InfPALS Report 2014/15 (Year 1)
A. M. Alcorn (InfPALS Senior Leader)
A.J. Storkey (Student Support Coordinator)

Teaching Committee Issues (AJS)

The leadership of InfPALS is demanding and it is hard to find a suitable leader. Last year we were very fortunate to have Alyssa as the InfPALS senior leader. Alyssa was extremely well qualified for the job and very capable. She handled the many issues that turned up very well. There were four sources of challenge that turned up, difficulties and uncertainties of student leaders in facilitating, planning and leading the sessions, handling first year student expectations, managing the expectations of others in the University and EUSA, and dealing with organisational uncertainties.

The InfPALS Senior leader met with me for an hour each week, which often resulted in additional meetings or other outcomes that had to be handled. There was a time urgency to many of the issues – if not dealt with quickly things would potentially get problematic. Having a highly organised senior leader ensured that InfPALS worked. Alyssa did InfPALS session observations for all InfPALS groups which turned out to be vital. EUSA also wanted significant feedback from us about the course and meeting attendance.

The InfPALS senior leader is a vital post. Alyssa spent a total of 50 hours on the job as senior leader. Not much of that was related to the fact that this was the first year this ran. I envisage the demands next year to be equivalent. Given it is unlikely (though possible) that we would get someone as capable as Alyssa for future student leadership posts, I anticipate that probably more hours are needed, and would like agreement in principle to an InfPALS senior leader post of at least 60 hours. As there are also training demands on top of that (training of the Senior leader and the involvement of the senior leader in the training of InfPALS leaders), it may be that 70 hours is more realistic. If the second leader observations are put in place, this increases yet further. It is important that the senior leader post is employed by Informatics. However this also makes it more of a challenging time commitment for a PhD student.

This reflects the real costs involved in having formal peer support provision in the school, on top of the >50 hours of my time that were involved in setting it up, attending meetings and managing it too. Given these real time costs, it is worth reflecting on the fact that Maths has a specific full time academically qualified Student Learning Advisor. This has been a significant boon to the student experience in maths across the board, and I think TC should reflect on the value of such a post.

In the first year InfPALS was primarily managed outwith the usual ITO structures (we did registration and group management via eventbrite), and student leader recruitment was done and handled directly by me. Student training was done by EUSA, and by me. The ITO was very helpful in handling student leader queries, provision of printing resources and other resources for student leaders, and in booking rooms. It would be helpful to formalise these procedures for next year's
student leaders and InfPALS groups, and plan the general administration now we know what is needed. It would also be helpful to work through the recommendations e.g. regarding form standardization, and provision of those.

The student leaders expressed uncertainty in the value of the long EUSA training days. They felt it poorly fit with an Informatics degree, and was more targeted at arts students. Though there may be reason to change the use of EUSA training in the future, I plan to continue with it next year.

There is a room issue for PALS post-decant. We are currently attempting to get a joint room for Maths and Informatics PALS groups. If that falls through there will be a room issue.

We had some engagement with MathPALS leaders last year. That proved valuable and we intend more engagement next year.
InfPALS programme report for 2014
(Year 1)

A. M. Alcorn, InfPALS senior leader
aalcorn@ed.ac.uk

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Report contents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme overview, 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>InfPALS session format and content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current programme strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas for improvement, and recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested addition to InfPALS for 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Programme overview, 2014

- 11 leaders (5 groups weekly), most second year students but with a few third and fourth years. Each leader was part of only one group.
- Ran one 50-minute session daily from September 29th to November 28th in Maths PALS room in Appleton Tower.
- PALS leaders identified a need for, and then organised two extra exam sessions, after the end of teaching (attended by 26 students total).
- Debrief meeting with senior leader were held every week until November, then bi-weekly. Debriefs between senior leader and responsible staff member also held approximately weekly.
- Session observations (conducted by the senior leader) occurred for all groups approximately mid-semester, followed by a discussion with the observed leaders and their receipt of a written session account and action points.
- Estimated that 55 different first-year students attended PALS, about 6/session on average (was higher earlier in the semester and tapered off near the end). This figure does not include the exam sessions.
- There were approximately 240 first-year Informatics students this year, but PALS places were not advertised for all of them (as this is the first year of the programme). Approximately 70 places were initially advertised, and more added later.
- Students mostly attended the same groups, but some switched and some new students joined late in the semester. This roughly balanced out the students who chose to stop attending.
InfPALS session format and content

Responsibility for sessions: After session 1, sessions were not centrally planned. Leader pairs were fairly autonomous. The degree of planning varied from detailed and carefully time-tabled with nice print-outs, to meeting 20 minutes beforehand. Each group did what worked for them.

Icebreakers: All groups did this in week 1 and most in week 2, and then stopped. Leaders seemed to think these were helpful; unclear what students thought. One group continued doing icebreakers every week, which student feedback suggests was not a good use of time. As new students drifted in throughout the semester, leaders were generally good about making introductions.

Addressing general student questions, PALS as a space to “ask anything”: Groups that tried to do this a few, isolated times during the semester were not very successful. It was awkward overall, and seemed to make both students and leaders embarrassed. The one group that did this well had “question time” at the start of the session, every session (see observation notes for Monday group). They seemed to succeed because they made it part of the routine from the beginning. It was not a special event, just what happens at PALS, as also quite a good warm-up and lead-in to the main session. Questions and help-seeking stop being embarrassing when they are normalised.

Student input to PALS topics: While the original intention was for leaders to solicit their group's input ahead of time re: session topics (which leaders would then prepare for), this generally did not work. Students e-mailing leaders about PALS or responding to leaders' e-mails was fairly rare. In some cases, students present at one session did make requests for the next session. However, overall the content was more leader-driven, often calling on their own experience of what was particularly difficult in the first year courses and what students might most need later on.

Relation of PALS to course content: PALS content was linked almost exclusively to two compulsory first-year Informatics courses (Computational Logic and Functional Programming). Leaders frequently used past paper material, past tutorials, as well as revisiting content and examples in the lectures. More specifically, topics tended to be addressed in the following way:

- Some groups fell into alternating between courses each week.
- Sometimes groups switched topics partway through a session (though this ran into problems with time-keeping and transitioning)
- Other groups sometimes split up during a session, with a leader and sub-group working on each course (less common).

“General academic skills” were not really addressed/identified in a topic in themselves, though many skills from these courses (e.g. doing programming, justifying one of many solutions, using course resources) are general Informatics skills.

Processing and summary activities: Groups improved on this over the semester, but this was a weak point and needs to be more fully and concretely addressed in training. Groups often ran out of time (time-keeping was a major issue!). When groups attempted this, the summary and processing was too leader-led. Overall, there was lack of clarity over what this meant in practice and how to do it. Leaders did not know what to say, and in some cases themselves were weak on these types of skills.

Session reporting: Each leader pair completed a written session report about what they did, and identifying possible issues for discussion in the debrief. While almost all groups did this regularly, often reports were so vague as to be unhelpful (e.g. writing “computational logic” as topic, “past papers” as activity, and “ran out of time” as issue). This is likely because (especially at the beginning), leaders lacked a sense of what would be meaningful to report, and language in which to report it. This could be better supported by more structured forms and example reports.
Current programme strengths

- High level of commitment from leaders. Most notable was their including willingness to engage with the session observation process and (sometimes critical) feedback, and their decision to offer extra PALS exam prep sessions after the end of teaching. While reporting fell off near the end of the semester, they remained committed where it counted-- in person, at sessions.
- Opportunity for leaders' personal growth and skill development. Leaders engaged with reflection, were hungry for discussion and feedback, and many of them demonstrated that their understanding of learning and peer-support issues matured notably over the semester. They were also better able to articulate this understanding and critically discuss their own performance by the end of the semester.
- Many students attended PALS consistently throughout the semester, and some new students joined as they heard about PALS.
- Upon leaders' reflection and student comments, PALS attendees improved many interpersonal skills such as working in groups, helping others, presenting their work, and meeting classmates.
- While hard to measure, both students and leaders believed that there were academic benefits to PALS in relation to the compulsory courses.
- The current frequency and format of debrief meetings appeared successful at addressing the most pressing shared issues across the programme, and helping leaders to improve their practices. No particular need to change this.
- Overall, leaders' choice of content and activities was successful and appropriate, and offers a good foundation on which to build in subsequent years.

Areas for improvement, and recommendations

1. **Labelling and presenting the PALS programme to Informatics students**: The current explanation of what PALS is was not appropriate or sufficient to communicate what it is, what it is not, and how it fits into the overall picture of Informatics teaching and learning. Even at the end of the semester, some attendees were still frustrated that the leaders were not tutoring, and/or had strong expectations that the leaders should be doing more leading.

   1.1. **Recommendation: Re-name the PALS leaders.** Manage expectations from the start by giving the “leaders” a name that reflects the desired role. It's not surprising that students expect to be subordinate and that “leaders” will tell them what to do! I suggest “group organiser” “PALS organiser” or “group facilitators”.

   1.2. **Recommendation: Re-write the PALS description.** Have a new, concise description of the PALS programme that stresses the peer learning aspect, with the PALS facilitators (or whatever) as more senior peers that help students to organise and work together effectively but are not tutors. It needs to emphasises students working together and answering each other’s questions. The existing description on the Informatics web page does this to some extent but was not enough, perhaps because students don’t know what “facilitation” actually means.

   1.3. **Recommendation: Send a consistent message across the department.** Talk to the first-year lecturers, tutors, societies, and InfBase staff about what PALS is and is not, and how it may fit with what they do. Make them aware that students can join PALS even late in the term, and it may be a good step for those who are struggling. Make sure PALS leaders are also aware of courses of actions for students who are persistently struggling-- for example, could they/should they suggest that student talk to their personal tutor?
2. **Training needs to be more concrete and more relevant:** Feedback from student leaders was that the EUSA training was, by and large, not helpful in terms of concrete skills and that they left with little idea of “what to do when you are up there in front of people” during a session. Leaders reported feeling very much at sea when they started sessions, and still not completely clear on what PALS and its activities were supposed to “be like” and thus what their role really was. While they (overall) did an admirable job in choosing appropriate content and activities, this was completely due to their own initiative, and not because they were ready-to-go after training. I think this was very stressful for some of them. Having a mix of experienced and new PALS leaders in 2015 will help with this issue a great deal, but I strongly believe that this will not be enough, and also puts an unfairly high burden on the experienced leaders.

2.1. **Recommendation:** Make sure department-specific training discusses example informatics-relevant activities (e.g. some of those used this year), and how to adapt EUSA suggestions for Informatics.

2.2. **Recommendation:** Run one or more mock PALS sessions, with leaders taking turns to have different roles. Current leaders said that being able to practice facilitating ahead of time would be very helpful-- something like running a short mock session.

3. **Re-focus leader training on idea of PALS as being about “tools, not tutoring”:** Conveying that PALS sessions should help students progress toward greater independence was a light bulb moment, for those leaders who got it, and is crucial in fostering shift from tutoring behaviours to facilitating behaviours. I like “tools not tutoring” as a catchphrase for this general idea.

3.1. **Recommendation:** The training should discourage a “completion emphasis” at sessions. It's more important to do only one problem, but students have an idea how to work on the others, than to do all the problems with intensive support.

3.2. **Recommendation:** This is the “teaching a man to fish, not giving a man a fish” idea-- most of them should have heard that one before, try it as an entry point for discussion!

3.3. **Recommendation:** In training and or debriefs, identify specific types of actions that are about tutoring, and those that require students to use their own skills. This was something that students did not appear to grasp concretely from EUSA training.

4. **Supporting PALS leaders as “chairpersons” and organisers:** Leaders feeling unsure or uncomfortable about chairperson-type activity was actually a big impediment to effective sessions. They weren't sure whether it was “allowed” or “polite” or to do things like saying it really is time to move on, firmly discouraging talk that may intimidate other students, or cherry-picking students into working groups that the leaders think will be effective or harmonious.

4.1. **Recommendation:** expressly discuss the “chairperson” part of PALS leadership. Ask leaders to think of themselves as running a meeting or working group, and making a valuable contribution by, for example, time-keeping and making sure they get to both topics they have promised to address that day, or acting decisively to make PALS a “safe space”.

4.2. **Recommendation:** plan and practice the chairperson aspects in training or debriefs. For example, write short example “scripts” for transitioning between activities, or asking students to form certain groups. Try them out. Ask students to attend to this aspect of sessions and comment on it in their reports.

5. **Explicitly discuss help-seeking as a learnable, practice-able, and crucial skill.** Leaders could readily identify question-asking and learning from questions as “take-home benefits”
of PALS, but it would be of more value to overtly discuss this with students, throughout the semester. Let's actually say to students that asking for help can be hard and intimidating, so that is why we are practicing at PALS. How do you know what you need? Where do you start? Let's break it down and do it together.

6. **Make the session reporting forms more structured.** Often reports were so vague as to be unhelpful (e.g. writing “computational logic” as topic, “past papers” as activity, and “ran out of time” as issue). This is likely because (especially at the beginning), leaders lacked a sense of what would be meaningful to report, and language in which to report it.

   6.1. **Recommendation:** Giving a more structured form for reporting might elicit more specific information, combined with doing very short pieces of prompted, reflective writing *during* the debrief meetings (otherwise it will not get done).

   6.2. **Recommendation:** Give out an example of a “good” report in order to be clearer about the desired level of detail.

7. **Spell out InfPALS leader and student policies that were left as “common sense” this year**, such as cover for leader absences, leader meeting attendance, late arrival to sessions, who to contact [at Informatics] with what issues... etc.

**Suggested addition to InfPALS for 2015**

**Senior leader office hour for first few weeks of semester:** Early on, leaders wanted to talk to me before or after the meeting about their planned session activities and other specific issues we did not have time to address as a whole group. I recommend that we schedule this in officially-- it’s a safety net, especially for the new leaders who may want to ask “is this the sort of thing I should be doing?”.

**Implement leader-to-leader session observation in the second half of the semester.** Students wanted more feedback on whether or not they were improving on the issues identified in their session observations, and were disappointed that there was not an opportunity to get it. I suggest that we implement peer observation, after the senior leader does the initial session observations and gives feedback for all groups. The general idea would be that a leader from a different session observes one session in a different group. S/he can either give general feedback, or feedback on how those leaders did on specific issues identified in the initial observation (e.g. re-directing questions back to the group, giving clear activity instructions, etc.).

**Encourage leaders’ goal-setting for each session and provide a structure to do this.** Encourage pairs of leaders to set goals and monitor each other during sessions, then check in and have a mini-debrief afterwards. For example, specific session goals might be:

- Person X will keep track of time, and stop the group with enough time for summary at the end
- Person Y will wait when a student asks a question, instead of speaking immediately
- Person Z will remember to check in with the students who aren't speaking, and try to draw them into the group interaction more

I suggest that the leaders report on their goals and their progress as a part of the session reporting. I think that if leaders actually do this, it may really help with some of the “chairperson” issues, and help leaders make incremental but real progress on use of facilitation and making the group more student-led. Debrief meetings have very limited time to address these key issues, but will be able to accomplish more if students are seriously beginning the reflective work on their own, and discussing with each other throughout the week.