

Chapter 8

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): Recognizing Employability Through PebblePad



Jacqueline Wilkinson and Gayle Brent

Abstract Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is a voluntary, weekly, academic assistance program utilizing peer-led group study to help students succeed in traditionally difficult subjects. PASS provides opportunities for students to strengthen their knowledge by being actively involved in group learning that is focused on identifying and reviewing key lecture content, testing understanding of difficult concepts, gaining confidence through discussing complex course material, and engaging in cooperative problem-solving methods. The sessions are facilitated by students who have completed at least one year of study, have excelled in the course, maintained a strong Grade Point Average and have completed a two-day intensive PASS Leader training course. Through planning, leading, and organizing sessions, leaders develop strong transferable attributes including interpersonal communication skills, listening skills, time management and organizational skills, leadership and team working skills, equipping them for professional life beyond university. Leaders are observed at least twice per trimester, by the PASS Coordinator and by a Senior Leader, with feedback provided to support development. Using an observation template on PebblePad ensures that comments can be easily reviewed before observations and leaders receive timely feedback that is stored in an accessible format, providing evidence of contribution and skills. Leaders also use PebblePad to reflect on their experience of the PASS Program and transferable skills developed, allowing them to identify, document, and evidence key employability skills and attributes.

Keywords PASS · Employability · STEM · PASS Leaders · Transferable skills

J. Wilkinson (✉) · G. Brent
Office of the PVC (Griffith Sciences), Griffith University, Southport, Australia
e-mail: j.wilkinson@griffith.edu.au

G. Brent
e-mail: g.brent@griffith.edu.au

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8.1 Introduction

This chapter details the process adopted in the three Schools within Griffith Sciences (Engineering and Built Environment, Information and Communication Technology, Environment and Science) to document the employability skills developed by students employed as leaders in the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Program. Section one reviews the literature on Supplementary Instruction (SI), as the forerunner of PASS, in relation to development of leaders. Section two examines the benefits of PASS for students involved in the program and for Leaders. Section three considers the importance of employability for STEM graduates in light of employer perceptions that STEM graduates lack generic skills required in the workplace. Section four discusses the PASS Program in Griffith Sciences and how leader training and development can bridge the skills gap. PebblePad is used to identify and enhance employability skills gained through involvement in the program, so that leaders can both articulate these skills and curate evidence of these skills for future employment opportunities. In addition, opportunities for critical reflection using PebblePad are provided to allow leaders to self-assess the development of skills.

8.2 Benefits of PASS

The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Program is a student-led, student-focused approach to academic learning support. Derived from the American model of Supplemental Instruction (SI) developed at the University of Missouri, Kansas in 1973, it has been adapted for use in Australia and is generally known as PASS. This internationally renowned initiative has been well researched with evidence that SI improves student retention, performance, and success (Arendale, 2014; Bowles & Jones, 2004; Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky, & Cowley, 2014). PASS is a non-remedial program that tends to focus on core first-year courses that are perceived to be more challenging and result in high failure rates or where there is recognition that peer-led communities of learning can benefit a cohort. PASS provides peer-led, active learning environments in which students work together to identify and review key lecture content, test their understanding of difficult concepts, gain confidence through discussing complex course material, and engage in cooperative problem-solving methods. PASS supplements the delivery of the core curriculum and aims to increase student academic outcomes, enhancing student learning experiences and thus increasing retention of students. As the PASS Program has both a content-specific (what to learn) and general academic skills focus (how to learn), it can play an important role in both students' integration into academia and empower them to take greater ownership and responsibility for their own learning while building self-efficacy (Dawson et al., 2014; Malm, Bryngfors, & Morner, 2012). The impact of PASS, beyond academic outcomes, cannot be underestimated. Students who connect early with their peers and gain a sense of belonging to their discipline and broader university community, are known to have an increased chance of success.

8.3 Benefits for Leaders

While the PASS Program has been well researched, less has been said about the benefits derived by the high-achieving students who engage in PASS Leader roles. The PASS Program provides an excellent training ground for student leadership development and affords the leaders opportunities to develop employability skills (Arendale & Hane, 2016; Ford, Thackeray, Barnes, & Hendrickx, 2015; Skalicky et al., 2016). Inclusion of PASS leadership on a student's resume indicates to future employers that the student has participated in a program that requires commitment, communication skills, and the ability to establish positive relationships with peers, faculty academics and those in leadership positions. The ability to demonstrate "soft skills" helps to distinguish between candidates of equal educational background (Nilsson, 2010). However, there is a dearth of research regarding the beneficial impact of the role for their own learning, personal and professional development and employability (Skalicky & Caney, 2010; Zacharopoulou, Giles, & Condell, 2015). A shift in focus is addressing this with studies emerging that examine the additional benefits of the program for the student leaders who are responsible for facilitating the sessions (Ford et al., 2015; McIntosh, 2017; Malm, Bryngfors, & Morner, 2012; Skalicky & Caney, 2010; Stout & McDaniel, 2006).

A study by Malm, Bryngfors, and Morner (2012) on the potential benefits of SI leadership divided the benefits into five main themes: improved communication skills; improved interpersonal skills; improved leadership skills; improved self-confidence; and deeper understanding of course content. Findings by Congos and Stout (2003) and Lockie and Van Lanen (2008) indicate that leaders improve their general study skills and strategies as a result of their work as SI leaders. Stout and McDaniel (2006) highlight academic benefits, improved communication, and relationship-building skills as well as enhanced professional development, including leadership and developing teamwork strategies. A study by McPhail, Despotovic and Fisher (2012) based on interviews with leaders at Griffith University found that being a PASS Leader improved self-efficacy specifically in the areas of cognitive development, performance, engagement, and satisfaction. Research by Ford, Thackeray, Barnes, and Hendrickx (2015) reinforces findings of earlier research and found that peer leaders developed employability attributes including leadership, time management, communication, and cultural awareness. Lockie and Van Lanen (2008) reported an increase in problem-solving abilities while Skalicky and Caney (2010) referred to an increased capacity for decision making. Couchman (2009) described the development of reflective practice among leaders, which can be characterized as a deeper awareness of the importance of planning, improved flexibility, and improvisation skills.

An area that requires further research is how leaders identify the skills they are developing. A key aspect of PASS Leader training and ongoing support is underpinned by reflection, particularly in relation to session evaluation, but self-assessment of the development of a range of skills is not necessarily part of every PASS Program. However, recent research by Chilvers and Waghorne (2018) highlighted that

by reflecting on the role of PASS Leader, students were able to clearly articulate and evidence the development of employability skills and attributes, including communication, confidence, teamwork, facilitation, and leadership.

8.4 Developing Employability

There are many definitions for employability; however, broadly speaking, employability is defined as ... “a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 3). Thus, employability is viewed as incorporating more than “just” discipline-specific or transferable skills—it also encompasses personal qualities and beliefs, understandings and practice, developed within the context of the student’s individual experiences. Given the diverse range of experiences that may contribute to this personal and professional development, the ability to reflect, to critically review a specific scenario to assess what worked and what did not, identify learning, and articulate skills and attributes, is essential.

At Griffith University, each discipline addresses the development of appropriate professional competencies to align with relevant industry expectations. This alignment is evident in the formal accreditation process, which seeks to ensure graduates have core skill-sets and foundational disciplinary knowledge to match industry expectations. In addition to this context-driven development of skills, the University has an overarching aim to provide opportunities for students to develop the *Griffith Graduate Attributes*. These attributes encompass a broad range of professional attributes and skills that are considered essential for graduates to operate in and contribute to society in ways which extend beyond a formal university qualification, and potentially beyond the context of their specific discipline (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015). Enhancing curricular and extra-curricular opportunities (such as involvement with PASS) with an overt focus on reflective practice designed to allow the student to identify, document, and evidence these strategically important graduate attributes is one way to support students to proactively prepare for their future career.

Creating the opportunity for students to engage in reflective practice is particularly important in Griffith Sciences. There are two key considerations that contribute to this. The first is that there is a perception by some employers that STEM graduates lack the employability skills required for success in the workplace (Australian Industry Group, 2015). The 2015 report *Progressing STEM skills in Australia* emphasizes the “lack of employability skills” and the “lack of qualifications that are relevant to business” as key issues for employers. However, it also highlights “lack of applicants with STEM skills”. This latter consideration raises questions about whether the graduates *actually* do not have the skills (completion of a STEM degree would tend to suggest they have some STEM skills) or if it implies that students and graduates in fact have the both employability and discipline-specific STEM skills, but they are not able to articulate these in line with employers’ expectations. The explicit need for

STEM students to engage in reflective practice is clear as it will develop their ability to clearly and confidently articulate their skills and attributes to match the needs of industry.

The second key consideration relates to the specific employability skills sought by employers. It is essential students develop their knowledge about the skills that employers value in the workplace, and the ways in which those skills will contribute to their success. There is evidence to suggest *graduates* are aware of the gaps between the skills and attributes they developed within their university degree and what they see as valuable in the workplace. A survey of physics graduates across a number of Australian universities, for example, revealed that graduates reported considerable gaps between attributes they gained from their undergraduate science degree and what they saw as important to their employment. These attributes included communication skills, planning skills, and awareness of ethical and social issues (O'Byrne & Mendez, 2012). Team work and leadership skills are likewise important as an individual may need to perform in the workplace as both a team leader and a team player (Sarkar, Overton, Thompson & Raynor, 2017).

What is important here is the notion that graduates (once employed) can identify these gaps. The systematic and overt inclusion of reflective practice (in the context of career development learning and career management) will ensure *students* have more opportunity to identify these gaps before they graduate, and they will therefore have more opportunity to identify experiences (like becoming a PASS Leader) to help them address these gaps prior to graduation. Identification of these skills gaps is essential, given the substantial evidence from employers that there are significant mismatches in the skills young people are learning and those industry require (Foundation for Young Australians, 2016).

Research in the UK highlighted that employers expect science graduates to have discipline-specific knowledge and skills from their degrees but also expect them to demonstrate a range of generic skills and attributes including team working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and managerial abilities (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Similarly, an Australian study (Ferns, 2012) reported that employers considered problem solving, team work, and communication as a more critical element of employment than discipline-specific knowledge. A survey of STEM graduate employers showed that generic skills such as critical thinking and problem solving were highly valued (Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2015). In addition, recent modeling has suggested that almost 40% of jobs in Australia have a high probability of being substituted with automation over the next ten to 15 years (Durrant-Whyte, Steinburg, Reid, McCalman, & O'Callaghan, 2015). Consequently, as technical functions continue to be outsourced to machines, having staff with strong transferable skills will become more important than ever as a way for businesses to connect with stakeholders. As a considerable proportion of science graduates will enter non-science careers or professions, the acquisition of work-relevant transferable and employability skills needs to be addressed.

8.5 PASS Program in Griffith Sciences

At Griffith University, the PASS Program operates across the university and is offered in all four Groups (Arts, Education and Law; Health; Griffith Business School; Griffith Sciences). Each group has a PASS Coordinator responsible for the recruitment, training, and development of Leaders. The Coordinators are accredited trainers, following the ten principles of PASS in line with the National Training Centre at the University of Wollongong. Each Coordinator has a degree of flexibility in day-to-day operations, allowing them to adapt to meet the particular needs of their Group. In Griffith Sciences, in 2017, 40 leaders delivered weekly sessions for 17 courses across two campuses.

Quality assurance processes are embedded in the program, specifically regarding criteria for the recruitment of PASS Leaders, formalized training for leaders, ongoing professional development for leaders and review and evaluation of the program each year. High-achieving students eligible to apply to be a PASS Leader are selected for their academic abilities and interpersonal, communication and problem-solving skills, as well as their ability to demonstrate empathy for others and capacity to act as a role model.

As part of the selection process, applicants are invited to attend two days of intensive training to equip them with the strategies to assist students while remaining within the boundaries of the role. On successful completion of training, they commence as a PASS Leader in Mentor or Mentee capacity. The PASS Leader Mentor role is a paid position with leaders required to plan, design, and facilitate sessions; attend lectures; liaise with Faculty staff; and promote the PASS Program. The PASS Leader Mentee role is an unpaid role and appropriate for those who are seeking to improve their leadership skills through a volunteer experience which offers training, guidance, development, and support. Ongoing development opportunities are provided for all leaders to enhance their skills commencing with a one-day paid refresher course at the start of the trimester. This is an opportunity to bring together new and established leaders on each campus. Training is tailored to address areas of development identified in the previous trimester's observations and leader reflections. Catch-up sessions take place at least once during the trimester and usually relate to marketing the program, how to deal with declining attendance and Exam Buster preparation. Senior leader(s) on each campus run the catch-up sessions, act as mentors to the PASS Leaders and become the first point of contact. Senior Leaders receive additional training to be able to observe each leader at least once per trimester to provide feedback and strategies to develop sessions.

8.6 How Working as a PASS Leader Can Bridge the Skills Gap

The success of the PASS Program is built on the thorough training of the PASS Leaders, ongoing professional development, feedback through observations, reflection and formative evaluation of the whole program enabling changes in the process. From the outset, leaders are encouraged to reflect on their experience with the Program. This commences with leaders reflecting at the end of the two days of Leader training to highlight any development needs and then reflect at the end of the trimester to consider skills developed and how they are using the skills or could develop them further (Fig. 8.1). The ability to demonstrate metacognition (capacity for reflection) is a capability that leaders can use to adapt and respond to situations, thus enhancing their graduate abilities and employability. Opportunities for critical reflection allow leaders to self-assess development of a range of skills and raise awareness of employability skills they are developing and how to articulate how these skills can be transferred to the workplace (Chilvers & Waghorne, 2018). Leaders also complete the evaluation section of their session plan to reflect on what went well and what could have been better, allowing them to develop skills in self-evaluation, critical awareness, and planning.

Below is a comment from a PASS Leader when asked to reflect on the impact of their involvement in the PASS Program on their employability and career aspirations:

Active involvement in PASS has led to the development of transferable skills, including team working, communication, organizational skills, public speaking and time management. Exposure to PASS has boosted my confidence and this has been reinforced by recognition



Fig. 8.1 Process for leader development and reflection

from academics asking me to work as a sessional tutor. I have now completely changed my career direction and have been motivated to begin postgraduate study and explore a future in academia.

It is important to use reflection for leaders to identify perceived competence in employability skills but more generally to raise awareness and highlight limitations in areas so that they are then in a position to identify the steps required to develop skills. Leaders are asked to highlight skills they have developed from communication; teamworking, time management, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, confidence. They then select one skill and provide an example. Reflections were completed by 25 leaders in 2018, with all highlighting increased confidence and communication skills, 85% reported improved time management and interestingly only 70% referred to teamworking. A comment from one leader on communication skills also highlights increased self-confidence:

My communication skills have massively improved since last trimester. I can deal much more comfortably with larger groups of people. I feel as though my sessions can be controlled whilst also being a relaxed atmosphere. This increase in my communication ability has crossed over to my life outside of PASS, such as talking at networking events, and I have been really grateful of that.

Leaders are formally evaluated twice during the trimester, using the observation record on PebblePad (Fig. 8.2). The observation template has the following sections: Introduction and Opening; Individual and Group Dynamics; Content and Strategy; Session Closure; Improvement Points; Standout Points; Session Plan and Materials Used. An important part of the quality assurance process of the program, the

Individual and Group Dynamics

	Satisfactory	Discuss
Appropriate activities to encourage group interaction		
Students doing most of the talking (helping each other)		
Leader promotes appropriate task focus		
Leader involves all students		
Leader promotes positive learning environment		
Leader establishes an effective peer learning environment		
Leader knows and consistently uses students' names		

Individual and Group Dynamic Comments

Fig. 8.2 Section from observation template

observation record is designed to enable supportive feedback to Leaders. It creates a framework to discuss areas that the Leaders are coping well with or aspects that may require work on. Examples of areas where feedback is given include: allowing students to shape the agenda at the start of the session, using appropriate questioning strategies to avoid re-teaching, time management and referring students to other resources for learning.

As the PASS Coordinator and Senior Leaders observe leaders and provide feedback, the leaders gain experience with performance evaluations and responding to both positive and negative feedback. The debriefing process always begins with the observer asking the leader how they thought the session went. Observers practice positive reinforcement and limit their constructive suggestions, targeting only one or two areas for improvement at a time. The leader and the observer then work together to consider strategies and tactics to improve the sessions, mirroring how professionals work together to solve problems.

During the session, the observer highlights if satisfactory or requires discussion with comments to provide more detail or context. For example, the leader may know most of the names but in a small group if the students are interacting well the need to use first names may not arise. Although the process of reflection has served to raise leader awareness of perceived competence in respect of some employability skills, this is an area that requires further development. As feedback can be one of the most powerful influences of learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the current reflection template will be adapted in line with Ford and Thackeray's (2014) approach to include further open-ended questions to elicit skills developed, for example, organization/presentation skills; listening/communication skills; leadership/teamwork skills; problem solving/"thinking on my feet".

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the impact of using PebblePad to document reflections completed by leaders and observations of PASS Leaders to provide evidence of the employability skills developed. The PASS Program not only provides academic support to students, improves course grades and retention but also enhances the learning experiences of PASS Leaders and provides pathways and opportunities for high-achieving students to develop and build employability skills. Consequently, PASS Program effectiveness should be considered in terms of benefits for leaders as well as quantitative analysis of grade calculations and retention of participants. Within the Griffith Sciences PASS Program, using PebblePad as a platform to record leader reflections and document observations has been effective in identifying and enhancing employability skills gained through involvement in the program. Through the process of reflection, leaders can have the opportunity to articulate these skills, identify steps needed to further develop skills and curate evidence of these skills for future employment opportunities.

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Jacqueline Wilkinson is the Student Retention and PASS Coordinator for Griffith Sciences. Before moving to Australia, in 2006, Jackie gained a range of management experience in the UK, including working as a Human Resources Manager and Management Consultant, specializing in Employment Law. Jackie moved to teaching in 2003 and taught English to adult learners in the Further Education sector. After completing a Graduate Certificate in Applied Linguistics at Griffith University, Jackie commenced in 2010 as an English Language Tutor and Lecturer with the Griffith English Language Institute and also provided one-on-one support as an EnglishHELP tutor. In June 2016, Jackie became a Student Success Advisor for the Schools of Engineering and ICT before taking on her current role at the start of 2017.

Gayle Brent is a Learning and Teaching Consultant (Curriculum) in Griffith Sciences. Gayle’s specialist area of interest is developing and implementing strategies to enhance staff and student understanding of employability, in both curricular and extra-curricular contexts. Gayle has a unique perspective on the challenges students experience at various stages of the student life cycle, having worked in roles that span outreach, orientation and transition, career development and alumni engagement. She applies innovative, creative solutions to enhance student engagement with employability-based learning.