

Peer assisted study sessions improve academic achievement. Why don't more institutions make use of them?

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It is now almost twenty years since the first Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) in the UK was held in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Manchester. PASS, also known as Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), now exists in many forms, the most common consisting of a series of group learning sessions, provided for students just beginning at university and led by students in the second or third year of their degree programme. These leaders, variously referred to as mentors or student leaders, act not as teachers but as facilitators, helping their groups to discuss and solve problems themselves in an informal, friendly environment. In this way, PASS/PAL helps to embed staff-student partnerships at the heart of the university learning experience. It works alongside more formal teaching, such as lectures or tutorials with members of academic staff, to assist students to become confident and independent learners.

Numerous published studies demonstrate that attendance at PASS/PAL leads to an improvement in academic performance across as diverse a range of disciplines as nursing, medicine, law, accounting, economics, English, microbiology, chemistry and mathematics (Duah *et al*, 2014). As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to serve as a PASS/PAL leader. It was clear to me and my fellow leaders that, by participating in the scheme, we increased our confidence and deepened our understanding of the subjects discussed, and the feedback from the students who attended the sessions suggested that they reaped similar rewards from the programme.

During the past two decades, the majority of Higher Education Institutions (HEI.s) have at some time or another dabbled in PASS/PAL, with varying degrees of success. Some, such as the University of Manchester and the University of the West of England, currently have hundreds of PASS/PAL leaders running sessions for thousands of their fellow students, whilst other institutions have barely any. Why is this?

Various objections to PASS/PAL are typically raised, but the majority tend to be founded on two things: misconceptions about the nature of PASS/PAL and perceived logistical problems.

One of the most common misconceptions is that PASS/PAL is a remedial intervention for struggling students. This is not the case: PASS/PAL is designed to target high-risk material (identified as being so ideally by staff in partnership with students), not high-risk students. Another misconception is that student leaders are to act as teachers. The truth is that PASS/PAL leaders act as facilitators of discussions about course materials which have already been delivered by an academic. These objections can be easily overcome by staff and student champions working in partnership with one another and with organisations such as the RAISE network to communicate the true nature of PASS/PAL to their peers.

Logistical problems are rather more difficult to resolve. PASS/PAL programmes are often started by individual, highly-motivated staff champions, working in partnership with a group of student leaders. Whilst this is sufficient to get a scheme up and running, adequate

resourcing is essential if the scheme is to be perpetuated or expanded to other parts of an institution. Though the operation of a successful PASS/PAL programme is not hugely resource-intensive, it does still require the support of administrators, academic staff and student support tutors to ensure its smooth running, and this undoubtedly requires 'buy-in' by senior leadership teams at departmental, school and university level. Given the amount of competition for resources within a HEI, such support can be difficult to obtain without a clear driver for the adoption of PASS/PAL within a particular course. However, once the value of PASS/PAL has been demonstrated in one department, this example can serve as powerful leverage for further support.

Another major issue is that of space: there is a finite supply of teaching rooms and, in the majority of HEI.s, these are in heavy demand during term time. Though timetabling additional sessions can therefore be difficult, creative solutions, such as holding PASS/PAL sessions in social spaces, have been employed to overcome this problem (Chilvers, 2013). Student champions of PASS/PAL can work effectively in partnership with staff champions and the HEI itself to ensure that the provision of space for this type of student engagement activity is a high priority.

Participation in PASS/PAL improves academic achievement. This we know. The barriers to its implementation across the entire Higher Education sector are largely the result of misconceptions (easy to correct) and perceived logistical challenges (not insurmountable). In many ways, then, it is odd that there has not been a more complete adoption of PASS/PAL by UK HEI.s. It is my hope that it will not be long before this is corrected and that PASS/PAL will then occupy a far more prominent place in the UK Higher Education sector than it does at present.

Reference list

Chilvers, L. (2013) 'Facilitators and Barriers to the Development of PASS at the University of Brighton.' *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 3 (1), 27-29.

Duah, F., Croft, A. and Inglis, M. (2014) 'Can peer assisted learning be effective in undergraduate mathematics?' *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*, 45 (4), 552-565.