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# PALs – students supporting students at the University of Lincoln Library



Lys Ann Reiners  
Senior Academic Librarian,  
University of Lincoln Library  
Tel: 01522 886306  
E-mail: lreiners@lincoln.ac.uk



Helen Williams  
Academic Subject Librarian,  
University of Lincoln Library  
Tel: 01522 886307  
E-mail: hewilliams@lincoln.ac.uk



Rachel Farrow  
PAL, University of Lincoln

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## INTRODUCTION

Topping and Ehly have defined peer-assisted learning as ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions’.<sup>1</sup>

In 2008, we received an award from the university’s Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, to pilot peer-assisted learning (PAL) in the university library (Lincoln) and in two learning resource centres at other campuses (Hull and Riseholme). The main remit of this project was for us to work with students to promote library services and resources to their peers.

## THE PILOT

We created a job description that was graded at a higher rate than that received by student casual staff but at a lower rate compared with our library assistants. We then appointed 11 undergraduates (PALs), studying a range of disciplines, based in Lincoln, Riseholme and Hull. After participating in our training programme, the PALs split their

time between offering roving assistance in the university library and campus learning resource centres and preparing materials, going into lectures and seminars to promote their role and supporting students on a one-to-one basis. While roving, they helped with general library duties, such as shelving and tidying. The PALs wore red polo shirts printed with ‘Library and Learning Resources – here to help’ and were therefore easy to identify by students needing assistance.



Figure 1. PALs Emily, Charlotte, Rachael and Akua (photograph by Alice Flear).

The PALs undertook a wide range of activities, including creating and delivering promotional presentations to student groups at lectures and seminars; promoting specific aspects of our services and resources, such as library workshops, e-books and journals; and reviewing our study support materials to identify additional materials and workshops that would be useful to students. They answered first-line enquiries such as helping students to find full-text journal articles, referring more complex enquiries to academic subject librarians or tutors. Informally, as awareness of their role spread, they also helped students away from the library, in academic buildings and student residences. Some PALs reported that this did create some problems, as they were seen as always ‘on duty’, and we advised them to set boundaries, to ensure that they were not overloaded. A small number of PALs who had exceptional qualifications and experience also offered one-to-one study support and mentoring.



Figure 2. An example of PALs promotional material – they created individual flyers to promote their role.

We held regular group meetings to share ideas and information and to provide additional training (it was difficult to get everyone together at the same time, and we often had to repeat sessions). The PALs formed a mutually supportive, creative group, and made a significant contribution to the development of their role. For example, they identified a need to have a base in the university library, and went on to set up the Palpoint (at an enquiry desk which is usually only staffed at certain peak times), for which they created a PALs staffing rota and handover book.

**REVIEW**

*What went well*

We have had a positive response from both academics and students, and we hope to receive funding to continue the project next year. Academics have welcomed this new role, and we have already received requests for PALs to be involved in induction. Students have also given us favourable feedback, through e-mails and our annual library survey. By providing an additional point of contact, we believe that the PALs have strengthened the link between the library and academics and students. Our PALs also reported similar experiences to those described by Graeme Barber at Southampton Solent University<sup>2</sup> which was that students were prepared to ask them very basic questions, whereas they may have been embarrassed to ask library staff these same questions. For ourselves, through working with the PALs, we have gained a deeper understanding of student behaviour, from the students' perspective.

We have had the benefit of having a ready-made focus group and have sought their opinions in a number of areas, such as our current review of enquiry services.

*What we would like to improve*

Creating the new PALs role was a more lengthy process than we originally envisaged. The project needed approval from various university committees, and a number of time-consuming, but essential, stages followed official approval. This meant that the PALs were recruited to start at the beginning of semester B, when ideally they would be available from induction week onwards. Some of you may remember the heavy snow that fell at the end of January 2009, which disrupted our carefully planned two-day training event ... and training is an area that we wish to strengthen, by offering a more extensive programme, including self-evaluative tests, with back-up programmes where appropriate. Communication was also another difficult area, both amongst the PALs and between PALs and the wider library staff, and we are planning improved communication pathways for the future.

**SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE**

In June we were invited to present the project at a conference organised by the department of library services and the academic professional development unit at De Montfort University. The conference 'Peer mentoring: opportunities and challenges in a diverse student community' was an ideal opportunity to share our experience with library and academic communities. It was interesting to hear from other institutions that are in the process of setting up similar projects and to

receive encouraging feedback from peers, including comments on how we had addressed issues that they would not have considered.

**RACHEL FARROW, A PAL, GIVES HER POINT OF VIEW:**

‘The job description I received was quite broad, which allowed me to work with the library project coordinators and the other PALs to develop the role. To an extent, we were able to develop at our own pace, which meant that I was able to partake in duties I was comfortable in carrying out.

I helped students to find books, to use the self-service check-in machines, the library catalogue, top-up of printer credit and other printing problems, how to access and search on e-journals and e-books and also how to create assignment plans that helped them to focus on the assignment title. I enjoyed working with students from various different courses, both PAL colleagues and PAL customers, as I was often learning how to solve these problems at the same time, which gave me a greater knowledge bank to help students in the future.’

**REFERENCES**

- 1 K. Topping and S. Ehly, *Peer-assisted learning*, Mahwah, NJ, and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998
- 2 G. Barber, ‘S.O.S.– Supporting other Students’, *SCONUL Focus*, 45, 2009, pp15–19