TASO — Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC) Institutional Data Use:
University of East Anglia –
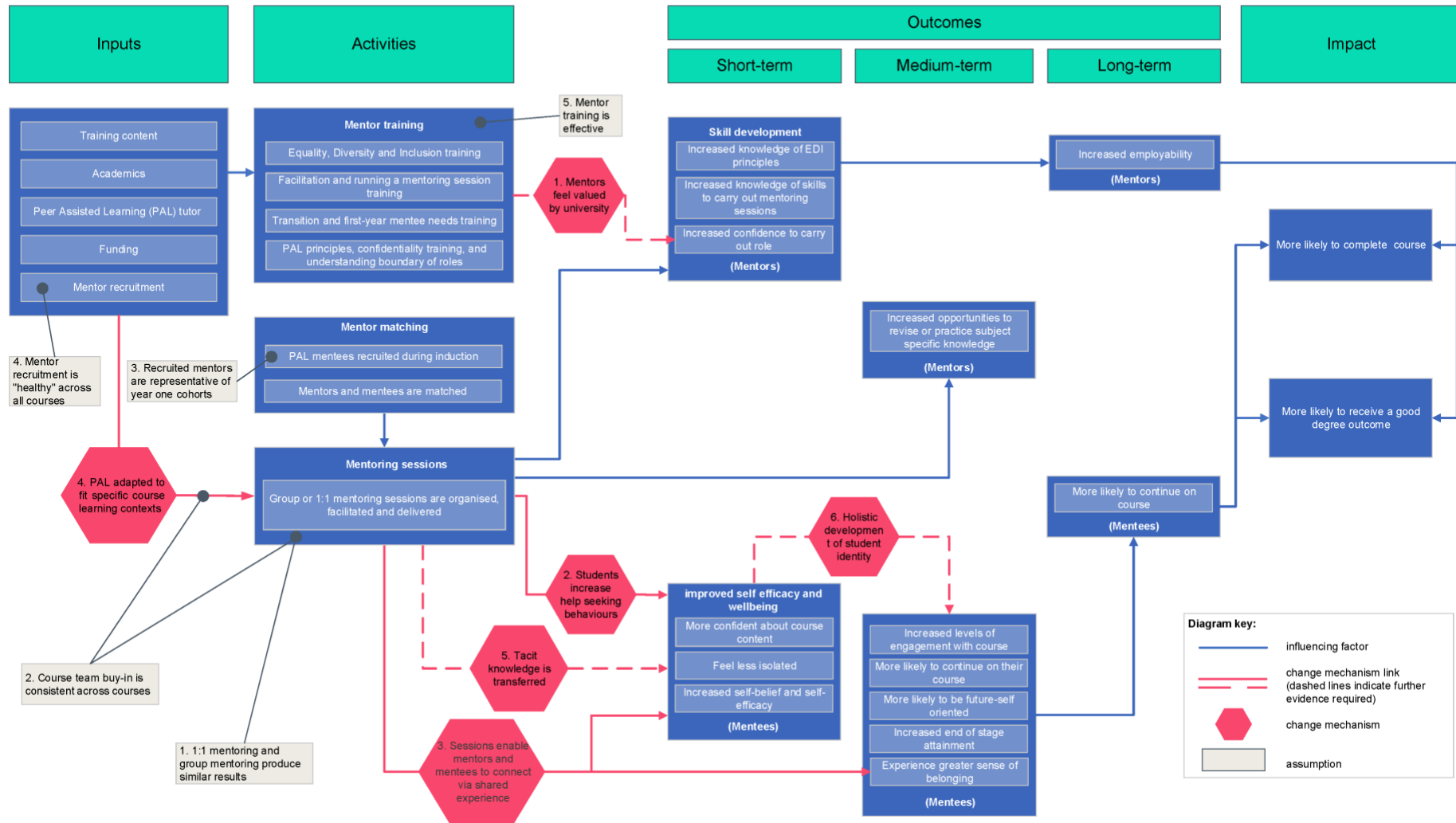# Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)

September 2024

Table of contents

ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE DIAGRAM

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)
Enhanced Theory of Change

University of East Anglia • TASO • SCoLPP Staffordshire Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice

Inputs	Activities	Outcomes			Impact
		Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term	

Inputs
- Training content
- Academics
- Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) tutor
- Funding
- Mentor recruitment

Activities

Mentor training
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training
- Facilitation and running a mentoring session training
- Transition and first-year mentee needs training
- PAL principles, confidentiality training, and understanding boundary of roles

Mentor matching
- PAL mentees recruited during induction
- Mentors and mentees are matched

Mentoring sessions
- Group or 1:1 mentoring sessions are organised, facilitated and delivered

Outcomes

Skill development
- Increased knowledge of EDI principles
- Increased knowledge of skills to carry out mentoring sessions
- Increased confidence to carry out role
(Mentors)

Increased opportunities to revise or practice subject specific knowledge
(Mentors)

improved self efficacy and wellbeing
- More confident about course content
- Feel less isolated
- Increased self-belief and self-efficacy
(Mentees)

Increased levels of engagement with course
- More likely to continue on their course
- More likely to be future-self oriented
- Increased end of stage attainment
- Experience greater sense of belonging
(Mentees)

Increased employability
(Mentors)

More likely to continue on course
(Mentees)

Impact

More likely to complete course

More likely to receive a good degree outcome

Assumptions
- 5. Mentor training is effective
- 4. Mentor recruitment is "healthy" across all courses
- 3. Recruited mentors are representative of year one cohorts
- 2. Course team buy-in is consistent across courses
- 1. 1:1 mentoring and group mentoring produce similar results

Change mechanisms
- 1. Mentors feel valued by university
- 4. PAL adapted to fit specific course learning contexts
- 2. Students increase help seeking behaviours
- 5. Tacit knowledge is transferred
- 3. Sessions enable mentors and mentees to connect via shared experience
- 6. Holistic development of student identity

Diagram key:
- influencing factor
- change mechanism link (dashed lines indicate further evidence required)
- change mechanism
- assumption

ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE UNDERPINNING NARRATIVE
VERSION V3 – April 2024
NAME Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)

WHY IS THE INTERVENTION BEING RUN?

PAL was first implemented at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in 2013 as a pilot scheme which ran across the university for first year students. Transitioning into and through the first year of university is a critical time for all students, but particularly those that come from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds. The peer mentoring scheme was introduced at UEA to benefit both the recipients (first year mentees) and deliverers of PAL (second year mentors). Interacting with mentors helps first years understand university processes and requirements as well as develop good study habits. Mentors and officers develop key skills that should aid in their future employability and career development. The mentoring scheme was designed and implemented to enrich the curriculum, reinforce learning and personalise the academic experience through either timetabled group mentoring or 1:1 mentoring based on student need. Since 2015, PAL has scaled and is currently funded through the UEA Access and Participation Plan (APP). PAL does not replace existing teaching or academic and pastoral support. Instead, it ensures that there are additional opportunities for students to learn from each other. The peer mentoring scheme is run by students for students.

PAL aims to support underrepresented students via student-led, active learning mentoring to support transition in the first year as well as longer term student outcomes such as continuation, completion, "good degree" outcomes, and progression. PAL supports students to process the significant amounts of information (both curricular and non-curricular) that students receive as part of induction and throughout their first year. Peer learning is key to this due to the shared experience between peer mentors (typically second and third year students) and mentees. Research from the pilot has shown that students of marginalised backgrounds have strongly benefited from the PAL scheme as it provides them a supportive tool to adapt and familiarise with a new academic and/or cultural environment.

WHO IS THE INTERVENTION FOR?

The initiative is designed to support first-year undergraduate (UG) students' successful transition university by matching them with second or third year student mentors on their course. The initiative is open to all first-year students. The intervention supports both academic transition and pastoral support via a trained mentor with specific module/course knowledge and the ability to signpost students to additional support services based on need.

PAL has one main beneficiary and two secondary beneficiaries. The main beneficiaries are UG first year students. However, mentors and course teams also benefit from PAL. Mentors receive dedicated training to support students which enhance their soft skills development. They engage in mentorship activities throughout the academic year which reinforces their subject-specific knowledge and increases their confidence.

PAL also supports course teams as co-curricular enrichment. It provides multiple modes of course engagement for students. It supports courses to deliver on several aspects of key metrics including the National Student Survey (NSS) particularly effective organisation and management as well as academic support. It also supports evidence generation for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which measures teaching excellence above defined quality standards.

WHAT IS THE INTERVENTION?

Most undergraduate courses at UEA run PAL. PAL is a complementary intervention to lecturers and other course support which provide one facet of transition support. PAL offers students access to peers if they perceive barriers to engagement with lecturers or other course staff.

Sessions: For group mentoring, PAL is structured as part of the timetable and mentors are invited to a set number of sessions in the academic year. 1:1 mentoring is scheduled for every three weeks. The timing and length of sessions vary by course.

Mentor training: Mentor training is run over six hours and focuses on the following topics:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Facilitation and running a mentoring session
- Transition and first-year mentee needs training, and
- PAL principles, confidentiality training, and understanding the boundaries of the mentor roles

WHO IS DELIVERING THE INTERVENTION?

Course teams: Course teams also support PAL through signposting and awareness raising.

PAL Tutor: The intervention is managed by a PAL tutor who oversees the operation of PAL.

PAL Mentors: PAL is delivered by second and third year students on a voluntary basis. PAL mentors undertake a six-hour training session prior to becoming mentors. Mentors learn about a variety of topics about effective mentoring including the importance of EDI as well as effective signposting.

HOW IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

Schools and courses make decisions about how to implement PAL that is fit for their course context. There are two main delivery modes: group mentoring and 1:1 mentoring. The PAL tutor and academic course team support the recruitment of PAL mentors both through generic communication but also through the identification of specific students as part of a development opportunity.

PAL is introduced as part of course induction. The PAL tutor and student mentors attend a scheduled session in the first week to raise awareness of the offer. The PAL tutor is responsible for academic buy-in, mentor training, mentor/mentee matching, timetabling for group PAL and monitoring PAL engagement in the academic year. For group mentoring, PAL is structured as part of the timetable and mentors are invited to a set number of sessions in the academic year. 1:1 mentoring is scheduled for every three weeks.

Group mentoring is timetabled as part of course curriculum. 1:1 mentoring is marketed to students and first years are matched once a mentee books a 1:1 meeting via MS Forms. Those students are then matched by the PAL tutor to an appropriate mentor.

WHERE IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

Group mentoring is a timetabled activity which uses university facilities. 1:1 mentoring requires mentor mentee matching by the PAL tutor. 1:1 sessions typically use University facilities but they are not formally organised at the course or institution level. Both activities are designed to be delivered in-person.

HOW MANY TIMES WILL THE INTERVENTION BE DELIVERED? OVER HOW LONG?

To support students to transition effectively, 1:1 and group mentoring is typically scheduled every three weeks over the entire academic year with variation at course level.

WILL THE INTERVENTION BE TAILORED?

PAL is student led and based on the bespoke needs of the group or individual mentee, this is determined on a course-by-course basis to ensure the mentoring programme best fits each courses' contexts and learners' needs. As such standardised materials or resources are not available to carry out a mentoring session. However, training is standardised for all mentors.

HOW WILL IMPLEMENTATION BE OPTIMISED?

PAL uses several strategies to enable effective implementation:

- Dedicated PAL link tutor
    - Central contact, key for coordinating and monitoring activity across the PAL scheme
- Course-level delivery decision-making
    - Group mentoring or 1:1 mentoring style
- Awareness raising during induction
- Mentor VLE access to support academic mentoring
    - Group-based mentors have access to first year module VLE to support students' academic needs
- Comprehensive mentor training

WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS / STAKEHOLDERS?

The key relationships for PAL are outlined in the diagram below:
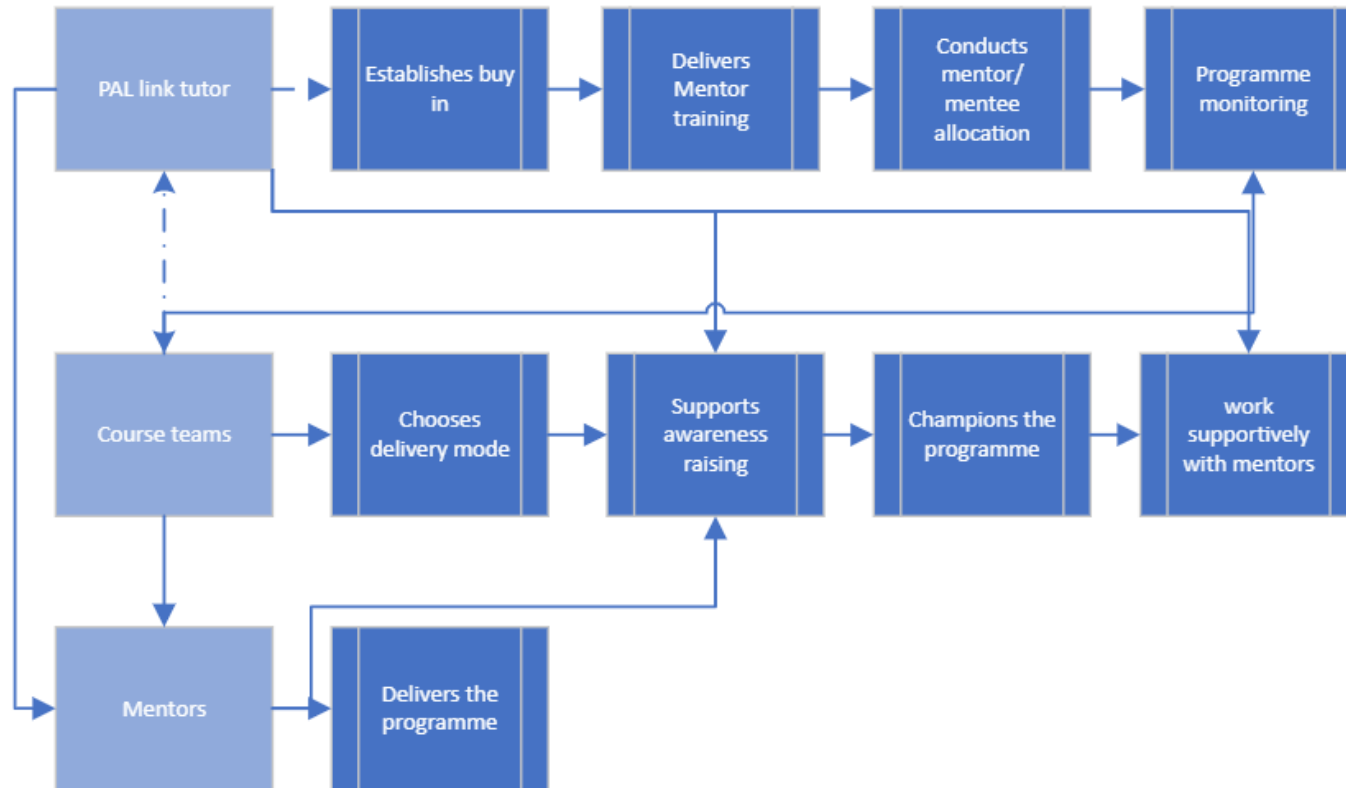
CHANGE MECHANISMS

Change mechanism 1

- *Mentors feel valued by the university*

By providing comprehensive, tailored training and dedicated support from the institution, **mentors feel valued by the university**, which in turn enables mentors to become more confident in their role. This empowers mentors to deliver 1:1 and group sessions successfully with mentees.

Change mechanism 2

- *Students increase help seeking behaviours*

Through awareness-raising efforts of the support mechanisms provided by the university and it's PAL mentoring scheme (both in induction and through mentoring sessions themselves), students are enabled to **increase their help-seeking behaviours**. Help seeking behaviour is, in this context, the act of actively searching for answers to questions, challenges and issues. Effective help seeking behaviour is theorised to support students transition effectively into their first year of study by: 1) being more confident about their course content, 2) feeling less isolated and 3) increasing self-belief and self-efficacy.

Change mechanism 3

- *Mentors and mentees connect or network based on shared experiences*

Peer mentoring uses second or third year mentors to provide mentoring to first year students. Through the delivery of group and 1:1 mentoring sessions, students are supported to meet people who have recently 'been where they have been.' Through this, **mentors and mentees are enabled to connect or network based on their shared experiences.** As a result they are a structured avenue of support and networking which students can access easily.

Change mechanism 4

- PAL can be adapted to specific school and learner contexts

PAL can be adapted to fit specific school and learning contexts. PAL can delivered through either 1:1 or group mentoring; Schools are given a choice between these mentoring models which 1) enables course buy-in and 2) allows them to make the best decision for students on their course.

Change mechanism 5

- Tacit knowledge is transferred through each session

Through mentoring sessions, second and third year students can provide first year students with formal academic knowledge and informal knowledge about the University. This **tacit knowledge is transferred through each session** and in turn enables mentees to 'get on' and settle in effectively in their first year, by increasing confidence about course content, self-belief and self-efficacy, whilst reducing their sense of isolation.

Change mechanism 6
- *Peer learning supports the holistic development of becoming a student.*

PAL is part of a broad suite of active learning pedagogies within their course which enable them to better acquire subject level knowledge and familiarisation of the university. **Peer learning supports the holistic development of student identity** through their growth of knowledge, behaviours and attributes in mentors. Peer learning particularly enables students to 1) be more confident about their course content, 2) feel less isolated and 3) increase their self-belief and self-efficacy. In turn, mentees experience: 1) increased course engagement, 2) greater sense of belonging, 3) a shift towards being more future-self oriented and 4) increased course continuation.

ASSUMPTIONS

Assumption 1

- *1:1 mentoring and group mentoring produce similar mentee outcomes.*

Courses can decide on appropriate delivery mode which implies that group mentoring and 1:1 mentoring produce similar outcomes.

Assumption 2

- *Buy-in is consistent across all courses.*

Course buy-in is key to programme implementation. The programme assumes that buy in is consistent but does not have formalised mechanisms in place to ensure this.

Assumption 3

- *Recruited mentors are representative of year one cohorts.*

The programme assumes that the mentors recruited provide adequate representation of course demographic profile without formalised mechanisms to ensure this.

Assumption 4

- *Mentor recruitment is healthy across all courses.*

Mentor recruitment may vary if one or more of the above assumptions articulated are not met.

Assumption 5

- *Training is effective.*

Mentor training has proven anecdotally and through pilot research to be effective in the past, as this has run from 2013 onwards.

WHAT IS THE EVALUATION AIM?

The aim of the evaluation is to establish evidence of the effectiveness of PAL on student engagement and outcomes. Research questions and hypotheses are detailed in the PAL trial protocol.

WHAT ARE THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS?

The evaluation design focuses on mentee student outcomes related to the end of the first year of study namely continuation, engagement and end of stage grade. The evaluation questions are reproduced below:

- What is the effect of PAL participation on student engagement on their course in the first year of study relative to students who do not engage with PAL?
- What is the effect of PAL on student continuation on their course at the end of the first year of study relative to students who do not engage with PAL?
- What is the effect of PAL participation on end of stage grades relative to those that do not engage with PAL?
- What is the effect of PAL on student completion of their course relative to those that do not engage with PAL?
- What is the effect of PAL on good degree awarding relative to those that do not engage with PAL?
- What effect does delivery mode have on student outcomes?
- Do underrepresented students who participate in PAL have better outcomes than underrepresented students who did not participate in PAL?

WHAT METHODOLOGY ARE YOU USING?

This study applied an ex-post quasi-experimental design to determine the relationship of PAL participation on the evaluation listed above. This study will use matched administrative data with localised PAL engagement data from the PAL team. PAL-engaged students will form a treatment group matched to a 'non-treatment' group using UEA undergraduate population data from 2016 to 2023.