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**THE UK EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE AND THE POTENTIAL
FOR ESTABLISHING PLTLIS PARTNERSHIPS**

ANDREW PYE

Peer-led team learning (PLTL) has been shown to be an effective educational intervention in the USA and many of the benefits of PLTL were exhibited at the annual PLTL conference in Dallas this year. PLTL in its strictest form is not widely used in the UK; however, a recent survey of “student-led peer learning” by the Higher Education Academy highlighted the increasing use of other forms of peer-led learning in the UK (Keenan, 2014). What are the drivers that have led to this increasing trend in the use of peer-led learning in the UK and what are the implications for PLTL? This paper will look at these issues, focusing in particular on the changes to tuition fees in England and their impact on the UK university sector.

Introduction of tuition fees in England and changes to the UK university sector

There is a stereotype that UK Universities are places of tradition, are conservative and are resistant to change. This might at one time have been true. In fact the system of UK higher education funding pre-1998 may have directly contributed to this way of working. Pre-1998 all university fees in the UK were covered by central government funding. To control government funding this necessitated control of the number of student places that would be funded and consequently each university had a set number of students allocated to them (independent of any performance measures). This created a very stable system with predictable demand and student numbers. Viewing this system through the neo-liberal free market paradigm so prevalent in the West today you could argue that this system also stifled competition between universities and therefore innovation.

In 1998 the first in a series of fundamental changes to the funding of higher education in England began with the introduction of tuition fees. This was in part motivated by a need to fund the massification of higher education, a trend occurring in all OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries over the last 30 years.

At first the effects of introducing fees to fund universities in England were modest. This was because of the high level of control the government still retained. Fees were capped at £1,000 (\$1,500) and the student number controls remained (the number of students each university could recruit). This meant that the collection of fees by universities was largely protected from market forces.

Over time the cap on the maximum amount universities could charge for their tuition fees rose. First to £3,000 (\$4,600) in 2006 and then to £9,000 (\$14,000) in 2012. However it is questionable how much of a market in fees this would have led to if it wasn't for the second change that took place in 2012. In 2012 the government announced that universities could recruit as many students with the highest

grades (A-level grades AAA-AAB) in a partial removal of the student number controls. In this way the first 'market' in student fees was created (albeit a very limited market due to the limited pool of students achieving these highest grades – thus the government was still able to control expenditure).

However, like the fees cap, the removal of student number controls was also extended. In 2014/15 an extra 30,000 un-number-controlled student places were introduced and from 2015/16 all student number controls will be removed in England. This should in theory create a free market for student fees, removing the perceived barriers to competition and innovation.

Table 1. Changes in funding for university tuition in England. Major events by year:

1962-1989	Maintenance grants are introduced in the UK for students to cover all tuition fees and living costs.
1989	The Conservative Party freeze grants and introduce student loans for living costs.
1998	Annual tuition fees introduced in England £1,000 (\$1,500). Means testing means that a third of students will not pay anything.
2006	£3,000 fees introduced in England (\$4,600).
2012	Fee cap increased to £9,000 in England (\$14,000). This is now the maximum amount UK universities can charge students for University tuition per year. At the same time the government announces the removal of student number controls for students with grades >AAB (equivalent of high grade point average scores).
2015	Conservative Party win the UK General election: Fee cap stays at £9,000* (\$14,000). Uncapped student places for all entrance grades will be introduced in 2015/16.
Further ahead	Totally uncapped fees? 'free market'? Greater differentiation of English higher education institutions into 'teaching' and 'research' universities?

*This table excludes the fees situation in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland where different caps and funding systems exist.

So what were the effects of these changes on the English higher education system?

Well in the short term unsurprisingly plans to charge students fees for university places in England were met with anger and mass protest. Initially there was also a dip in recruitment in the years that the fees caps were removed. Some of this can be explained by students choosing not to defer their university place for a year or deciding not to take a gap year so as to enter the system before the fees rise. This dip has since been reversed and the number of students entering higher education in England is now at its highest level since records began.

The second more interesting set of statistics are those showing the number of students entering higher education from more deprived backgrounds. This was one of the key arguments used to counter the introduction of fees, as social mobility is a key political agenda for all parties. The latest figures released by UCAS (the centralised universities admission system in the UK) show that when comparing admissions to university from the lowest participation areas, to the highest participation areas in England there has actually been a modest narrowing of the gap between these two groups. This suggests that poorer students are not being put off applying to university under the new fees system. Part of the suggested reason for this is that there are no upfront fees. Instead fees are covered by a government loan, which students only pay back once they are earning over £21,000 (\$32,400).

Student recruitment may have now recovered and the protesting may have receded but there has still been a longer-term shift in the way that students view their education in England. Unsurprisingly students are demanding more and are much more critical of the 'service' they are receiving. This was one of the stated outcomes of the governments white paper on higher education reform titled 'Students at the Heart of System' (Higher Education White Paper, 2011).

Results from the latest Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI, 2014) show that since the introduction of fees there has been a big increase in the number of students responding to the survey saying that their degree does not offer 'value for money.' When the same group of students was asked what their priorities for university expenditure would be they came up with the following list:

Top 5 student spending priorities for institutions:

- **Reducing fee levels**
- **Having more hours of teaching**
- **Reducing the size of teaching groups**
- **Better training for lecturers**
- **Providing better learning facilities**

Source: Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI, 2014)

With increasing fees and higher demands from students you would expect English universities to move quickly to improve the provision of teaching. But the same HEPI survey shows that since 2006 contact hours have increased by an average of only 20 minutes per week (a 2 % increase compared with a 300% increase in fees over the same period) (HEPI, 2014). Why have English universities been so lacklustre in their response? Well at the same time as increasing student fees, the government reduced grants to universities by the same level, meaning that universities in England were no better off financially after the fees charges were introduced (HEFCE, 2014). What's worse, the new system still artificially caps fees at £9,000 and there is no adjustment for inflation, meaning that the funding English universities receive is effectively being cut year on year in line with inflation. Therefore, English universities are preparing for an austere future.

PLTL = win win for students and universities

In such an austere environment where the expectations of students have been raised disproportionately in relation to the available funding, English universities are keen to try new and efficient approaches to deliver some of the priorities of students highlighted in figure 2. One such approach which has already been shown to be effective in the USA is PLTL.

Table 2. PLTL and peer-led learning is win win for both students and institutions.

Benefits to the University	Benefits for students	Benefits for peer leaders
Cost effective	Improves grades	Improved confidence
Increases small group teaching	Increases retention	Communication skills
Increases contact points in timetable	Students learn more	Employability and leadership skills
Reduces drop-out rates	Meet people on course	
	Support network	
	Creates community	

Peer lead team learning (PLTL) has been shown to be effective in the USA and many of the benefits of PLTL were displayed at the annual PLTL conference in Dallas this year. PLTL in its strictest form is not widely used in the UK, however a recent survey of 'student-led peer learning' by the Higher Education Academy highlighted the increasing use and wide prevalence of other forms of peer led learning in the UK (Keenan, 2014). Nearly all UK Universities now have some form of peer-led learning and this is the result of a rapid increase in peer-led education in UK over the last decade.

In some Universities these peer schemes are administered centrally while in others they are devolved to departments where they are led by departmental champions. There are also a few peer schemes of national prominence. The two peer learning schemes of national prominence in the UK are Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Both are based on supplemental instruction (SI). PAL has been operating since 2001 at the University of Bournemouth and was set up with £150,000 from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). PASS has been operating since 2009 at the University of Manchester and is recognised as the National Centre for SI in the UK.

Potential for international PLTLIS partnerships

The Peer-Led Team Learning International Society (PLTLIS) is a fantastic organisation of likeminded individuals and institutions leading the way in PLTL in the USA. PLTLIS organises a fantastic annual conference and link a network of staff and peer leaders as well as offering online resources. With the rapid changes taking place in the UK university sector there has probably never been a more receptive time for PLTL in the UK.

There are a number of ways in which PLTLIS could spread good practice in the UK, several of which were discussed during the annual conference. Starting with the most ambitious PLTLIS could set up an *International Centre for PLTLIS in the UK*. This in practice would only initially require buy-in from one UK institution to host the centre. This could then act as a beacon for PLTL in the UK and beyond to Europe. Finding the right partner intuition would be difficult as would funding the project in the long term.

Having a UK centre would make *setting up an international conference* in the UK easier. This was the second idea discussed. PLTLIS already has substantial experience and a good track record of running successful conferences so this would play to the expertise already held by the organisation. The main downside of holding an international PLTLIS conference in the UK would be the cost of travel for participants from the USA. In particular, the costs could prove prohibitive for peer leaders, meaning that fewer peer leaders would be able to attend the conference from the USA. This would be a real shame, as one of the key strengths of previous PLTLIS conferences has been engagement from peer leaders. A stepping stone to this aim might be to join a pre-existing conference in the UK such as the UK and Ireland PASS/PAL National Leader Conference.

Another pre-existing scheme that could be used to spread PLTLIS good practice is the *student study abroad years* that take place as a part of many undergraduate programmes. Students are already traveling between the UK and USA on these schemes with the aim of making a cultural exchange and learning more about their host country. These students could also act as ambassadors for PLTLIS during their time abroad. This could lead to opportunities for collaborative links to be made through our students. Ultimately these links could be strengthened to lead to research papers and collaborated funding bids between staff and students in the UK and PLTLIS.

Online resources are another area where PLTLIS already excel. The organisation is also working on a series of peer written workbooks to supplement courses and there is some potential to monetarize

these resources. However, it may be difficult to convince UK universities to spend their money on these. UK universities are currently trying to reduce their budgets due to inflation eroding the value of their student tuition fee income (capped at £9,000). In addition to this UK universities have a long history of sharing information and resources freely with their 'rival' UK universities. This is because until very recently all universities were publicly funded and were not competing with one another. With the introduction of a market for students and their tuition fees in the UK this may start to change.

One final area that was discussed was the potential of PLTLIS *peer leaders to take a more active role* in the organisation. The quality of the research conducted by peer leaders and the quality of the work they presented at the annual conference is testament to the enthusiasm and potential of these leaders. It is also clear that these students are the leaders of the future and the best ambassadors for PLTL.

There is no doubt students in the UK could benefit from PLTL. The recent survey of student-led peer learning' by the Higher Education Academy highlighted the increasing use and wide prevalence of other forms of peer-led learning in the UK (Keenan, 2014). Much of this is the result of massive changes occurring in the UK university sector. With the 2015 general election in the UK resulting in a Conservative Party majority it seems likely that market forces will be given even greater weight in shaping the future of UK higher education. In this future peer learning and PLTL are likely to play a greater role in supporting our students.

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For more information, contact: Dr Andrew Pye
College of Life and Environmental Sciences
University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus
Penryn, Cornwall
TR10 9FE, UK
a.j.pye@exeter.ac.uk