The Learning Assistant scheme at the University of Liverpool

Context

• *Student voice:* The scheme was motivated not only by staffing pressures but also by a desire to utilise undergraduate students' unique insights into learning, helping identify where new students struggle and how support can be made more effective. PhD students continue to play a vital role in supporting teaching at the University of Liverpool, particularly in large undergraduate modules. As the number of PhD students available to support teaching naturally varies with funding and recruitment cycles, we explored additional ways of supporting learning and engagement.

• *Response:* In response, I introduced the Learning Assistant (LA) scheme, a peer-support model where high-performing undergraduates—particularly those who had completed relevant modules—support teaching activities alongside teaching staff. I now manage the scheme, building on earlier work with Dr Subhrajyoti Saha.

• *Modules supported:* LAs currently support Year 1 *Numbers, Groups, and Code*, *Research & Study Skills*, *Intro to Probability and Stats*, and *Mathematical IT Skills*. They also support Year 2 modules, *Financial Mathematics*, and *Probability & Stats*.

Benefits

• *Proactive approach:* LAs are eager to circulate and check in with all students, not only those seeking help, using prompts like 'where are you up to?' to uncover difficulties early and encourage participation from students who may be less confident engaging with staff.

• *Facilitating problem-solving:* rather than giving answers, LAs effectively support groups by offering hints, clarification, and addressing misconceptions, helping students develop independent problem-solving skills rather than providing solutions directly.

• *Relatable, experience-based support:* Having recently completed the module enables LAs to provide insights into problem-solving approaches, effective study strategies, and reassurance about challenging topics in a way that is accessible and credible to current students.

Putting it into practice



• *Set-up:* LAs are undergraduate students who have previously completed Year 1 or Year 2 modules and are appointed as casual workers, based on academic performance, to support teaching activities.

• *Pilot:* The scheme was initially trialled in a Year 1 mathematical coding module delivered through PC workshops with around 180 students. Early cohorts struggled with MATLAB and Maple, and feedback from the Module Coordinator highlighted that LAs were able to relate to students effectively, offering reassurance that it is possible to learn coding from scratch.

• *Growth:* Over the past three years, the scheme has expanded beyond its initial coding module to support a wider range of Year 1 and Year 2 mathematics modules. Learning Assistants now contribute to PC workshops, problem-solving classes, tutorials and supported study sessions, reaching around 250–300 Year 1 students and 300–350 Year 2 students annually.

Challenges

• *Experience:* LAs often have little or no prior experience of supporting learning and therefore require training, supervision, and mentoring as they develop in the role.

• *Availability:* LAs have less flexible schedules than postgraduate students, and their availability to support Module Coordinators is often constrained by their own study commitments.

• *Sustainability:* The LA scheme relies on ongoing institutional funding and support to ensure LAs are appropriately paid for their contributions.

Impact

• *Improving conceptual understanding through relatable explanations:* LAs regularly help students move from confusion to understanding by identifying misconceptions and explaining concepts in alternative ways. Reflecting on their experiences, LAs frequently describe moments where a small intervention transformed a group's progress. One recalled working with students who were struggling with equivalence relations; they "broke the concept down into simpler, more applicable examples", after which the group "finished the worksheet ... and got them all right". In statistics, another LA described helping a student who was lost with pdfs and cdfs by starting with what they did understand and "explained the gaps in their knowledge until they had a good understanding".

• *Normalising challenges and building confidence:* Students often express relief when LAs share their own academic journeys. One LA supporting a coding module noted that "telling students that I was in the same position ... showed them that it was possible for them to do it too", helping reduce anxiety around programming. Similarly, in a probability module, an LA reassured a worried group by discussing their own experience of unseen exam questions; the students were "relieved and reassured" and continued to seek advice afterwards.

• *Encouraging collaboration and independent learning:* LAs help students develop confidence in discussing ideas with their peers, tackling unfamiliar problems, & seeking support when needed. In a PC lab, one LA described giving a small hint that enabled a student to solve a problem and then "begin explaining to the group", shifting the whole table into collaborative mode. Others emphasised the value of signposting: one LA noted that after directing students to PAL, they later saw them "engaging with PAL", encouraging students to develop help-seeking habits.

• *Scale of the Learning Assistant scheme:*

Academic Year	No. of modules	No. of LA roles
2023–24	1	2
2024–25	4	8
2025–26	7	20
2026–27	8	26

Advice to others



• *Adding value:* The LA scheme provides undergraduate students with valuable professional experience while enhancing teaching and student engagement; having completed the modules themselves, LAs are approachable and able to facilitate discussion in ways that differ to PhD students and staff.

• *Support and community:* Being an LA for the first time can be daunting, so opportunities to connect with other LAs through group chats or occasional meetings help build confidence and a sense of community among the community of LAs.

• *Structure and guidance:* The scheme requires mutual understanding between LAs and Module Coordinators. Clear expectations should be provided in advance, with regular de-briefs to ensure LAs feel supported, can raise questions, receive feedback, and remain clear about their responsibilities.

• *Recruitment and timing:* Plan recruitment early, taking account of undergraduate students' timetables and availability. Confirming their schedules before allocating roles helps ensure LAs can attend the sessions where they are needed, alongside their own studies. This coordination takes time but it is worth it.

Additional resources

If you would like to suggest your own spotlight, then please contact Dr Holly Barker and Dr Simon Fairfax. Further resources are available on the Math PAL-PASS network website

`https://maths-pal-pass-network.org/`.

Use this link to find out more about the Maths PAL-PASS network and access resources shared by colleagues.

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