

FNUUNIKUA



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SUPPORTING *Future* LEADERS

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APPRECIATING OUR STUDENT
MENTORS

RANADI APPRECIATES PEER-LED
TEACHING AT FNU

Appreciating our student mentors



Shuvikash Chand (third from left) PAL Leader for CIN410 and CIN623, with students at FNU's Nasinu Campus library.



As the national institution, Fiji National University (FNU) continues to provide high-quality education to all students through various modes of study. Whilst our academic staff, resources and facilities are here to ensure all students complete their studies at FNU fully capable and qualified, a method of study that also lends itself to a student's academic success is peer to peer learning.

As learning and teaching evolve towards meeting the demands of the 21st century, modern learners are in greater need of additional support to complement their learning. They need a friend, a guide, a peer mentor who can provide friendly support in pursuit of their academic goals – and PAL does just that!

PAL – Peer Assisted Learning – is a free initiative implemented in 2019 through the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement (CLTE). The initiative is now fully institutionalised at the University, spanning across 11 campuses throughout Fiji, including regional and international students from countries that include Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, Afghanistan and New Zealand.

Because the overall success of the concept is attributed to the students themselves, CLTE has decided to highlight

the success of PAL by dedicating the first week of May as PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) Appreciation Week. This is to celebrate and appreciate its PAL Leaders who have been strong pillars of the PAL programme in providing unwavering and consistent academic support to the students under their mentorship.

PAL Leaders are recruited based on their strong academic portfolios and are further trained and empowered to model and encourage effective and independent learning habits. Currently, PAL facilitation is at the helm of 96 dynamic and vibrant PAL Leaders.

The flexible mode of delivery of PAL through face-to-face and Zoom online sessions make PAL dynamic and ensures that PAL support reaches out to a large cohort of participants, including students who could not make it to Fiji due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

With the current learning environment shaped by COVID-19 restrictions, students will need to draw on the various learning support they need in order to successfully complete their studies remotely and online. Having a peer support network they can turn to is an added advantage for these students.

Students believe that the key to participating in PAL sessions lies in the warm and friendly atmosphere created by PAL Leaders.

PAL sessions are very popular with the student body here at FNU. The great thing about PAL is its inclusiveness, it can adapt to so many different disciplines and settings.

I think it is extremely important to think of the PAL sessions as a peer-facilitated programme of study, where the students co-create their learning experience with their peers. One of the benefits that we see is that when students attend weekly and attend as a programme of study, they get the most out of it.

Other benefits include progressing well in their courses, enhanced relationships with their peers within the course, making connections with teachers in the course and students across the PAL programme. This leads to the development of a learning community that enhances the learning journey – the core of what we want PAL sessions to be.

We have seen different things happen in different courses. That's the fantastic thing about working with lots of different disciplines and different colleges. We have already seen that PAL sessions are a springboard for other activities.

We see PAL Leaders encourage extra activities outside of their scheduled sessions. For instance, the students from the sessions often go to different workshops, student services or libraries, then return to the sessions and distribute the knowledge and skills learned from these activities.

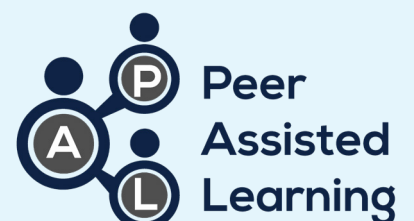
Anyone can benefit from PAL sessions. Our data shows that students who attended PAL sessions saw great benefits – whether it's revising content, social engagement or explaining concepts, theories and ideas to other students.

In a nutshell, PAL Leaders are there to facilitate learning as a relatable figure. PAL Leaders think about what they learned when they were doing the course and how they can convey that message to their students more effectively. It's about reframing those messages in a way that the students will understand

Our resilient PAL Leaders also do not seem to be deterred by the setbacks they encounter, whether it be looking for suitable venues, encouraging student participation and involvement, rescheduling PAL sessions, encountering demanding students or other unforeseeable obstacles. CLTE takes this opportunity not only to share the rippling benefits of PAL support service but also to express sincere gratitude towards the hardworking, dedicated and robust PAL Leaders.

To all the PAL Leaders, thank you for taking up the challenge and rendering your valuable services in solidifying the PAL programme. CLTE Salutes You!

Dr Deepak Prasad
Associate Dean Learning and Teaching Enhancement
Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement



Academic shares PAL observations



environment that is relaxing with no additional pressure. FNU's College of Humanities and Education (CHE) Lecturer in Education, Fesi Furivai Filipe (*pictured*), shares her observations and experiences in engaging peer leaders with students.

• **How valuable is peer learning in the assessment process and learner progress?**

I think it is a very important strategy and support system for assisting university students cope with the pressure of academic work and studies. Giving new students this opportunity to engage with a more senior student and learn from their peers helps boost their confidence and morale.

It also makes learning fun, interesting, manageable and less daunting. Furthermore, it provides the assisted students with tips on how to plan and manage their time, as well as how to create a doable study plan. It reduces the pressure on the students who accept such assistance. Interacting with peers and being able to share one's fears, confusion and academic stress goes a long way to helping students mentally and psychologically cope with university life and expectations.

• **What is your role in the coordination of peer learning at FNU?**

I have recommended a few second-year Bachelor of Education students to be Peer Assisted Learning Leaders. The PAL Leaders contact me via email to come and speak to the first-year Bachelor of Education students enrolled in the units I coordinate. I allow the PAL Leaders to have an introductory first session and explain their roles to the new students and also identify a suitable time for

the sessions. When this is confirmed, the PAL Leaders start their sessions after my tutorial classes. I note that the students are happy and satisfied with the arrangement and the sessions so far. While listening to the discussions, I was able to gauge the heightened student interest and willingness to learn from the PALs. There is a more relaxed atmosphere and much freer interaction and exchange.

• **How useful has this been in terms of your teaching process?**

It has helped immensely in making the understanding and learning of difficult concepts and theories and their application to real-life scenarios easier and simpler. This may be because the students can voice their confusion and doubts in smaller groups and be more confident to engage with someone their age and level.

• **Which course or specific unit that you teach is supported by the PAL initiative?**

This semester, it is the first unit offered for first-year Bachelor of Education Secondary students in the Bachelor in Education Secondary program – Fundamentals of Human Growth and Development and Educational Psychology.

• **How has the response been from students?**

The responses have been positive and the student turnout to the sessions has been very encouraging.

• **How do students perceive this form of learning?**

The students I spoke to found it useful and very helpful but maybe a survey towards the end of the semester may provide better feedback on its effectiveness.

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) is a service provided by Fiji National University's (FNU) Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement (CLTE) under the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching to first-year students through the engagement of senior students in providing tutoring assistance to new students to help them cope with studies. Peers help simplify complex ideas and concepts in a less formal

Student Testimonial

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) has improved my academic journey as it has helped me understand concepts clearly. The sessions have built my confidence because I am able to ask questions freely and clear my doubts, which is a very effective part of my studies.

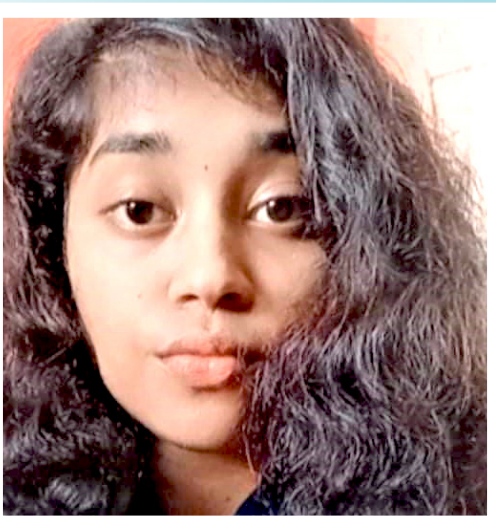
As a first-year student at the Fiji National University (FNU), the beginning was quite challenging because University life is different from high school, however thanks to the PAL sessions things have become quite easy to understand.

I would like to strongly encourage other students to join PAL sessions because it would help them in broadening their knowledge and understanding things more clearly. Through personal observations, I have noted that not all students participate in class and ask questions during lectures and tutorial time.

Hence these PAL sessions would help them learn better and build up confidence to share ideas and learn more through asking questions and clearing doubts.

Lastly, this session is free-of-charge, so every student gets equal opportunity to participate without any financial burden.

**Shania Neha Sharif | First-year student
Bachelor of Applied Social Science**



Knowledge increases by sharing – Farhat

Peer learning is a beneficial method of learning as it not only enables students to improve their grades but also better understand the subject matter, apply the knowledge gained during their studies and enables them to share their ideas and experiences with colleagues.

Some students may feel more comfortable interacting and asking questions regarding their course units from peers instead of their lecturers. Through peer interactions, they could also gain more confidence and be more vocal in lectures and tutorials.

For Wasima Shagufa Farhat, helping equip students with the necessary support tools they need to have a successful University learning experience is something she is proud of.

Farhat (*pictured*) is a Year 2 student at the Fiji National University's (FNU) Labasa Campus and is enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce in Human Resource Management, Industrial Relations and Information Systems programme.

She is also a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader offering mentoring to students in the Introduction to Business Management (MGT501) and Introduction to Human Resources Management and Industrial Relations (HRM501) units.

"When I learnt about the PAL initiative, I applied to be a PAL mentor because I used to face difficulties as a student and knew what it was like to have a support group made up of other students who all helped each other to understand and pass the units," she explained.

"I also firmly believe that our knowledge increases by sharing and not saving."

During her sessions, the former Labasa College student said that she ensures that each student has a



chance to voice their concerns or queries regarding the unit. The group collectively work towards the solutions and are encouraged to present their knowledge and ideas through various means such as presentations and during their round table discussions.

"It is quite a rewarding experience seeing these students improve their marks and complete the units with good grades."

"PAL is really in the best interest of the students themselves as they are the benefactors of this initiative."

Peer learning leads to positive outcomes – Kumar

The importance of having a positive and comfortable learning environment prompted first-year Fiji National University (FNU) Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) student Anishil Vishant Kumar to sign up for the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) sessions.

According to Kumar (*pictured*), PAL sessions are more informal and relaxed and provided a safe atmosphere for students to learn from their peers.

He commended PAL sessions for their approachability in terms of students feeling comfortable to ask questions of concern to them in a safe environment.

“I suppose you would be more willing to ask questions to your peers off the top of your head whereas you might spend a whole lecture preparing your question and many times skip asking it because of the thought that your question might sound stupid,” he said.

“During the study sessions, I do not feel much pressure. Instead, I feel freer to ask questions and gather as much information as I can on topics I find difficult to comprehend. It feels better to know that people have the same worries as you.”

“It helps to have a chat with someone who went through exactly what I’m going through. Whenever I’m having a bad time academically, it gives me reassurance that I can make it too.”

“Besides, I feel blessed to have a PAL Leader guide me, in addition to a teacher.”

The Nausori lad stated that PAL sessions played a significant role in him adjusting to university, in terms of awareness of the course contents and getting to know fellow students in the same field of study.

“My PAL Leader has helped me get organised in the beginning of my course. He also shares his practical experiences, which gives us an idea of what is expected of us.”



Fiji National University (FNU) final-year student Elizabeth Lusua Kado greets students with a cheerful smile and listens to each student recount their weekly study experience before taking charge to conduct the one-hour learning session.

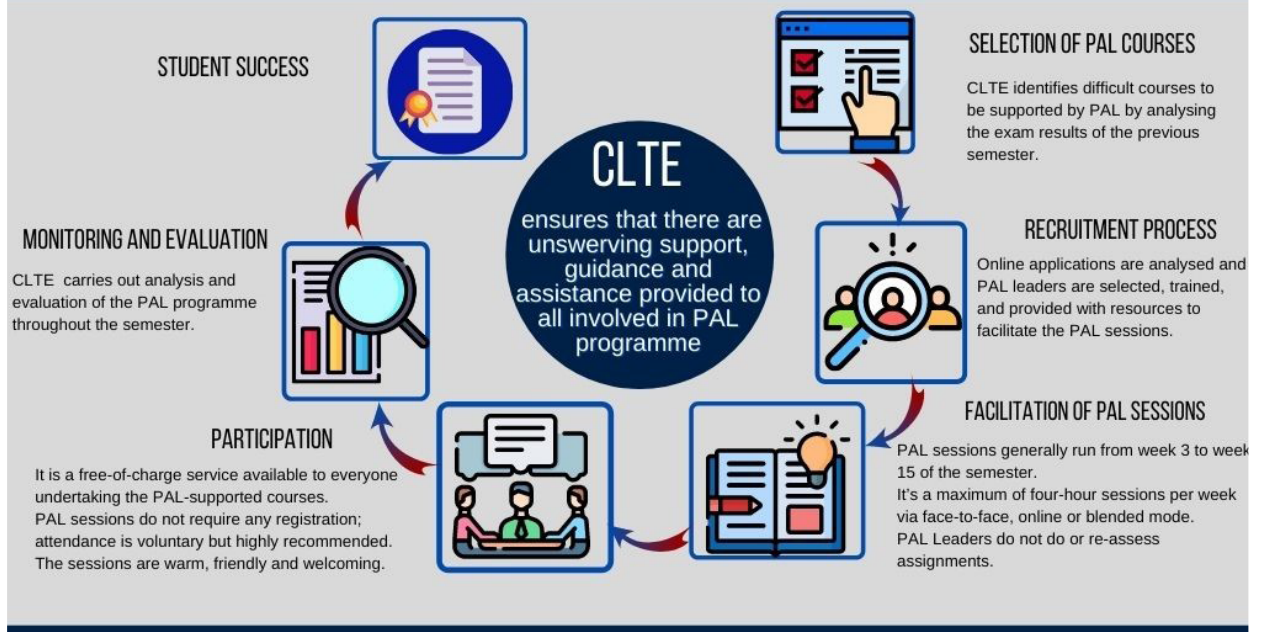
Kado (*pictured*) is a senior Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) leader, a free-of-charge initiative by the University’s Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement (CLTE).

During the PAL sessions, Kado begins by conducting an ice-breaker activity before the group of about 20 students participate in group discussions, activities, presentations and quizzes regarding the unit.

Kado conducts these sessions for the Production Technology of Vegetables and Flowers and Agronomy of Field Crops units that are part of the Bachelor of Science course at FNU’s College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF) at Koronivia Campus.

“I love these sessions, and I’m glad and somewhat proud that I decided to become a PAL leader,” she said.

HOW PAL WORKS



Kumar believes he has also developed a range of transferable skills, which has greatly assisted him in completing the assignments and preparing for exams.

“I have learnt how to structure my assignments, acquired presentation and essay writing skills and techniques together with some useful revision techniques.”

According to Kumar, these interactive study sessions also act as a platform to share ideas with people who want to listen to you while allowing everyone to pick up valuable lessons from the discussions.

“We discuss the assignment topics in our study groups where we end up with some great ideas on how to structure the assignment and what points/arguments to use to strengthen the content of the assignments.”

“It fascinates me to witness how individuals encourage and facilitate each other’s efforts to assist everyone to complete the course successfully.”

Kumar has been attending PAL sessions through Zoom and commended the University for offering such services online.

“Online learning has several tools such as videos, PDF, podcasts, and teachers can use all these tools as part of their lesson plans. Even Zoom session offers an efficient way to deliver lessons to the students. By extending the lesson plan beyond traditional textbooks to include online resources, the teachers have become more efficient educators.”

“Students can attend classes from any location of their choice. It also allows the University to reach out to a more extensive network of students, instead of staying restricted by the geographical boundaries.”

“Additionally, online lectures can be recorded, archived, and shared for future reference, allowing the students to access the materials at a time convenient to them. With online classes, since the classes can be taken from home or location of choice, there are fewer chances of students missing out on the lessons,” he added.



Kado proud of leadership role

“During the sessions, we discuss anything about the unit that the students need clarification on, and we also make it fun and interesting so that it does not feel like another lecture.”

“Towards the end of the session, we discuss the lecture notes and activities we would cover in the next session and agree on the games and activities, so everyone has something to look forward to.”

Kado’s own tertiary education journey influenced her decision to help other students achieve their academic dreams.

After attending Rampur Primary School and Rampur College in Navua, Kado attended Year 13 at Adi Cakobau School.

Unable to complete the academic year, she spent the next two years at Nabua Secondary School’s Matua programme before enrolling in the Foundation programme at FNU.

“I believe this was my chance to realign myself and focus on my attaining higher education. I spent nights on end studying and am grateful that I am now about to complete my degree.”

“I now want to help other students, even those who may have taken a longer path to reach University, like me.”

In her second year at Koronivia Campus, Kado was approached by the CLTE team after recommendations by her lecturers.

“I was glad to hear of this initiative and did not hesitate at the chance of helping other students be successful at FNU. I attended a full-day training to prepare for the semester-long PAL sessions, and I’ve decided to continue being a PAL leader as I have witnessed the benefits both academically and non-academically.”

Kado said one of the key observations she has made was an improvement in the students’ confidence in public speaking now compared to when they first began attending

PAL sessions.

She attributed this to the group discussions and presentations during the sessions, whereby most students could be more confident presenting or speaking in front of a larger, or the whole class, after participating in the smaller PAL groups.

“Every student that attends my PAL session has a unique personality, and so I employ different approaches,” Kado said.

“For instance, I pair a shy student with a vocal student in a group presentation activity to boost his or her self-confidence while speaking.”

“The students also enlarge their networking when they are part of these groups, and so they not only help each other during these scheduled sessions.”

“I have also benefitted from the PAL initiative as it has enhanced my growth in terms of leadership, time management, communication skills and networking.”

“I encourage students to attend PAL sessions that are offered at their various Campuses because it is a fun and interactive way of learning that boosts memory retention through group presentations and develops quick and critical thinking.”

MEET OUR PAL LEADERS



SCAN
HERE

Dass relishes her experience of being a mentor



FNU student Sheemal Dass took on the role of being a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader this year after being encouraged by her lecturers. Dass (*pictured*) describes the role as rewarding, enriching, and satisfying.

She said the experience provided her with an excellent opportunity to impart, guide and share knowledge with fellow students who may find the university transition challenging.

“Being a PAL Leader is a fantastic opportunity for me to use my knowledge and experiences to assist first-year students. I am mentoring the Introduction to Environmental

Science unit. Since I have completed the unit successfully, I am familiar with the concepts and aware of the common mistakes to guide the students currently enrolled in the unit,” said Dass, a final-year Bachelor of Science (Environmental Science) student.

“The PAL program is not only beneficial to the students who attend my sessions but also to me, as I get hands-on experience dealing with people in my field,” she said.

“When I started my university journey, I did not have any mentoring experience. When my name was recommended, I thought it would be a great way to provide the support I never received,” she added.

While growing up in Lautoka, Dass always had a profound love for flora, and the PAL sessions provided her with a great avenue to share common interests with her peers.

“As a PAL leader, I get to interact with many students, most of whom I do not know and have never met; this allows me to enhance my social skills as I have to interact with people of different personalities and different backgrounds.”

“Being part of the PAL programme has given me more confidence to speak up in social settings and to think out of the box. Another incentive was that being a PAL leader is a paid position, so it allows me to be casually employed while still carrying on with my studies,” she said proudly.

The soft-spoken Dass said she gets a great sense of happiness and pride by imparting her knowledge.

“I feel thrilled when I assist students in getting through

something that they have been struggling with, so I believe that being a PAL leader has not only helped me go a step further in my field of work but has also given me a sense of satisfaction on an emotional level,” she said.

Dass has a group of twenty-one students from Namaka and Natabua Campuses in her face-to-face PAL class.

“Students try their best to come to my sessions as many are based at the Namaka campus. However, we are connected on social media platforms where I can assist them if they have any questions.”

“I do prefer face-to-face classes as the class comprises of fun activities like class starter games, rapid-fire question rounds, and debates, looking at common exam questions, preparing charts and doing presentations. The sessions are in a very casual setting where I am actively part of the group during the discussions instead of standing outside the group and monitoring the forum.”

“The class works by redirecting questions from one member of the class to another so they can come to their answers on their own accord instead of me just answering a question,” she stated.

As a PAL leader, Dass has developed her leadership, organisational and planning skills and encourages others to participate in the PAL programme.

“I have become better at networking with people, and I believe the experience has increased my skills portfolio and made me more employable.”

Lecturer reiterates PAL benefits

The first year out of high school can be daunting for many, especially those transitioning to university. Being in a new study environment, juggling lectures with assignment deadlines and exams can leave students overwhelmed.

Fiji National University (FNU) academic Melvin Chand believes the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) initiative was beneficial. It supported students to remain focused on achieving good academic grades while also meeting classmates.

Chand (*pictured*), a lecturer in Economics, Banking and Finance at FNU Namaka Campus, says that PAL sessions were an excellent avenue for students to share knowledge and solve course-related tasks collectively.

“PAL provides means of facilitating discussion amongst students to foster academic skills and literacies. Students learn a lot from other students and participating in activities that encourage learning from their peers,” said Chand.

“I have noted for my course ECN502 - Introduction to Microeconomics, PAL sessions have enhanced and increased students’ academic engagement. Students are gaining more confidence and feel more inspired about the economics unit. I am confident they would pick up useful skills and get higher grades,” he added.

Chand stressed that PAL supports student’s engagement

with their studies and learning.

“The sessions are a great social and learning environment as students who require assistance are given tools by enthusiastic students who have completed the units. PAL encourages participation, sharing ideas and collaborative learning. It is a safe place to try to get clarifications from peers.”

Chand mentioned that he noticed a change in students’ attitude towards learning after attending a PAL session.

“Not only is the student’s confidence boosted, but I have noticed a reduction in anxiety as students interact more easily with peers in their year as well as students in other levels of study.

“I have seen that shy students grow in confidence, become more outspoken and capable. Similarly, I have been that students who have been outspoken gain a greater sense of control, more self-awareness and learn to know when they are better at keeping quiet and speaking up.”

“Attending the PAL sessions makes them better problem-solvers because they encounter problems and opportunities to improve in every session. I have seen our students trying new things and striving towards excellence if there is a problem.”

Chand adds that the PAL leaders play a pivotal role and are great role models for students.



“PAL leaders are viewed as students of high calibre, and seeing this can boost the self-esteem of students who sometimes doubt their capabilities.”

As a faculty member, Chand said that he has had the pleasure of meeting and working with keen students who are eager to make a difference in the lives of others.

Peer sessions are effective – Sumasafu



When Dutchy Tieri Sumasafu joined Fiji National University (FNU) this year, like all freshers, he was overwhelmed with the new learning environment.

However, the orientation session eased his nerves, allowing him to make new friends and become familiar with his learning environment on campus. His confidence was further boosted when he learnt about FNU’s Peer Assisted Learning sessions.

Sumasafu (*pictured*) is pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting and Finance at FNU’s College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies (CBHTS) at Namaka Campus.

He attends the PAL sessions, especially for his accounting unit, to strengthen his knowledge and attain good grades.

“PAL is a valuable resource that allows me to work through the problem together and better understand the course concepts with my peers,” he said.

“As a first-year student, the sessions have offered me a sanctuary where I can tune down everything else and immerse myself with peers to compare notes and seek clarifications in my subject,” he said.

The former Swami Vivekananda College student is happy to be receiving guidance from a PAL mentor who has completed the accounting unit.

“The most positive thing about attending my Computerized Accounting (ACC501) PALs session is being able to be comfortable while learning. Though we ask our lecturers

the questions at times, it’s easier to learn from our peers.”

“Krishaal (PAL leader) gives us the freedom to get comfortable in the session, having us ask the most basic to difficult questions without being insecure about asking, and conversing with other students.”

“The sessions we have at Namaka Campus are very relaxed. We have discussions with our leader who completely understands our queries as he may have experienced the same problem while taking the unit,” he adds.

The aspiring accountant said that the most positive aspect of attending the PAL sessions is to ask questions without being judged.

“PAL sessions has helped me understand more of the topics covered in my units. It allows me to work through problems, ask questions without fear, and provide me with a chance to get help with issues and questions that I have been struck on from someone who understands the concepts well.”

Sumasafu describes his PAL sessions as productive, comfortable and effective.

“I encourage students to take advantage of the sessions and get clarifications from students who had been in a similar situation. Plus, the session provides me with a distraction-free environment to get some work done.”

Ranadi appreciates peer-led teaching at FNU

Part from the traditional learning method of attending daily face-to-face classes, second-year Fiji National University (FNU) student Amelia Ranadi is grateful the institution has adopted Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) to enhance students learning experience.

Ranadi (*pictured*), a student at FNU's College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism (CBHTS), said she was introduced to the PAL sessions by one of her lecturers during a class at the beginning of the semester.

In her first-ever experience in learning with peers, the Bachelor of Commerce in Human Resource Management and Management student said she was pleased to see that the PAL programme was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, and participants felt at ease asking questions and helping each other out.

"I think this is a good approach in terms of helping students who may have queries and need supplementary information and guidance in their subject areas. This method is very helpful and valuable as we strive to get good grades," stated Ranadi.

Originally from Naitasiri, Ranadi attends the sessions with her eight colleagues. Their PAL Leader is Sonam Prasad, who Ranadi describes as 'kind and helpful'.

"We always have a great interaction with our leader who ensures that all our queries are responded to. Likewise, we have problem-based learning sessions and case studies to understand better the two human resources and management units which I'm currently undertaking."

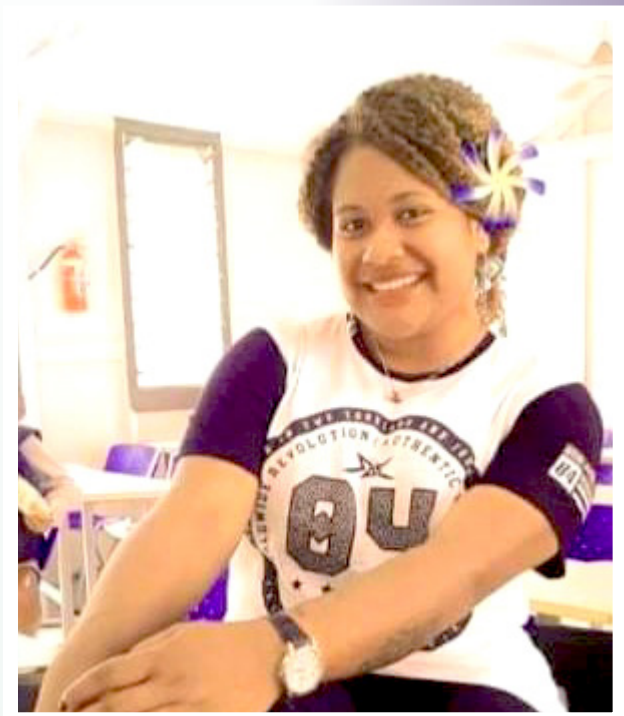
The former Wainimala Secondary Student emphasised that PAL has benefited her tremendously in her academic and she ensures she attends two hours of peer learning sessions each week.

"I cannot miss any of the sessions at any cost, because each session is a great learning experience and since it is a collaborative approach, I have noticed that I have become more confident and I can engage and communicate better with my colleagues."

"Just as our lecturers and tutors transfer their knowledge, peer learning is also done in a similar manner but in a more relaxed environment," explained Ranadi.

The aspiring human resource officer has urged other students to explore the benefits of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL).

"Peer learning is becoming more common for good reason among my friends at the Fiji National University. For those who are unfamiliar with this concept, I recommend that you show interest and engage in peer learning."



Chand happy to assist freshers

and Finance student at FNU's Namaka Campus, Chand (*pictured*) says there is nothing to lose and a lot to gain being a PAL leader. The role allows him to assist first-year students in understanding accounting concepts better.

"Students find some accounting concepts complicated, and I'm grateful to assist them. It is gratifying to see them relieved and at ease when I assist them in understanding accounting concepts," shared Chand.

"The main factor that pushed me towards becoming a PAL leader is my passion and self-love for accounting. I understand that many students would require help to succeed in accounting units, especially Computerized Accounting (ACC501), at the university level. PAL gave me a platform to use my knowledge and experience to provide study support sessions for freshers in the accounting unit."

"The role has provided me with an opportunity to meet a lot of new students. It is also a way for me to re-live my first-year experience through my mentees," he said.

The former Mulomulo Secondary School student is pleased to be part of the PAL program and thankful for the opportunity to forge ahead with his academic goals whilst being part of a beneficial initiative.

"The most positive impact of being a Senior PAL Leader is that it has enabled me to gain confidence, such as public speaking. This boosted my self-esteem, enabling me to put my views and concerns to the forefront."

"I have developed my communication and interpersonal skills through the facilitation of PAL sessions weekly, where I am required to attend to students on an individual basis to know the difficulties that they are facing with the course and work out possible solutions to it."

Though the role is a paid opportunity, Chand said he was surprised to be recognised via a certificate.

"One of the significant incidents that surprised me was when I was asked to collect my certificate. I never expected this since it is pretty rare to find these paid schemes to be recognised by a certificate at the end. I am grateful to FNU for providing us with these opportunities and recognising our immense efforts."

According to Chand, PAL sessions are life-saving sessions, as these sessions can save students from the last-minute rush for revisions.

"I encourage students to take advantage of PAL sessions. We are in a better position to guide you as we have been already completed the unit and know the areas of difficulty."

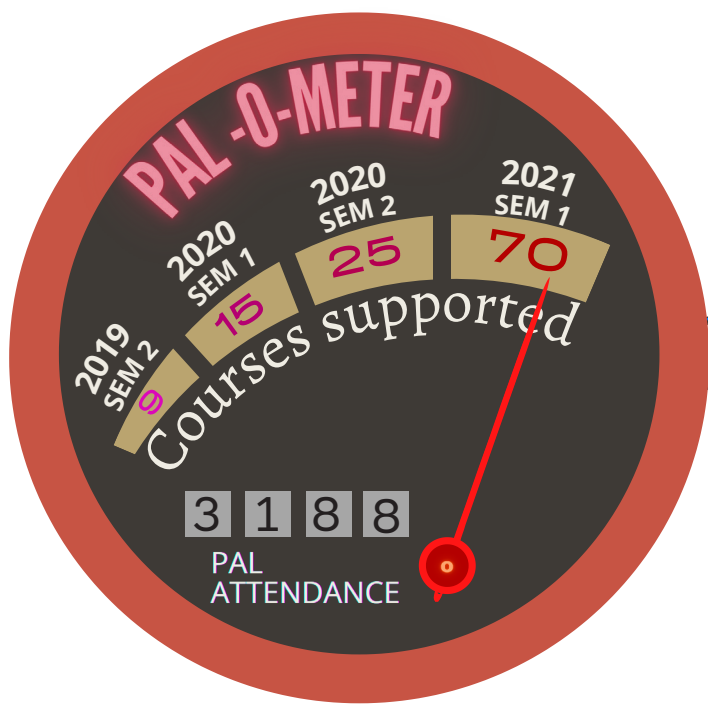
Chand urges capable students to become PAL leaders as the experience allows them to refresh their subject knowledge and develop confidence in people interaction and problem-solving skills.

"Get involved in the PAL scheme if you are a high calibre student and make a difference in students lives by providing them with tips to excel in their chosen subject area."

Aspiring accountant Krishnaal Minal Chand's mantra in life is to do his best to be the light for others. So, when the prospect to become a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader came up last year, he seized the opportunity without a second thought.

A final-year Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting

SEMESTER 1 2021



PAL helps students and leaders learn better – Al-Dousary

Mohammed Al-Dousary, a second-year Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery student at Fiji National University's (FNU) College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS), believes that being a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leader has allowed him to explore his teaching abilities.

Al-Dousary (*pictured*) has always been passionate about teaching, and the role enables him to challenge himself to discover the profession whilst being a medical student.

"The PAL scheme benefits both students and the leaders. Apart from being able to test my capabilities, it has helped me review previous year's materials and to have a taste of what it is like to earn money by putting in effort as an employee," he said.

The medical student is the PAL Leader for students enrolled in the MED501, Problem Based Learning for MBBS Year 1 unit.

"My duties involve imparting knowledge, tools and techniques which can help make understanding difficult topics easier. I also provide a narrative regarding which pieces of information relate clinically since medicine demands a hands-on approach and a detailed understanding of connection with anatomy, physiology and pathology."

Al-Dousary conducts his PAL sessions through Zoom for international students, who have not been able to

come to Fiji due to border closure. While sharing his views on learning and teaching in this COVID era, he highlighted that tools such as Zoom is the most feasible alternative and that we must adapt to this teaching and learning method if we want the gears to keep revolving.

"Zoom and other online platforms have enabled virtual

classrooms to exist as an adaptation to the pandemic, and it has opened new doors in social interaction."

"I prefer face-to-face learning to Zoom sessions; however, we must work with what we have to get things done. We cannot expect to come to a standstill. We have shown resilience in this pandemic, and I know we can use Zoom to do much good."

According to Al-Dousary, being a PAL Leader is not easy; however, he uses different methods to keep a balance between his role, studies and having a social life.

"I use various study/productivity techniques such as the 'Pomodoro technique' and 'time-blocking' to optimise time management. Being in control of my time allows me to do things I love such as going to the gym, volunteering at an NGO, reading books (not about medicine) and attending to my religious obligations along with my studies and being a PAL Leader."

Growing up, Al-Dousary had a profound interest in a variety of disciplines, including geography, history, mathematics, physics, music and commerce as well.

However, medicine seemed to be the option in which he could go out of his comfort zone while ensuring that he becomes part of a profession centred around service without barriers of race, religion, age, sexuality or gender.

"Furthermore, I worked towards achieving sufficient grades to be able to enter this competitive field of study. So after high school, I was eligible for a National Toppers Scholarship by the Fijian Government to pursue MBBS."

Sharing about his secret to success in life, Al-Dousary said: "we must be mindful in everything we do. This includes focusing on the present and letting go of thoughts that do not serve you in the present moment. You can apply this to any facet of life."



Initiative boosts self-confidence – Maharaj

Fiji National University (FNU) student Suwesh Maharaj believes the interactive study group sessions known as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) help students and leaders develop their confidence and improved academic results.

Maharaj (*pictured*), a Year 5 Bachelor of Dental Surgery student at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS), believes that being a Senior PAL Leader has allowed her to be more confident in expressing her ideas and knowledge.

"The reason I became a PAL Leader is that I wanted to assist and guide my fellow junior colleagues to adapt well to the University environment and boost their academic confidence by sharing my own experiences," said Maharaj.

"Through the PAL sessions, I get to meet several students with different backgrounds and struggles but with the same goal – to successfully finish their tertiary education to be able to secure a decent job."

Maharaj conducts face-to-face PAL sessions for the DNT509 – Oral Biology unit, where she assists her peers in understanding the concepts taught by lecturers and shares her practical knowledge relating to the course.

"When we interact with each other during the study sessions, I can feel that I have become more confident in expressing and imparting my knowledge, which further motivates me to keep assisting the students with their queries."

"You realise that you know something well when you can



explain or teach the same concept to someone else without hesitation and icing on the cake if they understand it at the first shot. Therefore, this is another advantage for me as a leader, where I can gauge my level of understanding and knowledge about particular concepts that we learn in class."

"Hence, this is an opportunity for me to better myself while helping others," she said.

According to Maharaj, the interactive study sessions have a friendly, enjoyable, and positive atmosphere, which makes learning more comfortable and exciting.

"These factors make the PAL sessions of value and allows one to voice almost any problem in confidence with the reassurance of it being taken positively. It is safe to say that PAL sessions are of value for their cooperative character, enabling students to share ideas, approaches, experiences or problems without reluctance."

Maharaj said there is also the social aspect of PAL sessions – encouraging socialisation and getting to know the students within the same field of profession, which, according to her, could be useful even after graduation.

"Many of us are staying away from home and our families, therefore, having friends could make us feel less homesick. PAL sessions serve as a great method of making new friends within your course of study, with whom you become comfortable even outside of the study sessions," she added.

Kumar

– A Physics Enthusiast

Fiji National University (FNU) alumnus and staff, Ashmit Kumar is the epitome of a physics enthusiast. Whilst currently a Physics Laboratory Technician, Kumar is on the path to becoming an academic one day to contribute to the development of the country through essential research data and pass on knowledge to the next generation of physicists.

Kumar (*pictured*) attributed his success to the mentorship he received from his lecturers while he was a student. He said this guidance helped shape his career, as well as strengthen his love for physics.

“My dream as a child was to become a scientist and help my country with innovative technology. I’m grateful to the mentoring I had that guided me in the right direction,” said Kumar.

“As a physicist, I work on projects, both individually as well as in groups, to bring about positive change in Fiji through innovation and technology.”

Kumar is currently working on a project with other colleagues trying to determine the feasibility of a biogas system in our local communities.

“This project, if successful, will help so many households save money on cooking gas. Especially in these trying times, this can mean a lot for most people.”

Tertiary Education and Career

Kumar enrolled in the Bachelor of Science (Maths and Physics) programme at the FNU’s College of Engineering, Science and Technology (CEST) at the Natabua Campus in 2016. As he had previously completed some courses for the same programme, he was able to cross-credit those courses into the new programme.

“I felt that FNU, given its strong reputation as a dual-sector institution, best suited my long term academic and career goals. At FNU, I could apply the theory taught during lectures to everyday practical applications.”

Sharing his experience as a student, he said, “FNU helped me realise my dream by providing me with the necessary skills and knowledge. I felt at ease during tutorials and classes as the student to teacher ratio was much better. This provided me with more contact with my lecturers and hence improved my academic results. Also, I was able to test the theory taught in lectures during laboratory classes.”

Kumar completed the programme and graduated in 2017.

“Straight after graduating, I worked as a Laboratory Demonstrator in Physics at FNU. I also enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma in Physics programme at FNU.”

After a year, he was promoted to Assistant Instructor in Physics position at FNU. He served in this position for two years before doing a short stint at The University of the South Pacific (USP).

During this time, he also completed his programme and graduated with a Postgraduate Diploma in Physics in 2020.

“My biggest achievement as a student is being a Co-Author for a research paper titled, Monitoring of

Environmental Radioactivity in Foodstuff in Fiji, which has been published. I also provided technical support for the following “Natural radioactivity measurement of gold mine tailings in Vatukoula, Fiji Islands.”

Later in 2020, Kumar joined FNU again as a Laboratory Technician in the Physics department, where he currently works.

“My job requires me to arrange, conduct and supervise laboratory classes. I find it very exciting since I get to do very interesting physics experiments and teach students how the knowledge and skills gained during lab classes can be applied to our local communities. Physics helps me understand how this world works, both on the microscopic scale and the macroscopic scale. Also, the physics experiments are a joy.”

Mentorship at FNU

According to Kumar, he was inspired by his professors and credited his success to them.

“My Professors – Professor Abdul Malik and Dr Kiran Kondamareddy – taught me to always remember that knowledge leads to innovation and innovation to prosperity within a country or community. They were excellent mentors and were ever ready to assist with all our queries,” shared Kumar.

“I believe that mentors guide students during the different stages in the learning process which students find difficult.”

“Mentors enhance the learning process and make it somewhat easier for students to succeed. Now FNU has the Peer Assisted Learning programme which I believe is even better, as students mostly feel more comfortable getting assistance from their peers,” he added.

As someone working in the teaching and learning section of the university, Kumar said his students also look up to him to be their mentor.

“Students do come up to me to ask for assistance and for me to guide them with their courses. I guess they see me as a peer mentor who would be able to enhance their learning process.”

Words of Wisdom

Giving his advice to students, Kumar said, “You are an integral part of our country’s scientific community. Never think that just because Fiji is a small country that it cannot be a leader in innovation.”

“We as Fijians can bring about innovative changes to our communities and mitigate or overcome many of the challenges we face; whether that challenge is poverty or global warming.”

“Be sincere with your studies. Work hard and work smart. Also, never hesitate to ask your lecturers or teachers questions. Your teachers are there to guide you and can be mentors for life. You could also have peer mentors if you are more comfortable with them,” he added.



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