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Cover Page Footnote

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The first year experience of a peer assisted learning program in two institutes of technology in Ireland

Carina Ginty and Nuala Harding

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a collaborative action research study in which peer assisted learning was deployed simultaneously across a range of disciplines in two institutes of technology in Ireland.

The aim of the research was to determine if peer assisted learning enhances the learning experience of first year participants. An action research approach was selected and involved three phases between 2009 and 2011. The implementation of each phase was informed by a review of the previous phase. The third phase also incorporated the rollout and evaluation of a new peer assisted learning student leadership module (an elective 5 ECTS European Credit and Accumulation Transfer System) in both institutes.

This paper focuses on both quantitative and qualitative data from the first year experience student survey, which was designed and deployed in phase one and repeated in phase two. The survey is supplemented by data from focus groups with student leaders and session reviews. Qualitative data was analysed using both the constant comparison method and text analysis.

Our findings illustrate the challenges associated with implementing and embedding a long-term peer assisted learning program as part of the first year student experience. In addition, we found wide ranging benefits for the two institutes of technology that collaborated on the development, rollout, and evaluation of the program. An evidence based model emerged, which involved a partnership between management, academic staff, student services, and learning and teaching advocates. These partners continue to work together to sustain the program.

INTRODUCTION¹

The higher education system in Ireland comprises of the university sector (seven institutions), the institutes of technology (14 institutions), and the colleges of education (five institutions), all of which are substantially state-funded, autonomous, and self-governing. In addition, there are a number of private providers. According to the Institute of Public Administration (IPA, 2009), the institutes of technology offer recognised awards from level 6 to 10

¹ Note: For the purpose of this paper the two institutes of technology involved with this study will be referred to as Institute A and Institute B. In the findings and discussion sections of this paper the peer assisted learning program in Institute A is referred to as PAL and in Institute B it is called PASS.

on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2010), established on a statutory basis in 1971, administers and co-ordinates support, planning, and state funding for higher-level institutions, in addition to promoting equality of access to, and excellence within, higher education.

Ireland's growth in higher education participation has been remarkable by OECD standards. Participation rates in state-funded higher education institutions increased from 20% in 1980 to 55% in 2004 (IPA, 2009, p. 242). Entry to higher education is usually linked to the operation of a points system based on performance in the Leaving Certificate examination, which is taken in the final year of secondary school. Alternative entry modes exist for mature students/adult learners and for students from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds.

In 2004, the Irish Government introduced the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) to stimulate innovative thinking and action within and across higher education institutions in Ireland. The SIF was all about creating a collaborative culture with a particular focus on the quality of teaching and learning, improved graduate education, broader access to higher education, and better managed higher education institutions. The HEA was responsible for the allocation of the SIF funding to the universities and institutes of technology in Ireland. To date there have been two cycles of SIF funding.

In 2008, Institute A was awarded SIF Cycle II funding of €2 million by the HEA to lead a three year project titled the "Student Leadership Program." This program consisted of two strands: "Student Led Learning" and "Curriculum Reform." Both strands in the SIF initiative have provided an opportunity for better engagement with students, particularly in relation to learning, teaching, and assessment. The peer assisted learning program was funded through the "Student Led Learning" strand in Institutes A and B. In addition, Institute B received support through Dormant Account Funding from the HEA. There was a specific requirement for collaboration between institutions when preparing the SIF II funding application. Both institutes involved had a track record in working collaboratively and had independently identified a need to assist students further in making a successful transition to higher education.

The approximate total student population of Institute A is 8,000 and Institute B is 6,000. There are a range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees available at both institutes in Engineering, Science, Computing, Humanities, Art and Design, Hospitality, Tourism, Business, Education, and Nursing. In 2008, the completion targets in both institutes were 72% for Year 1, 83% for Year 2, 81% for Year 3, and 91% for Year 4. Students who withdrew from programs reported wrong program choice, program unsuitability, financial circumstances, or personal reasons. Since September 2008, considerable effort has been invested in setting up the peer assisted learning program in both institutes to support first year students' transition to higher education. Both institutes worked initially with Bournemouth University and subsequently with the University of Manchester. The peer learning models

² Dormant Account Funding 2008-2013: HEA funding to support the national plan to achieve equity of access to Higher Education.

from each of these universities informed the peer assisted learning program design in both institutes in this study.

The rationale for the introduction of peer assisted learning at both institutes was to help first year students:

- integrate more quickly into college life,
- get a better understanding of the expectations of lecturers,
- develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of their chosen program,
- improve their understanding of the subject matter of their program, and
- prepare better for assessments.

With growth in class sizes and increasing diversity among the student population, peer learning study sessions offered students a distinct advantage as they encouraged first years to engage with each other and reflect on their program of study.

The peer assisted learning program in both institutes involved a group of senior year students from the same degree course undertaking "Leadership" training over two days. Subsequently two leaders worked together with a first year group of up to thirty students in a weekly timetabled one hour session engaging with students about a variety of topics, including campus life, student services, academic assignments, study skills, and much more. Leaders were required to complete session plans and session review sheets and submit them weekly to the program co-ordinators.

Phase one of the peer assisted learning program was rolled out in January 2009 in three first year programs in each institute, involving a total of 143 first year students and 12 student leaders. Phase two commenced in September 2009 with a combined total of 18 degree programs offered peer assisted learning sessions, supporting over 700 first year students and facilitated by 45 student leaders. Phase three commenced in September 2010 with a combined total of 30 degree programs offered peer assisted learning sessions, supporting 1400 first years and facilitated by 90 student leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The peer assisted learning program is a first year experience initiative which is designed to support students' transition to higher education and develop their learning and study skills. This paper explores two main themes from the literature: the First Year Experience and Peer Assisted Learning.

First Year Experience

It is well reported in the literature that first year students find entering third level education an unnerving, isolating, and intimidating experience (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Furthermore, Tinto (1998) describes the experience as moving from one community group to another and by undertaking this transition, students need to separate themselves from their past school associations in order to integrate into third level college life. During this process first year students will encounter lots of problems along the way, mainly due to the new club they are joining. Tinto (1998) argues any student moving to a new community or club wants to fit in and this all depends on

the personality of the individuals or of the institution in which membership is sought.

Many students are just not ready to cope with the demands of third level study and this can increase the doubts that students may have. For example, in the UK, Yorke (2001) found that two thirds of student withdrawals from university happen during or at the end of the first year. There are a number of factors cited that make it difficult for students to adjust to third level life, including financial pressures, the wrong choice of program or module, difficulties with making friends, and being homesick. The biggest factor reported in the literature is the lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required at third level (Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley, & Pearce, 2009; Jamelske, 2009; Kuh, 2001; Morosanu, Handley, & O'Donovan, 2010; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Schrader & Brown, 2008). The importance of aiding students' transition into higher education is reinforced by appreciating that undergraduates are likely to arrive with learning strategies suitable to second level school life. These strategies are less effective in third level learning environments which feature large class sizes and less easy access to staff (Cook & Leckey, 1999). Similar to Tinto's findings, Cook and Leckey (1999) consider transition to be the "greatest hurdle" in higher education (p. 157).

In a report of the Australian national surveys of first year students, McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000) found that almost 29% of students said they had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university. Around 45% of students said that they found the standard of work required at university much higher than they expected, and 57% thought university study was more demanding than school. These results highlight the vulnerability of first year students in the transition process. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) identified several variables that influence the transition to higher education, including academic and social involvement, family background, socioeconomic status, and level of academic preparation.

Consideration must be given to the reasons why students withdraw from a program in the first year, a process that is described by Braxton (2000, p. 1) as the "student departure puzzle." Yorke and Longden (2004) argue that a lot depends on the student's perception of their experience in higher education. This is affected by economic, organisational, psychological, and sociological perspectives, some of which are well beyond the powers of an institution to solve (Tinto, 1988). Schrader and Brown (2008) reported that, in the US, one in four college first year students did not return for their sophomore year and nearly half of the students in community colleges did not return to complete their degree in 2004. The Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2010) in Ireland reported that the average proportion of new entrants in 2007/08 who were not present one year later was 15% across all sectors and National Framework Qualification (NFQ) levels. The rates of non-presence differ according to the sector, ranging from 22% in an institute of technology to 9% in a university sector and 4% in teacher training colleges. Furthermore, the HEA (2010) reports that there is a clear and strong link between prior educational achievement and successful progression. Educational achievement is a strong factor influencing whether or not a new entrant progresses beyond the first year of their course of study. Empirical research over the last few decades corroborates these findings (McInnis, 2004; Tinto,

1988; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Tinto (1988) also describes the impact of non-progression on resources and it is a principal concern for students, parents, administrators, and managers of an institute.

In summary, many students are not prepared for the challenges of third level education and First Year Experience (FYE) programs are designed to support this transition and supplement the necessary academic and life skills (Brownlee et al., 2009; Jamelske 2009; Kuh, 2001; Morosanu et al., 2010; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Schrader & Brown, 2008). These academic and life skills can range from study (e.g., research, note taking) and time management skills to institutional awareness (e.g., location of the library, student union, IT labs), appropriate interpersonal behaviour, and seeking out personnel when personal issues arise. Evaluating programs developed to address such a wide range of knowledge and skills is an obvious challenge, especially when a First Year Experience is customised for each corresponding university or college.

As a result of the issues and challenges that exist in retaining and supporting students in first year, many third level institutions have implemented some form of intervention, formal or informal, to increase academic achievement and positive social adjustment. These efforts are focused on increasing retention rates (Schrader & Brown, 2008). A Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program is just one example.

Peer Assisted Learning

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is a form of study support whereby experienced student leaders from senior years support the learning experience of other less experienced students (Capstick & Fleming, 2001). As Capstick and Fleming (2004) explain, “the term PAL derives from Supplemental Instruction (SI), which draws upon a suite of learning theories that can be described as developmental” (pp. 2-3). It ranges in perspective from facilitation techniques, information processing, and knowledge sharing among peers, to academic socialisation, critical thinking, and reflection. Taking the academic social environment alone, Couchman (2008) explains “that students learn by being socialised into the particular ways of thinking, speaking and writing valued in the institutions and disciplines they study, or, as Becher (1989) described them, as ‘academic tribes’” (p. 83). Student leaders of peer assisted learning sessions therefore work with students to acculturate them into the various cultures and discourses of the disciplines they are studying (Couchman, 2008).

Peer assisted learning is also referred to as peer tutoring and has been applied in different ways in different higher education institutions. Peer tutoring is a system whereby learners help each other and learn by teaching. One perspective on peer tutoring is referred to in the literature by Hogan and Tudge (1992) as the Vygotskian perspective, which involves “more competent learners supporting weaker students and this helps their progression through the zone of proximal development i.e. the difference between a learner’s performance unaided and that when assisted by an adult or more competent peer” (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006 pp. 13-14). Literature has shown that when the peer tutor is more advanced, the collaboration between the student groups can improve student learning capabilities in a subject area (Beasley, 1997; Kalkowski, 1995; Tudge 1992; Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993).

Further review of the literature demonstrates that peer learning is essentially about developing a learning community. Tosey (1999) argues that any group of people on a course could be said to constitute a learning community. Therefore a learning community is something of an umbrella term to describe learning situations where a “group of people come together to meet specific and unique learning needs and to share resources and skills” (Burgoyne et al., 1978, as cited in Reynolds, 1998, p. 6). Furthermore, Tosey (1999) reported a peer learning community is not a therapeutic community; however, there is a strong emphasis on personal growth and development and involves a high degree of personal challenge for members. Much attention is given to the PAL group process, yet principles of power sharing and variation in modes of facilitation differentiate it from an analytical group.

Researchers have suggested or assumed that the benefits of peer assisted learning arise from “its discursive, active approach to learning” (Capstick & Fleming, 2004 p. 2). Peer assisted learning is also intended to represent a particular manifestation of cooperative learning (Donelan & Wallace, 1998). Cooperative learning may be defined broadly as working together to accomplish shared goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In peer assisted learning sessions, the intention is for students to collaborate and problem solve and connect pieces of information which will form solutions. Capstick and Fleming (2001) argue that thinking skills and understanding of course subject matter may develop within the co-operative environment of learning among peers. Therefore peer assisted learning sessions provide a learning environment where students are supported to construct knowledge from past experiences and previous knowledge. In this way, peer assisted learning is based on the principles of constructivism in a social context. This approach recognises that knowledge has both individual and social aspects which cannot be meaningfully separated (Tobin & Tippins, 1993).

In addition to the benefits of peer assisted learning discussed above, there are a number of challenges reported in the literature. One challenge can be the potential personality clashes between student leaders in study sessions (Beasley, 1997), which means that the program needs to be carefully coordinated by academic members in the institute in order to troubleshoot problems that arise. Low attendance on the part of tutees is another challenge cited in the literature (Beasley 1997; Carpenter 1996; Kalkowski 1995). Reasons for this vary from timetabling and promotional issues to issues with academic staff support. Beasley (1997) also reports on differing expectations on the part of the tutors and the tutees. Academic staff members have also been reported to express opposition to peer learning programs. Some lecturers fear that it is a substitute for teaching and student leaders may give the wrong information or fail to adequately diagnose students’ weaknesses (Beasley, 1997).

Overall, a variety of peer assisted learning studies have demonstrated the positive effect such schemes can have as a result of the relationship which develops between leaders and tutees. McDowell, Sambell & Davison (2009) summarise the benefits effectively as “behavioural - in terms of academic performance; attitudinal; self-esteem; motivational and relational” (p. 15).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An action research approach was chosen for this study. In contrast to other research methods, an action research approach allows the project collaborators to be active participants in the research (Robson, 2002). Indeed, Greenwood (2007) argues that action research allows for the “creation of areas for collaborative learning,” a process which includes the “design, enactment and evaluation of liberating actions” (p. 131). In this way, an action research approach aligns with the basic principles of peer assisted learning, particularly in relation to the empowerment of first year students.

The approach is further justified by Coghlan (2011, p. 54) who states:

Action research’s distinctive characteristic is that it addresses the twin tasks of bringing about change in organisations and in generating robust actionable knowledge, in an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry, whereby research is constructed with people, rather than on them or for them.

Therefore, unlike other methods, we (the researchers) were able to both inform and participate in the research project and this was made explicit to key stakeholders, namely first years, student leaders, academic course contacts, and management. An adapted version of the Mills (2000) model (Figure 1) illustrates the research spiral undertaken in this study. Phase one of the action research occurred in Semester 2 of the academic year 2008–2009. Further iterations took place over the next two years, with phase two in 2009–2010 and phase three in 2010–2011. Each phase was informed by the continual analysis and interpretation of data.

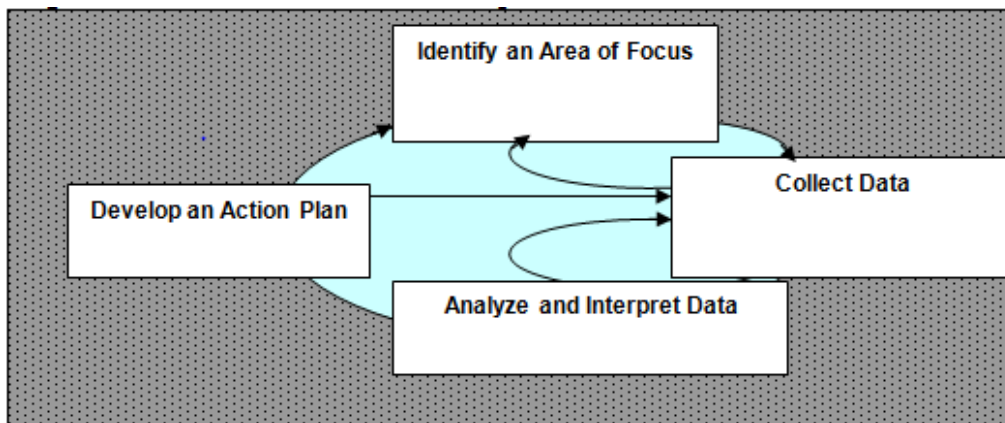


Figure 1. Dialectic Action Research Spiral adapted from Mills (2000).

The data presented in this paper emanates from an electronic student survey which was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative responses. The surveys were conducted online with students being notified of the survey through text messaging and email. The survey was distributed to all first year students who were offered peer learning study sessions on their timetable.

The survey instrument comprised of 14 questions with a mixture of yes/no and Likert-type scale questions with some questions containing sub-questions. The questions essentially focused on the rationale for introducing the peer assisted learning program and investigated the level of achievement gained by the first year students. For example:

- Did PAL/PASS help you integrate more quickly into college life?
- Did PAL/PASS help you get a better understanding of the expectations of lecturers?
- Did PAL/PASS help you develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of your chosen program?
- Did PAL/PASS improve your understanding of the subject matter of your program?
- Did PAL/PASS help you prepare better for assessments?

Data triangulation as advocated by Denzin (1998) was an integral part of the design of the survey instrument with questions requiring responses to similar concerns but in different ways. In addition, there was a mix of positive and negative questions in order to prevent responder bias. Students were given the opportunity to supplement and expand on their answers by the inclusion of open-ended questions.

The data presented in this paper relates to the student survey distributed to participating first year students in the first two phases of the study. In phase one, peer assisted learning was offered to a total of 143 students at Institutes A and B combined (see Table 1), of which a total of 43 students completed the survey (30% response rate). In phase two, peer assisted learning was offered to a total of 700 students at Institutes A and B combined (see Table 2), of which a total of 246 students completed the survey (35% response rate).

In phase two, a total of 45 leaders were trained in September 2009 (30 in Institute A and 15 in Institute B) to facilitate weekly one hour timetabled PAL/PASS sessions with first year student groups.

The qualitative data from the phase one and phase two surveys at both institutes was merged using SPSS and text analysis was undertaken focusing on three questions: how did peer assisted learning study sessions help the first year students, what were the best and worst things about peer assisted learning, and how could peer assisted learning be improved.

The data from the electronic survey was supplemented by data from focus group sessions held with student leaders. The focus groups were facilitated by the researchers, which was in keeping with an action research approach as it allowed the researchers to take an active role in the research process. These focus groups were held in each institute using a set of questions which concentrated on three main categories: development of employability skills, such as leadership, communication, problem solving, and time management; leader training; and feedback to leaders from the first year students who attended their support sessions. The focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed. In addition, the structured weekly session reviews which leaders submitted were examined in order to support and supplement the themes emerging from the survey. The reviews included the requirement to provide a written account of the peer assisted learning study sessions with

details such as level of attendance, reflections on the impact of the group work activities used, and the development of their leadership and facilitation skills. The qualitative data was examined using the constant comparison method of analysis (Glaser, 1965). The data was categorised based on frequently occurring themes that were both meaningful to participants and relevant to our focus of inquiry.

Table 1
Courses and student numbers offered PAL/PASS in phase one

Course Name	No. students
INSTITUTE A, PAL:	
BA in Hotel Management	30
BSc in Business Computing and Digital Media	30
BA in Furniture Production and Technology	30
Total Student Numbers in Institute A	90
INSTITUTE B, PASS:	
BB (Honours) Ab initio	32
BSc (Honours) in Construction Technology and Management	8
BB Hospitality Business Management	13
Total Student Numbers in Institute B	53

Table 2
Courses and student numbers offered PAL/PASS in phase two

Course Name	No. students
INSTITUTE A	
BSc Business Computing and Digital Media - Science School	60
BSc Computing and Energy Systems - Engineering School	30
BA Gnó agus Cumarsáid - Business School	23
BA Art & Design - Humanities School	100
BA(Honours) Hotel and Catering Management - Hotel School	30
BB Bar Management - Hotel School	30
BB Hotel Management - Hotel School	30
BSc Construction Management & Refurbishment Maintenance - Castlebar Campus	60
	70
All First Year Programmes in Letterfrack Campus	30
BA Personnel Management – Life Long Learning/Business School	
Total Student Numbers on all Courses in Institute A	463
INSTITUTE B	
BBS Business (Honours) Ab initio	44
BSc (Honours) Construction Technology and Management	20
BBS Hospitality Business Management	21
BSc Veterinary Nursing	25
BSc (Honours) Nursing in Psychiatric Nursing	25
Higher Certificate Business Studies	102
Total Student Numbers on all Courses in Institute B	237

FINDINGS

The findings in this section present qualitative and quantitative data from phases one and two, which included an electronic survey with first year students and a focus group with student leaders in Institutes A and B. It should be noted that there are limitations as the data was provided by a self-selecting sample, which creates biases. It can therefore be concluded that those who responded were first years who had attended peer assisted learning study sessions. Students who did not attend may be underrepresented in the sample.

Phase one findings

Over 70% (n = 30) of respondents to the electronic survey in phase one said the sessions improved their understanding of the subject matter of their program (see Figure 2).

Table 3 presents qualitative findings from an open ended question on how PAL/PASS sessions in Institute A and Institute B helped first year students. There are a number of similarities identified between both Institutes, such as: "PAL helped me get to know the class better", "make friends", "bond with the class", "share information", and "learn something new". Six key categories or themes emerged which sum up the impact of weekly PAL/PASS sessions at both institutes. These themes include: exam and assignment preparation, making friends and adjusting to college, a better understanding of the course, a safe environment, and serious fun (see Table 3).

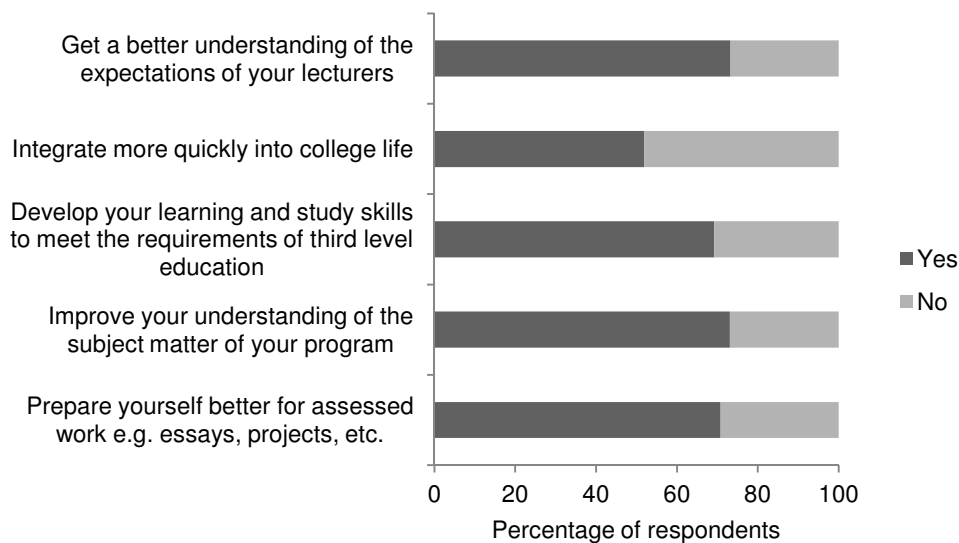


Figure 2. Self-reported benefits of peer assisted learning sessions at Institutes A and B in phase one (n = 43).

Table 3
First year experience of PAL/PASS sessions in Institutes A and B

	INSTITUTE A	INSTITUTE B
THEMES	How has PAL helped you?	How has PASS helped you?
Exam & Assignment Preparation	<i>"It helped me get a better idea of what kind of standard was expected of me."</i>	<i>"The PASS class helps me to improve my English. Helping us to finish the assignment."</i>
Making Friends & Adjusting to College	<i>"It has helped me to adjust into college life better and given me more confidence in interacting with my peers."</i>	<i>"Share the information and classmates know more about each other which has an effect on team work."</i>
	<i>"It has helped me integrate with my class mates more in a very friendly environment."</i>	<i>"Get to know the class better and helped with projects."</i>
		<i>"It has helped get a better understanding of college life from people who have been here longer."</i>
		<i>"Helps to gain knowledge of the college and how it works."</i>
Better understanding of the course	<i>"PAL was a great experience I only wish more people had attended. PAL helped me to understand what was to come on the course in following years and I now feel more prepared for the next stages on the course."</i>	<i>"It has helped me to get a better understanding of the course."</i>
	<i>"Through PAL sessions, I was introduced to something that I might only see next year, such as Google sketch up"</i>	<i>"Help get ideas out of my head. Make the class work as a team."</i>
	<i>"Being able ask any question to the leaders as they have done the year already and have experience e.g. on placement and exams"</i>	<i>"Helped with subjects that students were finding hard to follow. Especially the overseas students."</i>
	<i>"Helped me when I got stuck with something."</i>	
Safe Environment	<i>"You could talk openly about any question or query you had."</i>	<i>"A more relaxed class environment for all the students."</i>
	<i>"Being able to ask questions that I felt were inappropriate to ask in lectures."</i>	<i>"You could ask any question or query you had."</i>
	<i>"The leaders were easy to talk to and helped explain or find out things I didn't understand about college in general".</i>	
Serious Fun	<i>"Messing around but still getting work done."</i>	<i>"Studying yet having fun".</i>

In addition, student leader focus groups took place in both institutes and covered three main categories: skill development, training, and feedback from first year students. Table 4 summarises the feedback that student leaders gained from the first year students.

Within the focus groups, student leaders spoke about a range of professional skills which they acquired through their role, including confidence, teamwork, presenting, planning, organising, and delegation. They found the leader preparation training good fun, stimulating, structured, informative, and a new experience. An interesting development occurred in both institutes with some leaders selecting to take on the role again in phase two (academic year 2009-2010). In addition, this informed the design and implementation of a PAL/PASS Leadership Module during phase three.

During the first phase of implementation, leaders also identified similar issues to the first year students' experiences with PAL/PASS and these included: the late start of the program in the academic year, attendance problems, promotion of weekly sessions, issues with school managers, communications to students, academic support, and Moodle access. This feedback gained from the focus group with the leaders informed phase two implementation plans in both institutes. This included better communication about PAL/PASS, early negotiation and planning with school managers, early recruitment of leaders and the further development of support materials for leaders. In addition, the training of academic course contacts as supervisors was organised with a university in the United Kingdom which is recognised as a national UK centre for supplemental instruction.

Overall, first year students reported a positive experience of PAL/PASS in phase one despite the late start in the academic year.

Table 4

Student Leader Experience: Feedback from the first year students in phase one

Student Leader Experience PAL INSTITUTE A	Student Leader Experience PASS INSTITUTE B
Feedback from First Years	Feedback from First Years
Supportive, relaxed environment	Helped with projects
Saw the benefits immediately	Helped with accounting
Poor attendance impacted motivation	Interaction improved
Helped socially	Attendance problematic
Had trouble understanding lecturers sometimes – found PAL very helpful	Christmas start – problematic
Solving problems about maths	Beneficial to economics
Learning about Google Sketch Book	Helped with preparation for in-class test
Helped with assignments and exam preparation	CAD drawings support outside weekly sessions
September start would be much better	Poor support from academic teaching team
Poor support from academic teaching team	

Phase two findings

Institute A findings

In total 30% (n = 138) of the 460 first years offered PAL sessions at Institute A completed the electronic survey. Seventy-two percent stated they attended five or more PAL sessions, with 34% (n = 47) attending 10 sessions or more. In contrast 13% stated they attended just one or two sessions. Students who attended just one session (9%, n = 12) stated in an open ended question why they did not attend more than one session: “they felt it was a waste of time,” “they didn’t have any questions,” “the timetable didn’t suit,” “my lecturers didn’t tell me anything about it,” and “it was like the learning to learn module.”

Students chose from a list of topics (see Table 5) and were asked to indicate what they covered in PAL sessions. The most common topics or activities selected included: working out problems together (55%, n = 76); assignments (46%, n = 64); and getting to know Institute A (46%, n = 63).

Table 5
Topic/area/activities covered in PAL at Institute A

Topic/area/activity	% of respondents
Working out problems together	55
Assignments	46
Getting to know the institute	46
Exam revision	43
Student services	40
Lecture review	38
Other (please specify)	29
Researching finding information	28
Using the library	27
Plagiarism	24
Other	19

Over 67% (n = 92) of first years indicated PAL sessions helped them integrate more quickly into college life and 66% (n = 91) felt PAL gave them a better understanding of the expectations of the lecturers (see Figure 3).

First years reported in an open ended question on “the best thing about PAL.” Their comments included: “the leaders,” “working out problems from lectures,” “being able to ask any question in the session,” “if you missed a lecture you could ask about it in PAL,” “it is practical,” “great forum for discussing issues,” “chilling out and chatting about college and our subjects,” “getting to make friends with other class mates,” and “students working to help each other.” In contrast, students felt the worst thing about PAL was “the time and day of session,” “low attendance,” “some sessions were repetitive,” “not enough leaders,” “only one hour a week,” and “not everyone attends.”

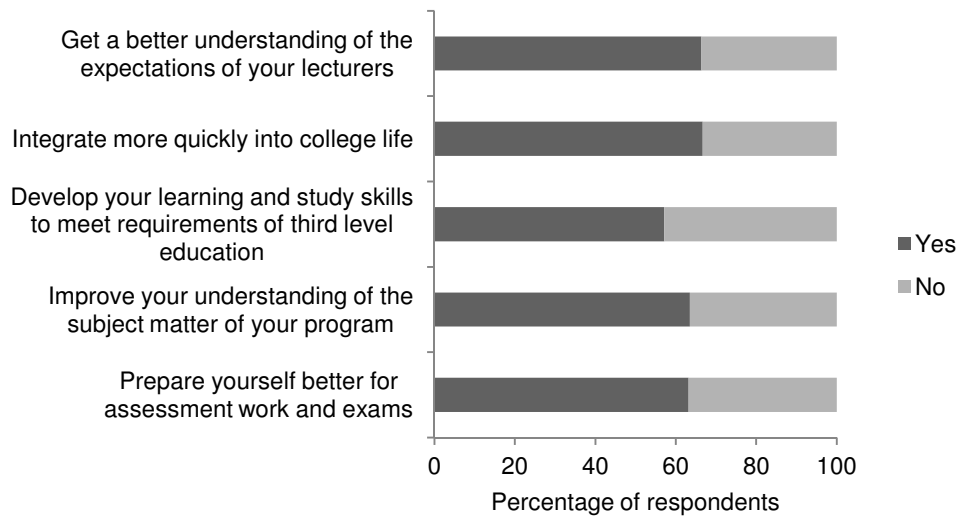


Figure 3. Self-reported benefits of PAL at Institute A (n =138).

Institute B findings

In total 33% (n = 78) of the 237 participants in the PASS program in Institute B responded to the electronic survey. Sixty-nine percent (n = 54) of the respondents indicated they had attended five or more sessions. Ten percent (n = 8) responded that they had attended one or two sessions. When asked to give a reason why they did not attend very much, they indicated that they “used the time to study on their own,” “the session was timetabled at a time which clashed with sports activities,” “PASS was on a day with a heavy class schedule,” or “they would rather go to the library.”

Respondents indicated that the most common activities in PASS sessions were exam revision 72% (n = 56), followed by lecture review at 55% (n = 43), working out problems together at 50% (n = 39), and assignments at 40% (n = 31) (see Table 6).

Table 6

Topic/area/activities covered in Peer Assisted Study Sessions at Institute B

Topic/area/activity	% of respondents
Exam revision	72
Lecture review	55
Working out problems together	50
Assignments	40
Placements	36
Student services	35
Using the library	35
Getting to know the institute	20
Social class building	16
Other	15

When asked how PASS helped them, the highest response 86% (n = 67) indicated that PASS improved students' understanding of the subject matter of their program. This question was based on the initial rationale for the PASS program, and 73% (n = 57) indicated that all the objectives outlined in the rationale were met.

Further responses included: "helped interact with all students in the class," "working out problems," "helped in preparing for placement," and "chemistry and solving problems." For a larger class-group, one respondent indicated "it helped our class get to know one another better as it was a different classroom environment," "it was the first time the whole class got split off into groups and it made you work with people you would not have before." In addition, one student commented: "I really think it helps to be involved with people who have gone before you and it gave us a great insight into what to expect from college life."

When questioned about the best things about PASS, similar themes emerged, in particular: interaction with classmates, the relaxed atmosphere, the group work activities, which helped with coursework that was difficult to pick up in a lecture, and exam advice and preparation. In contrast, students felt the worst things about PASS included the low level of attendance, timetabling issues, and that some students did not take it seriously enough.

Merger of qualitative data from both institutes in phase two

A selection of qualitative data from both surveys was merged and a text analysis was carried out on these items using SPSS. A web plot was generated to provide a visual representation of how the overall themes were related. Stronger, darker lines indicate more common responses while larger dots indicate that a theme was more common.

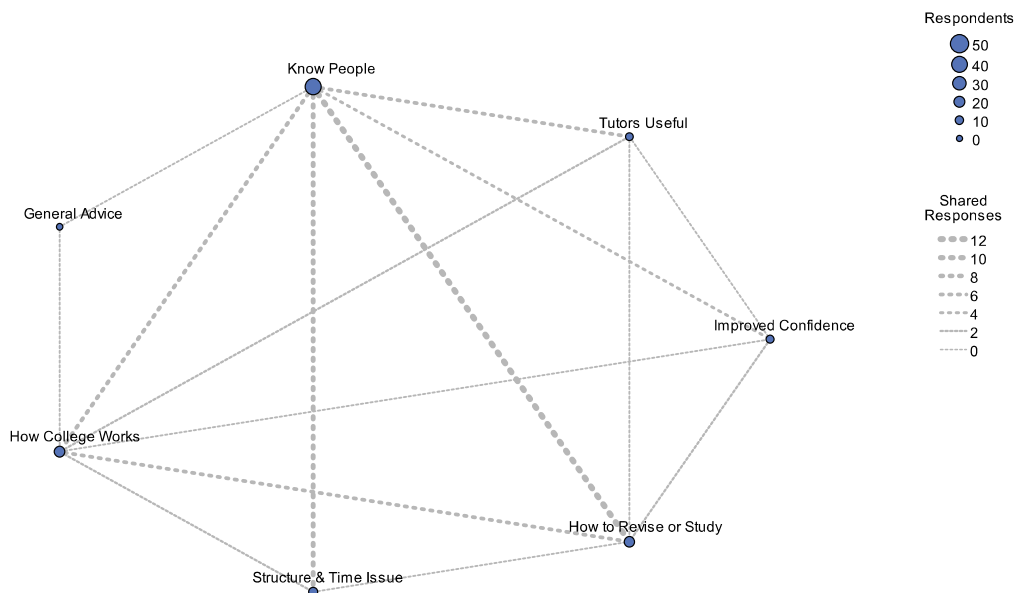


Figure 4. Web plot of ways PAL/PASS helpful at Institutes A and B.

Figure 4 shows a web plot of the extracted themes for the ways in which peer assisted learning was helpful in both institutes. The most common theme was that students found the peer assisted learning program a good way to get to know people (47.5%, $n = 28$). Students also found it helpful in figuring out how college works (27%, $n = 16$) and how to revise or study (18%, $n = 11$).

In addition, students reported that the best thing about peer assisted learning was the benefit of meeting other students (27%, $n = 61$). This was closely followed by get to know the course (23%, $n = 51$), support for problems (21%, $n = 41$), Interacting with older students (18%, $n = 40$) and Exam/Topic Revision (17%, $n = 37$). A number of other less common themes emerged (see Table 7).

Table 7
The 'best thing' about PASS at Institutes A and B

"Best thing" about PASS	No. responses	% of responses
Get to know classmates or other students	61	27
Get to know the course	51	23
Helped with problems and given support	47	21
Interact with older students	40	18
Exam/topic revision	37	17
Helping with assignments	22	10
Ran by students	16	7
Get to know the college	15	7
Leaders nice	15	7
To know what's expected	13	6
Fun	4	2

Table 8 indicates the combined responses when asked what was the worst thing about the peer assisted learning program, with the most commonly emerging theme being timetabling issues (41%, $n = 84$) followed by lack of student attendance (33%, $n = 67$). Nearly a quarter of students mentioned that there was no "worst thing" about the program. Other less common themes were also extracted. A small number of students negatively mentioned the lack of structure (5%, $n = 11$), the leaders (5%, $n = 11$), waste of time (5%, $n = 10$), and that it was boring (2.5%, $n = 5$).

Overall, it is worth noting that 21% ($n = 28$) indicated that they would not change anything about the peer assisted learning programs in both institutes. One respondent commented that they did not think it could be improved as "each year is dependent on the people who volunteer and the mentors this year were excellent." Another suggested that "it is up to the class themselves to make PAL/PASS a success, the personality of the leaders really just helps the process."

Table 8
Worst thing about the peer assisted learning program

“Worst thing” about PASS	No. responses	% of responses
Timetabling or scheduling issues	84	41
Students not attending	67	33
No worst thing	50	24
Lack of organisation or structure	11	5
Leaders	11	5
Waste of time	10	5
Boring	5	2

To conclude, first year students reported a positive experience of the peer assisted learning program. However, the data obtained in both institutes identified issues with attendance, communications, and promotion. Students also made a number of recommendations to improve the peer assisted learning study session experience in the future, such as:

- preparing a proposed timetable of what first years can do in the study sessions each week,
- encouraging more students to attend through better communications from school management and the teaching team,
- improving academic support of leaders, including by setting challenges and tasks that could be completed in the weekly study sessions,
- establishing school promotions of peer assisted learning and participation recognition awards,
- forming a connection with other first year experience initiatives,
- concentrating on subjects students are struggling with,
- extending the peer learning study sessions into the second and third year of a program,
- setting up social outings for the group (e.g., sport related team work activities), and
- increasing support from the lecturers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study emanated from an opportunity provided by a national funding call, which provided the impetus for two higher education institutions to collaborate. The initiative coincided with the aspirations of both researchers who had identified a need to provide additional support to first years in transition.

The primary focus of the study was to determine if peer assisted learning would enhance the learning experience of first year participants. The findings from our action based research study indicate an overall positive experience of the peer assisted learning program at both institutes. The major benefits of the program for first year students related to getting to know people, learning how to revise, improving confidence, and learning how college works. In contrast, a number of issues emerged in relation to the coordination of the first year experience, administration requirements,

communications, and school management roles and responsibilities. As a result, an evidenced based model emerged from this study that informed the setting up of a partnership between academic staff, student services, student representatives, administrative support, and learning and teaching advocates who now work together to sustain the peer assisted learning program in both institutes.

To support and sustain the program effectively we have identified a number of recommendations:

- providing annual supervisory training for academic staff contacts, which covers peer learning assessment, evaluation, and support,
- managing the study session timetable effectively by ensuring department heads liaise with the peer assisted learning academic course contacts and student services coordinators,
- engaging sessions in the virtual learning environment,
- offering a participation certificate for all first year students who attend a minimum of six peer learning study sessions,
- encouraging school-level management to take responsibility for communicating the benefits of the peer learning program to all first years and staff, and
- allocating contact hours to academic staff in each school to support the program and provide quality assurance for the student leadership module.

Overall, there were wide ranging benefits for the two institutes of technology that collaborated on the development, rollout, and evaluation of the peer assisted learning programs reported in this paper. On one level, it has enabled researchers in two Irish higher education institutions to collaborate on designing and deploying an action research project and on writing academic papers in the area of student engagement, peer learning, and the first year experience. On another level, the partnership has enabled a faster implementation process, with school management supporting the project aims quickly. School management recognised that this was a unique opportunity for both institutes to share their rollout experiences and develop a sustainable best practice peer assisted learning model. This recognition was aided by the Higher Education Authority's endorsement of the program. Other benefits included the development of a leadership training program, toolkit, and manual suitable for both institutes of technology, joint public relations, and the development of a 5 credit Leadership module.

In addition, our research identified key areas for promoting a peer assisted learning culture in both institutions, including:

- ongoing communication about the program to the students' union, school management, and all staff and students,
- ongoing sharing of experiences,
- responsiveness to issues raised by staff and students,
- identification of international institutes of best practice in peer assisted learning,
- openness to new ideas and approaches,
- undergoing training and seeking advice from centres of excellence in Supplemental Instruction (SI), and
- openness to improving the program at each academic year.

At a national level this study has informed the first year experience in other institutions of higher education. This was achieved through dissemination and engagement at national and international conferences and seminars. This study has impacted on the first year student experience in both institutes. It has raised awareness of the importance of supporting the transition into higher education, particularly with an increasingly diverse student cohort. At a time of increasing financial constraint, the challenge now is to make an informed argument for the value that accrues to an institution from supporting and developing a peer assisted learning program in the long term.

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