



IT'S MORE THAN JUST PASSING WITH PASS

PASS stands for Peer Assisted Study Sessions and is the UK variant of the well known academic assistance scheme – Supplemental Instruction (SI). SI was developed in the US in 1973 and is currently in use in over 300 HE institutions throughout the world to improve students' academic performance and retention.

Since 1995 the Learning Development team at The University of Manchester has supported the implementation of PASS in over 20 disciplines. In 2005-06, the Faculty of Life Sciences (FLS) implemented PASS for its 480 first year bioscience undergraduates.

PASS is a structured peer support scheme whereby higher year students (PASS Leaders) volunteer to support and facilitate the learning of first year students (participants). The Leaders, following training in areas including facilitation and group dynamics, are paired up to lead and facilitate group study sessions (max 20 participants). These non-compulsory PASS sessions take place weekly for an hour (ideally timetabled between two lectures) in a classroom-based environment.

The character of the PASS sessions is one of collaborative and active learning. They are centred on explorative discussions and interactions organised and/or facilitated by the leaders. Their main aims are to help participants better integrate into university life and to provide a safe and supportive environment where participants can engage in self-directed learning practices, compare and develop learning strategies and study skills for HE, as well as improve their understanding of the subject matter.

In FLS, as is usually the case, PASS was launched in association with course units that have been perceived as particularly demanding by previous cohorts of students: in this case 'Genes and Evolution' for semester 1 and 'Drugs: from molecules to man' for semester 2. The Leaders were supported by

an academic coordinator in each semester who suggested discussion topics and activities for the sessions. The coordinator also met weekly with the Leaders to receive any feedback generated during the sessions. It is important to stress here that PASS is not remedial in nature and that each Leader's role is not to be a teacher but a facilitator.

PASS was implemented in FLS with the following aims in mind:

- To assist participants with their transition to university life;
- To assist participants with their understanding of course material, and their development as independent learners;
- To provide both participants and leaders with an opportunity to develop or improve a range of transferable and study skills;
- To increase peer interaction and challenge the barriers between year groups, encouraging a sense of community within our large cohorts;
- To enable students to get a leader's view of course expectations; and
- To generate real time feedback about our first year courses.

The evaluation of the scheme is still ongoing but our preliminary data have been very encouraging.

First, our data show that for semester 1 (2005), compared to non-attendees, PASS had a positive effect on the overall academic performance of its regular participants; their failure rate dropped and their grades improved. This was tested in a carefully controlled environment with our first year cohort being randomly divided into two groups of similar size: group 1 was offered PASS in semester 1, and group 2 was offered PASS in semester 2, thus providing useful control groups. Interestingly, the 54 regular participants showed a good distribution of marks, indicating that their comparatively better academic performance was not due to good

students self-selecting to attend PASS.

Second, two complementary surveys have shown that the students saw PASS primarily as a support tool to further their understanding of course material and to a lesser extent as a tool to prepare for assessment. This comforted us in thinking that we had managed to promote amongst the regular PASS participants a meaning-oriented approach to learning as opposed to a strategic-driven one.

Finally, a survey has shown our Leaders have greatly benefited from the scheme. Typically, they developed a wide range of transferable skills. They also saw direct benefits to their own academic and personal development as they became more self aware as learners, and felt more confident, focused and valued by the faculty.

Following a successful pilot year, FLS has decided to offer PASS to all its first years (480) throughout the entire year. In response to last year's feedback and evaluation, two major aspects were changed in the PASS format: the PASS and mentoring schemes have merged, and PASS is now generic to the whole FLS first year course, so students weekly decide what is on the agenda. By placing the ownership of the scheme with the students, we expect it will continue to grow in strength and impact.

A full evaluation of 2005-06 and 2006-07 is intended to be presented at conferences in Keele (Science Learning and Teaching Conference) and in Gothenberg (European First Year Experience) this spring.

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