Lillis 2001, 2003, in Hilsdon 2013). Considering the implications for pedagogy, Hilsdon suggests that:

genuinely cooperative and collaborative work, with relatively symmetrical power relationships, is underway in PALS sessions to interpret course-related concepts and language. The implications of this for the development of student views on the nature of knowledge, and ways to improve pedagogy, indicate that further exploration in a more in-depth study would be fruitful. (Hilsdon 2013, p. 5)

Many definitions of peer-led academic learning exist. One example from Bournemouth University defines it as:

a scheme that fosters cross-year support between students on the same course. PAL encourages students to support each other and to learn collaboratively under the guidance of trained students, called PAL Leaders, from the year above. (Bournemouth University 2014)

This report will demonstrate that there are wide-ranging approaches to the organisation and operation of peer-led academic learning schemes. However, they all follow basic guidelines and principles¹ – they:

- support student learning;
- foster cross-year support for students, facilitated by more experienced students, usually from the year above, who are trained to provide a point of contact and support the learning of new, or less experienced, students;
- enhance students' experience of university life;
- are time tabled and participative – students work in small groups, engaging in discussions and a variety of interactive learning activities;
- encourage collaborative rather than competitive learning, active rather than passive;
- address both what students learn and how they learn;
- create a safe environment where students are encouraged to ask questions and receive guidance from other students about the course and its content;
- use the language and terms specific to the subject discipline;
- help students gain insight into course requirements and lecturers' expectations;
- assists students develop positive attitudes towards learning, keep up with their studies and complete their course;
- retain confidentiality within the PAL group;
- benefit all students regardless of their current academic ability and provide opportunities to improve academic performance;
- offer students place and time to practise the subject, learn from mistakes and build confidence;
- create opportunities for PAL leaders to revisit and consolidate their prior learning.

¹See: <http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/library/guest-visitor/pal.html>

According to Ody (2013, p. 301) as a voluntary, opt-in model structured peer-led academic learning has the following objectives, to:

- provide opportunities for discussion of learning strategies in small groups through collaborative and active learning;
- encourage a student-centred approach to learning;
- deepen the understanding of fundamental academic principles and develop intellectual and professional competences within an informal social environment;
- increase individual confidence in learning rather than superficial strategic learning designed to pass exams;
- promote the concept of academic and social communities;
- create an additional mechanism for communication and feedback between teaching staff and students.

The literature demonstrates that peer-led academic learning in higher education has a role in supporting: students' transition to college; social and emotional development; leadership and career skills development; satisfaction with college; learning and academic performance; and persistence and retention. There are also characteristics that distinguish peer-led learning from other support activity (Ody 2013) since it is:

- facilitative of student learning but is supplementary to tutor-led learning;
- structured and purposeful and should have appropriate training and support;
- dependent on small groups;
- open to all, non-compulsory, and takes place in a safe environment;
- fun and dependent on the engagement of immediate or near peers with shared experiences.

For a more comprehensive evaluation of the growth of peer-led learning in the UK see Hilsdon (2013) and Ody *et al.* (2013).

The report will now present the main survey findings in four sections which address:

- characteristics of the many schemes reported, their structure and organisation;
- benefits for key stakeholders (peer leaders, students and institutions);
- innovative practice (including many case studies to illustrate practice);
- reflections (on aspects of provision).

Survey findings

The *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey was the instrument for primary data gathering. It was designed and distributed by the report author in partnership with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2014 via various networks including HEA institutional contacts, the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) and Staff Education Development Association (SEDA) JISCmail groups and the UK National Centre for Peer Assisted Study Sessions. The survey was launched on 4 April 2014 and closed after the HEA Annual Conference on 3 July 2014.

The questions were broadly derived from the literature and aimed to:

- determine organisational and environmental factors related to schemes;
- gather information about peer leaders and target students;
- provide evaluative comments regarding key benefits to stakeholders;
- identify examples of innovative practice;
- attain a critically reflective commentary including the key arguments for, and main challenges of, introducing peer-led academic learning.

In order to consider the UK experience in the international context, information was also gathered about provision and practice in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and continental Europe. This section reports on findings related to the different types of schemes and aspects of structure and organisation.

Structures: the survey identified that peer learning is taking place across a variety of disciplines, including Midwifery, Creative Arts, Mathematics, Social Work, Food and Nutrition, Nursing, Public Relations and Communication, Zoology, Veterinary Studies, Creativity, Science and Environmental Studies, Languages, Law, Architecture, Travel and Tourism, Economics, Museum Studies, Engineering, and Chemistry.

Survey respondents indicated that recipients are predominantly first year students, though schemes also extend to higher years including final year, postgraduate, international students, students with disability, Black Minority Ethnic (BME) students, foundation students, partner colleges, and outreach to sixth form pupils. Trained leaders are usually second year students though examples of third and fourth year and postgraduate students also act as leaders.

Where schemes were more fully developed, they were often centrally co-ordinated and managed locally in departments. There were also examples of schemes co-run with academic societies, cafe approaches – for example, writing cafes with peer-to-peer feedback on extracts of written work – and examples of very successful schemes being organised and co-ordinated through students' union associations. Examples of innovation are included later in the report.

Respondents spoke enthusiastically about their involvement with schemes:

This is a really positive and exiting development. Students are great to work with and have boundless energy and some great ideas (Respondent (R) 64)

The provision of formally recognised student-to-student peer learning schemes appears to be increasingly prevalent across the sector. The commentary provided by respondents indicates high levels of energy and enthusiasm for these schemes which are reported to add value to student experience. The results range from fully embedded provision (since the early 1990s) through to schemes set up and ready to start in the academic year 2014-15. A generally positive bias is balanced with the sharing of key challenges faced, useful advice for new adopters and lessons learned. A total of 96 completed individual results were received representing 55 individual institutions.

Roles: the results indicate an eclectic mix of roles associated with peer-led academic learning schemes, for example, academic leads, course directors, mentoring assistants, centrally-located or programme-located co-

ordinators and PASS champions. In some cases, PAL/PASS forms part of a wider mix of student support including academic mentoring provision (for example PAL and academic writing).

Organisation: respondents indicated a wide range of organisational set-ups. Forty-three schemes were organised at institutional level, 52 at departmental level, 39 at programme level and 16 at unit level. Clearly this demonstrates overlap and some respondents clarified this, for example “Currently in the department, but in process of becoming institutional.” Others mentioned a partnership model: “It is a partnership – centrally co-ordinated, discipline-owned and student-led.”

In some cases, the scheme is run by specific departments or services, such as learning development teams, student skills centres and by students associations and students' unions.

A majority of 59 respondents specified that their scheme aims to provide both academic support and social support and integration, for example:

Academic support and social integration in most schools/programmes. On professional courses, PAL provides professional development support as well (R25)

It was useful to ask where peer-to-peer learning is mentioned in institutional strategic documentation as a potential indicator of institutional commitment. Twenty-eight respondents stated it is mentioned in their institutional access agreement, 43 in institutional learning and teaching strategies, 33 in development plans, and 27 in their university prospectus. It is also mentioned in annual school learning and teaching strategies, strategic plans for departments, libraries, and students' union, institutional websites, revalidation documentation and module handbooks. It also features in retention action plans and a student retention and success framework. Eleven respondents stated that they either did not know where peer-to-peer learning is mentioned, or it is not mentioned. Respondents recognised that mention at strategic level provides important opportunities for institutions to demonstrate commitment to the student experience.

Peer leaders and target students: forty-six respondents stated that they typically allocate two leaders to each peer-led learning group; 26 replied that there is typically one group leader, others suggested there may be more leaders per group.

Thirty-eight schemes reported group sizes between nine and 15 students, 21 have between five and eight students and 18 have 16 or more students. Other responses suggested group sizes of between one and four students. Further information is required to clarify the nature of the support being provided.

Leader training is considered to be very important by 97.6% of respondents and ranges from two-day training (39 responses) to less than one day (17 responses). Leaders are often supported on a continual basis, for example:

In addition to the initial 2 days of training the leaders have weekly debriefs and are offered optional, additional training (R59)

They receive 6 hours of specific training prior to post, but we have a weekly training meeting to update procedure and share best practice. Since all mentors will have been students in prior peer-led sessions they have received considerable implicit training (R36)

In some cases training is blended between online and face-to-face delivery:

One-hour introduction workshop, online course equivalent to 6 hours study and one day face-to-face training (R19)

Another respondent stated that the length of training can vary and can be more extensive if leaders are specifically supporting others with learning difficulties (R50)

The majority of respondents (53) stated the key target participants are all first year students which could include students from widening participation backgrounds, although 14 respondents mentioned widening

participation students specifically. Seven respondents stated that their schemes were targeted at postgraduate students. Free text responses indicated that there is also provision for second, third, and final year students, postgraduates, partner college top-up students, and BME students. Others also identified outreach as a specific target group, for example, “school children who are considering entering university” (R103) as well as having a role in the admissions process and open days (R106). Schemes were used to support undergraduate and postgraduate overseas students (R24) and there was also mention of PAL provision for “disabled students, especially those on the autistic spectrum” (R27).

Survey findings: benefits for key stakeholders

For the purposes of this report, the key stakeholders are identified as:

- peer leaders;
- participating students;
- institutions.

The reported benefits for each are presented below.

Benefits for student leaders who lead peer-to-peer learning activities

Leaders were predominantly second year students supporting first years although there were also postgraduate teaching and research leaders. The cited benefits for leaders tended to emphasise the development of a range of personal skills such as empathy, awareness, and confidence as well as professional skills such as leadership, communication, organisation, decision-making, and team work that are of value when seeking either placements or graduate employment. In addition to stretching students by “pushing [them] beyond the comfort zone” (R11) and providing opportunities for deeper understandings of the subject, and of the self ‘as learner’, there is a strong perception that taking on the role of peer leader provides developmental opportunities that the leaders may not have anticipated:

The personal and professional development that leaders gain as a result of their role as PASS leaders can be a transformational experience for some (R28)

An outline of the main benefits that are most commonly identified for peer leaders follows.

Acquisition of transferable skills: the most-reported benefit related to the development of higher-level skills, the development of personal skills, appears to emerge from reflection and growth of self-awareness:

Self-awareness and the reflection and realisation of their abilities (R106)

It was reported that leaders also appear to develop strong professional skills, of value to future employers:

I believe the main benefit is the development of transferable skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, time management and group facilitation. I believe that these are skills that are highly sought after in the graduate job market (R113)

The development of transferable skills within peer leaders is emphasised consistently within the literature in terms of employability and confidence-building, and was evidenced in survey responses:

Leaders have a wide range of transferable skills development opportunities that improve their employability and general confidence (R63)

Interestingly, the word “confidence” was used in 46 responses. An exploration of the psychological and cognitive growth that leaders appear to undergo and how this impacts on confidence and self-esteem particularly in relation to employability, warrants further exploration.

Relationships and belonging: survey responses identified that leaders often develop a new relationship with the university gained through working in partnership with academic tutors. These relationships appear to foster a deep sense of belonging:

*They get a feeling of belonging and this helps them to mature and grow as learners and as students (R58)
Closer integration with institution and fellow students (R20)*

Leaders appear to gain new insights into university structures:

This results in the students growing in confidence, gaining knowledge about their subject area and insight into the workings of the university (R24)

And this partnership approach offers an opportunity for real-time feedback on programme progress:

PAL helps to form a feedback loop between students, leaders and academics (R71)

Leaders *gain better relationships with staff (R36)*, and play a significant role in fostering social and academic integration within their learning communities:

The best advice can be given by those who have experienced similar situations such as the college to university transition (R78)

Through their “enhanced integration into university community” (R103), leaders can develop a “greater sense of community and belonging within their course” (R7).

Co-creation: closely linked with the sense of belonging and community, there were examples of leaders co-creating materials to support new students in their transition to university or in understanding their programme materials.

Our PAL leaders develop guides to help new students settle in to university (R24)

In Mathematics student interns employed over the summer have created new resources and provided feedback to the module leaders about the content of two modules. They then went on to act as student leaders for PAL sessions (R14)

Examples were also given where experienced PAL leaders “get involved in the training and mentoring of new PAL leaders” (R10).

Supporting transition to university: leaders appear to play a major role in supporting new students in their transition to HE when their experience can help new students to decode structures, practices and discourse and what was described by one respondent as “the hidden curriculum” (R20). This will be expanded further when discussing benefits for participant students.

Deeper understanding of learning: respondents identified that not only is leaders' understanding of their own subject deepened – “The student has time to reflect on and evaluate their own learning” (R24) – but their understanding of *learning*, and the learning of others, is enhanced:

Their own personal development increased hugely, due to three main factors: the reflective practice approach to our work with them, the inherent responsibility both independent and through teamwork, and the onus on presentations and leading groups. Their self-confidence grows, their understanding of independent learning improves and they become skilled practitioners who know how to manage themselves (R18)

Leaders are also able to offer a student point of view to understanding what is required, that, for example “helps students cope with the heavy workload of a four-year professional course” (R105).

Social and cultural awareness: many respondents also commented on leaders' roles in building community, cohort cohesion, and cross-cultural integration. One respondent described a PASS scheme in which former leaders support Masters students “where the benefits are mostly social” (R37). In other examples, international and UK leaders have the chance to mix together, providing “networking opportunities with other student leaders” (R55).

Benefits for students participating in peer-led learning sessions

Respondents identified significant benefits for less experienced students who attend peer-led learning sessions. Sessions appear to have benefit in reducing anxiety associated with the transition into HE. It is helpful to hear about the experiences of more experienced students and sessions provide a safe space for sharing concerns about study and settling in. The main benefits noted by respondents appear to cluster around a greater sense of belonging, improved academic confidence, and friendship development. New leaders often refer to the support they received from their own peer leaders as a key driver for wanting to be a leader themselves. One of the key challenges identified later, however, is encouraging attendance and encouraging students to participate in this useful, proactive approach to their learning.

Learning from experienced students: peer-led learning sessions provide space to:

Interact with peers in higher levels and get to know others from their programme ... gain reassurance regarding concerns ... have group help with queries and work ... it's a student-led space to explore issues together (R40)

Learning from those who have close first-hand experience provides authentic insights allowing participating students to:

benefit from the experience of a peer who understands and has lived their experience (R47)

Confidence and coping in a safe space: increasingly, new first year students arrive at university into large cohorts. This can feel quite intimidating and peer-led learning sessions offer an opportunity to make the 'large feel small', an important confidence factor discussed in the 'HERE project' toolkit.²

One respondent referred to it in this way:

Some academic schools have as many as 650 first years so making friends can be a challenge. The scheme allows small group interaction which may be lacking on some courses (R72)

The development of confidence was perceived to be a key benefit, as was the opportunity to explore their learning with other more experienced students in a 'safe' space:

Confidence building in knowing that they are not alone with their academic study concerns (R48)

Study sessions offer:

a safe environment for those first few weeks, I think it really makes a difference in the transition to HE (R19)

Chance to ask questions and seek help where it is safe to do so (R4)

This was explained by a respondent:

They feel more comfortable asking questions of fellow students even if they are one year ahead of them. This is inherently less intimidating than meeting with the tutor, which the student leaders then encourage them to do (R80)

Transition to HE: the key benefits appear to take place during transition to HE and it is believed to be an effective way to help manage student expectations.

Finding out how to study in university and enhancing their confidence (R19)

This was felt to be a key benefit both academically and personally:

Ability to develop academic and personal confidence in a safe environment of peers (R63)

Peer-led groups appear to perform a very important function in the support of new students to university:

The PAL leaders help them to 'feel at ease' coming into a new environment (R24)

Foster a sense of belonging, making friendships and forming peer support groups (R114)

Peer-led sessions appear to improve early student experience and help manage expectations by providing:

A sense of course culture and a greater understanding of course expectations (R7)

Better understandings of issues from a student's point of view (R109)

The academically-focused interactions in peer-led study sessions happen in a space in which the students "build a sense of academic confidence, community and belonging" (R49) that can help them to "make friendships and form peer support groups" (R114).

Social and academic integration and sense of belonging: leaders are well placed to guide new students through the academic culture, in supporting their academic integration and through building community.

² Part of the 'What works? Student retention and success' programme 2010 (www.HEREproject.org.uk)

New students can gain a valuable insight into the student experience direct from the PASS leaders who have been in a similar position and are well-placed to talk about the transition issues that new students will experience (R43)

Respondents stated that the peer-led sessions enabled students to take a “more active part in their learning” (R71), that when students find out, uncover and decode how to study, they gain in confidence:

It builds a sense of academic confidence, community and belonging (R49)

It can reassure students that they are building on their existing knowledge and can provide a sense of where their learning is going:

A realisation of what they know already and a focused idea of what is still to be done (R61)

It gives an opportunity to share ideas and discover others have similar problems (R8)

Respondents felt that this was being achieved through:

Social connection at early stages of their course strengthening academic knowledge and skills (R9)

Development of community: respondents were keen to emphasise that, as an enabler for community development, peer-led sessions improve “cohort integration” (R60) and facilitate “the development of peer groups in the academic environment” (R15).

I believe that the main benefit for students participating within the peer-led sessions is the opportunity to build communities of learning within their course which [allows] students to ask questions and deepen understanding within a safe environment where it is ok to not understand something or get it wrong (R113)

For some students it is more comfortable, also, to make friends in a session billed as study support than it would be to go to one advertised as a social (R54)

Comment has already been made about the development of community through a fostering of cultural awareness and involvement and integration of international students.

Improved engagement grades and retention: respondents reported that peer-led academic learning schemes help students to become more engaged in their learning and achieve higher grades, which is consistent with the literature (Arendale 2014; Blanc et al. 1983). This also promotes a sense of well-being:

It improves academic performance and lowers stress levels (R50)

Improved performance, clarification of ideas and practice of course content, consolidation of background knowledge, better understanding of assessment requirements, assistance with time management, demonstration of the application of course material, development of discussion and reasoning skills ... settling into the discipline ... better retention (R70)

Another respondent stated that:

Our schemes have demonstrated improved student satisfaction scores and improved academic attainment (R66)

Peer leaders are often cited as being influential in encouraging first year students to remain on the course. Malm et al. (2012) found that use of the SI model in an engineering programme at a Swedish university halved the number of withdrawals from the course. They also claim that this has a knock-on effect in reducing attrition.

Benefits of peer-led academic learning activities for institutions

As well as providing insights into the benefit for leaders and for participating students, respondents were invited to consider the main benefits for their institution. Key benefits identify that it is a “cost-effective mechanism” (R28) for:

- improving student experience particularly at transition;

- enhancing engagement, belonging, retention and success;
- developing community and learning partnerships;
- building a sense of belonging and addressing diversity issues;
- demonstrating commitment to student experience;
- meeting strategic goals;
- developing an impact base.

Some respondents felt that it demonstrated a genuine commitment that “every student matters” (R37), demonstrating:

a caring side of uni life that is appealing for prospective students and their parents at open days (R19)

It was generally agreed that the provision of peer-led academic learning helped institutions meet their strategic goals for retention and progression, and improve institutional reputation:

It helps build communities and the relatively structured and stable nature of the scheme gives many students a sense of pride that continues after graduation (R54)

Students feel well supported and tell parents, friends, etc. about this. Leads to higher recruitment and better retention rates (R17)

Schemes also provide “low cost opportunities” (R28) for “faculty to learn from students” (R25). During a study into the impact of introducing supplemental instruction, Malm *et al.* (2011, p. 665) undertook a cost–benefit analysis within a Swedish context that showed a gain over costs of some €300,000, concluding that: “from a purely economic standpoint, the investment is sound.”

Improved student experience at transition points: the role of friends and peers is recognised to be particularly influential in helping new students settle into university life, particularly at different transition points. The support of more experienced students, who have gone through the experience relatively recently, appears to be of particular benefit in easing transition and fostering new academic communities:

Creation of academic communities of learners which aim to ease transition from prior study to current study at university (R53)

It supports retention, student learning and smoothes the transition to HE (R4)

Better attainment and retention of first year students (R116)

Enhancing student engagement, retention and success: many respondents suggested that a major benefit for the institution is improved retention and success:

I believe that PAL supports student learning and attainment and it has been associated with improving retention and in particular an improvement to our continuation rates (R12)

Without a doubt it has helped our retention levels to stay at about 95%. It has created a friendly and supportive environment across the university campus (R24)

It develops a mutually supportive ethos and creates a body of students who are confident in their abilities and leadership (R109)

One respondent stated that, although their institution does not have issues with retention, they have noticed that “it definitely increases engagement and loyalty with the institution and a sense of community and belonging” (R49), and another emphasised this added value:

Retention and success is an institutional driver, but we believe there are many indirect outcomes such as the greater sense of learning community we can support (R26)

Developing community and learning partnerships: many institutions are actively seeking ways in which to grow a sense of belonging. The final report of the ‘What works?’ programme (Thomas 2012) emphasises

the importance of building belonging and community, particularly within the academic sphere, as a key success factor. In addition to fostering learning partnerships between students, schemes also have the potential to develop relationships between staff and students and these changing roles and relationships create opportunities for new forms of community to emerge, where staff and students are valued equally for the unique contribution they make (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014).

Peer-led academic learning schemes were reported by respondents to be a powerful mechanism that promotes community and belonging in student groups:

Learning and feedback between staff and learners – develops deeper bond and more professional attributes between both (R79)

As the scheme is largely led by students for students, it also creates a real sense of student community which is great for the benefit of the institution (R56)

Creation of academic communities of learners which aim to ease transition from prior study to current study at university (R53)

It's a practical initiative that demonstrates our student partnership approach (R40)

The survey responses suggest that peer-led academic learning is often part of a suite of student support services: “it complements other support activities, from a student perspective” (R47). It also has particular value for institutional stakeholders through “building strong relationships between staff and students” (R45), thereby improving both staff and student experience.

Building a sense of belonging and addressing diversity issues: respondents commented that peer-led academic learning opportunities offer a more “personalised student experience increasing satisfaction” (R59) and that schemes are well placed to help students settle in and develop a sense of belonging:

increases students' sense of belonging to the institution (R56)

provides a sense of community and belonging (R72)

we have large numbers of non-traditional students so providing an avenue for them to integrate into a group, make friends and engage with their course is vital (R46)

Demonstrating commitment to student experience: respondents felt that commitment to this aspect of student experience “flags a real intention to support and enable autonomous learners” (R11). It was often mentioned that it enhanced the institution’s reputation, for example:

It is attractive to prospective students and their parents at open days (R19)

It suggests we are student centred (R73)

Meeting strategic goals: respondents described a range of ways in which peer-led academic learning schemes help institutions to achieve their strategic aims:

Contributes to achievement of institutional strategy, provides a genuine example of the students as partners commitment, it aids retention (we have evidence for this), enriches what the programme has to offer, and provides a forum for academics and students to have rich conversations towards professional development (R34)

Peer-led academic learning schemes are reported to “discourage dependency” (R16, R80), “improve staff student relationships” (R58), and enhance student confidence (R67).

Although the majority of respondents identify that peer-led learning schemes have beneficial strategic impacts for example:

It is a wide-reaching, low cost approach for fostering a culture of engagement amongst students which research suggests can have positive impacts on institutional data re student achievement, retention and NSS results (R28)

One respondent did voice concern that institutions should not “see peer learning as a quick fix to cost cutting and staff shortages” (R51). But others felt there were no apparent grounds for caution:

There are no obvious negatives – everybody wins (R68)

Developing an impact base: some schemes are relatively new and in early stages of building an evaluation base:

We are planning a study to see what effect it had on student marks and learning (R80)

Our PASS scheme does not begin until Sept 2014 and as such it is difficult to state the benefits with any degree of certainty. We expect the scheme will support with integration, transition and academic performance (R113)

In other cases, peer-led learning is well embedded and evaluation data is available to demonstrate impact:

We have evidence of better attainment and retention of first year students and increased employability skills of second year academic leaders (R116)

Happy students, leaders with experience going out into the graduate workplace and an almost instant feedback mechanism from students to programme, enabling issues to be picked up early before they become problems. It's also a great marketing tool which I'm sure parents love (R58)

Support for first year transition; enhanced student engagement for both first years and leaders; fantastic employability opportunities for leaders; practical initiative that demonstrates our student partnership approach (R40)

It would seem to be a logical next step to build on the available data and co-ordinate a larger-scale multi-institutional impact study – including international partners – on the key benefits of peer-led learning. Such a study may focus, for example, on the benefit to students; graduate attainment of peer leaders; grade enhancement and retention of participating students; and the reputational and financial benefits for institutions.

Survey findings: innovative practice

Respondents to the *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK 2014* survey were invited to provide examples of innovative practice. These were useful both as an indicator of the scope of schemes and to identify potential areas of future research. Innovations demonstrate that there is a flexibility of approach and that principles underpinning peer academic learning may be applied to meet local needs.

Innovations identified may be broadly clustered into the following groupings:

- building a sense of community;
- developing employability gains;
- disciplinary application to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM);
- supporting students with disability;
- online and blended approaches.

Examples of innovation were expanded upon as brief case studies for this report.

Building a sense of community

The integration of learners into the learning community is a theme that recurs throughout the survey responses. Respondents offered the following as examples of community development:

LawPALS' – Lindsay Jack, University of Edinburgh

Set up in 2006, the Edinburgh Law School's peer-assisted learning scheme' (LawPALS) is the University of Edinburgh's longest established peer-assisted learning scheme. Although initially aimed to support students coming into the LLB degree through non-traditional routes, it is now a fully embedded and integral part of the LLB student experience for all our first years, providing a vital part of induction into law school and also university study. LawPALS is being expanded to support transition from years one and two to the Honours years. Former student leaders also share their experience of how they approached the new levels of study.

'Taking PASS to China: building communities' – Julia Braham, University of Leeds

In addition to a well established PASS scheme, the Leeds Business School also runs an 'International Study Group' (ISG) leader scheme where second year students act as trained PASS leaders in a peer relationship with second year direct entry (DE) students. Significant numbers of DE students come to Leeds from China, and it was decided in 2011 to take small groups of ISG PASS leaders and faculty staff there annually to meet them prior to their arrival in the UK. The aim is to build relationships between the UK PASS leaders and the Chinese DE students, enhance intercultural skills and awareness, and deepen relationships between the University and partner universities in China. This initiative has been found to: promote the social integration of the DE students; promote intercultural enrichment; develop friendships with direct peers; promote meaningful relationships between the UK and Chinese institutions; and enhance the progression prospects of the Chinese students.

'Including BME Students: using PAL as an inclusive approach to raising attainment and improving retention' – Cathy Pink and Anne Nortcliffe, Sheffield Hallam University

In 2013-14, the Faculty of Arts, Computing, Engineering and Science piloted a peer-assisted learning (PAL) programme on a small course with high Black Minority Ethnic (BME) student numbers. Although initiated as a response to an identified need – that is, a BME attainment gap observed on the course – all first year students have the opportunity to attend. The programme was introduced to support transition to HE, enhance peer interaction and student engagement, and improve academic performance. First year students are offered the opportunity to meet with PAL leaders who facilitate learning in an informal, supportive environment. Initial results show a positive impact on student retention through enhanced confidence and sense of community. Evaluation so far has sought to measure impact on academic skills development and changes in engagement, belonging and self-confidence (particularly within the BME cohort), and further evaluation of academic performance will be compared to previous BME cohorts to assess if PAL can impact on the experience and degree results of this group of students.

'Inspired students, inspiring students' – Christy Anna Evans, University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN)

'Flying Start' at UCLAN, offers free residential and non-residential events for prospective students to help them prepare for university prior to enrolment. In partnership with other support services from across the university, trained second year PAL supporters (PALS) also provide applicants with campus orientation, development of academic skills, and a social network. They also discuss the practical skills needed when living and studying away from home. Not all applicants are able to attend the summer programme and it was felt, therefore, that it would be of benefit to embed the Flying Start approach within courses during the first semester. In partnership with PALS, two pilot programmes were designed, one for international students within the School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, and the other for Social Work students. PALS worked in partnership with Flying Start staff and other academic colleagues to design a programme, and look at innovative ways of delivering the sessions, building on the experience they had gained over the summer. PALS built a learning community for students allowing them to bond and work better together. Three students said PAL had helped them stay on the course, and a further student said it helped them stay at university albeit on a different course. The experience was fabulous in terms of personal development for the leaders who really enjoyed working in partnership with the academic staff.

'The role of peer assisted study sessions in building communities of practice (CoP) for international students' Lucy Chilvers, University of Brighton

Although PASS offers a rich opportunity for the development of communities of practice and provides new students with active and collaborative learning experiences in a supportive environment, a low participation of international students had been identified at Brighton University. 'Community of Practice' (CoP) theory was employed in order to better understand the role of PASS in facilitating international students in developing a CoP on their course. Although based on a small data set, it was evident that PASS leaders play a vital role as established members of the CoP in supporting newcomer international students through sharing their experiences, designing and facilitating engaging sessions. Students' motivation was also found to be a key factor that leads to, and results from, participation in PASS sessions. However, misunderstanding of the role of the PASS leader or experiencing social awkwardness in sessions was seen to provide barriers to participation. An immediate outcome of this work is that PASS leader training is being enhanced at Brighton to ensure it contains a greater focus on cultural awareness, an understanding of the experiences of international students, and facilitation techniques for ensuring that group discussions and activities are as inclusive as possible.

Developing employability gains

The second set of examples of innovative practice concern employability gains. Enhanced employability emerged as a strong theme throughout the survey results and as a key benefit for student leaders. Respondents provided many examples of innovation incorporating employability into peer-led academic learning approaches. Much of current peer academic learning literature discusses the benefits for participants in terms of improved academic performance and better academic and social integration; however, there is a growing interest in how the skills, attributes and confidence developed by leaders contribute to their employability. Trained leaders report increased confidence, increased subject knowledge, greater understanding of self, and report that these enhanced attributes give them an advantage at interview for placements or graduate employment.

'Maths PAL: engaging students, faculty and employers' – Makham Singh, Aston University

Although NSS results are generally good across the university, Mathematics has not scored well in the past. Following staff and student consultations, a pilot PAL scheme was set up in 2013 in an attempt to address this problem.

The PAL activity centres on a competition in the first term, when students are encouraged to forge links with local employers, and with the aim of creating a mathematics poster themed around an employer's application of mathematics in the workplace. Volunteer leaders were recruited and trained and two paid PAL co-ordinators were appointed. The scheme was open to all new first year students. Eighteen students took it up and were organized into four teams. Each team produced a PowerPoint presentation, a 500-word report, and their poster. The competition element generated a good deal of motivation within the groups. The results were displayed and judged by staff at a finale event. This activity also promotes employer engagement with the mathematics programmes, encourages early discussion about placements, and it has already been agreed that employers will be invited to the 2014-15 finale event. The pilot was well received by everyone who took part: students, leaders, and academic staff. PAL leaders stated that they would recommend first years to become leaders themselves and a staff member commented: "students now feel able to knock at my door and they see us as humans – there was a real sense of belonging." In 2014, the scheme will be extended to Engineering and Applied Sciences foundation degree students.

'Placement PAL: supporting placement for students' – Oliver Schofield, Students' Union, and Kirsten Brown, Faculty Placement Officer, University of Bath

Placement PAL was piloted in January 2014 to support Economics students with their placement preparation. Fourth year PAL leaders offer support to second year students through discussion on topics such as professional behaviour, etiquette at work, and conflict at work, which would be useful while on placement. Although this is a new scheme, initial evaluation suggests that this support has potential to add value to the experience of the economics students. Students valued talking to more experienced students about their experiences on placement, and their expectations about placement are better informed. PAL leaders are also able to identify topics from their own experience to raise in discussion. The student perspective is an invaluable asset and, in partnership with the PAL leaders, the placement officer is able to offer additional benefits through the placement programme.

'Embedding leaders' employability within peer assisted study sessions programme (PASS)' – Justin Kennedy, University of Manchester

PASS provides leaders with a firm foundation in which key employability skills can be identified and developed through practice and reflection. However, it is important that leaders are encouraged and supported in identifying the skills practiced in their role and understanding of how to apply them in a professional context. This is important for leaders due to an increasingly competitive job market and for the institution in improving the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data sets. A comprehensive strategy has been put in place to aid leaders in the identification, development and refinement of key professional competencies, through a supplementary programme of support and ongoing training. The aim of the supplementary programme is to provide a basis for leaders to become well-rounded graduates, ready for the transition into the working world. The ongoing leader support helps leaders develop in their role; reflect on their own experiences to identify the skills they are acquiring; set personal goals and objectives to develop these further; and take personal responsibility and ownership for their own development. This critical reflection, goal setting, and impact measuring increases the confidence of leaders and gives them a toolkit for their future careers.

'Student leaders: the real winners in PASS programmes' – Melanie Giles, University of Ulster

There is a growing acknowledgement that peer academic leaders gain considerable benefit from their leadership experience and, until recently, this has received less attention in the literature than other aspects of peer-led academic learning. Work being undertaken at the University of Ulster aims to address this gap in the literature in order to identify how peer leaders develop the attributes that are so beneficial to them in their future employment. Leaders cite the development of personal attributes, enhanced confidence and self-esteem; as well as deeper subject understanding, development of enhanced communication, development of facilitation skills, and the ability to employ appropriate strategies to deal with difficult situations. These skills and attributes are acquired through a range of processes aligned to their experience as peer leaders, including developing deeper understanding of course materials and subject matter. While participant students are expected to set the session agenda, leaders need to have a contingency plan and be prepared to identify relevant and purposeful activities of an appropriate level of difficulty to engage students during sessions. They also need to be able to respond to issues of diversity. This develops their flexibility and adaptability. Dealing with students' issues and concerns during sessions is also said to enhance leaders' problem-solving and time-management skills.

Leaders are encouraged to consider the different learning styles of students within their groups and adapt activities accordingly, and to establish a supportive environment so that all participants feel confident to ask questions and make mistakes in private. Leaders must be attuned to the feelings of others and move them in a positive emotional direction. They must also be able to recognise when students are experiencing problems and be able to refer them to appropriate sources of help if required.

Not only are leaders required to set appropriate boundaries, but they must also be able to employ appropriate strategies to deal with difficult situations. As trained facilitators, they must be able to engage the group in exploratory discussion and redirect questions since their role is not to give answers but to inspire participants to identify their own solutions.

PASS leaders also benefit from the relationships they develop with each other and with the academic staff associated with the PASS process. As part of this process, leaders are continually required to reflect critically on their role and personal experiences, and this reflective practice is certainly an effective tool in practice-based professional learning settings and, in this context, has been shown to

impact on confidence and the quality of PASS sessions (Skalicky 2008).

A study at the University of Ulster (Giles 2013) used quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a better understanding of the impact the PASS process is having on leaders, particularly in terms of employability. Consistent with previous research, the qualitative findings suggest that the PASS process does indeed promote the development of skills and attributes to strengthen employability. However, the quantitative data suggest that the situation is more complex. The leaders' role may actually highlight their deficiencies in some areas – calling not only for more research, but for a need to help leaders identify other opportunities to further develop their employability skills.

Disciplinary application in STEM

Along with student integration and employability, a further set of innovative practices, identified by survey respondents, centred around the benefits of peer-led academic learning to particular disciplines and subjects. However, the place of peer-led learning in the support of students studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects was a recurring theme, and examples of innovation provided in the survey are expanded on here.

'The role of peer-led learning in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)' – Andrew Pye, University of Exeter

Despite its small size, the UK produces a remarkable 10% of the world's top scientific research (nationalstemcentre.org.uk) and in his 2007 report entitled 'Race to the Top' Lord Sainsbury stated that "In a world in which the UK's competitive advantage will depend increasingly on innovation and high-value products and services, it is essential that we raise the level of our STEM skills." It is important, therefore, that we are able to produce high quality STEM graduates. Yet STEM subjects have a reputation for being difficult, and new first year undergraduates often cite difficulty and complexity of content as serious problems. Here, peer leaders are well placed to draw on their own experiences to guide students through these 'difficult' STEM programmes. In an HE STEM project entitled 'The role of PAL in supporting student transition to HE STEM programmes from a PAL leaders perspective', Keenan (2012) identified that leaders had benefitted from the support and community PAL had offered them both as leaders and as first year students. This is perhaps one of the main reasons for the predominance of peer learning in STEM subjects. According to the 'HERE' project (2011), approximately one-third of all first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing and around one in ten actually withdraw. This is not an insignificant issue. So peer learning can have real payoffs. Peer-led learning also offers the opportunity for small-group working. In many STEM programmes, there is a focus on laboratory and field-based work with less emphasis on small group tutorials. Peer learning has the potential to fill this gap by offering a small-group learning environment. The final role peer learning can play in STEM subjects relates to employability. By giving students a chance to show their leadership potential and develop communication skills, peer learning can enhance the CV's of STEM graduates making them more employable and preparing them for their futures. It is therefore not surprising that peer-led learning schemes have a strong history of implementation and innovation in the STEM disciplines.

'The SYMBol project: second year mathematics beyond lectures' – Tony Croft, Loughborough University

The enthusiasm undergraduate mathematicians possess on arrival at university is, for many, short-lived. It would appear that moving through single-honours Mathematics courses presents particular challenges. Research indicates that this can lead to disaffection and reduced achievement, and in the worse cases alienation and withdrawal. Traditional pedagogical practices in university Mathematics departments are believed to contribute to this situation.

A scheme was therefore devised whereby third and fourth year PAL leaders support their second year peers providing an additional opportunity for learning Mathematics in a more participatory environment – one which would encourage dialogue, exploration and ownership. Offered for the first time in 2011-12, 13 leaders were trained and all second year students had the option of attending weekly 50-minute PAL sessions. The scheme has continued in a largely similar form since. Initial evaluation indicates that there is improved academic performance and improved student experience for both leaders and attendees. There is also improved dialogue between student groups and academic staff, and we have noticed that there is a more cohesive student community.

'Peer tutoring international students in STEM subjects' – Sriyani Jayaweera, Newcastle University

The International Foundation Programme (IFP) in Science and Engineering provides a one-year preparatory course for first year undergraduate studies supporting around 175 international students in total. All students are streamed in their 'English for Academic Purposes' classes, however, all academic subjects are taught in mixed-ability groups. Increasingly, in recent years, a number of gifted and talented international students in Science and Engineering are being recruited to the IFP with exceptionally high levels of mathematical skills. It was felt that giving these students a role as peer tutor would stretch these gifted and talented students at the same time supporting borderline students to reach their full potential. A peer-tutoring project was therefore piloted in 2012-13, resulting in a significant increase in student achievement in STEM subjects. We have been able to show improved academic performance among those students who have attended PAL sessions, even after controls using measures of prior attainment and more general engagement with their course. In addition to training the student leaders, we are also considering some form of training for the student participants. This is to help manage expectations – for example, to help ensure that students are clear about their roles as participants in such a scheme, and to help ensure they are clear that leaders are there to encourage and facilitate learning.

Supporting students with disabilities

A further example of innovation in practice identified the potential for schemes to support students with disability or specific learning needs. In particular, the need for enhanced training for leaders who work with these students was identified. This is an important area for further research and practice development.

'PAL and disability' – Val Chapman, University of Worcester

A Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) report entitled *Getting in, staying in and getting on: disability employment support for the future* (Sayce 2011) showed that, across the general population, a staggering 50% of disabled people were unemployed compared with less than 9% of non-disabled people. The *Report on the first destinations of 2009–10 disabled graduates* (AGCAS 2012) painted a much more positive picture revealing that generally similar proportions of disabled and non-disabled graduates succeeded in gaining graduate level employment. However, some disadvantage still existed, with 11.4% of disabled undergraduates remaining unemployed compared with 8.8% of their non-disabled peers.

It was within these contexts that staff in the Institute of Science and the Environment began to express concern regarding the amount of time needed to support disabled students – in particular those with an autism spectrum disorder – in laboratory work. Tutors reported that they devoted substantial time and effort in trying to achieve the most positive learning experience for disabled students in their practical classes; they were concerned that they were having to spend so much time ensuring their safe and effective practice that their peers were being significantly disadvantaged in terms of access to tutor expertise and the pacing of sessions. Additionally, support workers (funded by the Disabled Students Allowance) – who had no subject expertise or knowledge of safety procedures required for laboratory work – felt out of their depth in trying to give appropriate support during practical sessions.

An intervention was designed in partnership between Biological Sciences and the Centre for Inclusive Learning Support (CILS) to introduce a personal demonstrator peer-assisted learning scheme in an attempt to resolve the difficulties experienced by staff, students and support workers. Science students from the year above the disabled students were recruited, interviewed and given two half-day training sessions, backed up by online training by the Director of the CILS using specially developed materials. The interactive training included the provision of a broad range of information including, for example, basic information regarding equality legislation and discrimination; disability etiquette; disclosure and confidentiality; key principles of inclusion; competence standards; academic integrity and equity; and how to make reasonable adjustments.

Once trained, the personal demonstrators were able to give individual support to each disabled student in every module that involved practical work, either in the laboratory or in the field. Whenever possible, personal demonstrators who had already completed the specific module were chosen to provide support.

Although this was a small pilot, the benefits were dramatic and substantial. The disabled students who received support were able to complete practical tasks safely within the allotted time and were able to continue with their studies. This initiative promoted the development of employability skills for all of the students involved, enhancing the experience of certain groups of disabled students which, though comparatively small in number, traditionally have experienced substantial disadvantage in employment.

From a small pilot in 2011, which trained just four leaders, the PAL scheme was judged too effective to lose and so continues, now receiving access funding. In 2013-14, 23 students were trained creating a bank of 'accredited' students from which to draw when allocating support for lab and fieldwork. Key lab technicians have also received disability equality training and a bank of resources has been made available to all the lab technicians as well as leaders, on the University virtual learning environment (VLE).

Online and blended approaches

Survey respondents also provided examples of innovative practice in the provision of online approaches.

'e-PAL: PAL beyond the classroom' – Makis Malliris, University of the West of England (UWE)

Students who study part-time, or by distance, generally find it more difficult to participate in the peer-assisted learning experience than other students. e-PAL offers opportunities to help overcome the potential barriers of engagement, for example, created by timetabling of sessions. e-PAL mirrors the guiding principles of a more traditional peer-assisted learning format, where a more experienced student, will facilitate a collaborative learning session with students who are new to the module. e-PAL offers opportunity to do this in the online environment using collaborative software packages.

A three-phase e-PAL pilot was set up at UWE in 2011 in order to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort and on-going constraints of university timetabling; ensure more flexibility of timing, location, and mode of delivery using synchronous technology; and meet the demand for online working from increasingly technology-savvy students. The aim was to create an equivalent, synchronous experience in an online space to that of the in-class PAL sessions and to see whether PAL can be delivered effectively in this online format. This initiative was aligned with other university online developments such as online assessment and the use of the VLE.

In common with the literature (Beaumont et al. 2012), feedback from the users of e-PAL suggested a positive experience in which participants were more confident to contribute. They appreciated the flexibility and convenience of timing and location, and leaders found the e-PAL training was helpful. It was noted that online discussions were focused on conceptual academic concerns, the online environment felt safe, the technology was easy to use, and that suitable tools had been selected by the PAL leaders according to the activity in which they were engaged.

'A blended approach to PASS leader training' – James Stephens and Linda Moses-Alison, University of Cumbria

The PASS scheme at the University of Cumbria has grown exponentially over the last four years. In order to allow the PASS scheme to expand year-on-year, and taking into account the capacity of the staff managing the scheme, it was decided to develop a more sustainable approach to leader training. The first of the two-day face-to-face PASS leader training was adapted into an online learning module. Using the University's online learning environment, a module was designed to cover the same content as its face-to-face equivalent. The content is presented using a variety of online learning resources including, video and interactive tutorials. The online module covers: the principles of PASS, the role of the PASS leader, the importance of signposting, what happens in a PASS session, and dealing with difficult situations. Leaders received a one-hour pre-online training workshop to introduce the online module and to facilitate cohesion within the group. The leaders can work on the module between June and September and are able to request support from the PASS team if it is needed. The PASS team monitors the leaders' online activity and offers regular encouragement. An asynchronous discussion-board activity in September will also be used to prepare leaders for the full-day face-to-face training in September. The second training day will focus solely on putting into practice the principles and facilitation techniques, introduced in the online training, through a series of mock PASS scenarios. Implementation began in the summer of 2014 and feedback so far indicates that the scheme will offer sustainability in terms of PASS team capacity and scheme expansion. The leaders like the extended timeframe for completing the online module and it provides a model that could be used to introduce a fully online PASS scheme in the future for distance learners.

Survey findings: reflections

There was clearly a positive bias in the responses to the survey and it was important, therefore, to include questions relating to challenges that may be encountered and advice about how to overcome those challenges. PAL/PASS practitioners are clearly passionate about their work and always keen to promote their innovative practice at conferences such as the annual Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) conference³ and the European First Year Experience⁴ (EFYE) conference. This current survey indicates that peer-led learning schemes were overwhelmingly perceived to be of benefit to all stakeholders. The final part of the survey therefore set out to achieve some balance through an exploration of the advice that would be useful to help:

- make a case to introduce peer-led academic learning;
- discuss the challenges for new adopters.

Making a case for peer-led academic learning

Respondents set out enthusiastic arguments for adopting peer-led learning approaches with one respondent commenting “the enthusiasm and creativity of those involved will warm your heart” (R111). The key argument offered by respondents in making a case for peer-led academic learning was summarised by one respondent:

The main argument for peer academic learning is that it helps first year students with their transition to university and their academic attainment (R116)

There are significant benefits for all stakeholders: all the survey respondents were keen to emphasise that the provision of peer-led academic learning offers clear and significant benefits for all the key stakeholders:

The benefit for all involved was way above the expected outcome. Student engagement and development in both the peer leaders and those they support is extensive (R106)

Contributes to achievement of institutional strategy provides a genuine example of the student as partners commitment aids retention (we have examples of this) enriches what the programme has to offer and provides a forum for academics and students to have rich conversations towards professional development (R34)

Cost effective way of developing your students’ levels of engagement, independence achievement and support (R28)

Enhanced student engagement with the subject, the department and the institution supporting achievement, retention and improves student survey results (R47)

Significant changes in HE suggest we all need to embrace student-centred approaches to learning and teaching (R73)

There is a cost to the institution but there is nothing to lose (R72)

It enhances transition, settling in and retention: respondents reported the benefits in relation to supporting those students who need help to make the transition into HE.

Our evaluation has shown that some first year students feel more comfortable seeking support from other students rather than members of staff. [This] gives them extra support both academically and transitionally when they first start university. Our evaluation has also shown that generally students that interact with their student

³ see: www.aldinhe.ac.uk

⁴ see: [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/events/9/home.aspx/event/151843/default/european_first_year_experience_network_\(efye\)_2014_conference_](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/events/9/home.aspx/event/151843/default/european_first_year_experience_network_(efye)_2014_conference_)

mentors achieve better grades than those that do not. Thus, the main argument for peer-to-peer learning is that it helps first year students with their transition to university and their academic attainment (R116)

Not all students feel they need it but knowing that the option is there is fantastic for student well being (R56)

It's inclusive engagement with all students. Students can begin to feel a sense of belonging (R29)

It puts more of the emphasis of learning on the students and reduces dependency on academics: peer-led academic learning schemes play an important role in helping students to gain the skills of independent learning together with those of working with others.

The target students really value the sessions and also appreciate the fact that the college has invested time and money into the scheme. We're seeing students who are better prepared for lectures with a more structured approach (R61)

I would argue that the main benefits can be seen in the creation of academic communities of learners and the support attendees receive by attending sessions (R53)

Increased engagement of students in their own learning and development (R47)

It promotes strong learning partnerships: rather than dependency on tutors, the emphasis shifts so that a pleasing partnership develops between faculty and learners.

For me, as a member of faculty, the opportunity to work with mentors and officers keeps me in touch with the student experience and to see the best side of our students (R25)

It's fun having a different, more equal relationship with the students (R10)

It creates partnership and dialogue at all levels (R52)

Students can really benefit from having contact with more senior students who in turn are keen to pass on what they have come to understand about the course and university life (R46)

The sense of belonging and shared goals which arises between the department and peer mentors is excellent (P41)

It's a win-win situation: respondents were extremely positive regarding the many benefits of the scheme, including cost-benefit considerations.

It's a win-win situation – new students gain from the experience of meeting with and talking to current students, about transition issues, and the student PASS leaders gain valuable experience and develop a wide range of skills by facilitating the PASS groups (R43)

I cannot understand why you would not want to utilise your own excellent students to support the development of your students. The skills the leaders develop help them with employability and your mentees become more successful (R26)

Everyone is a winner. Yes there is some organisational and managerial work to get everything set up but this is well worth the effort (R58)

It has many benefits which far outweigh any costs. Both students and staff gain – massive plus for student engagement (R13)

It is the essence of students as partners in education and has wins for the individual, the cohort and institution as a whole (R49)

Peer-led learning activity is of clear benefit to the broad university community: broader benefits for the community are reported to co-exist with the many advantages for individual learners.

Although I am always keen to emphasise supporting learning as the main benefit for PAL, I believe that there are also significant benefits for other aims of HE including: social and cohort identity, employability and retention. My main argument for peer learning is that the benefits are many and varied! (R12)

It's a win, win, win situation which increases real time student feedback on the curriculum, increases student engagement and creates partnership and dialogue at all levels (R43)

It's massively rewarding. Everyone benefits, the leaders, the participants, the academic discipline and as a result, you (R68)

Challenges for new adopters

In addition to offering examples of advice for new adopters, survey respondents were asked to consider the main challenges new adopters might face in setting up schemes. The main challenges were broadly categorised into: gaining buy-in, awareness raising, evidencing benefits, setting up and maintenance of schemes, resourcing, quality assurance, embedding, and getting the organisation and processes right. Respondents summarised the key challenges as:

For a programme to really work institution wide, it needs buy in from everyone. Sometimes getting the correct messages out in order to create buy in can be difficult, especially in very large institutions (R56)

Convincing everyone it is a highly valuable exercise (R82)

Other respondents stated that a collaborative approach is central to successful implementation:

Get help from other staff members to launch PAL, it is a lot of work for one person (R105)

Gaining academic buy-in: the importance of gaining academic support and buy-in for the schemes is acknowledged to be important.

Generating buy-in is a key challenge in my view, especially from staff (R49)

Convince academic teams of the benefits and identify programme staff who believe in it and will make it work (R52)

Without staff buy-in and an understanding of the model then the schemes will not be successful. From a central point of view, it's really important that these schemes are seen to be coming from the programme, to be fully embedded within the programme culture, if it's not it would simply be an add on. Moreover, it usually takes one enthusiast on a programme to get PAL started, however it's not enough. The more awareness that all staff have of these schemes the better so that they can encourage student participation (R55)

One respondent identified that regular staff development programmes can be useful for awareness raising:

We run staff training workshops periodically and discuss our experience of running such a scheme. The main advice is to dive in and start something – it is a huge challenge but staff shouldn't worry if it isn't a huge success in the first year ... it takes time to tweak the scheme to fit each discipline (R39)

Training of peer leaders is also critical to success and links closely to quality issues:

Training needs to be made bespoke to the initiative, development of skills for peer leaders needs to be made explicit and should be given recognition (R27)

Gaining student buy-in: established schemes appear to have little problem recruiting leaders, particularly those who feel they have themselves benefitted from attending sessions in the first year. One respondent mentioned the value of peer leaders learning from each other:

Send a couple of students to the leaders' conference to learn about PAL in other institutions (R105)

However, it can sometimes be harder to persuade recipient students of the benefits:

Convincing first years of the benefits of PAL has also been challenging in some schools, leaders are the best advocates (R25)

Encouraging students to understand the advantages and benefits of peer-led learning is a big challenge (R21)

Encouraging leaders to maintain motivation if and when attendance drops off can be problematic and requires a close working relationship between leaders and their academic tutor or mentor:

Ensure that all leaders are tenacious and proactively seeking to form that special relationship with their group (R31)

Raising awareness: respondents cautioned that awareness-raising can be time consuming, and that it is really important to clearly identify the purpose of the scheme right from the start:

It takes two years for the service to become established (R33)

You need to have a very clear understanding of exactly what the scheme is (and is not) (R1)

Setting up schemes: some survey respondents counselled that setting up a scheme can take time. Gaining buy-in, linking start-up with the academic cycle, recruitment of leaders, and timetabling, can all be time consuming, especially for a new scheme.

Incremental development is key; start with a couple of well engaged courses or schools and build from there. If the scheme is being coordinated centrally it needs buy-in from the academics so target those most likely to get behind the scheme so that it doesn't fall at the first hurdle. The scheme does also cost; training, publicity and hospitality can add up as well it can't be done on a zero budget. Leaders need to be supported, they need robust training and opportunities throughout the semester to discuss things – this needs to be fully considered and the time and associated staff costs of doing so need to be realistically accounted for (R72)

Having sufficient time to set up the scheme. It is incredibly complex! Timetabling is a major issue – finding space and times when both leaders and student groups are available (R25)

The first year is hard because the first cohort of leaders have no precedent to go on. Staff coordinators may also have a learning curve (R13)

Respondents were very much aware of the importance of clarity about commitment, time and resourcing involved in order to persuade staff to become an “Academic Champion” (R53) of the scheme, but also that a collaborative approach helps to mitigate undue loading:

Having a dedicated team or individual with allocated time and funds has been identified as being an essential ingredient for success (R66)

Interestingly, and in the spirit of true peer learning, the survey identified that more experienced practitioners often freely shared their experience with those wishing to set up schemes in different institutions – a useful way to build confidence and get schemes off the ground more quickly.

Need for data: a lack of data and information might also be an obstacle to building buy-in from staff. For example, one survey respondent remarked on the difficulties of “persuading academic staff of the benefits using robust data as there are very few controlled case studies available” (R62). Another commented:

Ultimately it's getting academics on board with it. It has taken us a long time to get things to a stage where most academic staff members have at least heard of the scheme and then you have to get them to buy in and it can sometimes be hard to get them to change their opinion if they've heard about a poor PAL experience (R39)

Resourcing: timetabling and provision of financial and administrative support, are regularly identified as key challenges. Respondents identified that embedding peer-led learning sessions in the timetable closely adjacent to other timetabled sessions is critical to success:

Embedding activity at timely and relevant points in the curriculum is important, providing a seamless purposeful place for peer-led learning (R65)

Think about timetabling peer support sessions really early in the process (R52)

The need for financial support was mentioned specifically by a number of respondents as a general resourcing issue, particularly in relation to academics' time allowances, the costs for training leaders, and other general commitments.

It is not a quick fix cheap alternative ... and not a cost cutting measure (R51)

It needs to be reinforced with real commitments in terms of staff work planning (hours of remission) that needs to be agreed at institutional level (R64)

Provision of administration support to track the numbers and check quality (R110)

Quality assurance: understandably, those contemplating, or in the process of setting up, new schemes may be nervous about the question of quality control. One respondent suggested that learning to “trust” the leaders (R109) might be an issue for some:

Deciding who to target, or whether it should be available to all. If available to all, then how to ensure quality provision across all programmes (R18)

Getting the momentum going and trying to ensure consistency from one department to the next (R61)

In the UK sector, everyone thinking about setting up a peer-led academic learning scheme is advised to attend supervisor training at the UK National Centre for Peer Assisted Study Support. The supervisor training includes the training of leaders and therefore provides confidence and a consistent approach to quality assurance.

Embedding into organisational culture: embedding requires all stakeholders “making the scheme their own so it works for them” (R19). Respondents also suggested that embedding overlaps with the challenge of resourcing:

It requires institutional commitment perhaps funding a sustainable model that is not dependent on one or two enthusiastic individuals (R34)

Getting organisation and processes right: respondents spoke of the importance of getting things right: *Finding members of staff to be champions of the programme. The programmes should belong to the students but be overseen by the department they live in. As student populations are static, it makes sense to embed the programmes in schools so that good work might continue without having to rely on a few keen students to keep it going from year to year (R53)*

Getting implementation of schemes right: discussion of the 2014 *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey results has provided an overview of the scope and range of peer-led academic learning activity in the UK and examples of innovation in practice. Respondents identified some of the main challenges that need to be considered when setting up peer-led learning schemes, which include gaining stakeholder buy-in, raising awareness of the benefits of such schemes, resourcing, and embedding into organisational culture. Respondents were also asked to provide advice for new adopters in order to demonstrate how they had met some of the key challenges in their own practice. The advice offered identified facilitators and barriers to implementing a successful scheme within their own context, to talk to others who had successfully implemented schemes, to contact the National Centre for PASS, and to devise pilot schemes that address an identified need.

Below, further case studies offer examples, reflections and ideas:

A strong team of students and staff working in partnership within and across schools and central departments is vital to the development and expansion of PASS across an institution. A variety of approaches are needed in order to address the range of factors that can facilitate and inhibit the development of PASS. While the success of PASS hinges on a bottom-up approach, demonstrating and reinforcing the student-led ethos of the scheme, it seems that an influence from the top is also required for the structuring, funding and sustainable expansion of PASS. Ideally, as PASS becomes more embedded into an institution's culture, and with the benefits to students evidenced by impact-evaluation research, it will become a valued priority for resourcing.

Four helpful factors in facilitating the development of PASS at the University of Brighton are:

1. Have a strategic focus to the goals for implementation, and impact evaluation of the scheme. Identifying strategic goals, such as seeking to improve the student experience, retention, attainment or attendance helps to provide a basis for PASS evaluation, which in turn is useful for securing ongoing funding. For example, since receiving 'Access Agreement' retention and widening participation funding in 2012-13, the PASS team at the University of Brighton conduct annual research into the impact of PASS on the retention, success and engagement of students who participate regularly.
2. Raise the profile of PASS by working with PASS leaders and attendees to co-present evaluation findings at a variety of internal committees, workshop and conferences. This helps to demonstrate students' enthusiasm, experience and ownership of PASS. Collaborating with the Student Union's Teaching Excellence Awards and Step Up Conference continues to raise the profile of PASS among staff and students.
3. Due to PASS primarily being a student-owned and student-led initiative, it is essential that students are consulted and involved in the implementation process. At Brighton, students are consulted via meetings with course reps or at the staff-student liaison committees in order to establish the most appropriate modules or courses for PASS to be embedded into. While retention and achievement data can be helpful in guiding implementation, it is the student interest and challenging course material that have proven most influential to the success of PASS pilots.
4. Academic staff endorsement of PASS has proven highly influential to students' attendance. PASS is a voluntary opt-out model (Wallace 1995; Fostier and Carey 2007) but it is typically included in first year students' timetables in order to encourage participation. If students perceive that their tutors consider PASS to be beneficial to their studies, this can have a positive influence on attendance at sessions. While an academic staff champion leads the promotion of the scheme, it is important that the whole course teaching team endorse PASS to students. Information and discussion sessions that demystify PASS and demonstrate to course teams the support from Heads of School and Course Leaders have been helpful for this purpose.

Four barriers to the development of PASS have also been identified.

1. Students perceiving PASS as remedial has had a negative impact on attendance. PASS intends to project a positive, proactive, developmental image in which students of all abilities can gain. The PASS model aims to target high-risk course material, as opposed to high-risk students (Wallace 1995). However, some students can still misunderstand this and perceive PASS as a remedial intervention. We have become more careful in how PASS is introduced to students and found that PASS leaders explaining their own experiences is much more persuasive for enticing students to sessions. Timetabling PASS also communicates to students that PASS is part of the

course culture and all students are expected to benefit from engaging.

2. Some attendees misunderstand the PASS leaders' role and feel disappointed if leaders do not simply answer questions but instead facilitate the group to work collaboratively to help one another. In PASS leader training, emphasis is placed on the role of the leaders as facilitators of the learning process as opposed to re-teaching course material. This can be a challenging balance to strike, so regular supervision prompts leaders to continuously reflect on their practice. In order to manage expectations, leaders explain and reiterate their role, and the purpose of PASS, at the start of sessions for the first month or whenever someone new attends. Additionally, some academic staff have concerns about leaders teaching course material. However, regular debriefs and observations of the leaders provides reassurance on this matter.
3. While the early stages of introducing schemes often relies on the good will and enthusiasm of staff championing the programmes, as PASS transitions from the peripheral to mainstream practice, resourcing a sustainable model will be required to support its expansion. A variety of academic staff, support tutors and administrators make up the school-based staff PASS teams and careful consideration needs to be given to the time and resource required for PASS to succeed. Establishing this resourcing structure from the beginning of a PASS pilot ensures a sustainable approach for the future.
4. One of the most fundamental and challenging aspects of implementing PASS is the organisation and logistics, such as timetabling sessions and booking rooms. Despite PASS supervisors working closely with timetabling staff, finding enough rooms at the right times can often be a challenge. A creative approach at Brighton has helped in this situation with some students meeting in social spaces or booking library rooms.

Further examples of recently implemented schemes set up to meet an identified need:

'Peer learning for key skills and pastoral support' - Andrew Pye, University of Exeter

Peer learning was set up to help first year students in Zoology, Animal Behaviour, Conservation Biology and Ecology, Marine Biology, and Evolutionary Biology settle into university life. It aims to nurture a small campus community feel by getting students into small groups led by more experienced second year students. Following the experiences gained from the pilot and student feedback, a new and improved version has been launched with more and more of the running of the project being taken over by the students and students creating resources.

'MPharms PALS' – Helen Hull, University of Portsmouth

'MPharms PALS' aims to aid transition to university life and develop a sense of belonging. PAL leaders share their experiences and insights into university life.

'PALS for direct entrants (DE) from partner colleges' – Carolyn Gentle, Joceline Triner, and Rachel Shaw, University of Plymouth

A new scheme to help manage the expectations of direct entry students of university life and study. Differences in study cultures and academic procedures between the institutions can make this transition a tricky one for these students. Leaders receive training specifically for this group in order to understand the special requirements of the direct entry students. It is anticipated that this provision will help direct entry students.

'PAL for home and international students' – Gita Sedghi, University of Liverpool

This scheme was set up to support new students transition between school and university and adjust to university life within the Chemistry department, specifically in Mathematics. The scheme also supports second year direct entry students from China. The scheme was set up to promote a partnership approach to learning and teaching between senior students and staff. Leaders draw on their own experience to support new students and international students and also contribute to co-curricula activities.

'Dispelling myths of nursing and midwifery by quick innovative engagement' - Avril Hendry, Shona Montgomery, Edinburgh Napier University

An outreach scheme piloted within the School of Nursing and Midwifery where PAL leaders work with local school pupils to actively encourage them to consider nursing or midwifery as a future career and to dispel myths in these careers that are often portrayed in the media.

The international context

This report is primarily based on the findings of the 2014 *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey which identified that the schemes in the UK are generally based on the PAL/PASS models. These models derive from the American ‘Supplemental Instruction’ (SI) model developed at the University of Missouri, Kansas City (UMKC) in 1973 by Dr Deana Martin. Since then, through the development of SI/PASS national centres, staff from over 1,800 institutions across more than 30 countries have been trained to implement their own programmes.

- Contributions to this report were also invited from the six international SI/PASS national centres (US, UK, Australia, Canada, Sweden, and South Africa). Further contributions from New Zealand demonstrate the growth of schemes there and show how such schemes coalesce with ethnic culture. Additionally, there is an example of a long established UK scheme, another contributor describes the introduction of peer assisted learning in Germany, and finally there is a brief overview of peer led team learning in the US. The global reach and overview of activities indicates that peer-led academic learning schemes are practiced in a global context and are valued across many different cultures.

This section provides:

- an overview of the role of a PASS national centre and short overviews from the six national centres;
- an example of a long established scheme in the UK;
- an example of a very new scheme aiming to influence change within a traditional learning and teaching culture in Germany;
- examples from New Zealand showing how such schemes coalesce with ethnic culture;
- an overview of peer-led team learning in the US.

Overview of the role of a national centre and of the six national centres

National centres are accredited to deliver training for Supplemental Instruction supervisors, who are then able to deliver the training necessary for students to be SI/PASS leaders within the internationally accredited model addressing:

- academic performance – through conceptual understanding of academic material;
- learning strategies – by integrating learning approaches into the course content
- discussions, which essentially links the ‘what to learn’ with the ‘how to learn’;
- orientation and transition – by providing a relaxed and supportive environment in
- which students can adapt to a new environment through a process of socialisation.

National centres provide opportunities for staff across a national sector to collaborate, disseminate, research and evaluate impact, participate in accredited training and quality assure their local schemes. The network of national centres works with the International Centre (based at the University of Missouri, Kansas City) to support the above activities across the international network of universities engaged in PASS/SI.

The International Centre, University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) – Marion Stone

Dr Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) proposed, and then successfully piloted, what would become Supplemental Instruction (SI) - a programme that could yield measurable results, is cost effective, and helps students work toward becoming independent learners. Since its inception at UMKC, the International Centre has trained faculty and staff from more than 3,500 institutions around the world. SI has expanded into programmes in at least 30 countries worldwide.

At UMKC, SI is embedded in Biology, Chemistry, and Health Sciences. SI also supports Business, Humanities, and General Education curricula and is expanding its reach every year. Nationally, in the US, there have been a growing number of two-year institutions implementing SI programmes as a result of the support of grants and

other initiatives supported by federal government. While the number of four-year institutions attending training has held steady, the number of two-year institutions seeking training to implement SI programmes continues to rise.

The UK National Centre for PASS – University of Manchester UK, United Kingdom

The University of Manchester became the UK National Centre in 2009. Since then, a range of events has been undertaken by accredited trainers at the centre including:

- supervisor training – three training courses (three days long) have been run annually, with a total of 253 trained supervisors from 66 UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Spaces are limited at each session with a maximum of 18 participants per course. Most courses operate with a waiting list;
- designing leader training – an advanced course for supervisors that enables a review and development of an institution's leader training programme;
- National Centre meetings: the Centre currently holds meetings of supervisors from across the sector. Meetings take place twice a year, with one meeting held in Manchester and (generally) the second meeting co-hosted by a different institution. A special interest group for research and evaluation has also been formed and there is interest in developing opportunities for additional online meetings;
- Annual Leader Conference – four conferences for PASS leaders have been held, each event co-hosted by another institution in partnership with the National Centre.

PASS was first introduced into the University of Manchester in Chemistry in 1995. The programme is now widespread across the institution and plays a significant role in enhancing and personalizing the student experience, ensuring that students are active partners in their learning.

The Australian National Centre for PASS – University of Wollongong, Australia – Sally Rogan

The University of Wollongong (UOW) has been the National Centre for PASS in the Australasia region since 2005, leading the second wave of PASS implementation in the region after earlier efforts by other Australian institutions faltered in the 1990's. UOW has trained staff for 37 of the 39 Australian universities, plus a number of staff for dual-sector providers and high schools. PASS now supports the learning of many tens of thousands of students around the country each week. UOW has also trained many staff from institutions in New Zealand, Fiji, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore and, most recently, the People's Republic of China. This has led to a very collegial and collaborative PASS community of practice, with many hundreds of staff across the region. It is characterised by a very high standard of PASS implementation, which is showcased annually at the National PASS Forum (organised by UOW) and attended by 150 to 200 staff and student participants each year. The contributions of PASS leaders are also recognised each year at the Forum by the awarding of National PASS Leader Awards. These are selected through an external process and are highly sought by institutions as further evidence of their programmes being best practice. The National Centre for PASS also publishes the *Journal of Peer Learning*.⁵

PASS was first implemented at UOW by Sally Rogan in 2002. It is the most awarded peer-learning programme in the world, having won multiple accolades at institutional, national and international level. It is fully embedded and supports students in every faculty at UOW and at multiple transition points. PASS at UOW usually has a team of around 100 PASS leaders who are paid to undertake the role. PASS is the flagship 'First Year Experience' programme at UOW but is also used to support cohorts entering into some second year courses and postgraduate courses in Business and Medicine. PASS at UOW delivered 25,000 contact hours for the first semester of 2014. This is an increase of 20% on first semester of 2013. While PASS is always mainstream, the UOW PASS programme does actively seek to support disciplines which have a higher percentage of students from a disadvantaged background, in line with national social inclusion policies.

⁵ See: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ajpl/>

The Canadian National Centre – University of Guelph, Canada – Krista Bianco

While there has been steadily growing interest in the implementation of the (SI) model in Canada, since the first programme was introduced in 1997, the last five to ten years have seen a boom in institutionally-sponsored programmes starting up at higher education campuses across the country. In order to promote a common understanding of how SI is implemented in Canada, a set of best practices were developed in early 2014 by a working group of SI professionals organised and lead by the Canadian National Centre for SI. This set of guiding principles is also helping the Canadian SI community to better articulate and differentiate the role of an SI leader from that of a tutor or teaching assistant.

At the University of Guelph, where the oldest SI programme in Canada resides, there has been strong institutional support from the University administration since the programme began in 1997. SI leaders participate in the programme as ‘experiential learners’, and therefore volunteers, which impacts upon our approach to training, development, and mentorship. There is a great deal of variety across the country in how SI leaders are compensated for performing in their role, which is primarily a result of the specific context and student demographics of the institution.

The Swedish National Centre for SI – University of Lund, Sweden – Leif Bryngfors

Supplemental Instruction was introduced into Lund University in 1994 and the National Centre was established in 2002.

In addition to its co-ordination role within Scandinavia, the Centre also collaborates with upper secondary schools and middle schools in the region to offer support in introducing SI. This has been very successful in promoting good relationships with the schools, enhancing recruitment, and supporting the transition of students to university. The scheme works in two ways, (a) SI leaders from the University visit the secondary schools and (b) students in the upper secondary schools are trained to become SI leaders in their own schools. Some upper secondary schools leaders also act as SI leaders in middle schools to support those students in their transition. This work has been recognized by our Skåne Regional Council who have invested in a pilot introducing Supplemental Instruction into rural areas with the aim of attracting, recruiting, and educating students in strategic disciplines such as Technology and Public Health. A pilot scheme, offering SI to seventh and ninth grade secondary pupils in deprived areas, has worked well and it is anticipated that there will be a high demand for SI to be implemented in other rural areas across the country.

The South Africa National Centre – Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), SA – Liesl Smith

SI has been operational in South Africa for 21 years since its introduction in 1993.

In the early 2000s the HEIs in the country underwent mergers that resulted in 35 universities and institutes of technology merging into 21 institutions. In addition, there are also 50 further education and training (FET) colleges post-merger. All 21 South African HEIs and approximately 60% of the FET colleges received SI training pre-merger. An effective strategy was adopted in 2013 where regional training is provided to allow more colleges with limited budgets to attend. There has been a growing increase in SI supervisor training requests, again, since late 2013. SI is not an institutional strategy everywhere; in some institutions trained individuals are implementing and co-ordinating SI only in their academic department.

At NMMU, SI has been fully embedded and an institutional strategic priority since 1993 and is only offered in at-risk modules with a pass rate of 55% and below. Although first year modules are allocated funding first, it is not restricted to first year level only.

Other national and international experiences

An example of a long established scheme in the UK – Bournemouth University – Neil Ford

Introduced as a pilot in Computing, Hospitality and Conservation Sciences in 2001 (as a Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning phase three project) the scheme is now fully embedded across all full-time undergraduate programmes. The Bournemouth University (BU) scheme is centrally organised, with the centre organising leader training and observations, and locally managed within schools in terms of timetabling and resourcing. Leaders are supported by a discipline specific tutor (PAL contact). During 2013-14, 263 PAL leaders were recruited, trained and paid, providing an opportunity for over 4,100 first year students to attend timetabled PAL sessions.

PAL has been through a number of developmental phases at BU with lessons learned at each stage. Achieving senior management and academic engagement with PAL was dependent on identifying and communicating benefits for all stakeholder groups. Determining roles and responsibilities for supporting PAL (e.g. timetabling and academic support) was critical to achieving student engagement with PAL. When PAL was introduced in 2001, student completion was at the national average of 77.9%. Since the introduction of PAL, student completion has steadily increased and by 2011 had met its target completion rate of 84%, well above the sector average of 81.5%.

Our commitment to sustained growth and continued innovation in the scheme is supported at a strategic level. It is mentioned in the institutional learning and teaching strategy and in our 'Fair Access Agreement'. It is represented within the Centre of Excellence in Learning where sustained growth and continued innovation will be a key theme. Funding has recently been awarded for the development of a range of multi-media leader training resources.

Bielefeld University, Germany – Andrea Frank

Having received training from the UK Centre for SI/PASS the aim for Bielefeld University is to introduce the use of peer-assisted learning in a variety of departments from October 2014.

German higher education is traditionally didactic teaching with limited opportunities for students to discuss, create their own knowledge and 'find their own positions'. Peer learning and the introduction of PAL will focus on students learning from each other at the very beginning of their studies. PAL will be integrated in lectures with the aim of increasing academic performance, increasing the number of students passing their first year exams, and improving motivation for their studies. The introduction of PAL at Bielefeld University is supported through a grant and it is hoped that the University will contribute to a change in the German culture of teaching and learning. The initial pilot will be offered to all students in various subject areas. The success of the project will be measured through learning outcomes oriented evaluation and questions within the annual student survey.

The New Zealand experience – Deborah Laurs

In 1999, a peer-assisted learning scheme was set up and funded by Victoria International for international students in first year Commerce courses, with five leaders supporting approximately 100 students. Seeding funding from Trinity Newman Foundation between 2001 and 2004 extended provision to all students in core courses in Commerce, Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Psychology, and was administered by Student Learning Support. In 2005, schools agreed to fund leaders' salaries, and PASS is now offered in more than 30 courses including: Accounting, Commerce, Politics, English, Media Studies, Film, Theatre, Modern Languages, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Social Policy, Law, Chemistry, and Psychology. In 2014 there were 140 groups with more than 80 leaders supporting approximately 1,500 participants over two semesters.

Martin McMorrow of Massey University, New Zealand, reports that one distinctive feature of peer mentoring in New Zealand is its integration into the bi-cultural context, in which the integration of Maori culture into

tertiary learning and teaching practices is a stated goal of universities. PAL is also seen as a way of raising retention and performance of Maori and Pacific Island students, who form a growing proportion of university-age students. Specific peer-mentoring schemes for Maori and Pacific Island students are typically based at university marae (Maori community centres) and incorporate Maori cultural concepts and practices. PAL fits very well with the more community-based concept of learning and teaching within Maori culture – and with the inseparability of the two practices of learning and teaching – in Maori language, they are expressed through the same word: '*ako*'.

Peer-led team learning – US – Ellen Goldstein – West, PLTL consultant

Peer-led team learning (PLTL) was developed in 1995, with funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), to improve Chemistry education. The City College of New York in collaboration with the Universities of Pittsburg and Rochester received a grant to reform learning and teaching in 'Workshop Chemistry' in order to improve poor grades and retention in large introductory lecture courses in Chemistry. Additional NSF funding was received from 1999 to 2006 to disseminate the model of peer-led team learning (PLTL). By that time, faculty members within STEM disciplines in approximately 100 universities were involved (Dreyfuss 2012).

In 2011, the Peer Led Team Learning International Society (PLTLIS) was formed to support practitioners and peer leaders. Stephanie Marshall (HEA), Chris Keenan (Bournemouth University), and Andrew Pye (University of Exeter) are the UK Board members. A yearly conference allows practitioner and student leaders to exchange ideas and provides PLTL training courses for faculty interested in learning more about the PLTL model. PLTLIS membership allows faculty to share workshop materials, receive training, and participate in the conference.

Emerging research data are proving to be most encouraging, for example meta study of published research on PLTL (Gosser 2011) shows an average improvement of +15% obtaining A, B, or C grades

Summary

This report was produced from the responses to the 2014 *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey. Several significant themes emerged in relation to the student experience of peer-led academic learning such as students working in partnership with the institution, the employability of leaders, and improved student satisfaction through development of learning communities.

From its introduction to the UK in the early 1990s, the provision of peer-led learning schemes has grown, strengthened and become fully embedded in a number of UK institutions, with others embarking on newer schemes, often in an innovative way, for example, use of online approaches, support of outreach activities, and through academic societies.

Schemes described in the survey were predominantly based around the PASS/PAL model. Some respondents did mention that no one size fits all, and examples of innovation demonstrate that there is scope within the principles of PASS/PAL to tailor schemes in order to address institutional and other identified needs. This was seen in the example of the Mathematics poster competition (see p 23) where an innovative approach to implementation achieved positive outcomes for both leaders and participant first year students that were consistent with the broad peer-learning literature, and also improved student satisfaction ratings. Furthermore, there is opportunity to implement PAL to meet an explicit need, for example, for placement students and for students with disability. There is also evidence that peer-led academic learning supports not only first year students but is increasingly used to support the experience of second year students, and, in some cases, postgraduate students.

Survey results indicated a wide variety of examples of how schemes are organised – from a lone enthusiast to more structured, centrally co-ordinated and locally managed schemes. The general consensus was that central co-ordination and institutional commitment are important in terms of sustainability and that schemes should be structured, supported and organised, otherwise they will not be sustainable.

Respondents identified that there have been considerable developments on the original aims of the early schemes. Many of the case studies provided for the report described new initiatives and the contributors will continue to share their findings through the new community.

Contributions from the US, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, UK, Sweden, Canada and Germany show that peer-led learning approaches are valued in a global context providing opportunities for strategic developments. The National Centres for SI/PASS offer opportunities for closer partnership activity. It would be useful to build on these international networks in two ways. First, to explore the possibilities for sharing knowledge, expertise and for collaborative research. Secondly, to establish an international leaders' network as a forum for promoting the skills of leaders to potential employers.

Reference to the unforeseen benefits for peer leaders was a continual theme throughout the report, specifically in terms of their skills development, increased confidence, and improved employability. Leaders can impact directly on staff and student experience offering real-time feedback and contribution to course delivery. Deeper understandings are gained of self and subject. The development of employability skills is sometimes formalised through engagement with employers and enhanced leadership training. It promotes a sense of belonging and partnership with the academic community when leaders often take on further responsibilities, for example, helping with open days and engagement with co-creation activities. Further research is required into the learning gains for leaders, particularly in relation to their self-awareness, personal development as leaders, and employability. Future discussion about reward for peer leaders would be useful, to address questions of whether it is important to reward leaders, what form of reward is most beneficial to students, whether offering rewards skews the relationship being developed between leader and faculty, and whether offering rewards articulates a 'value' message to the leader.

Schemes such as these cut across institutional rivalry because practitioners enthusiastically share their experiences in the spirit of collaboration rather than competition. In their co-ordinating role, the national centres offer supervisor training three times per year, networking meetings, annual leader conference and co-hosting of other events around the sector. These provide an opportunity for both quality assurance (for example, in peer-leader training) and for facilitation of active collaborations.

The report findings present a broadly positive view of schemes. This is largely inevitable when responses are invited. To some extent this was counterbalanced by the inclusion of requests for advice to new adopters and identification of challenges to overcome.

Further limitations that need to be identified must also be acknowledged. Firstly, it was an ambitious aim to achieve a 100% response to the *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey. However, 95 individual responses representing approximately 55 UK HEIs were received – a pleasing result. Secondly, as this report set out to map the reach and scope of peer-led learning, it inevitably focused on practice from a staff point of view rather than a student point of view. It would be useful for the proposed new peer-led learning community to draw together national and international data that will have a student focus – for example, a collaboration with the *International peer leadership* survey to be launched in 2015 – in order to achieve a more rounded picture.

Recommendations

This final section draws on the key findings of the 2014 *Mapping peer-led academic learning UK* survey and the case studies provided by practitioners, making recommendations that seek to address key challenges identified by survey respondents.

- i. ***The Higher Education Academy, the UK National Centre for PASS and other key stakeholders will work together to decide next steps arising from the report.***
Partnership in agreeing next steps will be immensely helpful in providing sector leadership, supporting growth in the community of practice and in building opportunities for collaborative practice and research.
- ii. ***The national and international peer-learning community should promote the sharing of practice, undertake pooling of data and collaborative research into the participative pedagogies, and build a bank of impact studies.***
Co-operation and sharing lie at the heart of collaborative practice. This report is in keeping with existing literature in making a case for further research into the pedagogical implications of peer-led learning, especially the need to better understand student perceptions of participative pedagogies. Multi-institutional pooling of data would underpin the development of in-depth impact studies and provide robust evidence upon which decision makers might draw.
- iii. ***Participation of all institutions in nationally recognised training and development is desirable, ensuring adoption of consistent and quality-assured approaches prior to implementing schemes.***
Rigour and consistency are imperative to establishing a solid foundation for evidence-based practice that assures safe-guarding, fairness and appropriate use. A basis for sharing and disseminating best practice, supporting innovation and quality enhancement is invaluable.
- iv. ***Articulate the purpose and focus of each scheme, identifying the associated evaluation strategy, quality and performance measures.***
Broad consultation and effective communication are essential in eliciting support for the creation, implementation, maintenance and evaluation of schemes. Adopting and adapting approaches that are best suited to meet the needs of students, programmes and institutions benefits from clarity and diligence.
- v. ***Ensure executive leadership and support, evidencing the presence of schemes in strategic documentation.***
All schemes should be in keeping with institutional mission, values and priorities. Attaining the support of executive and senior colleagues is an essential pre-requisite to securing the commitment and resource that are vital for scheme sustainability.
- vi. ***Mainstream peer-led academic learning schemes within the curriculum.***
Being able to see an immediate link to a student's course of study and associated learning gains are useful in helping persuade cautious students to participate, particularly if these benefits are expressed by other students and staff. Adopting schemes in all faculties, exploring potential application to disciplines that have not previously participated, offering schemes to students at all levels and modes of study are but a few ways to build engagement and commitment.
- vii. ***Implement schemes early in the student's life cycle.***
Proactive and early commencement of engagement offers greater opportunities for students to benefit. Introducing students to schemes prior to enrolment is particularly helpful. Clear, positive messages at the outset regarding benefits alongside roles, responsibilities and expectations are invaluable. Enabling

new students to participate and experience schemes as students so they may recognise the added value of joining the next generation of peer leaders is especially important.

viii. ***Engage a broad group of stakeholders for each scheme that will include students, academic staff, employers and other interested parties.***

Although student leaders and participating students are considered key stakeholders, it is highly beneficial to consider a wider group of stakeholders. Involving more diverse players such as placement teams and employers helps determine a clearer focus and greater creativity in design, implementation and reach.

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Appendix I: Survey questions

Mapping peer-led academic learning (UK)

Section one: overview

1. Is there a formally recognised student-to-student peer-learning scheme at your institution, for example, peer-assisted learning (PAL), peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), or other?
2. What is your role or involvement in peer-led learning in your institution?
3. Is your peer-learning scheme organised at institutional level, departmental level, programme level, or unit level?
4. Is your peer-learning scheme primarily designed for academic support, or social integration?
5. Where is your provision of peer-to-peer learning mentioned in your strategic documentation?

Section two: peer leaders and target students

6. In a typical peer-learning group, how many 'group leaders' are involved?
7. In a typical peer-learning group, how many 'target students' are involved?
8. How important do you personally think peer-leader training is on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = 'not important' and 5 = 'very important')?
9. How much training do peer leaders receive in your institution?
10. In general is your peer-led academic learning targeted at all first year students, all widening participation students, postgraduate students, or other?

Section three: evaluation

11. What do you personally believe is the main benefit for student leaders who lead peer-to-peer learning activities?
12. What do you personally believe is the main benefit for students participating in peer-led learning sessions?
13. What do you believe is the main benefit of peer-learning activities for your institution?
14. Please share with us an example of an exciting or innovative approach to peer-led learning taking place in your unit, department or institution.

Section four: advice for those considering introducing peer-led academic learning approaches

15. If you were advising others who are not yet engaged with student-to-student peer-led academic learning approaches, what would be your main argument for doing so?
16. What do you think is the main challenge for new adopters?

Section five: permissions

17. Do you give permission for us to use information you have provided in a broad and anonymised way?
18. Do you give permission for us to contact you for any further information
- 18a. If so, please provide your name and email address here

The report team

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