



Born in the USA – Exploring the PLTL Model in the UK Higher Education

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Born in the USA – Exploring the PLTL Model in the UK Higher Education

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Abstract

In September 2021, Queen Mary University of London piloted Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) for the first time. PLTL workshops were introduced into three independent modules with the purpose to identify any challenges we may face and to establish a set of recommendations for a scaled up PLTL programme at QMUL. In 2019, QMUL launched the 2030 strategy. Our mission is to be the most inclusive university of its kind, anywhere by 2030. PLTL directly sits under the strategic pillar for student engagement but indirectly impacts a wide range of QMUL's strategic aims. Our findings from the initial pilot suggest the workshops are most effective if they are compulsory, assessed, held regularly, and assigned to students.

Keywords: United Kingdom, PLTL Pilot, Student Engagement, Learning Community, Sense of Belonging, Attainment Gap

Introduction

In the 2021/22 academic year, Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) introduced Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) into parts of the undergraduate curriculum for the first time. Being one of the first non-US universities to incorporate PLTL, while staying true to the six critical components identified by Gosser et al. (2001), we initially ran scaled down pilots. In the UK, PLTL has a unique set of challenges as the academic model is different. The design of the pilot workshops was aimed to explore and address these challenges. This reflective essay will discuss why QMUL is interested in the PLTL model, the challenges to adapt PLTL in the context of UK Higher Education (HE), how we designed the pilots, some initial thoughts and, finally, our plans going forward. For the benefit of our international readers, we have included a glossary of terms commonly used in UK HE.



Figure 1. The five QMUL campuses across London

Why is QMUL interested in PLTL?

QMUL is the only campus-based university in London (Figure 1). Located in the heart of East London, QMUL has one of the most diverse student populations in the country with 76.9% of our undergraduate students identifying as Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) in 2021/22 (Figure 2). In contrast only ~30% of our academic staff identify as BAME. This mismatch in student/staff profile and lack of visible representation and role models who “look like” our students may affect their sense of belonging and, by extension, their motivation and

engagement with university activities (Dreyfuss, Liou-Mark, & Gafney, 2013, pp. 4, 7; Wilson & Varma-Nelson, 2016). Furthermore, like many universities around the world, QMUL is working towards closing attainment/awarding gaps between students from different ethnic backgrounds. When comparing degree classifications by ethnicity, QMUL is closing the gap between BAME and white students for “Good Honours” (defined by the UK Government as a First or Upper Second Class Honours) which is currently at 3%. However, there is a widening of the gap for First Class Honours (increased to 9% in 2020/21), especially in recent years which PLTL may help with (Snyder et al., 2016). Finally, we are concerned with students who are “not eligible to progress” (NETP) into their next year of studies without resitting exams or taking interruptions of studies which PLTL has shown to help by improving student outcomes (Wilson & Varma-Nelson, 2016). The introduction of PLTL in various institutions has shown to persist in other parts of their university experience (Eberlein, 2004) and creates a sense of community which support students throughout their university experience (Dreyfuss et al., 2013, p. 7).

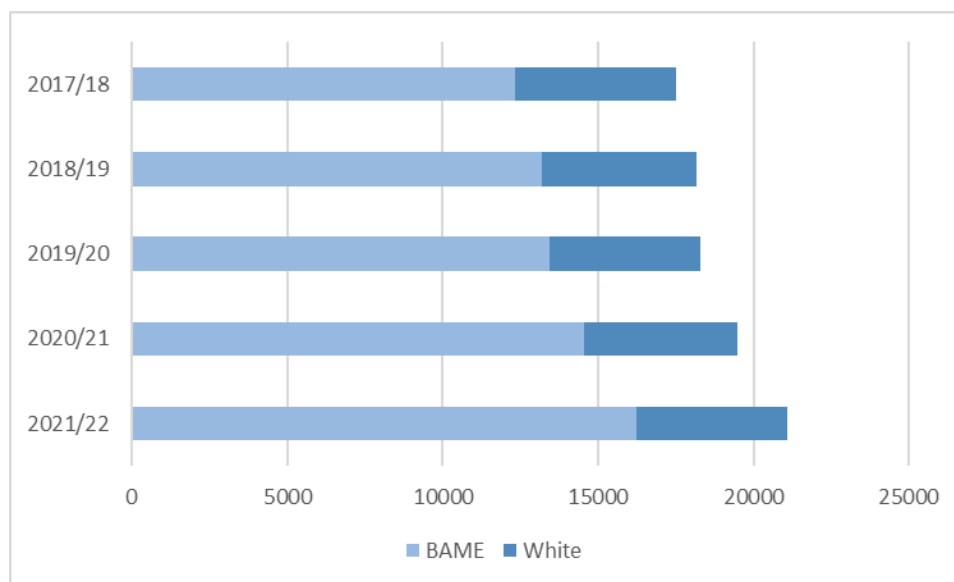


Figure 2. Demographic data of QMUL students over the past 5 years

In 2018, a delegation from QMUL visited Florida International University (FIU) to observe PLTL in action and learn lessons for implementation in London. Our interest in PLTL stemmed from its success in the USA in enhancing student engagement and improving outcomes (Wilson & Varma-Nelson, 2016; Gosser, Kampmeier, & Varma-Nelson, 2010; Woodward, Weiner, & Gosser, 1993) including that for the Peer Leaders

(Alberte et al., 2013b). With the FIU student profile having several commonalities with QMUL, the team sought to gather insights as to why PLTL had been successful and how their model (Alberte et al., 2013a) could be adapted for UK HE.

The biggest challenges for QMUL at that time were (1) financial support for the programme and (2) adequate space/capacity within timetabling. While these remain an issue, the increased use of remote/online study during the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique opportunity with less pressure on study spaces. Furthermore, one of the six critical components of PLTL is institutional support. In May 2019, QMUL launched the 2030 Strategy with an aim to be “the most inclusive university of its kind, anywhere.” There are four strategic pillars that underpin this goal including “Excellence in Student Engagement,” and our PLTL pilot was launched under this strategic pillar.

Challenges and Considerations

In common with many other UK universities, QMUL has two 12-week teaching semesters: Semester A from September to December and Semester B from January to April.

Unlike the carousel model for teaching in the USA, modules in the UK are only taught once per academic year, i.e., modules taught in Semester A are not repeated in Semester B. This impacts how we plan the PLTL model as it significantly reduces the pool of Peer Leaders available. Unlike the USA where students may be peer leading while being a semester ahead, in the UK model, Peer Leaders must be recruited from a senior academic cohort.

Most undergraduate degree programmes in the UK are taught across a 3-year period which is shorter than in the USA model. This gives Peer Leaders less time to develop in their new role. Furthermore, as mentioned above, for any given module, a Peer Leader can only peer lead once per academic year. This gives them far less practice to feel confident in their peer leading abilities and less time to familiarise themselves with the content compared to their USA counterparts.

An additional set of challenges is associated with the logistics of running PLTL workshops. For undergraduate students in the UK, formal teaching does not take place outside of the traditional academic hours – 0900 to 1800 Monday to Friday. By contrast, there are many examples of PLTL workshops in the USA taking place outside of these hours, particularly at weekends and later in the evening. Due to these rigid academic teaching hours, timetabling and the availability of small workshop-style rooms have been an issue, especially for QMUL.

Whilst we cannot award credit for undertaking the role of a Peer Leader, a final consideration was whether to remunerate Peer Leaders. For our Phase One pilot we made

the decision not to pay our students (FIU approach). However, in line with QMUL's mission to be the most inclusive university of its kind by 2030, we are currently developing a costing model that would allow us to pay Peer Leaders.

Pilot phase one – module-level PLTL

The goal of Phase One has been to identify the challenges of running PLTL workshops on a module-level. Three modules were involved with the pilot across two faculties. The original application of PLTL was in chemistry and so we chose two chemistry courses to pilot PLTL in, as well as a more mathematical module from the School of Economics and Finance where the course organiser expressed an interest in piloting PLTL. The workshop structures and styles of deliveries were varied between the modules to understand what works best at QMUL.

After consulting with our colleagues in FIU, we wanted to remain as close to the six critical components that were identified in successful implementations of PLTL workshops (Gosser et al., 2001). Due to an anticipation of adequate workshop space being a problem in the future, we wanted to use this phase of the pilot to explore online versions of PLTL or “cyber-PLTL” (cPLTL). While it comes with a unique set of challenges (Young & Lewis, 2022), the rationale for cPLTL in the modern context of higher education is very enticing as it overcomes “lack of adequate classroom space for groups, difficulty with scheduling an additional two hours during the day, and the availability of leaders” (Varma-Nelson & Banks, 2013, p. 97). In the literature, cPLTL and PLTL's effect on student outcomes does not have statistically significant difference (p. 101). However, due to our online sessions being voluntary, we were not able to effectively evaluate its usefulness for our context.

CHE206A Pharmaceutical Chemistry

CHE206A, a level 5 (Year 2) module, had PLTL introduced as a **compulsory** element of the module to complement teaching by academic staff/members of Faculty. PLTL workshops were assessed contributing up to 5% to the overall module grade. Marks for PLTL were based on pre-work (like readiness surveys) and engagement during the workshops. There were 5 x 90-minute workshops. Each workshop was preceded by a briefing session with the Module Organiser and the Peer Leaders where the problems were co-created, discussed and refined to create the workshop materials. All workshops were held in-person on campus with one exception where a Peer Leader delivered a mixed-mode/hybrid session for international students.

In 2021/22, 91 students were enrolled on CHE206A. Eleven Peer Leaders were recruited (from level 6/Year 3) based on their performance in CHE206A (in 2020/21) (passed at A-/B+ grade) and their prior engagement with CHE206A (records of attendance and activity logs for our virtual learning environment, QMPlus). The cohort was divided alphabetically into 10 groups each containing 9 students. The cohort had 27 and 64 male and female identifying students respectively. Seventy (70) students identified as BAME, 19 as White and 2 who declined to disclose. Each group was randomly allocated a Peer Leader; one Peer Leader acted as a reserve/substitute. The demographics of the Peer Leaders were as follows: 8 female and 3 male; 8 BAME and 3 white. Peer Leaders underwent initial training co-delivered by the Queen Mary Academy and the Module Organiser. In addition, Peer Leaders met bi-weekly with the Module Organiser to continue their professional development, co-create content for PLTL workshops and discuss approaches to facilitating the sessions.

CHE102B Fundamentals of Organic Chemistry

CHE102B, a level 4 (Year 1) module, introduced PLTL as a series of **voluntary** workshops that supplemented teaching from academic staff/Faculty. This pilot of voluntary PLTL was not assessed for logistical reasons (class size and availability of appropriate rooms).

There were 4 x 90-minute workshops throughout the semester with parallel sessions being led by seven Peer Leaders. The demographic of the Peer Leaders are as follows: 5 female and 2 male; 6 BAME and 1 white. The workshop material closely followed the taught lecture content. As with CHE206A, each workshop was preceded by a briefing session with the Module Organiser and the Peer Leaders where the problems were co-created, discussed and refined to create the workshop materials. All workshops were held in-person on campus. While anecdotally those students who attended the workshops and the Peer Leaders enjoyed PLTL, it was difficult to incentivise attendance, and engagement with PLTL was exceptionally low. On average, there were only 10-15 students attending each PLTL workshop, and they were allowed to self-select their groups. Students generally attended the same groups, but some would change Peer Leaders depending on the week. Some sessions also had to be combined to ensure the group size was not too small.

ECN226 Capital Markets 1

ECN226, a level 5 (Year 2) module, introduced PLTL as **voluntary** workshops that supplemented teaching from academic staff/Faculty. This was the only pilot to run outside of the Faculty of Science and Engineering. PLTL was not an assessed part of the module. Unlike

the chemistry modules, it did not run parallel sessions each week. Instead, there were 4 x 1-hour workshops throughout the second half of the semester with a total of 6 Peer Leaders. The demographic of the Peer Leaders are as follows: 2 female and 4 male; 5 BAME and 1 White. Each Peer Leader facilitated only one session per term and two of them co-facilitated a workshop. One of the workshops was initially planned to be held exclusively online to investigate potential challenges but was reverted to in-person after numerous requests from students.

Out of 200 people enrolled on the ECN226 module, 15 expressed an interest in PLTL at the start of the semester. However, due to it being largely dormant at the start of the semester, the first session was only attended by 7 people. This number started to rise with 12 students attending the third workshop after having heard about them through word of mouth. By the end of the term, more students expressed interest, but the size of the workshop was capped at 12 students.

The preliminary feedback from Peer Leaders (Figure 3) and students was overwhelmingly positive and PLTL offered one of the few opportunities for students from different years to work together. Peer Leaders from all three modules who fully engaged with the programme were recognised with an award on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). This is a student's official digital transcript that provides a full record of their university achievements - both academic and extracurricular. In addition, Peer Leaders were eligible and encouraged to apply for QMUL's Student Enhanced Engagement and Development (SEED) Award which recognises our students' contributions in shaping and co-creating their education. Six Peer Leaders from this cohort successfully applied and have received this award.

“Thank you for the opportunity. I personally feel like I have learned a lot from this experience.”

“Thank you for letting us be a part of this pilot study and giving us this opportunity to develop ourselves and work on our skills.”

“Thank you for the amazing opportunity to do PLTL. It was a great experience and I have learned some invaluable things.”

Figure 3. Quotes from 2021/2022 Peer Leaders

QMUL workshop format recommendations for 2022/23

Compulsory In-Person Workshops

Interviews with those students who participated in the pilots show that the first few workshops are key to get students who are apprehensive interested in PLTL. Peer Leaders are also worried about facilitating the first workshop. However, this is a key hurdle that, once overcome, allows for both students and Peer Leaders to enjoy PLTL. While making the workshops compulsory makes the administrative side more difficult, long-term, it is felt to be required to fully maximise the benefits of PLTL.

A second benefit of making PLTL compulsory is in generating richer data to evaluate. Student attainment data is more easily available and comparable since a workshop register is kept and allows for students to be surveyed. Making PLTL compulsory will also allow QMUL to build the scholarship and evidence base to underpin our approach to PLTL. Workshops should also be in-person unless there are mitigating circumstances. While we do not have a direct comparison of compulsory workshops exclusively held online, students in the voluntary workshops preferred to have sessions in-person to maximise face-to-face interaction both with their peers and Peer Leaders. In-person workshops appear to foster a stronger sense of learning community.

Smaller groups (between 8-12) provided greater levels of engagement for the students and built a stronger community of learners between the students and the Peer Leaders. This not only helped the students but also provided the Peer Leaders with a greater sense of fulfilment after the pilot had ended as they became familiar with the students.

Assessed

Making PLTL an assessed component of the module, however small, creates a psychological stake for the students to complete the pre-work and be familiar with the material. Results suggest that students who engaged with the workshops were more likely to outperform their peers. Making the workshops assessed creates an extra incentive for students to attend and legitimises the introduction of PLTL.

Programme level pilot 2022/23 - 2024/25

The next phase (2022/23) will deliver programme-based PLTL. We will be introducing PLTL as a programme-level strategic intervention in the School of Biological and Behavioural Sciences focused specifically for statistics; PLTL will be introduced into two Biology modules (one level 4, Year 1; one level 5, Year 2) in 2022/23. They are both core modules that develop students' statistical skills. We plan to continue PLTL within these two

modules for at least 3 years to track student progression throughout their time at QMUL. PLTL will also continue in CHE102B and CHE206A as compulsory and assessed module-level PLTL. In the programme-level pilot, we plan to introduce PLTL in “high-impact” modules in first and second year. These are modules that cover core subject knowledge that students require across a variety of modules in the programme. This will allow PLTL to sit strategically within the programme structure and have the maximum impact on learning and the student experience.

For this next phase of PLTL training, we are aiming to have a greater focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion considerations during Peer Leader training. We are also including various support resources that can be signposted to our students and make sure that the Peer Leaders are able to create an inclusive environment for all our students. We plan to foster a greater sense of community between the Peer Leaders by planning a joint celebratory event at the end of the year to recognise their achievements. Furthermore, we are creating group forums online to allow Peer Leaders and their students to communicate outside of the workshops. We are hoping that these extra steps will allow for better outcomes for all groups of students and increase students’ sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Our initial experiences piloting PLTL at module-level suggest that the approach can be adapted to operate within the national HE context and that the introduction of PLTL at module- (if not programme) level could be used to develop learning communities, drive student engagement, and enhance the student experience in the UK.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Glossary

Academic Staff – Members of Faculty: Assistant, Associate or Full Professors

Assessments – This includes final exams, essays and reports. *Assessing workshop, e.g., including workshop as a graded component.*

Course – Degree/Major. In the UK a degree is made up of modules. Students need to take 120 credits each academic year. Modules are usually 10 or 15 credits. A Bachelor’s degree is obtained in three years, with a total number of 360 credits. An integrated Master’s degree is obtained in four years.

First Class Honours – The highest degree awarded in the UK. US equivalent - students with an A average across all classes.

Good Honours - defined by the UK Government as a First or Upper Second Class Honours award

HEAR Transcript - Higher Education Achievement Report. This is a student's official digital transcript that provides a full record of their university achievements - both academic and extracurricular.

Honours Grading System – First-class honours (70% or higher), Upper second-class honours (60–69%), Lower second-class honours (50–59%), Third-class honours (40–49%)

Lecturer – Member of Faculty, with the rank of Assistant Professor

Level 3 – Freshman

Level 4 – Sophomore (entering university students start at Level 4)

Level 5 – Junior

Level 6 - Senior

Lower second-class honours – The third highest degree awarded in the UK. US equivalent – students with a B average across all classes

Module – A component of an academic year which is a component of a degree, e.g., a type of “course” (U.S. system) on a particular subject

Module Organiser - Course convenor, e.g., course coordinator or program coordinator

NETP – Not Eligible to Progress. Students at risk of attrition

Ordinary Degree – also known as a pass. US equivalent – students with a C average across all classes

SEED Award - Student Enhanced Engagement and Development Award. A QMUL award that recognises our students' contributions in shaping and co-creating their education

Semester A (1) – Fall Semester

Semester B (2) – Spring Semester

Third-class honours – The fourth highest degree awarded in the UK. US Equivalent – students with a C+ average across all classes

Timetabling – Scheduling

Upper Second Class Honours – The second highest degree awarded in the UK. US Equivalent – Students with a A-/B+ average across modules

Virtual-Learning Environment (VLE) – Digital / online Learning Management System

For more information, see <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/modules/guidance/index.html>