Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

‘PASS was the best thing that could have happened to me academically and for the first time I am actually enjoying education.’

PASS Participant

An overview

- Peer Assisted Study sessions (PASS) is a scheme that is intended to foster cross-year support between students on the same Programme. It encourages students to support each other and learn co-operatively under the guidance of students from the year above.
- PASS has five main aims and it is intended to help students:
  - Integrate quickly to university life
  - Gain insight into the requirements of their programme, and their lecturers’ expectations from the perspective of a more experienced student
  - Improve their learning and study skills to meet the demands of their programme
  - Enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative group discussion
  - Prepare better for assessed work and examinations
- After receiving training the more experienced students, called PASS Leaders, facilitate weekly study support sessions for groups of students from the year below.
- PASS sessions are intended to be planned, structured and friendly. In PASS, the emphasis is on everyone in the group working co-operatively to develop their understanding. PASS is therefore about exploratory discussion lead by the PASS Leaders. The more everyone joins in these discussions, the better the sessions work.
- Content for PASS sessions is based on existing course materials – hand-outs, notes, textbooks and set reading.

Peer Assisted study sessions are NOT:

- Targeted at weak or problem students – all participants should benefit
- Teaching by students
- A means of reducing existing lecturer – student contact
- An environment just for social chatting

Basic Requirements of PASS

- In order to run effectively PASS requires the support and involvement of the Programme academic team and administrative staff
- One member of the academic team and the Programme PASS Contact, will need to meet regularly with the PASS Leaders to guide them, provide them with course timetables and assignment briefs, and obtain feedback from them
- PASS works best when it appears as a normal part of the student’s learning activities and is timetabled at times students will find convenient ie, immediately after a lecture
- PASS Leaders are trained in their role. This involves an initial 3 modules of generic training, with further sessions being used to provide discipline support, resources, share experiences, academic sessions and consolidate or add to their skills

Benefits for Programmes

Feedback indicates that PASS provides the following benefits:

- Evidence of cost-effective additional student support which can be used to Institutional Audit, Subject Review or for marketing
- Creates links between year groups which can help develop a more cohesive course culture
- Increases the level of student involvement in and ownership of learning
- Support can be targeted at specific areas of a Programme which students find particularly challenging with an aim to improve student understanding
- PASS Leaders provide additional, in-time and considered feedback for the Programme Team
- In their PASS Leaders, the Programme gains altruistic and committed students who can help promote the Programme and meet with internal or external reviewers

Benefits to individual students

Feedback obtained during evaluation indicates that most recipients of PASS:

- Enjoy and benefit from the small group work and collaborative discussions that take place during PASS
- Like the PASS environment where it is okay to admit to not understanding something and to make mistakes
- Consider that PASS has improved their understanding of the subject content of their course by providing an opportunity to discuss or practice their subject
- Welcome the opportunity to meet regularly with a student who has been through the first year and survived it
- Feel that PASS has helped them get to know other members of their group and settle into university
- Benefit from the PASS Leaders advice on Programme direction and what is expected of them
- Obtained discreet, valuable support and advice when it was needed

Benefits to PASS Leaders

During evaluation, Leaders have indicated that PASS has:

- Developed their personal and employability skills such as leadership, team working, organising, time management, listening, interpersonal communication, facilitation and presentation skills
Enabled them to gain confidence especially in situations when team work is required to attain a goal
Provided valuable experience to enhance their CVs
Enabled them to revise and practise the subject, and gain a deeper understanding of it
Provided an opportunity to register for accreditation of their activities through reflective portfolio (e.g., Personal Skills award)

Benefits to academic staff
PASS Leaders act as a first point of contact for first-year students and should reduce the number of 'minor' requests from students
Helps students to become better prepared for classes, manage their workload, and keep up with course work
Helps students to learn to work more effectively in a peer-based group
Leaders give feedback to their Programme PASS Contact on how first-year students are receiving course content

What will help PASS to succeed?
PASS may prove to be a valuable addition to your programme, but certain preconditions will give it a better chance of success. PASS appears to work best on the following type of programme:
Subject matter allows scope for discussion and a range of different interpretations or perspectives
Subjects where students feel motivated and challenged by either the workload or the complexity of their subject
Subjects where students would benefit from small group discussions

It is also recommended that a piece of assessed work be set early in the academic year. It will provide an excellent focus for discussion during the first few PASS sessions.

Roles and Responsibilities
To enable PASS to operate effectively the Programme PASS Contact, teaching team, PASS Co-ordinators and PASS Leaders must have a clear picture of their roles and responsibilities. Good practice in the delivery of PASS indicates that the following should be in place for PASS to succeed:

Programme PASS Contact
Keeps in touch with PASS Leaders for the Programme and meets them regularly every 2-4 weeks to discuss how PASS is progressing
Reports on PASS to Programme/School Committees and acts as a link between the Academic Team and the PASS Leaders
Liaises with Programme Administrators to ensure that PASS sessions are timetabled and take place at sensible times, for example, immediately after a lecture
Ensures that information about PASS is visible. This can include information in the Programme Handbook and promotion of the scheme during Open Days and through the Department or School website
Involves PASS Leaders in Programme induction so that new students are made aware of PASS and have a chance to meet with their Leaders at an early stage
Ensures that PASS Leaders know what their students are currently studying by providing them with:
  - Teaching schemes
  - Assignment schedules and briefs
Advises and helps PASS Leaders to prepare their sessions
Liaises with PASS Co-ordinators over recruitment arrangements for new Leaders

Programme staff
Time demands on staff should be low. PASS is most successful when viewed by all parties as an inclusive and enhancement activity, rather than replacement or remedial. The teaching team can support PASS in the following ways:
Encourage students to attend their PASS sessions
Suggest topics or issues that students may wish to discuss during their PASS sessions
Provide the Programme PASS Contact with copies of teaching schemes and assignment briefs
Through the Programme PASS Contact, indicate to PASS Leaders any specific points or advice they would like the Leaders to pass on to their students

Staff may also wish to consider whether there any activities they would like covered in PASS sessions. These may involve the review of Programme materials, or activities aimed at reinforcing understanding or preparing students for a forthcoming learning experience.

PASS Leaders: work in pairs to
Plan and organise weekly PASS
Attend the initial PASS Leader Training course and, when possible follow-up training with the PASS Academic Leads and Co-ordinators. Such sessions are intended to enable Leaders to practise and consolidate skills, and provide them with resources to use with their students
Plan their PASS so that they are structured yet friendly, and include small group learning activities that will enable students to review subject content, practise essential study skills or analyse assignment requirements
Facilitate PASS sessions by encouraging students to help each other, engage in collaborative discussions and share ideas
Encourage students to take responsibility to decide what is to be discussed in PASS and by agreeing, in outline, a programme of topics for discussion
Keeps in touch with students so that they are aware of what is to be discussed in their next PASS session
Liaises with their Programme PASS Contact, Co-ordinator and other Leaders

PASS Co-ordinator
Monitors and oversees the PASS programme
Provides a point of contact for students and staff connected with PASS
Provides information to Schools/Departments regarding the possible costs and benefits of n PASS to aid business planning
Attends meetings between Programme PASS Contacts and their Leaders to share ideas and good practice
Co-operates with staff in recruiting and selecting potential Leaders
Gives ongoing support and training for Leaders
Observes at least one PASS run by each pair of Leaders and provides formative feedback following the session
Meets and/or runs workshops for staff so that they are aware of how best they could support PASS and make the scheme work for them
Support academic staff to evaluate PASS in their discipline
Promotes PASS within the University

Learn more
Email: pass@contacts.bham.ac.uk
www.pass.bham.ac.uk