



## Utilisation of a peer assisted learning scheme in an undergraduate diagnostic radiography module



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Peer to peer support programmes involve students supporting each other in either an educational, social and/or pastoral way. This is now common place in higher education institutes and has been proven to decrease student attrition and improve grades.

**Aim:** To evaluate a peer assisted learning scheme (PALS) within the University of Exeter undergraduate programme, where final year (stage 3) students held extra-curricular teaching sessions in an on-campus X-ray room throughout the academic term to support a first year (stage 1) module introducing basic projectional radiographic examinations, radiation safety, patient care and radiographic equipment. PALS sessions were unstructured and as such could involve roleplaying radiographic examinations, revisiting lecture material and/or discussing hospital placement or pastoral issues.

**Methods:** Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection were used. 16 of 63 stage 1 students and 9 of 29 stage 3 students were electronically surveyed upon completion of the PALS sessions. Relevant colleagues and educational specialists were also informally interviewed. These were put in context with autobiographical reflections and the existing literature base on PALS.

**Results:** All agreed that the sessions provided a good environment for stage 1 students to improve their practical skills, revise lecture content, and gain confidence for upcoming clinical placements. Stage 3 students gained experience teaching students, an essential role of a graduate radiographer's job. Improvements around recruiting stage 3 peer leaders, sustainability, timetabling and session structure were explored.

**Conclusion:** The PALS proved to be a successful initiative within the undergraduate programme and will be continued into the future.

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### A background on peer to peer support

Peer to peer (P2P) support programmes were first championed by Dr Deanna Martin from the University of Missouri in 1973 as a strategy to improve retention within “high risk” programmes of study.<sup>1</sup> These have since become commonplace with over 50 HEIs registered with the UK “national PASS network”.<sup>2</sup> P2P support programmes are broadly defined by Boud 2014 as “students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways”<sup>3(p4)</sup> and typically fall into two broad categories:

- Peer assisted learning schemes (PALS) or Peer assisted study sessions (PASS) designed to support learning within a specific

discipline or module of study. This can take the form of pre-planned and structured extra tutorials, practicals or study sessions; or may be informal in nature.

- Peer mentoring (or “buddy systems”) where target students meet with more experienced students from their discipline to discuss a broader range of academic, social or pastoral topics.<sup>4</sup>

P2P learning is not intended to replace formal taught or pastoral components to a programme of study but rather should provide additional support. As such they are typically voluntary and extra-curricular. In the context of PALS, this will involve a staff member organising and overseeing arrangements (peer programme organiser), senior students facilitating the sessions (peer leaders) and the target students (mentees). Peer leaders are not required to provide “the answers” to mentees but rather to help guide their own individual learning.<sup>3,4</sup>

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## Clinical Imaging 1

University of Exeter (UoE) runs a three year undergraduate diagnostic radiography Bachelor of Science (Honours) programme. The undergraduate first year module “Clinical Imaging 1” (PAM1017) introduces students to the components of commonly used radiographic equipment, their principles and rationale for use, and practical elements such as performing routine projectional examinations. As a stage 1 module, PAM1017 also plays an important role in preparing students for their first clinical placement, which immediately follows the module.

PAM1017 involves 16 hours of formal lectures and 14 hours of practical sessions in the on-campus X-ray room, making it intensive for contact hours. With a cohort of approximately 60 students, practical sessions in the X-ray room are repeated 6 times with student groups of around 10 students. This represents a logistical challenge to provide students the time required to practice on the equipment, particularly quieter and less forthcoming students. To address this, in the 2014/15 academic year a PALS was established as part of the PAM1017 module alongside formal taught components. This report will discuss the development and evaluation of this PALS.

### Development of the PAM1017 PALS

The PAM1017 PALS consisted of two weekly one hour drop-in sessions for stage 1 students (i.e. mentees), hosted by two to three rotational volunteer stage 3 students (i.e. peer leaders). Attendance was voluntary and the primary goal was to give mentees opportunities to have extra practice using the X-ray equipment, whilst also being able to ask peer leaders for advice on lecture content or about the practicalities of clinical placement. The sessions would also give peer leaders some practical teaching experience and provide a career development activity. Sessions were unstructured and were to be guided by the mentees questions and perceived needs. Mentees were not required to do any formal preparation for the sessions but were encouraged to bring questions and areas they wanted to improve on to make the sessions more useful. Peer leaders were not asked to prepare specifically for sessions, but rather to expect any potential questions relating to stage 1 studies. Sessions were held without the direct presence of academic staff in the on-campus X-ray room, with the generator disabled but equipment otherwise operational.

Planning for the sessions initially began before the module started. Suitable timeslots were identified on the stage 1 and stage 3 academic timetables, being mindful of assessment deadlines. An early identified peer leader then advertised the scheme to the stage 3 cohort and used a *Doodle* poll to organise volunteers. The PALS timeslots were also intensively advertised to mentees during lectures and via emails.

### Evaluating the PAM1017 PALS

Brookfield's “four lenses of critical reflection” were adopted in order to retrospectively gauge the views of key stakeholders regarding the PAM1017 PALS.<sup>5</sup> An anonymous and confidential open-ended SurveyMonkey questionnaire was sent to mentees and peer leaders involved (i.e. the “student lens”; see [Appendix A](#)); relevant academic colleagues and educational specialists at UoE were informally interviewed (i.e. the “colleague lens”); and my own autobiographical reflections were recorded (i.e. the “autobiographical lens”). This was put in context with the existing literature base on P2P support programmes (i.e. the “theoretical lens”).<sup>5</sup> As this exercise was an audit activity of teaching practice, ethical approval was not required under UoE policy. However, all involved

were informed that their anonymised views could contribute to publication.

### The “student lens”

#### *Mentee PALS feedback*

16 of 63 mentees responded. 2 respondents had attended weekly sessions every week with other respondents having a wider range of attendances from one to five of the seven weeks of PALS sessions offered. Four had not attended any sessions citing reasons such as feeling they had too much other academic work to do, timing issues with the sessions' timetabling, and in the case of one student: “*laziness*”.

The 12 students who had attended sessions all agreed they were a useful initiative. Many agreed it was helping them prepare for their upcoming clinical placement and provided a useful opportunity to go over lecture and practical content. This also extended to include insight into future modules and other general academic aspects of the course.

*“I found this a less pressured environment and as there were generally smaller groups/ 3 students they were really good for support. No set content = brilliant!! Means we can ask to go over anything”*

*“Good advice for surviving the placements as well as the degree.”*

Students felt they benefitted from different perspectives on radiographic positioning techniques for common X-ray examinations, which can be subject to personal professional preferences in technique. Students reported receiving useful tips on patient care particularly with challenging patients, linking in with an adjacent patient care module. This is useful as in taught sessions there is only time to go over the positioning of a “compliant” patient.

*“I really felt that these extra sessions was where a lot of the learning of positioning took place - there was more one on one time.”*

*“They were useful to gain extra practice with the equipment and ask the stage 3 students questions we might not ask the lecturer.”*

Some comments suggested the PALS sessions had a pastoral element with students feeling supported and “put at ease” by hearing stories from peer leaders on their experiences both academically and at hospital sites.

*“I feel less worried about the placement, hearing the seniors' stories and experiences of it.”*

Other benefits reported included gaining self-confidence and improving interpersonal skills. One student commented on a greater appreciation and respect of the role of the diagnostic radiographer. Peer leaders also noted PALS opened the mentee's eyes to the size of the task ahead of them and the wide range of patients and experiences they will be seeing. Peer leaders also commented mentees found it motivational to see peer leaders teaching with a good knowledge base after a relatively short period of study.

Some mentees suggested the sessions would work more efficiently if they were pre structured, reducing the initial discussion of what was to be covered in the session. However this also goes against some comments of praise for the informal “drop-in” nature of the session.

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