

PAL Experience

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I was first contacted about PAL just before the start of my second year. I am currently a third year computer security and forensics student, based on the Luton campus. I was emailed by Eve Rapley, the PAL Coordinator, advising that my name had been put forward to be a possible PAL leader. The email had a brief explanation of what PAL was. I was so curious I emailed her back straightaway and was booked in for an interview. We discussed PAL and the training that I would have to attend and what was needed throughout the year. The idea seemed very good so I agreed and my journey with PAL started. I originally wondered why I was selected for PAL. Reflecting back on my first year at University, I would have to say that it was probably because I was always helping others anyway, whether it was my colleagues in group work or if someone was just stuck. They would often come to me for help and I was more than happy to help them. I guess that the lecturers saw my helpfulness as well as a dogged determination would be good attributes for a PAL leader.

The PAL training took place over two days at both Luton and Bedford campuses and contained everything we should need to run PAL sessions throughout the year, along with some ideas for breaking the ice and what we could do for the initial PAL session. Training complete, we were handed over to our academic course contacts who would assist us throughout the year as well as setting up the PAL groups and assigning the PAL leaders. Our first contact with the students was at Induction. Dr Daly (academic course contact) introduced PAL to the first years and we briefly spoke about ourselves and how we would be assisting them throughout the year.

As the first session approached I was a little nervous but also excited to try something new. I think I understand how new teachers must feel, looking forward to helping people but with the small nagging doubt at the back of your head that students may not find what you say interesting or even useful. The disadvantage of not being a lecturer or tutor is that there is always the chance that the students will not listen or will be disrespectful, but I suppose that is a chance you take being a tutor as well.

Despite my nerves the first session went reasonably well. I could tell at the start who was going to be a problem and who would listen and take note. Nothing dreadful happened, no rotten fruit was thrown at me, and we established some guidelines for future sessions before I bid them farewell.

As the year progressed things did not always seem to go as I planned. Some of the students did not seem to want to engage, which I found very frustrating and even annoying. Putting work into some of the students did at times seem pointless and I was on the verge of giving up on numerous occasions. Then something happened that changed my mind and made me want to stay. Someone

said the advice I had given them was very helpful and thanked me for it. There is nothing quite like that feeling that someone has appreciated your advice, and even better, has found it helpful. Although PAL only ran over the first two terms I still saw my PAL group at university and they still asked me for my advice on exam revision and how they could get the best results. I took this as a great compliment rather than an intrusion on my examination revision, and even encouraged my fellow second years who were not PAL leaders to assist the first years.

PAL Part Two: The Story Continues...

After I completed my first year as a PAL leader I have to say I felt a great sense of accomplishment and pride and even a little sad that my PAL journey had ended. I was, however, pleasantly surprised that this was not the case. At the end of the academic year, I and a few of my colleagues were contacted to see if we were able to assist with the training of the new PAL leaders.

I started assisting with the training for the new PAL leaders, which took place over two days just as the original training had, once at Bedford and once at Luton. I was surprised and pleased that PAL had grown so much and there were so many new PAL leaders joining the group and that more subject areas had joined our little club. The training went well and the enthusiasm was infectious and reminded me why I loved being part of PAL.

With the training complete, the new and battle worn but reinvigorated PAL leaders went out to help the new batch of first years. As had happened in the pilot programme, there were initial teething problems as PAL bedded in and the new batch of first years met their new PAL leaders and the sessions started again.

The problems from this year do seem to be slightly different from last year but the rewards are the same. The first time a new student smiles and realises that they are not alone and that there are fellow students willing to help them without judging. One of the benefits of this year is that the first years get the benefit of not only the second years' experiences but also of the third years'. This gives them a unique perspective of what they can expect in years 2 and 3. This can be really useful when students are struggling and cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Overall PAL has proved to be a very positive experience and I have gained a number of skills that will prove to be very beneficial in the future. For example, I am now more confident when presenting to a large group of people and have found I can communicate more effectively to people at all levels, from first and second years to academics. In my opinion PAL is very beneficial to all concerned, whether you are a PAL leader, a participant in the PAL group, or even a lecturer.