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# Tutor and tutee experiences of same-year/level peer-assisted learning in health sciences' extended curriculum programmes

## Abstract

*Peer-assisted learning (PAL) encompasses the active acquisition of knowledge and skills among students in similar social settings where teaching one another enables reciprocal learning. Same-year/level PAL (SPAL) is applied in theoretical and clinical teaching across medical disciplines worldwide and is regarded as a teaching and learning strategy promoting self-directed learning. However, it is unclear if SPAL is supporting the academic progress and skills development of students placed on extended curriculum programmes (ECP) in health sciences education (HSE) effectively. This paper focuses on ECP tutors and tutees' experiences of SPAL on their academic, personal and professional development. Six qualitative, semi-structured group interviews were conducted with 41 ECP students (14 tutors and 27 tutees) after they had participated in SPAL sessions. Findings indicate that SPAL supports ECP students not only academically, but also improves graduate attributes and leadership development, and promotes adapting to higher education through the establishment of communities of learning. Embedding structured SPAL sessions into ECPs in HSE was found to be central to the success of this teaching and learning strategy.*

**Keywords:** *communities of learning, extended curriculum programmes, health sciences education, peer-assisted learning, same-year/level*

## 1. Introduction

The incorporation of same-year/level peer-assisted learning (SPAL), as a form of general peer-assisted learning (PAL), is part of medical curricula worldwide (Herrmann-Werner *et al.*, 2017). Regarded as an established teaching and learning strategy, SPAL has many pedagogical applications in theoretical and clinical settings across medical disciplines (Bugaj *et al.*, 2019; Ten Cate, 2017). The implementation of SPAL in health sciences education (HSE) is a response to the criticised limitations of expository teaching and is aimed at promoting self-directed learning among students

(Hernández Coliñir *et al.*, 2022). Same-year/level PAL activities, such as extra class tutorials and/or practical sessions, are thus designed to facilitate active and reciprocal learning between tutor and tutee from the same study cohort and consequently focus on improving their academic progress and skills development (Guraya & Abdalla, 2020; Herrmann-Werner *et al.*, 2017; Topping & Ehly, 1998).

The overall phenomenon of PAL is underpinned by cognitive and social constructivist learning theories, including Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) and Bandura and Walter's theory of 'social learning' (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The theorisation of PAL is therefore based on the social interaction between peers that enables learners to create new knowledge and skills that are managed within a certain zone of proximal development (Arendale, 2014). Participation in PAL activities furthermore establishes 'cognitive congruence' between students (Bugaj *et al.*, 2019; Piaget, 2013). Cognitive congruence refers to the sharing of similar knowledge bases and learning experiences between tutor and tutee that promotes the sensing and support offered in addressing each other's educational needs (Bugaj *et al.*, 2019). Topping and Ehly (1998) argue that the noted pedagogical benefits of PAL are deeply rooted in the more relaxed cognitive closeness shared among peers than between students and faculty staff that enables better assistance offered for learning. The self-determination theory additionally posits that PAL tutors develop self-awareness, confidence and a sense of expertise when taking up the teacher's role during PAL sessions (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter, 1956).

## 2. Same-year/level peer-assisted learning in extended curriculum programmes

The concept of foundation provision (FP), through the development of extended curriculum programmes (ECPs), was introduced across South African (SA) universities to address inequalities in HE access by marginalised students (Chukwuere, 2021; Garraway & Bozalek, 2019). To accommodate these educationally disadvantaged students in HE, SA universities instituted ECPs that are focused on supporting these student cohorts with developing the necessary academic and social skills to be successful in their studies (Council on Higher Education, 2020). The concept of FP thus echoes "access to success", as it aims at promoting the social justice agenda of equal university access and simultaneously focuses on addressing the academic shortcomings of ECP students producing high dropout rates (Garraway & Bozalek, 2019).

Teaching and learning strategies employed in FP should thus sense and appropriately respond to students' socio-educational needs to ensure the delivery of FP curricula supporting their academic progress and skills development (Garraway & Bozalek, 2019). The focus of SPAL on the reciprocal learning it enables among students in the same study cohort and the pedagogical benefits it offers students sharing similar social and cognitive closeness, consequently, seems to be conceptually aligned with the aim of FP. However, a shortfall of evidence is noted in the literature to confirm that SPAL responds effectively to ECP students' educational shortcomings and whether it is implemented by Universities of Technology (UoTs) in support of the academic progress and skills development of students in HSE (Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021). The significance of this study's investigation is further highlighted by responding to the available literature claiming that more qualitative studies are needed to fully explore the impact of SPAL on student development in general (Guraya & Abdalla, 2020).

This qualitative paper forms part of a bigger research project focused on contributing to the delivery of FP curricula that supports HSE students effectively with their socio-educational needs. The study's objective was to establish the effects, advantages and disadvantages of SPAL on the academic progress and skills development of ECP students qualitatively. This paper consequently reports on ECP students' experiences of the effects of SPAL on their academic, personal and professional development after implementation in the classroom during 2017–2019.

# 3. Methods

## 3.1 Study design

A qualitative study with an inductive approach through semi-structured group interviews was conducted. During 2017–2019, ECP students in HSE at a South African UoT participated in SPAL sessions aimed at improving their academic progress and skills development. A compulsory year module (Physiology) for all HSE first-year students at this institution was selected for the implementation of SPAL sessions. The semi-structured group interviews were conducted with tutors and tutees who had participated voluntarily in these SPAL sessions to qualitatively determine the effects and possible advantages and disadvantages of SPAL on their academic, personal and professional development.

## 3.2 Population and sampling

All first-time entering ECP students who had participated in the SPAL sessions during 2017-2019 (n=138) at the particular UoT were considered the target population for this study. A total of 30 tutors participated in the SPAL sessions, and 108 participating tutees were randomly allocated to these tutors. Table 1 indicates the number of tutors and tutees for each year group that was considered the target population for the study.

**Table 1:** Number of tutors and tutees who participated in the SPAL sessions in 2017-2019.

| Year | Number of tutors per year | Number of tutees per year |
|---|---|---|
| 2017 | 10 | 31 |
| 2018 | 10 | 39 |
| 2019 | 10 | 38 |
| TOTAL | 30 | 108 |

Tutors and tutees who participated in the semi-structured interviews were sampled separately and differently. Purposive total population sampling was deemed appropriate to ensure optimal data accumulation and support the validity and richness of the qualitative data obtained from the tutors (n=30). Of the 108 tutees, 10 from each year group were randomly selected and invited to participate in the separately conducted semi-structured interviews for tutees. Thus, 30 tutors and 30 tutees were invited to the six separately conducted year-group interviews (three year-group interviews for tutors and tutees, respectively).

## 3.3 Data collection

Semi-structured group interviews rather than focus-group discussions were selected as a mode of data collection, as the interviews' objective was to obtain individual responses rather than inspire group debate (Brown & Edmunds, 2011). Based on the context of responses, the semi-structured group interviews allowed the researcher some degree of flexibility to adjust the

wording and pose questions differently while gaining insight into participants' views (Kumar, 2019). Although members were allowed to interact freely during the interviews, questions posed were focused more on obtaining individual views of the effects of SPAL on members' academic progress (focus-area one) and personal and/or professional development (focus-area two). The group interviews also permitted members to express their beliefs about any possible advantages and disadvantages experienced while participating in the SPAL strategy (focus-area three). The semi-structured interview questions were non-directive, and members could focus on any part of the question(s) during answering. All six group interviews, conducted by the researcher in the presence of a dedicated independent observer, were audio-recorded for transcribing and verification purposes.

To confirm the credibility of the narrative, the researcher provided a synopsis of the responses, and participants could confirm their satisfaction with how their response(s) had been interpreted and recorded, thus limiting subjectivity during the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Completed transcriptions of all interviews were verified against the respective voice recordings by the independent observer to ensure that accurate transcriptions of recordings and trustworthy data were analysed.

## 3.4 Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the qualitative datasets. This methodology was selected as it enables a systematic approach to identify emergent themes from the data through a data interrogation and engagement process. The systematic approach guided the researcher to recursively develop, review and refine rich themes that emanated during the data analysis descriptively (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The themes identified were confirmed through repeated data analysis using ATLAS.ti software (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH; Berlin, Germany).

## 3.5 Ethical considerations

All invited participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was confirmed with all interviewees before informed consent was obtained. Ethics approval was received from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSREC) of the University of the Free State (ethics clearance number: UFS-HSD2021/1908-0003), and permission was granted by the Data Management Unit of the participating UoT to invite students to participate in this study.

# 4. Results and discussion

Of the 30 tutors and 30 tutees invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews, 14 tutors and 27 tutees (participation rates 46.7% and 90.0%, respectively) consented to participate in the study. The number of invited tutors and tutees and participation rates per year group are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2:** The number of invited tutors and tutees and individual participation rates for the different year groups.

| Year group | Number of invited tutors (TRs) | Number of tutors that participated and participation rate (%) | Number of invited tutees (TUs) | Number of tutees that participated and participation rate (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2017 | 10 | 3 (30.0) | 10 | 10 (100) |
| 2018 | 10 | 6 (60.0) | 10 | 9 (90.0) |
| 2019 | 10 | 5 (50.0) | 10 | 8 (80.0) |
| Total | 30 | 14 (46.7) | 30 | 27 (90.0) |

**TRs, tutors; TUs, tutees.**

The research question informed the development of the semi-structured group interview guides. It was also used to classify the six identified themes according to the three focus areas of the interviews. Table 3 represents the allocation of themes based on the relevant part of the research question and focus area.

**Table 3:** Allocation of themes identified during semi-structured group interviews according to the relevant part of the research question or focus area.

| **RESEARCH QUESTION** | |
|---|---|
| What are ECP students' experiences of the effects, advantages and disadvantages of SPAL on their **academic, personal and professional development** after implementation in a selected HSE module? | |
| **Focus area one** | |
| Part one of the research question<br>Academic development | Theme 1 |
| | SPAL influences student academic progress and learner comprehension |
| | Theme 2 |
| | SPAL supports student assessment preparation and goal-setting |
| **Focus area two** | |
| Part two of the research question<br>Personal and professional development | Theme 3 |
| | SPAL influences the development of graduate attributes |
| | Theme 4 |
| | SPAL supports leadership development in tutors |
| | Theme 5 |
| | SPAL supports student adaptation to the HE environment through the development of communities of learning |
| **Focus area three** | |
| Part three of the research question<br>Advantages and disadvantages | Theme 6 |
| | SPAL's success is dependent on the implementation structure of the strategy |

**SPAL, same-year/level peer-assisted learning.**

## 4.1 Theme 1: SPAL influences student academic progress and learner comprehension

Tutors and tutees' responses (presented verbatim; slightly adapted to promote legibility) revealed that participating in the SPAL sessions facilitated an improved understanding of the module content, which they experienced more compelling when engaging with the content in a group format rather than alone. The improvement in comprehension supported their academic progress and consequently influenced their assessment grades positively.

> *I almost failed ECP, and the peer-assisted sessions very much helped me to pass. I got a distinction at the end of the year. So ja [yes], it assisted a lot (TU11).*

> *I remember my first test I failed [sic], I think I got 30%, and my last final test I got a 70 something [%]. So, it was very useful. It helped me to understand the work better and also to remember it much better than studying alone (TU14).*

Notably, the tutor groups also experienced the same perceived enhancement in comprehension and the subsequent positive effect on their academic progress. This finding thus confirms that collaborative learning between tutors and tutees was enabled during the SPAL sessions (Boud, 2014).

> *I feel like my group, or as a group, we helped each other. Ja [yes], so it was basically about helping each other (TR5).*

> *For me, as much as I was supposed to assist some people, it is very interesting to see how other people think. Maybe the person you are supposed to assist, they can understand it so much easier than the way you understand, and then you also get some [idea] how you can study it (TR2).*

> *For me, I think it helped me … in a sense of … if you are teaching somebody … if you know something, and you are helping someone to understand more better, you are also learning to understand (TR9).*

Drawing on the 'teaching and learning' concept itself, one would expect the role and related benefits of the tutor to be better positioned at the 'teaching pole' of the concept. Conversely, the role and related benefits of the tutee would be better situated at the 'learning pole' of the concept. However, as both tutors and tutees viewed the PAL sessions as beneficial for their learning, it is not unreasonable to argue that a more defined peer learning (the intersected domain between collaborative and cooperative learning) was established within this learning community (Arendale, 2014; 2019; Oakes *et al.*, 2019).

The underpinning learning theories of PAL, such as the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) and 'social learning' (Bandura & Walters, 1977), apply to the findings of this study. These theories explain that enhanced learning occurs in a social context through witnessing peers and their behaviours from the same social stance and adapting pre-existing knowledge to construct new knowledge or understanding. Networks of knowledge between tutor and tutee must be as close as possible to sense and potentially resolve any learning challenges experienced, thus enabling a drive to acquire new knowledge. The SPAL sessions might therefore have supported the noted enhanced academic progress and perceived improvement in comprehension better than lecturing, as the networks of knowledge between tutors and tutees are substantially closer than between student and lecturer (Bugaj *et al.*,

2019). This cognitive closeness between the SPAL participants probably provided a better position for tutors to explain content to tutees at an appropriate level of understanding (Topping & Ehly, 1998).

The positive results of enhanced academic progress and learner comprehension were also noted in other studies and identified as some of the possible pedagogical advantages of PAL in general (Havnes, 2008; Pickles *et al*., 2019).

## 4.2 Theme 2: SPAL supports student assessment preparation and goal-setting

The second prominent theme identified from the interviewees' responses was the perceived assessment preparation and goal-setting support offered by the SPAL sessions. Not surprisingly, interviewees indicated an apparent improvement in their assessment preparation practices, as many of them also viewed the SPAL sessions as beneficial for their academic progress, as discussed earlier.

> *For me, Sir, it is a matter of pre-preparation, because I always prepared everything after the lecture, but now that I was a leader, I have to prepare beforehand. So, when the test comes you don't do everything in the last minute and then you don't know anything (TR4).*

> *Later I started to study from previous papers as well, which helped me understand in which ways the content could be asked (TU11).*

> *It helped me to be disciplined and know that if I want something … if I want to pass and have that goal, I will definitely go for it (TU8).*

In a recent review article, the authors mentioned that implementing PAL in various HSE programmes instilled a feeling of better preparedness for future assessments among participants (Hernández Coliñir *et al*., 2022). The current study showed that several factors could be responsible for participants experiencing advantages in the 'assessment dimension' of the whole 'teaching, learning and assessment' continuum. These factors include a better understanding of course material through the exposure to various learning styles (Abay *et al*., 2017), the creation of a more relaxed learning environment and/or the self-motivation participants claimed to have developed (Oakes *et al*., 2019), that in turn established more confidence in their assessment preparation (Cole *et al*., 2018).

> *So, when I saw the way other people study … they write notes from slides and stuff like that, and I was like: "Maybe that's a good idea" and try doing that (TU1).*

> *I think I also got to learn a lot because the environment became less tense (TU2).*

> *So, I feel like the learning experience really helped me to get out of my comfort zone (TR5).*

> *And the discussions are very helpful because you get different views … if you see things or something in a certain way, another person might have a better explanation of it, so it helped me grow a lot (TR4).*

## 4.3 Theme 3: SPAL influences the development of graduate attributes

Interviewees claimed that the SPAL strategy influenced their development of graduate attributes positively. Graduate attributes include a certain set of skills, knowledge networks and potential

of graduates that had to be developed resulting from the higher education experience and the habitual standards of tertiary education (Gamage *et al.*, 2023). This study's findings relating to the academic outcomes of the SPAL strategy have been discussed. However, these findings are equally applicable to the current theme, as knowledge acquisition and retention are general attributes required to be developed in graduates (Wong *et al.*, 2022). A disclosure of the list of uniquely defined graduate attributes by the UoT affiliated with the interviewees may reveal the identity of the institution. Consequently, the authors further discuss this section of the study's results with reference to how other researchers generally view graduate attributes in the employability context (Gamage *et al*., 2023).

Developing graduate capabilities, found favourable in the eyes of employers, comprises the achievement of the higher education process and attributes such as proficiency in interpersonal behaviour and teamwork (Gamage *et al.*, 2023). Similar responses were noted among the respective interviewees of 2017–2019, as they believed they had developed skills such as self-motivation, confidence and teamwork through the SPAL strategy.

> *We did a lot of group work, and I think that prepared us in the Radiography department [workplace] because we also do a lot of group work, so it also teaches you how to work with others and that you have to depend on each other to get the work done (TU19).*

> *So, it gives you the skills to adapt to different settings and different people with different personalities – your personalities may clash, but at the end of the day, you know that I just need to do what needs to be done (TU5).*

> *I grew with confidence in myself, Sir. It motivated me to work harder and it … yes it motivated me to work harder and also working in groups, Sir (TU18).*

The academic progress, in addition to the skills that were developed by the interviewees in this study, can also be closely grouped with the four main areas listed in a recent UK study. In this study, the authors classified the most sought-after graduate attributes under self-awareness and lifelong learning, employability and professional development, global citizenship and engagement, and academic and research literacy (Wong *et al.*, 2022).

Gamage *et al.* (2023) highlight the important role of PAL and its related team activities in developing graduate attributes when such a strategy is firmly embedded into university curricula. Therefore, the authors believe that implementing a structured SPAL strategy into ECP curricula can assist universities with providing the necessary higher education experience and space for students to develop the graduate skills required from an early stage of their studies. This, in turn, might also sustain FP at SA UoTs offering ECPs in HSE to foster and deliver employable graduates for the health sector.

## 4.4 Theme 4: SPAL supports leadership development in tutors

Another prominent theme that emerged from the responses of the tutor interviewees was the support they believed had been offered to develop leadership skills by facilitating the SPAL sessions.

> *I am able to work with people now, and I have acquired leadership skills and I am able to plan my things now like no more procrastination, if I want to do something I do it that day (TR6).*

> *I had to prepare upfront and as a leader had to see that everyone is on the same page (TR7).*

Bugaj *et al*. (2019) assert that tutors benefit from PAL by improving their own subject knowledge, skills, attitudes and leadership competencies through peer interaction. Improved leadership skills enable tutors to also become better learners as they develop more autonomy, self-confidence and professionalism to manage PAL sessions effectively and achieve the desired outcome of the teaching and learning strategy (Arrand, 2014). Our findings showed that tutors align their perceived leadership development with their improved ability to sense and track their tutees' academic progress and take up the responsibility for their tutees' educational needs. These abilities, reflecting the development of leadership skills in tutors, are deemed essential and indicative of a functional PAL strategy (Bugai *et al*., 2019).

> *What activity actually impacted on my side is stepping up to leadership. Learning okay, I am responsible for this person [tutee] and this person's academic performance* (TR1).

> *They definitely would be different … compared to the next meeting and that way I could see that people [tutees] become more determined and like they are more engaged with their schoolwork also progressing in other units* (TR9).

> *I don't know if it is relevant, but for me it was finding other ways of doing other things because I had to bring my thinking capacity to the thinking capacities of different people [tutees]* (TR11).

> *We all know that we have different methods of studying, so I had to learn their method of study in order for them to understand* (TR13).

The self-determination theory alludes that when tutors take up the teaching role, it instils a sense of expertise, enabling the development of self-awareness and self-confidence needed to reflect on one's teaching practices and possible shortcomings. Tutors thus sense their responsibility to lead the learning during PAL sessions and become experts in their unique way (Festinger *et al*., 1956). This phenomenon was also noted in the current study, where tutors' leadership and dedication occurred in acts such as developing additional group activities when needed, encouraging tutees to actively participate in the PAL sessions, seeking assistance when feeling unsure about facilitating PAL sessions and acknowledging self-identified shortcomings.

> *So, it was very helpful, because we will use q-cards … ask each other questions, and when you don't understand you ask and then if we can't reach an agreement we go back to our books, and then the next day we first try to find a solution we did not understand the most* (TR6).

> *My group wasn't as interacting and engaging … they would all look at me for answers. But I would encourage them to speak up and like* [TR9] *said, it got easier you know with more sessions that we have* (TR10).

> *So, now I have to use my personal time, that I would have used to do whatever, to actually go through my books to assist someone else [tutee]. I do not like to be told what to do. But that is also an advantage … I reflected* (TR3).

> *And you know, learning and knowing also that you can ask for help from other people, even if I was the team leader but some of the members were still helping me* (TR10).

Responding in such a manner proved that self-reflection practices were employed by ECP tutors to reflect critically on their role as tutors and accommodate their tutees' specific educational needs. Bugaj *et al*. (2019) report similar responses from student tutors who indicated the importance of applying self-reflection to ensure effective peer tutoring has taken place.

## 4.5 Theme 5: SPAL supports student adaptation to the HE environment through the development of communities of learning

The current study's interviewees commended the SPAL sessions for supporting them in their adjustment to HE. Relevant to the SA context, the transition challenges of ECP students are profound because of the variation in their educational backgrounds (Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021). Interviewees highlighted the relaxed and safe environment the PAL sessions offered for learning. They emphasised that sharing the same academic challenges experienced by both tutor and tutee on the same level of education promoted the development of a trusting and even lasting companionship.

> *Where we are learning together … we are having similar challenges and all that. So, it did give us sort of security and a sense of a community* (TU3).
>
> *Okay Sir, the peer companionship promoted my self-esteem and coping skills and then due to that my failing rates were decreased and my understanding was improved* (TU17).
>
> *It really helped us to build a sisterhood and a brotherhood amongst each other. Even now like, we still communicate with each other we still have each other* (TR6).
>
> *I am able to help the mentees now with regard to any issues that they have regarding adjusting to the environment of a university and academics and everything else* (TU23).
>
> *I think it was a good opportunity for me to meet new people to make connections and to learn about or rather to adjust to university life as a whole* (TR4).
>
> *It was supportive … you know you could have insight into how things are done at university level* (TU4).

A recent Irish study highlighted the supporting role cross-year/level PAL (CPAL) could play in assisting students in adjusting to university life by forming a community of learning (Bermingham, Boylan & Ryan, 2022). Similarly, a sense of belonging and security was also formed among ECP participants in this study, which promoted their self-esteem and confidence. The SPAL sessions supported ECP participants beyond an academic level, as interviewees claimed that the formation of this camaraderie also addressed their transitional challenges. This finding is important as the pre-established outcomes and objectives of SPAL sessions are mostly focused on addressing academic challenges, whereas CPAL can accommodate wider-focused outcomes such as addressing social, pastoral and transitional matters (Makala, 2017). Furthermore, findings from this study imply that SPAL and its related activities could also support adapting to tertiary education and not merely only address academic and retention challenges. SPAL implementation in ECP in HSE could, therefore, be seen as a teaching and learning strategy that might not only address the lack of certain academic skills in these ECP student cohorts, but also assist vulnerable students with broader transitioning challenges through the development of a community of learning within SPAL groups.

## 4.6 Theme 6: SPAL's success depends on the implementation structure of the teaching and learning strategy

During the group interviews, interviewees were prompted to indicate any perceived advantages and disadvantages experienced in their academic, personal and professional development during their SPAL participation. The advantages dominated the interviews' dialogue and were mainly included in the abovementioned themes. The less prominent perceived disadvantages highlighted by interviewees were received in a rather constructive manner, as participants communicated the seeming disadvantages experienced with an accompanying solution and, in some instances, even suggested possible changes to the strategy's implementation structure.

Most interviewees' opinions towards improving the SPAL strategy's implementation structure focused on aspects such as the group dynamics of the PAL sessions and the timeous implementation of the SPAL strategy into the ECP curriculum. In keeping with findings from other studies, these suggestions are indicative that interviewees sensed the importance of such a strategy and acknowledged that a carefully designed PAL framework is warranted to optimally unfold the strategy's potential to address the educational needs of students in HSE (Guraya & Barr, 2018).

The success of a PAL strategy is indeed influenced by the group dynamics within the PAL sessions (Bermingham *et al*., 2022). When planning the implementation of a PAL strategy, tutor training should focus on how to facilitate clarification of module content and include developmental opportunities to understand group dynamics (West, Jenkins & Hill, 2017). As indicated by this study's interviewees, managing the complex demands of tutoring and how to act in difficult situations require a set of developed interpersonal skills, which may not always be present in selected tutors. Therefore, assistance to tutors in developing the skills to manage PAL sessions effectively is important (Arrand, 2014). Despite the emphasis on the necessity of tutor training to ensure effective peer learning, it has been argued that current research still lacks the standardisation of tutor training and consequently creates an unclear picture of whether high-quality training is implemented in every PAL programme across medical programmes (Hernández Coliñir *et al*., 2022; Herrmann-Werner *et al*., 2017). Although a trusted staff member was responsible for training the tutors for this study, the findings highlight the importance of optimal empowerment of tutors to ensure an effective PAL strategy, regardless of the type and focus of PAL (SPAL or CPAL) (Bermingham *et al*., 2022).

> *I think the training could have been more intensive. Maybe we could have received an actual programme whereby like we are taught on how to deliver the content* (TR11).

> *I think they just need training to know certain stuff, how to do this, how to do that, how to handle this, how to handle students when they maybe are tired how to … ja [yes] how to handle students. Not just academically* (TU8).

> *I totally agree with (TU8) about they need more training in terms of to handle each personality* (TU9).

Interviewees expressed their concerns that the PAL strategy was viewed as an 'add-on' initiative to their existing academic load as it was not formally embedded in their curriculum. The benefits of structured PAL, fully incorporated into the curriculum are well documented (Herrmann-Werner *et al*., 2017), and confirm that PAL sessions should preferably be time-tabled to justify the credits earned and time spent by students.

> *It will be much nicer if it was all incorporated into the work that we are already doing as opposed to being an extra addition as it takes up more time* (TU6).
>
> *Maybe distribute 5% of our continuous marks per year and distribute it to this peer-assisted learning projects … it will attract more students to participate* (TR7).
>
> *Because it is not incorporated in our programme, we would not take it seriously* (TU4).
>
> *I think that it should be done more frequently, put on the timetable* (TU1).

Dedicated time allocated to PAL consequently promotes students' acceptance of this teaching and learning strategy and increasing attendance of PAL sessions subsequently increases its overall effectiveness for participants from an early stage of studies (Arendale, 2014; De Menezes & Premnath, 2016).

## 5. Limitations

As some limitations were identified, readers should interpret the findings and conclusions within the study's context. The implementation of SPAL sessions was limited to only one compulsory ECP module at one SA UoT known to offer SPAL to ECP students. The qualitative data findings were also based on the views and beliefs of ECP student participants involved in the PAL sessions dating back to 2017. Therefore, the findings and conclusions may neither be equally applicable to wider ECP student populations nor equally representative of different HE contexts. Further research studies are recommended to include student representation of other tertiary institutions possibly offering SPAL in ECP in HSE and include students with more recent experience participating in SPAL sessions.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper qualitatively broadened the understanding of SPAL's effectiveness on participants' academic, personal and professional development. The authors conclude that the newer form of SPAL implementation in HSE holds similar proven potential as its older CPAL counterpart in creating a safe and accessible environment for peer learning. The authors believe that SPAL could be seen as a teaching and learning strategy responding effectively to vulnerable students' educational needs by supporting their academic progress and skills development. The existence of cognitive and social congruence between SPAL participants, being similarly marginalised, promotes learning in ECP students, offers students some assistance in adapting to HE and supports the development of graduate attributes. Findings furthermore reiterate the need for well-structured and punctual implementation of SPAL into FP curricula, as it was perceived as central to the overall success of the strategy.

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## Declaration of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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