

Academic Paper

The Meaning Making Journey of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leaders in HE

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Abstract

This study, set in a small UK Higher Education Institution, investigates how 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate students, who facilitate Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) group study sessions and provide pastoral mentoring support to lower year students, make sense of their journey in becoming PAL Leaders. In-depth interviews, including visual data collection, were conducted with six PAL Leaders, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to understand how they made meaning of their experiences. The subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data revealed three super-ordinate themes: social connectedness, self-development, and self-efficacy. The study highlights how student engagement with PAL schemes can increase a sense of belonging, enhance cognitive and communication skills, promote perspective transformation through critical reflection and stimulate personal growth. Gaining competence as a PAL Leader, fostered by encouragement and positive feedback, can also increase a student's self-belief in successfully navigating and overcoming challenges.

Keywords

peer assisted learning, peer mentoring, higher education, meaning making, lived experience

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to provide a deeper insight into the PAL Leaders' experiences of becoming an academic study mentor and how they make meaning of that journey. There has been much previous research around the perceived benefits of being a PAL Leader, including increased confidence, enhanced communication skills, and gaining of academic and employability skills. However, there has been less focus on the phenomenological experience of becoming and being a PAL Leader, and answering this question offers the valuable opportunity to discover the different perspectives and lived experiences of those students who take up this mentoring role, which will further add to the expanding body of research on peer mentoring in higher education. In addition, it could also have implications for best practice in relation to how institutions support PAL Leaders during the training and mentoring process, and subsequently, this may not only benefit the leaders themselves but also the students to whom they provide help and guidance.

The institution where this study takes place, provides access and opportunity to people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, most of whom do not possess formal qualifications to study at undergraduate degree level and thus helps them to define and pursue success through education. Therefore, this provides a suitable environment to seek further and deeper understanding of the student PAL Leaders' experiences. Many PAL Leaders have themselves, faced and overcome barriers in their lives, but despite this, are still highly motivated to provide guidance, act as role models and give something back to their local student community.

Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), also known as Supplemental Instruction (SI), originated at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in the early 1970s, and became embedded in UK educational institutions in the 1990s (Longfellow, May, Burke and Marks-Maran, 2008, West, Jenkins and Hill, 2017, Warren & Luebsen, 2017). PAL encourages a student-centred process to learning with the aim of increasing individual academic confidence (Ody & Carey, 2013). 'The PAL approach also operates at the confluence of collaborative learning, cooperative learning groups, and learning communities' (Arendale, 2014, p.1).

One of the core principles of PAL is that it is open to all students and is non-remedial therefore promoting inclusivity. Topping and Ehly (1998, p.4) assert that 'PAL is a vehicle for engineering positive contact between groups who would otherwise remain alienated – contact across the divides of age, gender, ethnic origin and social class.' In addition, as most PAL sessions are held on a weekly basis, usually at the same time, and are attached to a particular module or academic programme, thus 'there is the potential to productively view attendees and facilitators as a community of practice comprising of peer learners and PAL Leaders' (Adam, Skalicky and Brown, 2011, p.17). Being part of these communities can further increase students' sense of belonging; as Tinto (2017) highlights, students who see themselves as belonging to a group are more likely to have an enhanced sense of purpose and motivation, therefore becoming more involved with their peers in ways that further promote persistence.

There are several studies in the literature related to evaluating PAL Leader experiences and listing the many benefits they gain from their participation. For example, research undertaken by Young, Thompson, Sharp and Bosmans (2019) identified an increase in subject knowledge and self-efficacy, although they did not seek to measure academic achievement. Bandura (1993; 2000) states that people with high efficacy embrace difficult tasks as a challenge rather than a threat, which is reflected in the findings of McPhail, Despotovic and Fisher (2012) who reveal PAL Leaders' self-efficacy beliefs in their professional performance, engagement, and satisfaction within their roles as leaders, along with evidence of developing cognitive skills.

In relation to employability skills and practicing reflection, Laurs (2018, p.38) found that PAL Leaders developed 'marketable skills such as using initiative, openness to diversity, self-awareness, the ability to set goals and work both independently and with others.' The Laurs (2018) study also revealed that students saw the value of adding their acquired PAL skills and experience to their CVs and citing examples of practice at job interviews. An earlier study by Zacharopoulou, Giles and Condell (2015), asserts that the process of reflection is seen as important for PAL Leaders to recognise the benefits of employability skills development and to identify their own development needs. Indeed, without reflecting on their experiences, it would be more difficult for students to make sense of their journey as a PAL Leader and thus make decisions based on their understanding to inform their future plans and actions (Mezirow, 1990).

Meaning Making in Relation to the PAL Leader Journey

Mezirow (2000, p.1) claims that a 'defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience and to integrate it with what we know to avoid

the threat of chaos.' When students become PAL Leaders, it can be a disorientating experience as they are taking on a new role with new responsibilities. Therefore, they may make 'cultural and psychological assumptions which influence' how they make sense of this new experience (Mezirow, 1977, p.154).

The importance of promoting regular reflective practice as part of the PAL Leader experience is essential as we 'transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based' (Mezirow, 1997, p.7). This will help to develop deeper meaning making and effectively trigger transformative learning.

There are four recent studies which explore how PAL/SI Leaders make meaning of their experiences as academic student mentors. Firstly, using a narrative methodology with very experienced peer mentors who also provided academic support, Bunting and Williams (2017) present a series of rich and interesting stories which reveal insights into the mentors' transformative experiences and uncover five themes which include the meaningfulness of their everyday experiences and reflection in transformation.

The case study by Lozada and Johnson (2019) explores how Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leaders experienced perspective transformation whilst academically and pastorally mentoring lower year students. Using themes such as: 'connecting with others; engagement on campus; internal changes; and interpretation of the role, the study findings reveal that the students experienced a sense of internal change, and a reinterpretation of their role' as they transitioned from student to SI Leader (Lozada & Johnson, 2019, p.13). However, the study does not identify evidence of when this turning point was for the leaders, but it does present evidence of the value of self-examination and critical reflection.

In a transcendental phenomenological study investigating the unique and complex experiences of undergraduate SI Leaders, Eller (2016) reveals two significant findings stemming from the four themes of: importance of relationships; engagement of self or others; valuing teaching and learning and developing interpersonal skills for life learning. The first finding relates to the importance of relationships throughout the SI Leaders' journey, from seeking to become a leader to their persistence in their experiences whilst on the programme. However, some SI Leaders expressed disappointment with the lack of supportive relationships which made their experiences less rewarding. The second finding is the development of SI Leaders' intrapersonal skills and how, in their engagement with the programme, they are likely to enhance their existing skill sets or competencies as well as develop new ones.

Finally, the IPA study undertaken by Tamachi, Giles, Dornan and Hill (2018), evaluates both medical student attendees and PAL Leaders' lived experience in PAL sessions. This study uncovers some interesting themes such as safety and egalitarianism, along with a strong sense of camaraderie and purpose, with PAL Leaders being able to understand their students' 'wider sociocultural context which promotes social congruence' (Tamachi et al., 2018, p.5). The research into understanding the attendee and PAL Leader relationships in this study is both comprehensive and enlightening.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into higher year undergraduate students' lived experiences from being a student to becoming a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader. It aimed to investigate how they interpreted and made sense of this phenomenon, paying close attention to the words they used, and exploring the impact their experiences had on their student and personal lives. The design therefore adopted a qualitative research strategy, which allowed for the

identification of issues from the perspective of the student participants and provided the opportunity to understand the interpretations and meanings that they gave in relation to their journey (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) was chosen as the most appropriate approach as it is concerned with making sense of major life experiences ‘...in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience’ (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). This study thus assumed a phenomenological stance, was interpretivist in nature and therefore adopted an inductive approach, in that it builds themes that emerge from the words of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

The participants

The sample of participants (see Table 1) was selected purposively so that they could provide specific insight into the experience central to the study (Smith et al., 2009). The six participants are studying for different degrees and in higher years of study. The majority are female, and most are in their twenties, however, all are mature students who originate from the UK and EU countries and had been PAL Leaders for over 5 months. As is required for an IPA study, the sample was small and relatively homogenous.

Table 1: The PAL Leader Study Participants

Participant	Course & Year of Study	Gender	Age	Country of Origin
Giovanna	2 nd Yr. Law	Female	38	Romania
Belinda	3 rd Yr. Law	Female	23	England
Alice	3 rd Yr. Business Management	Female	26	Germany
Siobhan	3 rd Yr. Law	Female	24	Ireland
Lenny	2 nd Yr. Law	Male	27	Italy
Andrea	3 rd Yr. Business Management	Female	47	Romania

Data collection procedure

There were two data collection methods adopted for this study, via semi-structured interviews and via photo elicitation, therefore employing ‘methodological triangulation’ (Denzin, 2015) to explore the lived experiences of the participants, in an effort to ‘provide more holistic and balanced explanations of these experiences’ (Noble & Heale, 2019).

Participants were advised at the recruitment stage that the interviews would take place online, would be recorded, to allow for later transcription, and last approximately 45-90 minutes. All six interviews took place over a 3-week period and were conducted via Skype due to the Coronavirus pandemic, which prohibited face to face interviews. Each interview lasted between 40-70 minutes, slightly less than the recommended timescale proposed by Smith et al. (2009), however, this did not appear to inhibit the process as the interviews and photographs provided sufficient data for analysis. Using the pre-prepared interview schedule as a guide, rather than strictly adhering to it, allowed some ‘freedom to probe interesting areas that arose’ and ‘follow the interviewee’s interests and concerns’ (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.58).

Data analysis

Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed using online software, which was checked for security prior to usage. The interviews were, once again, viewed one by one, ensuring all the participants’ words were captured which included the noting of significant pauses and laughter (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This was the first immersion and interpretation of the data. Steps 1-6, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009) and illustrated in Figure 1 were then followed.

Figure 1: IPA Data Analysis Process, Adapted from Smith et al., 2009

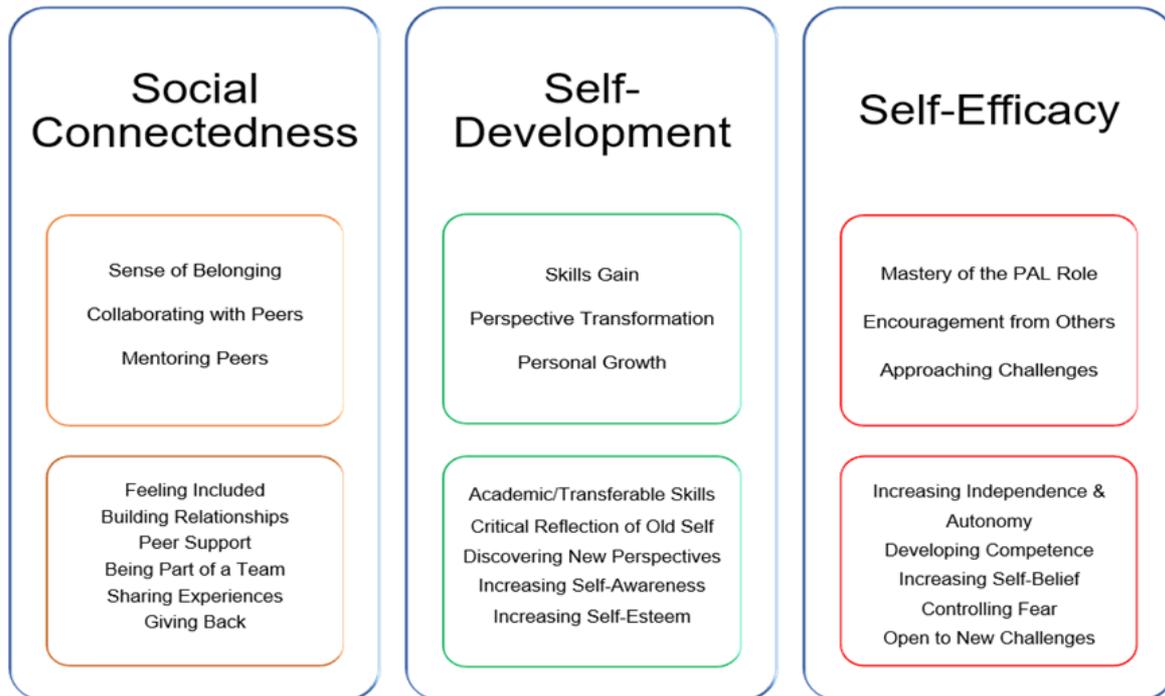


After completing Step 6, a full narrative account was produced, supported by quotes from the data, and these findings were discussed along with relevant literature to provide further interpretation.

Findings

As illustrated in Figure 2, the meaning making of the participants in relation to their journey from being a student to becoming a PAL Leader, through interpretation of the data, revealed three superordinate themes. The first theme is Social Connectedness whereby the participants shared their experiences of developing a sense of belonging and collaborating with and mentoring peers. The second theme is Self-Development which is concerned with the students' skills gain, perspective transformation and personal growth. The final theme is Self-Efficacy where the students revealed their thoughts and feelings on the challenges of mastering the PAL role, of receiving encouragement and positive feedback from others involved with the scheme, and also they shared their subsequent approach to dealing with challenges.

Figure 2: Meaning Making of the Student PAL Leader Journey Superordinate Themes



Social Connectedness

The participants shared their varied personal experiences in relation to settling into a new environment as students, as well their feelings of inclusion and developing a sense of social connection when attending PAL or becoming PAL Leaders. The PAL Leader role offers students the opportunity to both work and learn with their peers and the participants shared their insights on partnering with and feeling supported by their PAL partners, as well as having the opportunity to mentor lower year students with whom they could share their experiences and knowledge.

For Giovanna, coming to a new country, from a country where “We didn't know too much about others,” she was curious and excited about discovering new cultures and meeting new people at university. Being open to learning and open to new experiences was very important to her and seeing this quality in others enhanced her sense of connection with other students.

Moving to another country and city left Siobhan without a support network, which made her first year on the Foundation Course difficult.

Siobhan:

“I found it a bit difficult having moved to London on my own with no family or anything.”

However, in the first year of her undergraduate accelerated course she attended PAL as a participant and found a safe space where she felt accepted and included, which increased her self-confidence.

Siobhan:

“With things like PAL and the students who were running it they kind of made you feel like it was okay to be you. Yeah, it just really helped me kind of gain that confidence that I needed that hey, it's okay to ask these things or say these things.”

Alice had expectations of being among younger people and found it difficult to build relationships with the older students. She felt she had nothing in common with them which resulted in no sense

of belonging and leaving her feeling isolated. This sense of isolation dissipated somewhat in her second year, as being part of the PAL scheme and working with other students regularly, and getting to know them, increased her sense of feeling part of a group. The prospect of studying in a different academic system and at a higher level of study, was at first, overwhelming for Andrea which made her doubt herself, her abilities and that she belonged. Therefore, she decided to take it each day at a time and not put herself under too much pressure.

Andrea:

“Because I finished high school long time ago, and the different system, what I asked myself, oh my god, what I'm doing here, this is not for me. (Pause) I thought, if I'm crying in the beginning, how is going to be then, so I'll take it time by time...”

Belinda really valued the support she received when working with her PAL partner. Working closely with another student helped her to focus and prepare for sessions and allowed her the opportunity to switch from being supported to providing support.

Belinda:

“But I think the main thing is the support that you have [...] and having that little debrief or meeting your PAL Leader partner five minutes before, or even discussing what you're going to do two days before and having that preparation and knowing how the session is going to run, how you're going to do it. Who's gonna lead, who's gonna support [...] So yeah, you're supporting each other, which is amazing.”

Being part of a team made Andrea feel like she mattered, she felt empowered and that she was important. It gave her the opportunity to discover new ideas, new ways of thinking and have new experiences.

Giovanna's difficulties in learning new technology as a new student served as a motivation for her to want to help and mentor others. Her choice of words suggested that she wanted to use her experience to comfort new students and prevent them from feeling the discomfort that she had previously felt.

Giovanna:

“I start learning about the internet and about this technology more. Which made me, how to put it in words? Made me wanting to help other new students. So, I wanted to share the experiences I went through with others in order for them to feel more comfortable, to feel more welcomed.”

As Lenny had previously been supported by PAL as a first-year student, his main motivation was to give something back. It was important to him to be able to help inspire confidence in other students and to help them through their difficulties. For Alice, people sharing their problems and trusting her meant a lot to her. She could help them to look at their problems in different ways. She was discovering the influence she could have on others.

Self-Development

In practice, PAL schemes offer the opportunity for the enhancement of transferable skills and the participants gave examples of the ways in which they had individually developed their skills and what this meant for them. The participants were also encouraged to reflect on their personal development which revealed an awareness of their meaning perspectives and how they challenged these to promote perspective transformation and personal growth throughout their journeys of becoming PAL Leaders. Their descriptions sometimes referred to the images they had submitted to symbolise their PAL experiences.

Belinda's experience of developing strategies to deal with unexpected questions, being able to react quickly, and answer these questions coherently and accurately were very important for her, especially in preparation for future employment.

Belinda:

"So being able to think on the spot and continue talking just like now (laughs) and coming up with an answer that is coherent, is especially important. Erm something that they will understand. Yeah, I think that's incredibly important for jobs, interviews, career, anything."

Learning the skill of being able to explain something clearly and elicit the understanding of others was very satisfying and fulfilling for Siobhan, as she empathised with the students she was helping, having struggled herself with grasping academic content.

Giovanna critically reflected on the culture in which she was raised and on how this affected her influence on her own life and her ability to voice her opinions for fear of how this may negatively affect others. Becoming a student and PAL Leader helped her challenge these assumptions and gain the confidence and freedom to communicate her thoughts and feelings.

Giovanna:

"I was always relying on my mom, my ex-husband, because I got married when I was young, (pause) always I was doing what other people wanted, because I wasn't raised in a way to have my own opinion. Starting to study and becoming a PAL Leader, I've realised that I can have my own opinion without upsetting anyone. I can express my feelings freely without upsetting anyone."

Due to his social class, Lenny had felt inferior to the people he served in his job. His PAL Leader experience helped him to reflect on this assumption and develop the confidence to change this perception of himself and how others saw him. Andrea felt that her shyness had prevented her from taking up opportunities that would greatly benefit her. Her reflections were regretful in not engaging with PAL earlier but also hopeful, in that she felt like a different person who was now more open to new experiences and perspectives.

Andrea:

"It's another me, I'm more open to ideas, to try new things. I discovered that if you try new things you'll be surprised. I'm still shy in kind of way. I feel sorry I didn't try it before. I don't know. Long time ago. Why? I've been closed in a room and someone opened the door. Why I didn't try that door before because it's giving you another way and opportunities."

Alice chose an image of a flower to illustrate how becoming a PAL gave her the opportunity to put her first difficult year behind her. She really began to feel a sense of purpose in being a PAL Leader, which helped with her personal development, sense of self and increased her confidence.

Alice:

"What came to my head straight away was a flower or like a plant, you know? Because now after my first year of uni, I was like really close to quitting, then I became a PAL Leader and the second year was easier and I really felt I was growing [...] like a little plant or a little flower that just starts like growing or blooming, like you know, I think that really symbolizes it."

In submitting an image of vines growing up a staircase, Belinda felt that she had to open herself up to change and accept it as inevitable. The significance of the staircase in her image as a way of growing up and not down signified that PAL offered her the chance for personal growth. Her use of the metaphor of 'go towards the light' signifies her journey was illuminating, which could be related to her increasing self-awareness.

It is worth highlighting that four out of the six participants chose floral images or plants to symbolise their PAL Leader experience.

Self-Efficacy

To become a successful PAL Leader requires commitment to and application of learning, and the participants further revealed their experiences of navigating the challenges of the role and reflected on how receiving recognition of their capabilities and positive feedback were also important to them in taking on a new and unfamiliar role.

The urge to help people was very strong for Giovanna and she was conflicted between wanting to help the students and wanting to do exactly what she needed to do to be a good PAL Leader. It seems that she had to work hard to challenge and reflect on the way she originally knew of helping people, and in doing so, she discovered a new way to do this. For Belinda, learning to develop others by advancing their understanding, resourcefulness and academic skills meant encouraging their independence rather than fostering dependence, using her experience and knowledge to help enable lower year students.

Alice's initial expectations of the PAL Leader role changed through her experience and practice. She developed a sense of independence and responsibility in making her own decisions and planning her sessions with her PAL Leader partner. She gained confidence in trying out new things.

Alice:

"I had like a picture of what PAL was going to be and then it was completely different. And it became like, yeah, I felt like I was becoming more independent, because I was, you know. (PAL Leader partner name) and I were like making our own sessions. We did it differently in our own way."

Adjusting to the role as a facilitator and not teacher was a difficult process for Siobhan. However, in applying reflective practice and showing commitment in her preparation for each session, she managed to gain momentum and competence.

The praise and affirmation that Giovanna received from a student attendee on her effective communication skills and her ability to inspire others not only helped her confidence but increased her self-esteem and pride in self. The feeling of pride seemed unfamiliar to her, so this positive feedback held great personal importance. Initially, Alice was hesitant and doubtful that she would make a good PAL Leader. However, being identified as a good candidate for the role by her tutor and also receiving acknowledgement for her good work by the PAL Supervisor, positively influenced her belief in her own ability and increased her feelings of being trusted and respected.

Alice:

"I felt really honoured when my tutor asked me [...] I wasn't really sure if I was the right person for it. I felt also very honoured when the (PAL Supervisor) gave me such nice feedback after we became PAL Leaders and made me believe that I can do it."

Lenny also felt honoured and humbled that he had be put forward for the role by one of his tutors. His initial feelings were of elation and then a sense of responsibility and focus on doing a good job. He viewed becoming a PAL Leader as the beginning of a pathway for further personal development and opportunity.

Lenny:

"...apart from happiness and joy, it gives you a kind of responsibility, at least it did to me, to be more focused. I was like, okay, so now that I had this opportunity, how can I make it better? How can I develop from there?"

The first emotion for Andrea, in being recommended for the PAL Leader role, was one of surprise, as she was a quiet student who had kept a low profile. However, she thought that being encouraged to do things which were challenging for her and would increase her profile would be good for her, even though initially she did not see the qualities that her tutor saw in her.

Towards the end of the participant interviews the PAL Leaders also disclosed varied feelings on being part of the PAL Scheme and shared their individual approaches in dealing with challenges. Giovanna's PAL Leader experience helped her to deal with her fear in a positive way which led to her feeling more in control of her emotions. She has accepted fear as something she needs to confront and overcome when facing future challenges.

Giovanna:

"I'm a very anxious person, but I am able to deal easier now with my fears thanks to the PAL sessions, because if I know I'm I am scared of something I will push myself in doing that thing in order to deal easier with it [...] So that's one thing I've learned from PAL. Push yourself and go out from your comfort zone."

In using metaphorical 'doors' to describe different opportunities presented by the PAL Scheme, Belinda viewed each experience as chance to try something new, even if the challenge was difficult, as each one offered scope for self-discovery. Siobhan learned to control her negative thoughts and feelings particularly when dealing with the unexpected disappointment of receiving lower academic grades. As a result, she was able to view this situation as an opportunity to put in the extra effort needed to increase her academic performance with ultimate success. Lenny's image to symbolise his PAL experience was his PAL Leader certificate, which he used as motivation whenever he experienced low self-worth. He felt a huge achievement in becoming a PAL Leader which has fortified his ability to deal with setbacks and to show persistence in meeting challenges.

Finally, Andrea realised that in trying new experiences and taking on new challenges, such as being a PAL Leader, even if she failed, she would gain something from it, and if she succeeded, she would progress, which promoted an optimistic outlook.

Discussion and Conclusions

In sharing their experiences as first year undergraduate students, the participants revealed the challenges they faced as new EU students in the UK, which included cultural integration and adapting to a different academic system. For mature students, returning to education after a long period can induce academic anxiety and younger mature students who are facing fear of social failure can experience feelings of isolation and loneliness. Although these challenges are well represented in the research of Taylor and Ali (2017), Ecochard and Fotheringham (2017), Twigg-Flesner (2018) and Young et al., (2019), there is a lack of literature in relation to the experiences of mature students from the EU. However, it is also clear from this study that while multiple characteristics can present multiple challenges, it cannot be assumed that all students, with a particular set of characteristics, or from a particular group, experience these challenges in the same way, which is important in relation to informing future mentoring provision.

Involvement in the PAL scheme increased the participants' sense of belonging through increased academic and social engagement (Tinto, 2017). In discovering and building relationships through collaboration with their peers, the participants emphasised the importance of feeling supported, feeling part of a team, and developing an increased sense of responsibility to others. For example, Belinda stressed the importance of her supportive relationship with her PAL Leader partner, particularly in helping to plan content for the sessions, and being part of a team not only increased Andrea's self-esteem, but as an active member, she appreciated sharing and gaining knowledge

and understanding with her peers who also provided alternative perspectives (Adam et al., 2011).

Mentoring lower year students provided the participants with the opportunity to share their experiences and knowledge, inspire and develop others and become trusted guides, which they deeply valued. For example, Alice greatly valued her role as a trusted confidante for students, listening to and advising them when they needed help outside of the PAL sessions (Lozada & Johnson, 2019). For Lenny, the opportunity to help to increase confidence in his mentees was a way of giving back the support he had received from other PAL Leaders in his first undergraduate year, which is reflected by participants in the studies of Bunting and Williams (2017) and Lozada and Johnson (2019). Therefore, the participants' experiences emphasise the importance of encouraging students to engage in peer learning and with peer mentoring schemes. These findings also support existing research on the social benefits of such initiatives for university students.

Whilst volunteering as PAL Leaders, the participants' developed and enhanced several skills in relation to academic knowledge, cognitive skills and communication, which are well represented in the related literature reviewed and discussed in this study. Cognitive skills enhancements, as listed by (Topping & Ehly, 1998, p.18), in relation to 'active listening, problem identification and fluency and speed of response,' are reflected well in Belinda's experience of having to think and respond quickly and accurately to questions posed, in a way that others understood. While Siobhan learned to 'reconstruct and revise information' (Topping & Ehly, 1998, p.18), and empathically communicate it in a way that 'connected to her fellow students' level of understanding' (Stigmar, 2016, p.132). Developing these transferable skills increased the participants' self-confidence in their personal effectiveness as students and as PAL Leaders.

The value of encouraging self-reflection in PAL Leaders (Laurs, 2018, Lozada & Johnson, 2019) is borne out by the participants' responses relating to perspective transformation. For example, In Giovanna's case, there is the possibility that she had internalised the cultural expectations of being a daughter and young wife, as described by Mezirow (1977, 1990). In becoming a student and a PAL Leader, her realisation that she could speak up and share her opinions authentically, suggests a developing sense of autonomous self through critical reflection on old self and her meaning perspectives, and through discourse (Mezirow, 1977). Similarly, Andrea reflected on her old self, questioning her reluctance to engage with the PAL Scheme. Sharing her metaphor of previously being "closed in a room," may signify that she held self-limiting beliefs about her abilities, which affected her pre-conceptions, and led to her rejection of accessing the scheme. Andrea's transformation to "another me" indicates that she had critically reflected on her assumptions in relation to herself, and her frames of reference, and subsequently became more open to new experiences by engaging in communicative learning, which aligns with Mezirow's (1997) assertions in 'Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice.' The personal revelations of questioning and challenging cultural expectations and old self, through critical reflection and discourse and exploring others' perspectives in relation to one's own, do not conclusively prove that perspective transformation has taken place in both cases, rather, that the participants may be at different phases of their transformative journey.

It is also interesting that four of the participants in this study chose plants or flowers, usually associated with growth, to symbolise their journey in becoming a PAL Leader referring to their image to describe their meaning making of their personal growth. An example of this is Alice's description of her symbolic image of a little flower blooming and how her awareness of personal growth began when she became a PAL Leader in her second year, which may signify that she had developed her sense of self and no longer felt like an outsider. In describing her image of growing vines to illustrate her PAL experience, Belinda expressed an openness and a pragmatic approach of accepting the inevitability of personal growth and change in her journey. This brave and open outlook to self-development is similar to the participants' experiences of inner change in the Lozada and Johnson (2019) study. The participants' experiences of increased self-awareness, inner change, growing self-esteem and an openness to self-development reveal that in becoming PAL Leaders their journeys of personal growth are ones of emerging and of becoming.

In developing their competence as PAL Leaders, some participants shared their struggles in relation to managing emotions and mastering facilitation, whilst others promoted a self-reliant approach and exercised collective agency to create and innovate within their PAL sessions (Bandura, 1997, 2000). For example, Siobhan, experienced difficulty in not falling into the trap of teaching but through increased self-awareness and honing her preparation skills, she developed an efficacious approach in directing students to find their own answers by using the available academic resources. This is a key attribute of a successful PAL Leader, as described by West et al. (2017). Receiving positive feedback from student attendees and the PAL supervisor and the confidence shown in the participants by the nominating tutors, contributed to an increasing belief in their capabilities, despite some having had initial self-doubts of their suitability for the role. The feedback from the PAL Supervisor on her progress, underscored Alice's capabilities (Bandura, 1997) which increased her confidence in executing her duties reliably and successfully. However, prior to this, Alice had doubted her efficacy as a future PAL Leader despite being encouraged to apply for the role by her tutor. Andrea also had similar initial doubts about her tutor's faith in her to perform the role effectively, questioning why she was viewed as a suitable candidate and dwelling on her own perceived weaknesses (Bandura, 1997). However, following her experiences on the scheme, she was very happy that she had accepted the challenge.

The participants' increased self-efficacy as PAL Leaders was reflected in their overall approach to meeting challenges, which reveal increased motivation, perseverance, persistence and optimism in negotiating psychological barriers and overcoming setbacks to subsequently achieve their goals. Giovanna's experience of being a PAL Leader helped her to exercise control over her feelings of fear and anxiety when dealing with challenging situations which also increased her motivation, as she revealed, "Push yourself and go out from your comfort zone," which echoes the sentiments of participants in the Laurs (2018) study and the West et al. (2017) article. The pride and sense of achievement felt by Lenny whenever he looked at his PAL Leader certificate served as a source of motivation and entrenched a determination to persist even if it took time for him to achieve his goals. Being a PAL Leader had helped Andrea to view her failures and successes as opportunities for personal development and advancement, which contributed to her optimistic approach to future challenges.

Further Research and Implications for Practice

The discussion of the findings in this study has highlighted a shortage of literature relating to mature students from EU countries and their transition into UK higher education. Therefore, further research is needed into the experiences of EU mature students studying in the UK and the difficulties they encounter as first year students, which would further inform the design of peer mentoring provision to support and promote a sense of belonging.

This study adds to the expanding body of research on peer mentoring in higher education. In providing a deeper understanding of how students make meaning of their journey from being a student to becoming a PAL Leader, the conclusions reached have further implications for best practice in Peer Assisted Learning in Higher Education. The varied challenges that the students faced in their first year at university provide important insights into the experiences of mature and EU students. The effectiveness of the PAL scheme in promoting a sense of belonging in the students provides further evidence of the social benefits of peer collaboration and peer support and the inclusion of PAL Leaders at student induction events would further promote first year engagement with such schemes.

The many gains shared by the PAL Leaders in relation to the acquisition of transferable skills and the importance of encouraging their reflective practice to foster perspective transformation and stimulate personal growth, illustrate how PAL schemes can develop students both professionally

and personally and setting aside space and time for reflective practice would provide students with further opportunities to reflect on their personal learning. Developing competence in the PAL Leader role can present emotional challenges for some students, hence the importance of providing them with encouragement and positive feedback, which can help to increase their self-confidence and self-efficacy. The introduction of one to one or group coaching at the early stages of their PAL Leader journey would provide timely support and encouragement whilst they are settling into their new role.

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