

# Peer Assisted Learning at UEA

A 3-year implementation project  
(January 2013 – December 2015)

## Report on Phase 2

September 2013 – June 2014



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **PAL at UEA: Background and introduction:**

A three-year pilot is currently taking place to introduce Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) into UEA. First year undergraduate students / mentees are mentored by students in higher years, with the aim of supporting them through the transition into higher education. PAL is run by students for students and aims to facilitate complementary learning rather than replace formal teaching. Mentees attend PAL sessions on a voluntary basis in small groups and learning is facilitated by mentors working in pairs. Further information about PAL can be found at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/pal>

### **UEA Objectives**

The core objectives for PAL are to:

1. *Enhance the student experience*
2. *Improve performance*
3. *Promote employability for mentors / officers*

### **Review of Phase 2**

Eleven schools took part in Phase 2 in 2013-14 which ran through the Autumn semester for the majority of schools. Three schools took part in the Spring semester.

### **Attendance**

Attendance remains low in some schools, although it tended to be high initially and tailed off towards the end of the semester. Attendance was found to be higher where sessions were timetabled, sufficient notice of location and content was given and where a core group of students attended regularly.

### **PAL Evaluation in relation to UEA objectives**

#### ***Enhance the student experience***

Evaluations from all students who have participated in PAL as mentees, mentors and officers indicate that they value the experience. Mentees appreciate the support they are given to orientate to life at UEA. The interaction between students in different years is valued by mentees and mentors. Mentors report that PAL allows them to reflect on their experience and gain additional learning and social opportunities. Officers report greater involvement with UEA. Examples of PAL making a difference to retention include students being directly supported by PAL mentors or advised to seek help from module organisers or the Dean of Students.

#### ***Improve performance***

Mentees and mentors report that PAL has helped development of study skills. This is particularly valuable to international students when English is not their first language. Others report the value of preparation for professional aspects of courses and revision for assignments. Increased confidence in achieving higher grades is reported by both mentees and mentors.

### ***Promote employability for mentors / officers***

Mentors and officers report that PAL has provided the opportunity to develop skills relevant to employability from the application process onwards. Planning, organisation, time-management, team working and reporting as some of the skills they will take forward into their careers. Mentors and officers who have graduated have described the contribution of PAL has made to successful employment.

### **The PAL team perspective**

The PAL team, Anne Guyon, PAL champion and Vicky Hawkes, the PAL administrator have developed a timeline to ensure forward planning. Systems and processes have been developed and improved during Phase 2 to enable efficient recruitment of officers and mentors, record-keeping and timely payment. A critical area for development was timetabling PAL sessions where possible.

### **Phase 3**

All schools who participated in Phase 2 are continuing into Phase 3. There have been changes of module and PAL is to be extended across both semesters in some schools in response to student feedback. Changes associated with the amalgamation of schools in HUM and FMH have resulted in reconfiguration of PAL within those schools.

A number of changes have been put into place in the light of Phase 2 experience and student evaluations:

#### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment began in January 2014 in order to ensure completion in advance of the revision and examination periods for the majority of students. Approximately 140 mentors and 13 officers have been recruited.

#### ***Training***

A 3-part training programme has been developed with two parts focussing on generic aspects of the development and delivery of PAL and the third part school specific training.

#### ***Timetabling and timing of sessions***

Meetings have been held with LTS team leaders to put PAL sessions onto the student timetables. Time slots need to be found when both mentees and mentors are available and to ensure that the sessions are not too far removed from relevant teaching.

All schools are offered a maximum of 12 1-hour PAL sessions, or equivalent, across one or two semesters. The timing of sessions is decided by individual schools in order to support students at key points of the academic year.

#### ***Configuration of groups and teamwork***

In a number of schools where attendance has been low the number of groups has been reduced with the flexibility to increase the number according to demand.

## ***Communication***

Data protection prevents mentors accessing mentees email addresses. Arrangements will be negotiated with individual schools for officers, as employees of the university, to have access to cohort email addresses to encourage attendance. Mentors will collect email addresses from mentees who attend sessions. Blackboard will remain the official means for the PAL team to communicate with mentors. Module organisers are encouraged to add officers and mentors to module Blackboard sites to access current course materials. Facebook and Twitter are to be used at the mentors' / officers' discretion.

## ***Evaluation evidence***

In addition to evaluation measures used in Phases 1 and 2, a Teaching Fellowship project entitled 'Measuring the impact of PAL on students' performance and module evaluations' is to be conducted in 3 schools, DEV, MED and NBS, throughout the course of 2014-15. A project evaluating Speech and Language Therapy students' experience of PAL is also planned.

## ***Timing of evaluation data gathering***

Evaluation will be conducted electronically and in hard copy form and made available from the beginning of the academic year in order to try to capture as much data as possible.

## **Phase 4**

The PAL project was originally funded to complete in December 2015. Funding has now been extended for the full academic year 2015-16. Recruitment for Phase 4 will begin in January 2015.

## SECTION 1: PAL at UEA

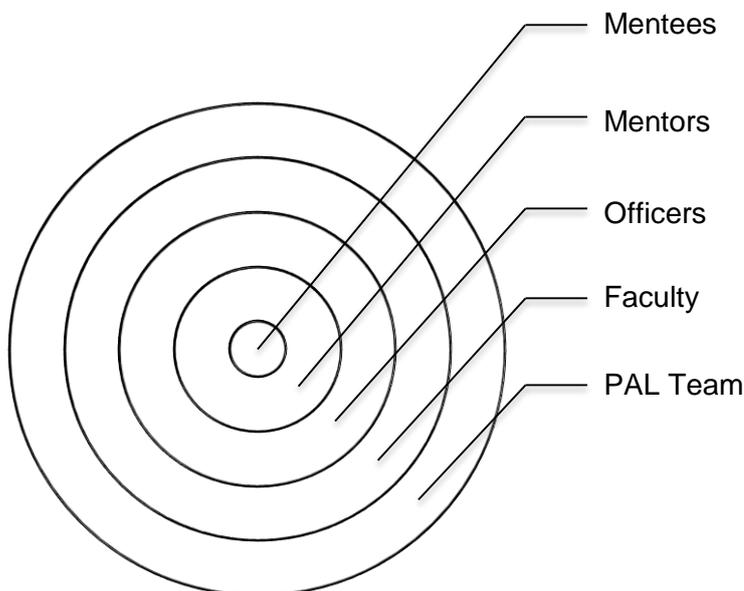
### Background and introduction:

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), also known as Supplemental Instruction and Peer Assisted Study Sessions, is a structured group mentoring system. First year undergraduate students (mentees) are mentored by students in higher years, with the aim of supporting transition into higher education. Mentors provide academic and pastoral support based on the experience and skills they have gained. Since its development at the University of Kansas in 1973 this type of student support has been adopted by approximately 1500 universities worldwide. A three-year pilot is currently taking place to introduce Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL), into UEA.

The key to PAL is that it is run by students for students. PAL is usually linked to specific modules and aims to facilitate complementary learning rather than replace formal teaching. Mentees attend PAL sessions on a voluntary basis in small groups and learning is facilitated by mentors working in pairs. Groups meet for the equivalent of one hour per week and the sessions are designed to be structured, but relaxed, creative and fun. The aim is to create a community of learning with mutual benefits for mentees and mentors alike.

Further information about PAL can be found at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/pal>

### Structure of PAL within UEA



Mentees are at the centre of the scheme and are encouraged to contribute to sessions, initially by generating questions about any aspect of transition. Over time the expectation is that the mentees will share knowledge, skills and resources with each other.

Mentors are required to attend training which emphasises their role as facilitators, not teachers. They gain the skills to create a safe, confidential learning environment. Working in pairs provides mentors with mutual support and mentees with differing perspectives. Mentors encourage mentees to be proactive in their learning which encourages independence and confidence. Mentors collect attendance data using the mentees' registration numbers and initials to ensure an element of anonymity. Attendance data is submitted to the PAL champion via the school officer.

Officers are recruited from post-graduate student cohorts or experienced mentors and are provided with leadership training as well as attending the same training as the mentors. They supervise and support the mentors by promoting team-work, liaising with faculty to ensure PAL is based on current teaching materials, observing PAL sessions and collating attendance data to submit to the PAL team. Officers are required to submit a monthly report of PAL activity to the PAL champion.

The PAL team consists of the PAL champion, PAL administrator and administrative assistant. The roles of the team are to promote, develop, implement and evaluate PAL. The complexity of PAL requires liaison at each level of the university structure.

PAL is overseen by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Academic and Academic Director for Taught Programmes.

## **UEA Objectives**

Phase 2 of PAL coincided with the introduction of the New Academic Model, with the aim of supporting students to meet the threshold criteria for achievement and encourage increased retention. The core objectives for PAL are to:

1. *Enhance the student experience by:*
  - supporting transition into higher education
  - promoting integration into university life and orientation to UEA
  - learning from more experienced students
  - providing additional social and learning opportunities for mentors
  
2. *Improve performance by:*
  - attaching PAL to core modules / 'tricky' areas
  - encouraging interactions between levels
  - providing opportunities for mentors to revisit core learning
  
3. *Promote employability for mentors / officers by:*
  - consolidating academic studies
  - developing skills, e.g. writing CVs and job applications; facilitation; leadership; team-working

## SECTION 2: Review of Phase 2

Eleven schools took part in Phase 2 which ran in the Autumn semester, 2013-14, for the majority of schools. Three schools took part in the Spring semester.

### Participating schools

| Faculty | School  | Autumn semester | Spring semester |
|---------|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| SCI     | Chemistry (CHE)                                   | ✓               |                 |
|         | Computing Science (CMP)                           | ✓               |                 |
|         | Environmental Sciences (ENV)                      | ✓               |                 |
| SSF     | International Development (DEV)                   |                 | ✓               |
|         | Norwich Business School (NBS)                     | ✓               |                 |
| HUM     | Film, Television and Media (FTM)                  | ✓               |                 |
|         | Language and Communication Sciences (LCS)         | ✓               |                 |
|         | Political, Social and International Studies (PSI) | ✓               |                 |
| FMH     | Norwich Medical School (MED)                      | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | Nursing Sciences (NSC)                            | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | Rehabilitation Sciences (RSC)                     | ✓               |                 |

### First year experience

In order to plan an appropriate focus for PAL information about issues faced by first year students was gathered during PAL training sessions. Key issues identified were:

**Orientation and adjustment:** settling in and getting to know the university including people, places and finding the way around; homesickness; fear, uncertainty, confusion or feeling overwhelmed.

**Social and practical aspects:** meeting new people and making friends; choosing clubs and societies; dealing with finances and budgeting; balancing paid work with study; managing laundry, cooking and shopping or dealing with flat-sharing politics

**Cultural:** language and cultural differences for international students or adjustments such as coping with the drinking culture of peers

**Academic:** managing workload and deadlines; time management and organisation; managing reading lists; using the library and other facilities, such as Blackboard and eVision.

## PAL activity

Topics covered in PAL sessions reflected these issues. Early PAL sessions focussed on settling in and practical aspects of transition into higher education but quickly moved to addressing academic issues, such as discussion of core concepts; sharing study styles and skills; preparing for tutorials or seminars. Mentors devised quizzes and exercises to help mentees revise and prepare for assignments. Future module options were also discussed. For students on courses with work-based placements, mentors shared their experiences in preparation for the placement and provided the opportunity to debrief afterwards.

## Attendance

| School     | Total cohort | No of groups | No of sessions | Attendance range | Rounded average | % cohort |
|------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|----------|
| CHE        | 55           | 3            | 11             | 6-42             | 14              | 25%      |
| CMP        | 90           | 4            | 7              | 4-28             | 12              | 13%      |
| DEV        | 190          | 2            | 10             | 2-41             | 20              | 10%      |
| ENV        | 132          | 6            | 9              | 1-11             | 3               | 2%       |
| FTM        | 35           | 2            | 11             | 2-7              | 3               | 8.5%     |
| LCS        | 70           | 4            | 10             | 1-18             | 4               | 6%       |
| MED        | 160          | 4            | 12             | 10-56            | 31              | 39%      |
|            |              | 4            | 10             | 7-64             | 27              | 34%      |
| NBS        | 200          | 13           | 10             | 26-125           | 57              | 28.5%    |
| NSC Autumn | 215          | 2            | 3              | 30-40            | 37              | 17%      |
| NSC Spring | 80           | 4            | 8              | 15-67            | 37              | 46%      |
| PSI        | 90           | 4            | 7              | 3-15             | 8               | 9%       |
| RSC        | 85           | 3            | 3              | 7-48             | 19              | 22%      |

These data indicate that attendance remains low in some schools, reflecting the experience of other universities in the early stages of introducing PAL (Capstick et al, 2004; Hammond et al, 2010). Attendance tended to be high initially and tailed off towards the end of the semester. Officers reported that factors which influenced attendance related to timetabling, appropriate location and sufficient notice for sessions. Other factors included the organisation, enthusiasm and encouragement of mentors and group size. Low attendance appeared to discourage others from joining, whereas larger groups attracted others to join. Several officers and module organisers reported that running PAL in the Autumn semester only meant it was too far removed from the examination period. Feedback from mentees indicated they would have attended sessions in the Spring semester, had they been available, to prepare for examinations.

The ratio of mentors to mentees also influenced attendance. In some schools, e.g. PSI, NBS, fewer mentees attended than expected resulting in very small groups or no attendance. In others, e.g. NSC, there were insufficient mentors to meet the high demand. In this case groups ran in alternate weeks, however this proved very demanding for the mentors and only three sessions ran overall. The combination of timetabled sessions and appropriate numbers of mentors encouraged mentees to attend in good numbers which ensured interactive discussion.

When introducing PAL into DEV in the Spring semester it was decided to start with two groups run by 3 mentors with the option of increasing to 3 groups if demand increased. This strategy has been successful in that, although attendance dropped away at times, it averaged 10% overall which is higher than some other schools introducing PAL for the first time.

### **All Student questionnaires**

In order to gain insight into the reasons students do or do not attend PAL sessions, questionnaires were distributed to all students on relevant modules in schools implementing PAL in the Autumn semester. 635 out of a possible 897 questionnaires were returned. Key findings indicated that 89% of respondents were aware that PAL was attached to the module. 74% had attended at least one PAL session. Of the 12 available sessions 24% had attended one session, with 17% attending two sessions. 2-11% had attended more than 3 sessions and 5% of respondents reported attending all available sessions.

Factors which would attract attendance (10-50+ respondents)

- More suitable timing / location
- Timing sessions later in the module
- Advance notice of location, timing, purpose and content of sessions
- More structure / organisation

Reasons for not attending:

- Sessions not useful or of limited benefit
- Student mindset
- Does not suit learning style

Of those students who had attended PAL sessions 77% had found them useful. Most useful aspects (10-100+ respondents)

- The opportunity to develop study skills and revise

- Mentors' experience, honesty and helpfulness
- General advice and support
- Gaining understanding of the course / module
- Help with professional aspects of the course, e.g. placements / portfolios
- Reassurance, confidence-building
- Help with settling in
- Focus on individual needs

Other benefits:

- Getting to know other students
- Myth-busting
- Enjoying being part of a group

Suggestions for improving PAL. In addition to those considered helpful for attracting students (10-90+ respondents)

- More practice exam papers and questions
- Better communication between mentors and mentees
- Timetabled sessions / protected time
- Closer links to module materials
- Extend sessions into Spring semester
- More practical activities

## **PAL Evaluation**

As with Phase 1 evaluation was sought through individual feedback from mentees, mentors and officers. The evaluation forms were redesigned from Phase 1 to reflect the UEA objectives for PAL. The purpose of evaluation was to identify strengths of the scheme and consider improvements for future implementation.

Evaluation is based on mentees', mentors' and officers' experience and perceptions of PAL. Respondents were asked to provide quantitative data using a Likert scale as well as qualitative data in the form of comments. More detail regarding individual schools is available on request from the PAL Champion.

Evaluation forms were distributed with the option of return via email or hard copy. Regular reminders were sent via officers to mentors to mentees. Returns varied across schools. This is likely to relate to reduced attendance at PAL sessions towards the end of the semester.

### **Mentees' evaluation**

120 mentees completed evaluation forms. A summary is provided below

#### ***Has attending PAL sessions improved your experience at UEA?***

94% of respondents reported that PAL had 'very definitely' or 'definitely' been beneficial. The remaining 6% reported 'neutral' or 'not sure'.

**Illustrative comments:**

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Increased confidence</i> | Made me more confident about what I actually know. Helped me to be more confident in asking and answering questions in lectures.  |
| <i>Orientation</i>          | Now I know where to go if I need help with a certain type of problem [...] both academically and living on campus.<br><br>... helped us to feel more in control of what we were doing, to know what was to come in the future and feel more prepared. |
| <i>Transition</i>           | PAL has helped my transition from secondary school to University on both a social and academic level  |

**Has mentoring benefited your learning?**

86.5% of respondents reported that PAL had 'very definitely' or 'definitely' benefited their learning. 10% were 'neutral' or 'not sure'. The remainder did not respond to this question

**Illustrative comments:**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>Clarification</i>                     | Helped to explain in more detail what we have covered in the lectures<br><br>Very useful for covering stuff that is otherwise rushed through and for asking questions                           |
| <i>Deepening understanding</i>           | PAL has aided my understanding of challenging concepts in coursework, helped me improve studying habits and supplemented my learning experience with helpful tips and advice                    |
| <i>Revision / assignment preparation</i> | X's reassurance about the OSCE helped me feel much more confident and relaxed. Going through questions similar to those in the written paper [...] helped me refine my revision techniques too. |
| <i>Professional development</i>          | We got to look at portfolios, which was useful for seeing what is expected of us academically, not only in the 1 <sup>st</sup> year but in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> years        |
| <i>Shared learning</i>                   | Group revision and being able to have our questions answered  |

**Do you think your PAL experience will help you in the future?**

86% of respondents reported that PAL would 'very definitely' or 'definitely' help them in the future, with 12% 'neutral' or 'not sure' and the remainder non-responders

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>Laying a foundation</i> | <p>Helped to enhance my background knowledge of chemistry which will be beneficial for the coming years.</p> <p>I have been more prepared [...] in terms of how to not get stressed out, how to be organised and knowing how to prioritise my work.</p> |
| <i>Confidence</i>          | <p>I feel a lot more confident with examinations</p> <p>... things may be more defined in further years and better confidence therefore [PAL] won't be of as much benefit</p>   |
| <i>Ongoing support</i>     | <p>It is good to hear from the students in older years as we progress through the course</p>  |

### ***Would you recommend PAL to students starting next year?***

95% of respondents would 'very definitely' or 'definitely' recommend PAL to incoming first year students. 4% responded 'neutral' with the remainder as non-responders

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>Support</i>          | <p>More informal than lectures so you feel more comfortable asking material to be explained.</p> <p>... I'd definitely recommend it because it's just a great way to revise [...] helps to reinforce ideas in your head.</p> <p>Talking to individuals who have been on that path it makes it easier because you will all be talking the same language</p> |
| <i>Sharing concerns</i> | <p>It helps you realise any confusions or troubles you have are likely experienced by the other group members and the PAL mentor can help you feel less overwhelmed</p>  |
| <i>Practicalities</i>   | <p>It's a helpful way of getting information about basic stuff which no-one explains when you start, like using BB, library, referencing, filing notes etc</p>   |
| <i>Limited benefit</i>  | <p>It is not particularly useful so probably not. Unless someone has many questions to ask it is useful</p>  |

### ***Are there specific improvements you would suggest for the next phase of PAL?***

Most of the improvements suggested by mentees focussed on ways of encouraging attendance such as timetabling sessions and consistency of room bookings and mentor pairings. Others felt that more notice needed to be given for PAL sessions, including content, and that communication could be improved.

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>More structured sessions</i> | Having a more structured timetable [...] students don't always speak up when asked to come up with their own ideas of things to cover |
| <i>Timetabling</i>              | I couldn't attend some sessions because of timetable [...]. It would be good if the same time each session is possible                |
| <i>Flexible timing</i>          | More sessions? Maybe evening sessions so easier to attend?  |
| <i>Regular mentors</i>          | More regular people [...] so we can get to know them  |
| <i>Communication</i>            | Make it easier to contact mentors. Make sure mentors check timetabling and scheduling   |

***Are you interested in applying to be a PAL mentor in the future?***

62% of respondents reported they would be interested in applying to become a mentor in the future. This corresponds to a high proportion of mentees being recruited to mentor in Phase 3 of the PAL project.

***Skills development***

Mentees were asked to rate benefits they had gained across a number of areas. 91% of respondents reporting they had 'definitely benefited' or 'benefited' in 'Increased knowledge, understanding and skills'. There were also positive responses for 'Confidence in starting university' and 'Understanding the requirements of university'. The widest variance was for 'Academic writing', with 49% rating it as 'definitely benefited'/'benefited' and 43% 'not sure'/'no benefit yet'. This is likely to be a result of conducting most sessions through discussion with minimal writing practice.

| <b>BENEFIT</b>                              | <b>Definitely benefited</b> | <b>Benefited</b> | <b>Not sure</b> | <b>No benefit yet</b> | <b>No benefit</b> | <b>N/R</b> |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Confidence in starting university           | 40                          | 48               | 14              | 4                     | 6                 | 7          |
| Understanding requirements of university    | 48                          | 49               | 12              | 2                     | 2                 | 6          |
| Getting to know other students              | 28                          | 55               | 21              | 4                     | 4                 | 7          |
| Increased knowledge, understanding & skills | 53                          | 54               | 3               | 1                     | 0                 | 6          |
| Academic writing                            | 15                          | 43               | 29              | 23                    | 1                 | 8          |
| Confidence in getting good grades           | 27                          | 52               | 28              | 3                     | 2                 | 7          |
| Confidence in completing your degree        | 30                          | 51               | 27              | 3                     | 1                 | 7          |

***Comments on any other aspect of PAL***

Finally mentees were asked to comment on any other aspect of PAL:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Praise for mentors</i>                       | [Mentor] is a top lad, friendly, confident + honest PAL Mentor<br><br>They were really useful and answered any questions and supplied us with loads of extra information which I think helped.               |
| <i>Survival</i>                                 | I wouldn't have been able to get through my first term without PAL!<br>[Mentors] were amazing!   |
| <i>Developing a social learning environment</i> | After the first two weeks we started to get a more regular attendance [...] thus making the group a nice friendly and chilled environment where students felt comfortable and able to bring their questions. |

### **Mentors' evaluation**

A number of mentors from schools in Phase 1 reapplied for Phase 2 which provided a mix of experienced and new mentors. Out of approximately 120 mentors evaluation forms were received from 49 mentors, with poor returns from particular schools, especially those where attendance was low. A summary of responses is provided below. Further detail will be provided by the PAL champion on request.

#### ***Have you benefited from being a PAL Mentor?***

89% of respondents felt they had 'very definitely' or 'definitely' benefited from being a PAL mentor, with the remaining 12% responding with 'neutral'

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Interaction between years</i>            | I have made contacts with 1 <sup>st</sup> year students [...] helping to create a more communal university atmosphere.   |
| <i>Benefitting learning</i>                 | It has [helped with] recapping my own subject knowledge and approaching it in different ways and from different perspectives.  |
| <i>CV building &amp; skills development</i> | I have gained some more experience to put on my CV. Now I can apply for jobs as a learning assistant.<br><br>I have also found the facilitative nature of the mentor work really useful in developing my clinical skills.<br><br>I now know when to take a step back [...] rather than be directive.<br><br>I had not studied the module I was mentoring. So not only was I able to develop my leadership, mentoring and communication skills with people from a variety of backgrounds but I was able to widen my knowledge of the subject by learning new notions and theories |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Understanding university systems</i> | I have learnt even more about the university. I also was very keen to explain how systems such as getting an extension work, as I did not understand this in the 1 <sup>st</sup> year.  |
| <i>Insight and flexibility</i>          | I have become more self-aware through taking the sessions and they have given me a further insight as to what it is like to be in a [leadership] role.<br><br>Working alongside different pairings exposed me to a variety of cultures to work with and strengthened my team working skills enormously. |
| <i>Social benefits</i>                  | Being a PAL Mentor [...] has been a really positive way of building friendships between year groups.  |

***Has mentoring benefited your learning?***

74% of respondents reported that PAL had ‘very definitely’/‘definitely’ benefited their learning. 24% were ‘neutral’ and 2% felt it had ‘definitely not’ benefited them.

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Social learning</i>            | I feel PAL provides an opportunity to see how other people best manage things like exam timetabling and revision techniques, along with improving communication between lecturers and students   |
| <i>Learning through mentoring</i> | In order to facilitate the learning of mentees I would have to ensure I knew the subject material in enough depth, so I was able to revise previous modules and address gaps in my knowledge.<br><br>When 1 <sup>st</sup> year students ask me what essay markers are looking for it makes me think about this, and reflect on why I may have got different grades.<br><br>The sessions showed me how different people learn through different styles and strategies so I was able to develop my new styles to work around their interests |
| <i>Limited benefit</i>            | [PAL] has not provided me with any new methods of learning or focus. I know my learning style and PAL has not contributed to this.   |

***Do you think your PAL experience will help you in the future?***

90% of respondents felt that PAL experience will help them in the future. The remaining 10% were ‘neutral’ / ‘not sure’

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Relevance of experience</i> | PAL has shown me that schemes in their infancy can vary greatly from year to year and school to school, and [...] it is important to |
|--------------------------------|--|

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
|                                   | address a wide range of issues and create a wide range of [communication] channels, regardless of background, knowledge or need.  |
| <i>Employability</i>              | <p>Being a mentor is evidence of many key skills for employment [...] because it shows you not only want to improve yourself, but also to help the people around you in many ways, not just academic.</p> <p>The skills I've developed during mentoring and confidence in my presenting skills will benefit my future career. The experience will look good on my CV and provide me with a subject to discuss in future interviews.</p> <p>I plan on staying on in academia and this may help me gain an assisting / teaching position when studying for a PhD.</p> |
| <i>Communication skills</i>       | I learned how to communicate clearly in order for others to understand  |
| <i>Facilitation</i>               | ... as a doctor, a key part of my job will be helping patients come to a decision about treatment etc. [...] I feel the skills of facilitating I have learnt in PAL will aid me with this.  |
| <i>Professional relationships</i> | Good experience that I learnt the importance of keeping calm even when the partner was irresponsible or irritating.   |

***Has your PAL experience helped you with applications for jobs / further study?***

Responses were more varied. 38% of respondents reported PAL had 'very definitely' / 'definitely' benefited them. 60% were 'neutral' / 'not sure', with 'no response' from the remainder. Many comments referred to respondents not having applied for jobs / further study yet, so their experience was as yet untested.

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Positive re prospects</i>   | ... it was something that was noticed by my project supervisor and something that the careers people say is good to have.   |
| <i>Lack of interest in PAL</i> | I had an interview recently which may have been influenced by PAL. I talked about PAL in the interview but the interviewers didn't seem that interested.  |
| <i>Uncertain re benefits</i>   | While PAL is a great scheme [...] I will certainly name as an achievement on my curriculum vitae, I'm not sure in what context I can bring the lessons learned through PAL forward into my chosen career. |

These last comments suggest that linking experience and skills gained through PAL to future employment should be part of PAL training to help students to see its relevance to a wide range of careers. Stronger links with UEA's Careers Service are planned for Phase 3.

***Are there specific improvements you would suggest for the next phase of PAL?***

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Continuation across semesters</i>        | As it is a year long module and 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester is harder and contains an exam I feel demand would be greater for PAL at this time.   |
| <i>Timetabling / timing</i>                 | Attendance of students might be improved if the sessions were timetabled   |
| <i>Quality of sessions</i>                  | ... attendance will only remain stable/improve if the sessions are good and there are problems.  |
| <i>Improved communication with faculty</i>  | ... more contact is needed between mentors/officers and the school lecturers, to know what the students were studying in their lectures, or what their exam structures were to be like this year<br><br>... encouragement from module leaders would help in increasing numbers |
| <i>Improved communication with mentees</i>  | Better explanation to mentees what the sessions are about before they come to the first one. [...] have a mid-year evaluation so we can improve the quality of the service provided  |
| <i>Access to curriculum materials</i>       | It would be useful if mentors could be subscribed to the relevant module on Blackboard from the start  |
| <i>Increase understanding across school</i> | ... some 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students were recommending to 1 <sup>st</sup> years not to go to their PAL classes, so I think something needs to be done about the stigma that has been created around PAL.   |
| <i>Increase academic emphasis</i>           | Greater emphasis on academic writing   |
| <i>Support during placement</i>             | Not enough support during placement (study days to incorporate PAL)  |

***Are you interested in applying to be a PAL mentor / officer in the future?***

63% of respondents reported that they would like to continue as mentors or apply to become officers. This has translated into a number of re-appointments.

***Skills development:***

Most respondents rated their skills as 'improved' or 'definitely improved'. 90% of respondents reported improvement in their communication skills. Over 80% reported improvements in ability to build

confidence in others; their own confidence, leadership and team-working skills. 79% of respondents reported improvement in understanding the student experience. 59% reported increased cultural awareness. The remaining 41% reported 'no effect yet', including respondents from NBS and DEV whose students come from a wide range of backgrounds, suggesting pre-existing raised cultural awareness in those schools. Individual students reported a reduction in confidence in their abilities, leadership and team-working, communication and flexibility. This warrants further investigation.

| <b>BENEFIT</b>                       | <b>Definitely improved</b> | <b>Improved</b> | <b>No effect yet</b> | <b>Reduced</b> | <b>Definitely reduced</b> |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Confidence building in others        | 15                         | 28              | 6                    | 0              |                           |
| Confidence in your abilities         | 16                         | 24              | 9                    | 1              |                           |
| Understanding the student experience | 6                          | 33              | 10                   | 0              |                           |
| Leadership and team-working skills   | 16                         | 25              | 7                    | 1              |                           |
| Communication skills                 | 17                         | 27              | 4                    | 1              |                           |
| Cultural awareness                   | 6                          | 21              | 19                   | 0              |                           |
| Flexibility                          | 10                         | 26              | 10                   | 2              |                           |
| Problem solving                      | 12                         | 26              | 11                   | 0              |                           |
| Ability to articulate skills         | 9                          | 27              | 11                   | 0              |                           |

### **Officers' evaluation:**

As in Phase 1 the majority of officers were recruited from PGT/PGR cohorts. In Phase 2 14 officers were recruited, with one officer in most schools. Due to the large cohorts in MED, NBS and NSC, additional officers were recruited, with a ratio of one officer to 10 mentors. In NSC experienced UG mentors requested the opportunity to apply for the role, which was supported by the school.

During the Spring semester, when the NSC officers were on placement an officer from a different school assisted with supporting and supervising the mentors, which proved to be a successful arrangement and demonstrated that officers do not necessarily need to come from the same academic background as the mentors / mentees. Nine officers provided feedback which is summarised below

#### ***Have you benefitted from being a PAL Officer?***

All officers reported that they had 'definitely benefited' / 'benefited' from being a PAL officer

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>Development of skills</i> | <p>Work experience for jobs that require administrative or even management skills</p> <p>It also developed my teamwork skills as I worked with my mentors to develop new strategies and make PAL work more efficiently in the school. [...] they valued being included in the development</p> |
|------------------------------|---|

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | ... communication skills [gained] during my conversation either with other officers or with my mentors and also with PAL champion and administrator  |
| <i>Problem-solving and flexibility</i>   | We had some difficulties in this school about timetabling and mentor changes, therefore I had to be able to think of and develop solutions. I also had to [...] think on my feet when a plan or process did not go according to plan |
| <i>Insights into project development</i> | It has also educated me about the potential of PAL, and given me the experience of being involved in a pilot project.  |
| <i>Insight into UEA</i>                  | I feel that I have learned a lot about the workings of the University and of other schools.  |

***Has mentoring benefitted understanding of academic structures and university processes?***

All but one of the officers felt they had gained a better understanding of academic structures and processes. The remaining officer responded 'neutral'

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Understanding structures</i>                   | <p>If I was not aware of academic structure of university processes, I would not have been able to do my job properly.</p> <p>Working with the module leader and the mentors as a subject-specific team also showed me how students at different levels can become involved with the teaching and support side of university life</p>                                      |
| <i>Understanding beyond own school experience</i> | <p>Although I was part of previous PAL phases and this made me aware of the academic structure it was good to see how [a different] school works as I feel it is extremely different to anything that I have experienced, either as a student or within PAL.</p> <p>I now have a greater understanding of timetabling and I learned how the room booking systems work.</p> |
| <i>Training</i>                                   | The training sessions for the role increased my understanding of PAL and the way it is being used at UEA and other HEIs. Working within the framework of PAL has given me direct experience of the admin and management structure of a project such as this.   |

***Do you think your PAL experience will help you in the future?***

All officers agreed that PAL would 'very definitely' / 'definitely' benefit them in the future

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>Recognition of relevance of skills gained</i> | Most jobs require the skills mentioned before (supervisory and management, organisational and administrative skills, communication) |
| <i>Direct relevance</i>                          | It is valuable experience to have on my CV at this time - as someone seeking to pursue a teaching-focussed academic career          |
| <i>Seeing HE from both sides</i>                 | I have more of an insight into teaching at university level and am seeing things from both sides now                                |
| <i>Insight into the student experience</i>       | I feel it is great experience to have worked with students and to have a greater insight into what students have difficulties with. |

***Has your PAL experience helped you with applications for jobs / further study?***

As with the mentors, there was a wider range of certainty in response to this question, which related to whether officers has applied for employment or further study at the time of completing the evaluation. The comment below reflects others' comments

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>Future benefit</i> | I believe it will be beneficial and a good topic of discussion for the jobs that I will apply for (e.g. teaching and PGCE courses). |
|-----------------------|---|

***Are there specific improvements you would suggest for the next phase of PAL?***

The officers had a number of suggestions for improvement, which reflected those of the mentors and mentees. These are summarised below

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>Frequency and timing of sessions</i>    | The fact that the number was reduced [after good attendance initially] can be due to lots of factors (e.g. the students [...] don't feel the need for extra support or they just had a hard schedule and not much time).<br><br>... it would have been better to have less frequent PAL sessions in the beginning (that the material might not be so hard) and keep PAL going in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester as well, especially closer to their exams. |
| <i>Mixing mentors from different years</i> | This year all the mentors were 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students who had previous experience of PAL [...] they knew how to run the sessions etc. [...] in future it will be a good idea to mix 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year mentors together [...] development of new connections and exchange of knowledge and experiences.   |
| <i>Timetabling</i>                         | Attendance at PAL sessions was an ongoing battle: the undergrads were very reluctant to attend something that was optional! [...]  |

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
|                              | officially timetabling PAL onto their schedules might have increased attendance   |
| <i>Quality of mentors</i>    | Some of mentors are really friendly and hard working but some of them do not prepare and seems they do not show any interest which reflect to the mentees to be not interested.   |
| <i>Training for officers</i> | More practical things such as how Blackboard works, how to book rooms, how to liaise with module conveners and advertising PAL might have been more useful. I was worried about contacting module leads in case they found me annoying. |

These final comments suggest that more emphasis needs to be put on the officer and mentor qualities and duties in the training sessions. Early introductions of officers to module organisers are also important to the development of PAL.

***Are you interested in applying to be a PAL officer in the future?***

Three officers responded that they would like to continue. Others are due to complete their studies before the next phase of PAL is complete and will therefore not be eligible

***Skills development***

| <b>BENEFIT</b>                       | <b>Definitely improved</b> | <b>Improved</b> | <b>No effect yet</b> | <b>Reduced</b> | <b>Definitely reduced</b> |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Confidence building in others        | 3                          | 5               | 1                    |                |                           |
| Confidence in your abilities         | 2                          | 6               | 1                    |                |                           |
| Understanding the student experience | 4                          | 3               | 2                    |                |                           |
| Leadership and team-working skills   | 4                          | 5               |                      |                |                           |
| Communication skills                 | 5                          | 4               |                      |                |                           |
| Cultural awareness                   | 1                          | 4               | 4                    |                |                           |
| Flexibility                          | 3                          | 4               | 2                    |                |                           |
| Problem solving                      | 4                          | 5               |                      |                |                           |
| Ability to articulate skills         | 4                          | 3               | 2                    |                |                           |

All officers reported that their leadership and team working skills; communication skills and problem-solving abilities had improved. The spread was wider for understanding the student experience; cultural awareness and the ability to articulate skills. The first two domains may reflect having less direct contact with mentees.

***Comments on any other aspect of PAL***

Comments included suggestions for improvement as well as reflections on the overall experience

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>Detaching PAL from specific modules</i> | It might be more helpful to have PAL running as less of a module-specific scheme, as changes enacted in the module this year made running and planning sessions very difficult.   |
| <i>Improved support for officers</i>       | I experienced several tough weeks where I was unsure as to what they had decided regarding the session I was meant to be holding.   |
| <i>Communication</i>                       | Would be much easier if mentors were able to contact the whole year/class directly to encourage attendance and introduce ourselves.   |
| <i>Benefits of PAL</i>                     | After the first two weeks we started to get a more regular attendance from specific people thus making the group a nice friendly and chilled environment where students felt comfortable and able to bring their questions. |

### **SECTION 3: The PAL team perspective**

The PAL team, Anne Guyon, PAL champion and Vicky Hawkes, the PAL administrator, has worked on a number of initiatives resulting from evaluation of Phase 1. Close liaison with module organisers and other interested parties within the schools is critical. Planning, implementation and review meetings are a regular feature of the PAL calendar. A timeline has been developed to ensure forward planning and that activity takes into account students' commitments and availability during the recruitment, training, planning and implementation phases of PAL.

Systems and processes have been developed and improved during Phase 2 to enable smooth running of recruitment of officers and mentors, record-keeping and ensuring timely payment. The administrative workload associated with PAL is very heavy and an assistant has been appointed for additional administrative support.

A key area was timetabling the PAL sessions where possible and the administrator spent a considerable amount of time on this at the beginning of the academic year. Finding times when both mentees and mentors are available is an ongoing challenge, which needs continual review as students' personal timetables vary.

Promoting PAL continues to be a major priority in order to maximise attendance and increase faculty awareness. An image and publicity materials have been developed throughout Phase 2, which is used to promote PAL via post cards, bookmarks, posters, digital screens at strategic points as well as PowerPoint presentations. The PAL webpage: <http://www.uea.ac.uk/pal> and Blackboard site are kept up to date to provide current information re recruitment and other activities.

The PAL champion, three mentors and an officer attended the PASS Students as Partners national conference at Plymouth University in November 2013. This provided an opportunity to network with other universities offering similar schemes as well as raising the profile of the scheme at UEA.

The champion, two officers and a mentor presented at the UEA Learning and Teaching day in May 2014. The officers and mentor were able to answer questions from the floor and provided the student perspective which reflects the ethos of PAL.

The champion has joined the UEA Student Academic Transition group which includes members from across the university with an interest in supporting first years. The PAL champion also attended the European First Year Experience conference in Nottingham in June 2014.

We have continued to learn from the experience of Phase 2 and a number of developments are being put into place for Phase 3.

## **SECTION 4: Overall summary in relation to UEA's objectives**

Phases 1 and 2 of the introduction of PAL to UEA have focussed on the practicalities of implementing PAL and much has been learned from this experience. This has been an intense period of development and there have been considerable improvements in the planning and organisation of PAL. The evidence collated so far is based on the student experience and perception of the benefits of PAL. There have been some difficulties with evaluation and attendance returns. Phase 3 will focus on ensuring that data is collected to provide more objective measures of the effect of PAL on the student experience, performance and employability.

### ***Enhance the student experience***

Evaluations from all students who have participated in PAL as mentees, mentors and officers indicate that they value the experience. Mentees appreciate the support they are given to orientate to life at UEA, from finding their way around campus to understanding academic expectations in higher education. The interaction between students in different years is valued by mentees and mentors. Mentors report PAL provides an opportunity for them to reflect on their experience so far, articulate and consolidate their learning as well as gain additional social opportunities. Officers report a sense of greater involvement with UEA. This is especially valuable for PGT/PGR students coming to UEA from other institutions. Module organisers and students have provided examples of PAL making a difference to individual students' retention. Students have been directly supported by PAL mentors or advised to seek appropriate help from personal advisors, module organisers or the Dean of Students.

### ***Improve performance***

Mentees and mentors report that PAL has supported them in their studies. PAL provides the opportunity for students to discuss challenging concepts. This is particularly valuable to international students attending lectures when English is not their first language. The development of study styles and skills was seen as important. Others report on the value of preparation for professional aspects of courses and revision for assignments. Mentors revise their own learning to support the mentees and some mentors report development of communities of learning in their groups which are beneficial to mentees and mentors alike. Increased confidence in achieving higher grades is reported by both mentees and mentors.

### ***Promote employability for mentors / officers***

Mentors and officers report that PAL has provided the opportunity to develop skills relevant to employability from the application process onwards. They describe planning, organisation, time-management, team working and reporting as some of the skills they will take forward into their careers. For those entering the health professions mentoring and facilitation are seen as key skills for working with service users. Mentors and officers who are graduating from UEA have been asked to contact the PAL team about the role PAL plays in job applications. Email quotes below were received recently.

'My experience as a PAL Officer was a great asset in my recent job applications. PAL was firstly an ideal first introduction to the application process and prepared me for subsequent interviews where I was then able to draw upon my time at PAL again, with relation to my ability to work as part of an enthusiastic team, to take the initiative and also practical skills such as using spreadsheets to monitor attendance and produce monthly reports. I have recently been offered an internship related to sustainability reporting that will use all of these skills, and I am sure my time at PAL contributed to this.'

'... the chance to be a PAL mentor [...] really worked in my favour in my last interview which lead to my graduate job offer. The managers that interviewed me [...] were very impressed that I enjoyed helping other people to learn as it is a big part of the company philosophy. I have really developed as a person since joining PAL two years ago, both in terms of confidence and skills.'

I think PAL did help - as my role is a customer facing role I focused my interview on other experience (retail & waitressing) but as I put PAL on my CV - the interviewer specifically brought up a question about PAL and asked me to explain what it was and how it worked - it allowed me expand on my "customer" facing role and how I deal with finding solutions to problems. It also gave me an example of where I worked both in a team and independently.

PAL offers an opportunity for students to progress from mentee to mentor and in some cases to officer. This in itself provides career progression within the scheme. All applicants, whether new to or experienced in PAL go through the same application process in order to ensure equal opportunities. This requires applicants to articulate their experience, strengths and what they hope to gain from PAL. Empathy for the first year experience and the desire to support students are frequently cited as reasons for application. Some applicants refer to difficulties in the first year and the desire to prevent others from having a similar experience.

Overall the experience of Phase 2 of PAL reflects that of Phase 1. The increased number of schools has provided the opportunity to evaluate PAL from a wider perspective. The focus for Phase 3 will be to increase attendance; ensure that PAL sessions are timed to support the needs of the mentees; sessions are timetabled where possible and improve the collection of attendance and evaluation data.

## SECTION 5: Phase 3

All schools who participated in Phase 2 are continuing into Phase 3. A number of changes have been put into place in the light of Phase 2 experience, student evaluations and new school configurations. There have been changes of module and PAL is to be extended across both modules in some cases. In the new school of Politics, Philosophy and Language and Communication Sciences there will be a single module for all first year students which will be mentored by students from all three programmes. In Health Sciences first years on the new Paramedic Sciences course will be mentored by medical students.

### Participating schools / programmes

| Faculty | School   | Autumn semester | Spring semester |
|---------|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| SCI     | Chemistry (CHE)  | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | Computing Science (CMP)  | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | Environmental Sciences (ENV)   | ✓               | ✓               |
| SSF     | International Development (DEV)  | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | Norwich Business School (NBS)  | ✓               | ✓               |
| HUM     | AMA: Film, Television and Media  | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | PPL:<br>Philosophy; Political, Social and<br>International Studies; Language and<br>Communication Sciences | ✓               |                 |
| FMH     | Norwich Medical School (MED)   | ✓               | ✓               |
|         | HSC:<br>Nursing; Paramedic Sciences; Allied<br>Health Professions  | ✓               | ✓               |

### Recruitment

Recruitment began in January 2014 in order to ensure completion in advance of the revision and examination periods for the majority of students. Approximately 140 mentors and 13 officers have been recruited to date. As in previous Phases mentors and officers are contracted and paid for their roles. The contracted period has been increased to allow extension of PAL across both semesters. This will also enable mentors and officers to contribute to the recruitment and training of the next generation of mentors. Mentors are contracted to complete a maximum of 50 hours and officers a maximum of 60 hours.

## ***Training***

A 3-part training programme has been developed with two parts focussing on generic aspects of the development and delivery of PAL and the third part school specific training. In addition officers are provided with leadership training by colleagues from CSED. Part 1 takes place before the Easter break to ensure availability of students before the examination period. Parts 2 and 3 take place in Week 0 or Week 1 of the new academic year. Part 3 is organised and led by PAL officers.

## ***Timing and timetabling***

All schools are offered a maximum of 12 1-hour PAL sessions across one or two semesters. The timing of sessions is decided by individual schools in order to support students at key points of the academic year, such as settling in, formative or summative assignments, and preparation for work-based experience or choosing modules for subsequent years.

Meetings have been held with LTS team leaders to put PAL sessions onto the student timetables. This is one of the most challenging aspects of implementing PAL as time slots need to be found when both mentees and mentors are available and to ensure that the sessions are not too far removed from relevant teaching.

## ***Configuration of groups and teamwork***

In a number of schools where attendance has been low the number of groups has been reduced with the potential to increase the number according to demand. In such cases mentors will work in groups of 3 or 4 initially to allow for flexibility of delivery. Officers are encouraged to work as a team and encourage the same of their mentors, with regular meetings and debrief sessions. This provides the opportunity to problem-solve and share good practice.

## ***Communication***

Difficulties with direct communication between mentors and mentees have been addressed. As data protection prevents mentors accessing mentees email addresses without their consent, mentors will collect email addresses from mentees who attend sessions. Schools have been asked to give permission for officers to have access to cohort email addresses to promote PAL and encourage attendance. Blackboard and the PAL email, [PAL@uea.ac.uk](mailto:PAL@uea.ac.uk), will remain the official means for the PAL team to communicate with mentors and officers. Module organisers are encouraged to add officers and mentors to module Blackboard sites to access current course materials. Facebook and Twitter are to be used at the mentors' / officers' discretion.

The PAL champion plans to attend team meetings in schools implementing PAL to ensure faculty are fully aware of the purpose and practicalities of the scheme.

## ***Evaluation and research***

In addition to individual and group evaluations, in Phase 3 there will be greater emphasis on gathering data such as comparisons of attrition before and after implementing PAL; comparing marks / grade profiles; engagement with the module; student satisfaction surveys; reports to SSLCs; gathering exit data on mentors' and officers' first employment destinations.

In addition a Teaching Fellowship project entitled 'Measuring the impact of PAL on students' performance and module evaluations' is to be conducted in 3 schools, DEV, MED and NBS. A project evaluating Speech and Language Therapy students' experience of PAL is also planned.

Completion of evaluation forms during later PAL sessions has been the most reliable way of collecting data in Phase 2; however this did not capture students who dropped out of the scheme earlier in the year. Evaluation will be conducted electronically and in hard copy form and made available from the beginning of the academic year in order to try to capture as much data as possible.

### ***Formalising CPD opportunities for mentors and officers***

Mentors will be encouraged to include PAL activities in their Higher Education Achievement Records (HEAR) when these are introduced into UEA. Discussions have taken place with PGR training coordinators in some Faculties to ensure that PAL activities can contribute to PGR/PGT officers' Personal and Professional Development (PPD) credits. Stronger links to UEA's Careers Service are planned.

## **SECTION 6: Phase 4**

The PAL project was originally funded to complete in December 2015. Funding has now been extended for the full academic year 2015-16. Recruitment for Phase 4 will begin in January 2015.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The PAL team would like to thank the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Academic, Heads of Faculty and Faculty Learning and Teaching Quality Committee members, Heads of School and Module Organisers for the support they have given to the implementation of PAL. We are especially grateful to Adam Longcroft, Academic Director for Taught Programmes, for his support throughout Phases 1 and 2 of PAL.

We are very grateful to our colleagues in the Centre for Staff and Educational Development, Dean of Students and the Students' Union for contributing to the training of officers and mentors.

Within the schools module organisers, officers and mentors have worked extremely hard to make PAL work for them. In particular the enormous enthusiasm of the officers and mentors in sometimes difficult circumstances has helped to motivate the whole team and drive PAL forward.

We also thank the mentees who attended the sessions and helped to demonstrate that PAL can and will work.

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