

Peer Support for First Year Students in the School GPEM, UQ

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The poster graphically demonstrates the significance of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in enhancing the learning outcomes for first year students embarking on 4 year programs of study in regional and town planning and environmental management programs at The University of Queensland (UQ). PASS is embedded in all six, first year, foundation courses with more than a dozen student leaders drawing up to 40% of enrolled students to PASS each week.

Evidence of Assessment: Attendance correlated to grades attained has consistently produced graphic evidence that regular attendance at PASS enhances final grades. A regression analysis of university entrance scores plotted against PASS attendance and average grades attained demonstrates that PASS benefits all students, but significantly the average student. Monitoring of retention rates over a six year period reveal low student attrition when compared to national rates. Surveys of students attending PASS will be presented highlighting what initiatives work well in maintaining attendance and what aspects could be improved. Significant socializing benefits for students who attend these sessions are also revealed in the returns.

Detailed Summary: PASS at UQ is derived from the Supplemental Instruction model (University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1973). PASS was deployed in the School of Geography Planning Environmental Management (GPEM) at the St. Lucia campus in 1995, albeit on a small scale of a single session of one hour a week in one course. With the appointment of a first year coordinator in 2005, PASS expanded in GPEM to six, first year courses in several programs with an enrolment >1300 students and more than a dozen student leaders. Attendance varies from 20% to 40% of course enrolment and sessions are run by high achieving, second or third year students. The PASS program aims to improve the quality of learning and is voluntary, student-centred and student-directed with a focus on providing self and peer-formative assessment with immediate feedback within an interactive and collaborative learning environment. The poster provides a graphic snapshot of the impact of PASS on enhancing student's grades in a foundation course, Environment and Society (GEOS1100), and highlights the importance of PASS for average achievers in raising their grades proportionately more than other groups. The poster also illustrates the critical social benefits of attending PASS that assist in settling new students into university life. Data on attrition rates in all first year courses in GPEM supports the contention that the expansion of PASS has stabilized attrition rates in this course to between 2-8% when compared to national averages of 18%. Feedback from students who attend PASS sessions is consistently positive and their support for the program has resulted in a steady growth in voluntary attendance to reach approximately 40% of enrolments in GEOS1100.

Implications for Institutional Improvement or Advancement: An organized and sustained peer mentoring program such as PASS embedded in all programs across the institution would enhance retention rates in first year courses and programs. To this end, it is the University's policy to promote and expand PASS across a broader range of programs. With the Australian national average attrition rate quoted as 18%, the implementation of PASS is one strategy that may be adopted to lower this rate. A significant intake of international students underpins Australian tertiary institution enrolments. Apart from the academic support that peer mentoring sessions offer, there is evidence presented in this poster that the social benefits of attending PASS are very important for many students, particularly international students and those students in their first year after leaving school. Many of the students who drop out of university make their decision by the fourth week of term and so it is critical that PASS commences in the first few weeks of the program. PASS assists this transition from work or school to university in getting students together in small, course orientated groups to socialize and work together with their peers. The student leaders, who are just a year or two ahead of the group, can draw on their experiences as a newly arrived first year and take some of the anxiety out of these early days which may lead to increased retention.