

# Implementing and sustaining successful Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programs: Insights into practice

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*This double 'Nut and Bolts' session will bring together a panel of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) practitioners to lead a discussion on key issues relating to the implementation of PASS programs in the Australian context. PASS programs currently support student learning across 25 Australian tertiary institutions, offering peer-led group study sessions in selected subjects across a broad range of disciplines. Providing effective peer learning experiences for students requires a strategic approach to the coordination, implementation, and evaluation of all aspects of the program. This session will cover three important areas of such a strategic approach: consideration of institutional, political, and evaluative factors; recruitment and training of PASS Leaders; and their ongoing personal and professional development. Through this shared discussion it is hoped that participants will better understand PASS and its implementation across higher education in Australia, and importantly develop a network of PASS contacts for further advice and professional discussion.*

## **Considering institutional, political and evaluative factors (University of Wollongong)**

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is a voluntary academic assistance program predominantly offered as a first year experience initiative that is designed to assist in the transition to university life. Facilitated by senior students it combines “what to learn”, “how to learn” and transition skills preparing participants for tomorrow’s learning and life today. PASS utilises peer-led group study sessions which combine discipline specific learning skills and consolidation of content, fostering a supportive and engaging learning environment. The professional and personal development the Peer Leaders receive prepares and enhances those senior students for their role in tomorrow’s graduate positions.

The PASS Program is largely based on Supplemental Instruction (SI), developed by Dr Deanna Martin in 1973 at the University of Missouri, Kansas City (UMKC). SI and PASS have been implemented in over 30 countries. PASS / SI not only assists students in the successful transition to university life, but encourages an engaged learning community based upon prominent educational theory. In particular the work of Vygotsky, who argues that learning takes place when learners practise with the assistance of more capable others and that knowledge is actively constructed by people talking, working and discovering together (Vialle et. al., 2008).

At the University of Wollongong (UOW), the PASS program is the cornerstone of the First Year Experience. Commencing in 2002, it targets historically difficult subjects which students

struggle with and caters for a range of abilities and student goals. It is also attached to subjects for other reasons, such as the establishment of broader learning communities in smaller cohorts. For the first five years, PASS concentrated on supporting traditionally difficult, technical subjects in such disciplines as computer science, math, chemistry and economics. PASS then successfully expanded its support to the Law, Creative Arts and Arts Faculties. It is also in its second year of supporting the Graduate School of Medicine. UOW now runs the most diverse PASS program of any Australian university, supporting first year, second year and postgraduate subjects across nine faculties. It also offers PASS at four of its satellite Education Centres.

UOW is the National Centre for PASS and the Program Manager, Sally Rogan, is the internationally accredited (UMKC) National SI / PASS Trainer. With Sally Rogan as the National Trainer since 2005, the National Centre offers support to PASS Programs in the Australasian region. Over 120 staff from 25 institutions in Australia, NZ and Malaysia have now benefited from the training and assistance the PASS team at UOW has provided.

The success of PASS at UOW at an institutional level has been epitomised by the numerous awards the Program and its administrators have received, in regard to their contribution to teaching and learning. However, PASS has also been successful at a subject level, as it has been rigorously assessed using quantitative and qualitative surveys and reports each semester and econometric analysis using the Heckman technique. The results of such rigorous assessment have indicated the improvement of grades and the reduction of failure rates amongst participants (O'Brien, 2006).

As such, the UOW presenters will outline and facilitate discussion on the necessary institutional, political and evaluative factors, as well as funding considerations and other campus requirements to implement a quality PASS Program.

### **Initial recruitment and training of PASS Leaders (Deakin University)**

An effective PASS program is very much dependent on its PASS Leaders, with the recruitment and training of Leaders being crucial to the success of the program. Leaders act as mentors for new students and so need to have a range of attributes or the potential to develop them. These include knowledge of the subject area, skills in interacting with individuals as well as with groups of students, an understanding of student diversity and needs, and the ability to lead a group of students in activities that encourage engagement in subject content.

But how do PASS Coordinators recruit and train Leaders? Deakin University has piloted PASS in trimester 1. 2009 with an Accounting unit, and had a new PASS Coordinator running PASS training with the support of a trainer experienced in Supplemental Instruction. The presenters will discuss the thinking behind the training program and outline tried and true PASS training strategies as well as offering some new approaches.

Recruitment is the first step in getting together the PASS Leader team. Faculty “buy-in” was deemed to be important so the choice was made to engage the Faculty of Business and Law in the recruitment, selection and training of the PASS Leaders. Besides the fact that the Faculty is funding the program, they are in the best position to recommend suitable students. Recommendations were sought from the Unit Chair for suitable candidates as potential Leaders. This was important because it helped to develop a collaborative partnership between the Division of Student Life and the Faculty.

As PASS was new to Deakin, a group interview process was used to begin to fill the knowledge gap. This also gave applicants an opportunity to demonstrate their presentation and interpersonal skills and helped the trainers gauge what the Leaders might need to develop in the training program. Again, a key contact from the Faculty Teaching and Learning Group was involved in the selection process, and staff in Student Life worked collaboratively with colleagues in the Faculty, modelling the team approach that the PASS Leaders need to develop. The collaborative partnership was further enhanced by involving faculty staff in the training of the Leaders.

The two-day training program was essentially based on the outline suggested at the PASS Supervisor training run by the National Centre at UOW. The excellent PASS Leader training materials, produced by UMKC and supplemented by materials produced by UOW, were invaluable. They support the use of a range of group learning strategies involving pairs, clusters and small groups. Content covers the nature of the role as well as relationships and responsibilities. A simple activity on the pedagogical underpinnings of PASS was also introduced. This started with a reflection on how students learn and helped the new Leaders appreciate the educational validity of the PASS approach.

Leader training needs to be underpinned by learning theory. The aim was to ensure that the training experience modelled the approaches to facilitation fundamental to PASS. The two-day training included as many opportunities as possible for Leaders to work in collaborative groups, practise questioning techniques, and develop the strategies that they would use in their PASS sessions. The Leaders were also encouraged to take on facilitation roles from day one. Team building activities were used to help Leaders get to know each other and themselves, and these built up to presentations on the second day, with feedback from the trainers and from a trusted friend. Encouraging supportive relationships within the team was seen to be invaluable to the Leaders' ongoing personal and professional development.

The aim of the training program was to empower this group to take on a new and unfamiliar role. The presenters will invite further discussion and suggestions from others involved in PASS and other student training programs.

### **Ongoing personal and professional development of PASS Leaders (University of Tasmania)**

The benefits of PASS extend well beyond the impact it has upon academic and campus community engagement outcomes for first year students. The employment of high-achieving students in roles of leadership and mentoring provides valuable pathways for these students connecting them to the institution in ways that they might otherwise not engage. PASS enhances and extends their own learning experiences and provides an opportunity to develop further their graduate attributes outside of their own course environments.

PASS was introduced at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) in three units in Semester 1, 2007 with the aim of increasing student achievement and subsequently enhancing retention in these units. An increase in interest in the program from both staff and students across the University led to the development and implementation of a strategic plan for the growth of PASS across targeted first year units in all faculties. This strategic approach has enabled PASS at UTAS to grow to support 31 units and over 1500 students in 2009, and in only its third year of operation.

The successful growth of PASS at UTAS has been facilitated by embedding sound quality assurance processes and research-informed teaching and learning practices into the program, specifically in regard to the training and ongoing support for PASS Leaders. In addition to being informed by the literature on effective teaching practice and student-centred learning approaches (Biggs, 2003), PASS at UTAS embeds critical reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995) in all levels and aspects of the program's operation. Comprehensive evaluation of the program has evidenced both increased average academic outcomes, enhanced campus community engagement, and excellent retention rates for students who attend PASS regularly. In addition, the development of the leadership skills and generic graduate attributes of high-achieving students in their roles as PASS Leaders has been a key outcome of the program. In 2008 UTAS two PASS Leaders received national awards in recognition of their excellence and contribution to student learning.

With thirty-six PASS Leaders currently offering 68 PASS sessions weekly across the three UTAS campuses, an organisational framework has been established to ensure that Leaders are supported in their role not only by the PASS Program Coordinator, but also by more experienced Leaders. Selected experienced PASS Leaders are given the opportunity to further develop their leadership skills by taking on a senior mentoring role in the program. Each PASS Mentor cares for a group of approximately 12 Leaders from different disciplines, and these groups meet fortnightly throughout the year for ongoing professional learning and sharing of ideas. This embedded professional learning and cross-disciplinary collaboration between PASS Leaders has resulted in the development of a diverse variety of dynamic activities being used in PASS sessions.

Providing opportunities for PASS Leaders to collaborate and reflect is seen as crucial to maintaining a successful and high quality program. It not only enhances the confidence of the PASS Leaders but importantly the quality of the PASS sessions themselves thereby enhancing the outcomes and experiences of first year students.

UTAS will share and facilitate discussion about the processes incorporated into the program to provide ongoing personal and professional development for PASS Leaders. These will include the formal evaluation of PASS sessions, and also the opportunities of collaboration and reflection afforded to PASS Leaders through both formal and informal measures.

**Session:** This double Nuts and Bolts session will be structured to incorporate 30 minutes of presentation from the three contributing universities followed by 30 minutes of shared discussion.

### *References*

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