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Melissa Zaccagnini and Irina Verenikina

ABSTRACT

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), a peer led academic support program that has multiple documented academic, social, and transition benefits, is increasingly being utilised in Australian institutions. Whilst PASS has been evaluated from multiple angles in regard to the undergraduate cohort, there is limited research regarding the benefits of PASS for postgraduate students, particularly international postgraduate students. This specific cohort's perspective is significant as international students constitute a large proportion of postgraduate students in Australian universities. This study investigates the role of PASS in contributing to the experience of international postgraduate coursework students at an Australian university through an investigation of its perceived benefits by this cohort of students.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades a significant body of literature has emerged regarding the effectiveness of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) or Supplemental Instruction (SI) in supporting students' academic work (e.g., Bowles, Bates, & McCoy, 2008; Congos & Schoeps, 1993; Martin & Arendale, 1993; McGuire, 2006; Ning & Downing, 2010). The value of PASS as a university transition program has been demonstrated by numerous researchers (Carver & Cuffe, 2012; Malm, Bryngfors, & Morner, 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2009). For example, PASS has been found particularly suitable for undergraduate first year students as it addresses major transition issues, such as providing "engaging learning experiences, practical and timely support services, and a sense of belonging" (Huijser, Kimmins & Evans, 2008, p. 51). The adjustment to the new, unfamiliar culture of university is assisted here through interactions with more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1997). These are students who have received recent experience of entering the university and therefore can tune into the needs of students who are just commencing their study.

With the major focus of the PASS literature on undergraduate students (Carver & Cuffe, 2012; Malm et al., 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2009), the participation of postgraduate students in PASS has received little attention from researchers. Such paucity of research in this area is consistent with an overall "lack of empirical evidence about how postgraduate students on a taught master's degree experience study support" (Halett, 2010, p. 226). Halett (2010) suggests that the problem might lie in a common perception that postgraduate students are not "in need of study support" (p. 226) as they

are already familiar with the university culture. However, in the Australian context, the diversity of the group of students enrolled in postgraduate degrees has to be taken into account. One particular cohort of postgraduate students that might benefit from a transition program such as PASS is international onshore students.

International students constitute a large proportion of postgraduate enrollments in Australian universities. According to a recent government survey (Edwards, 2011) "international students make up around 50[%] of all coursework masters enrolments" (p. 1). In spite of a recently documented decline in the number of international students, Australia aspires to remain one of the largest providers of international Higher Education in the world. While the decrease in the numbers has been attributed to a complex set of various economic and political factors, the perception of Australia as a quality tertiary provider continues to be critical to the choices that students make in regard to the country and the institution they want to select for their study (Ross, 2011).

A significant factor that contributes to the quality of education at an Australian university is the students' experiences, including supportive learning environments and student engagement (Edwards, 2008). Yet, as recently demonstrated by the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, "in a global context, there is room for improvement in the engagement of international students in Australia" (Edwards, 2011, p. 1). Specifically, a particular concern has been expressed in relation to "integration of international learners, and their interactions with institutions and domestic students" (Edwards, 2011, p. 2).

In this study we ask how PASS can contribute to the international postgraduate students' experiences of integration into the culture of an Australian University. Taking into account the argument of van der Meer and Scott (2009) that the students' perceptions of PASS are a valid indicator of its success, this study investigates the perceived effectiveness of PASS for postgraduate international students at one university.

The benefits of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

PASS is an Australian version of Supplemental Instruction (SI), which was developed in 1973 at the University of Missouri, Kansas City by Deanna Martin, with an aim to increase student success in difficult courses (Martin, 2008). Prior to becoming an international program, SI was recognised formally through certification by the United States Department of Education as an "Exemplary Education Program" (Martin & Arendale, 1993). It is a voluntary academic peer learning program that aims to help students master the content while integrating discipline specific learning skills. It targets the units of study with historically high failure rates or those that are perceived as difficult by student participants (Martin & Arendale, 1993). One of the major differences between the PASS program and other academic support programs is that it is non-remedial. The program mainstreams academic assistance and is differentiated by voluntary involvement and its availability to all students enrolled in the unit—both high achieving students and students with difficulties. High achieving senior students facilitate weekly one hour sessions.

The effect of PASS/ SI attendance on student academic performance has been demonstrated by numerous studies (e.g., Malm et al, 2012; Martin & Arendale, 1993; Ning & Downing, 2010; Zerger, Clark-Unite, & Smith, 2006). Quantitative evidence suggests that those students who attend PASS/SI increase their final marks in comparison to those who do not attend (Zerger et al., 2006). Numerous studies indicate that attendance at SI improves student retention (Bowles, et al., 2008; Etter, Burmeister & Elder, 2001; Martin & Arendale, 1993). This provides a significant financial benefit for institutions (Malm et al., 2012).

Less research has been conducted in regard to the intangible benefits of PASS, which are harder to measure than academic results (Huijser et al., 2008). Even though PASS can sometimes still be perceived as being "in essence an academic-only peer learning program" with "collaborative learning and peer support around formal learning and assessment processes" (Townsend, Delves, Kidd, & Figg, 2011, p. 40), other benefits of this program have been increasingly researched. For example, in their study of students' motivation for participating in PASS and their perceived effectiveness of the program, van der Meer and Scott (2009) found that even though the students highly valued the study of the content and the development of learning skills, the effectiveness of social integration was also of high significance for them. PASS also effectively promotes the development of social networks and on-line learning communities (Huijser et al., 2008).

Peer assisted learning amongst postgraduate students

Recent studies highlight "the lack of academic attention that has been given to peer-to-peer teaching amongst postgraduates" (Deakin, Wakefield, & Gregorius, 2012, p. 604). The paucity of research in this area probably relates to the view that because postgraduate students come to the University with an undergraduate degree and are already familiar with the university culture; they are not in need of integration programs. Yet, the few studies that researched the experiences of peer assisted learning by postgraduate students all agree that this cohort needs just as much support as undergraduate students (Deakin et al., 2012; Field, Burke, McAllister, & Lloyd, 2007; Halett, 2010). While the definition of "support" is still debated (Halett, 2010), the authors agree that the benefits of such programs for postgraduate students include both academic skills and the social factors of their study at the university. Halett (2010) emphasised that postgraduate students themselves saw "the environment as being central to the learning process" (p. 235), which is echoed by the study of Deakin et al. (2012) who found that peer assisted learning (PAL) created "a relaxed and informative atmosphere" (p. 611) where postgraduate students not only learnt new research skills but met other students in an informal and interdisciplinary setting. These findings are similar to those obtained a decade ago by Hortsmanshof and Conrad (2003) who found that a Postgraduate Peer Support Program for Applied Psychology contributed to a "culture of sharing."

In relation to specific peer assisted learning programs such as PASS, the studies of its benefits for integration into the university to date have been limited to the experiences of undergraduate students (Carver & Cuffe, 2012; Malm et al., 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2009). Yet, PASS has much to offer to postgraduate international students who usually do not have experience of study in an Australian university and therefore need support during their

transition into a foreign (to them) university culture. Existing research into the experiences of international students in Australian higher education summarised in the next section is supportive of this point of view.

International postgraduate students in Australia

Current research demonstrates that international students who study in Australia, including postgraduate students, experience a number of difficulties adapting to new learning environments, which is exacerbated by the stress of cultural adaptation in general (Campbell, 2012; Guilfoyle, 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Issues such as loneliness and isolation (Sawir et al., 2008), decreased motivation and engagement, and feeling less academically competent were identified (Guilfoyle, 2006). These significantly affect the quality of the international students' experiences in an Australian university and their engagement with study.

The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Edwards, 2011) promotes "group-work and interaction with students and staff outside of specified class times" as a positive factor for student engagement (p. 16). A recommendation was made for Australian Higher Education providers to find programs that foster closer ties between international and domestic students (Sawir et al., 2008). It was found, however, that international students tended to spontaneously engage in interactions with other students who are "predominantly from the same country of origin" (Neri & Ville, 2008, p. 1535) and that friendships with domestic students were rare. While same-culture networks are essential, Sawir et al. (2008) argue that they "cannot substitute for adequate pastoral care by universities or ensure satisfactory engagement with local cultures" (p. 148). In a recently published report, Edwards (2011) calls for Higher Education providers to continue to promote activities that foster and promote interaction amongst all students, both domestic and international. PASS has a significant potential to provide important "social learning spaces" that allow for "collaborating on academic work as well as for making friends and socialising outside classrooms" (Burdett & Crossman, 2012, p. 214). The current study seeks to explore international students' perceptions of PASS and its perceived effects on their study at the university.

THE STUDY

Background

This study was conducted at a large university in New South Wales, Australia, in which PASS has been utilised as a collaborative peer learning strategy since 2002. The program commenced with core first year undergraduate Commerce and Informatics units and has grown substantially in the ensuing 10 years. In 2010, the program successfully supported 46 units across two academic semesters. It is attached to a large proportion of first year units and forms a cornerstone of the first year experience strategy. Since 2007, PASS has been gradually introduced into Postgraduate Coursework programs at this institution, thus far in three Faculties.

Theoretical perspective

The PASS/SI model is underpinned by the most widely accepted learning theories: behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism (Martin & Arendale, 1993; McGuire, 2006). Specifically, the theory of social constructivism has been named as a methodological basis of the program (Jacobs, Hurley, &

Unite, 2008). According to the social constructivist paradigm, "knowledge is socially constructed ... as a result of dialogical and dialectical interactions between teachers (facilitators) and students and between students" (Jacobs et al., 2008, p. 7).

The theory of social constructivism puts emphasis on the role of social interactions in learning (Vygotsky, 1997). The notion of a more capable other is used in contextualising the role of the more experienced leader in scaffolding the learning of the participants. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1997) is integral in understanding the way in which the participants in PASS extend their knowledge, understanding, and capacity to learn when collaborating in a peer environment. In a PASS context, students are required to examine what they know and understand and are challenged to build new knowledge in collaboration with peers, the ultimate goal being that the participants rebuild their own conceptual framework around the content (McGuire, 2006).

The ZPD emphasises collaboration and negotiation between the learner and the more experienced other. This flexibility and participant led learning is integral to the PASS process. Essential here is the role of the leader, who, being a student themselves, is just slightly above their learner's level, and therefore is best positioned to work within their students' ZPD. Alongside the role of the experienced leader, the contribution and interaction amongst peers is also key to the PASS learning process. Additionally, the participants in PASS are encouraged to take an active role in their learning with the goal of achieving the capacity of an independent learner (Vygotsky, 1997).

Recently, the role of emotional support in learning has been emphasised by social constructivist theorists. For example, Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) discuss the importance of "the creation of a safety zone" (p. 51) for knowledge to be effectively co-constructed. Jacobs et al. (2008) highlight the importance of a "safe space" (p.10), emphasising that learning always includes both affective and cognitive dimensions that are inextricably intertwined within it.

Aim and research questions

Our study aimed to investigate the role of PASS in contributing to the experience of international postgraduate coursework students during their study at the University. To achieve our aim we explored the perceptions of PASS held by postgraduate international students. Specifically, we posed the following research questions:

- What attracted postgraduate international students to participate in PASS?
- What benefits do the postgraduate international students see in attending PASS?
- How do international students see the role of social interactions in PASS?

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

In order to achieve the purpose of our study and answer our research questions, postgraduate (course work) international students who attended the PASS Program were invited to participate in research to share their perspectives on attending this program. The study included an on-line survey and individual semi-structured interviews with a smaller number of participants.

Participant selection

Our investigation focused on two core postgraduate units of study from master's degrees in the Faculties of Commerce and Education. In the PASS group for the Commerce students, there were two leaders: one was an Australian and native speaker and the other was an international student and an English as Second Language (ESL) person. In the PASS group for the students from Education, the leader was an Australian and a native English speaker. The students were at different points of their study at the time of the research and sequence progression in the degrees allowed for flexibility in their choices. Both units were delivered for thirteen weeks in a face-to-face mode and their enrollments included a mixture of domestic and international students. The majority of students in the Commerce unit (approx. 95%) were international students and around half of the students in the Education unit were international students (10 out of 19). A total of 164 students were enrolled in the Commerce unit, of which 89 attended PASS at least once and 68 attended more than five times. A total of 19 students were enrolled in the Education unit, with 11 attending at least once and four attending more than five times. Only students who attended PASS sessions more than five times were invited to participate in the study. The University Human Research Ethics committee approval was granted to conduct the research.

Online survey

The aim of the survey was to gather background information on the students' experiences with PASS. Considering that for all the participants English was not their first language, the survey consisted of a mixture of simple open response and multiple choice questions (with an option of additional answer). The survey was designed around the following aspects: the reasons the students chose to attend PASS, the benefits they felt they gained, the role of the leader in supporting students' learning, recommendations, and comments.

Fifty students who met the selection criteria were invited to complete an online survey via an online link that was sent to their university email address at the end of the semester. There was a response rate of 32% (16 students). There were five male and 11 female participants. Most of the students indicated their country of citizenship was China (62.5%). There were also students from Thailand, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and the Solomon Islands. There were two respondents who did not specify their citizenship but just identified themselves as "international student."

Interviews

On completion of the survey, students were invited to volunteer to participate in an individual semi-structured interview that aimed to expand upon and complement the data from the survey. The interview questions extended the survey questions by exploring the reasons behind the

participants' views of PASS. Two students from each unit who first expressed their interest were selected to participate in the interview. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed for emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Interviews with each of the four students lasted for approximately 30-45 minutes and the students were able to provide extensive answers, examples, and explanations to the semi-structured questions offered by the researcher in a conversation-like manner. The interview questions included open-ended questions in relation to the benefits of attending PASS for the study of subject matter, meeting other people, the role of the leader, and their recommendations. Additionally, the participants were asked how the PASS study compared to lectures and tutorials and the importance of PASS for learning English. An open question was offered at the end of the interview, asking the participants whether they wanted to add anything.

The interview participants included a diverse group of students, which is characteristic for the Masters by coursework postgraduate program at the University. All participants came from different countries and had different previous experiences. Brief introductions for each participant are presented below (pseudonyms are used).

Ali, a male Saudi Arabian student in his thirties. He was in his first year of study in the Master of Education degree at the University, prior to which he spent a semester in a College, adjunct to the university, studying Academic English. On completion of his master's he planned to continue his study in Australia with a doctorate degree.

Bec, a female Chinese student in her twenties, was enrolled in a Master of Commerce/Professional Accounting degree. It was her first semester at the university. She held a bachelor's degree in International Trade from her home country.

Cindy, a female Sri Lankan student in her forties, was enrolled in the second semester of her Master of Education degree at the University. Back home, she worked in the Ministry of Education as an English language course coordinator for school teachers.

Donna, a student from Solomon Islands in her thirties, was enrolled in her first semester of a Master of Commerce degree. Prior to her master's enrolment she spent a month doing her Academic Introductory Studies at the University College. She held an undergraduate degree, Bachelor of Arts (Economics) from New Zealand, which she completed 10 years ago. Back home she taught in a high school and worked as a company planning team leader. She commenced the semester enrolled in one PASS session, and after mid-session joined an additional five PASS sessions.

FINDINGS

The online survey and the individual interviews allowed us to gain an understanding of the perceived benefits the students felt they gained from attending PASS, both in relation to the content of their study and to social interactions during the PASS sessions. In this section, we provide a summary

of the online survey results followed by an analysis of the individual semi-structured interviews with the four selected students.

Survey

Students' responses to the survey included yes or no answers to all the questions and a written component. While the written component of each answer was informative, it was quite concise, which was expected from international students with English as their second language. The answers to the open-ended question, "why did you choose to attend PASS?" revealed that the students' attendance was strongly motivated by an opportunity to improve their academic study (15 out of 16 responses). Students indicated that they attended PASS to "improve and get help/support in their study" of the subject matter. Only one student came to PASS out of curiosity: "Interesting and never heard of it before." This came as no surprise as the marketing for the program specifically focuses on the benefits that regular attendance at PASS can have on increasing marks and reducing failure rates. Many students mentioned the importance of the content (13 out of 16) with some making note of attending PASS in order to "improve marks," whilst others specified they attended to "learn and better understand the content." One student commented on "developing English skills."

In response to a multiple choice question, "how has PASS supported you as a student in this unit of study at the University?" the participants indicated the positive effect of PASS by choosing from the proposed list of answers (Table 1).

Table 1
How PASS supported international students' study (survey results)

Multiple choice answers	Responses	
	N=16	%
Improved my understanding of the content	14	87.5
Assisted me in preparing for assessments and/or exams	10	62.5
Allowed me to meet other people	11	68.7
Encouraged me to take responsibility for my own learning	10	62.5
Increased my motivation in the study	10	62.5
Other (please specify)	0	0.0

Most of the participants who completed the online survey found that PASS improved their understanding of content (14 answers out of 16). Most felt that PASS allowed them to meet other people in the unit (11 answers). Also, a majority of the students (10 out of 16) felt that PASS encouraged them to take responsibility for their own learning, increased their motivation in the unit, and also assisted them in preparing for assessments and/or exams. There was an option for students to add their own description; however, no students elected to do so.

In response to the question about the role of the leader, "how has the PASS leader supported your learning?" all the participants offered positive comments. There was a substantial emphasis (9 out of 16 students) on the

leader reviewing the content through discussion: “Go through key points,” and “review and analyse the lecture content.” Respondents also mentioned the leader’s use of “practice,” “providing examples,” and “sharing of study techniques” (3 answers). Four students referred to socio-emotional and personal aspects: “Enthusiastic, patient and kind,” “good,” “knows how to communicate with all attendees,” and “motivates.”

Five participants provided feedback to the last question of the survey: “Do you have any other comments?” These included complimentary comments, such as “great experience” and “makes you happy,” and even requests for more similar experiences: “need more time together,” “less students in one class,” and “more [practice] papers.” One respondent summarised PASS as “a great experience to interact in smaller groups and learn with other students in the same unit of study.” Overall, the survey data indicated that all the international postgraduate student participants had a positive experience in PASS with 100% of students answering yes to the question: “Would you recommend PASS to a friend who was studying this unit?” However, as was expected, most of the students’ responses were concise and appeared to be constrained by a written mode of expression as all the participants had English as a second language.

Interviews

Overall, the results of the interviews were consistent with the survey data: students were in agreement that attending PASS had benefited both their learning related to the content of the study and helped them to meet other students. All the participants were eager to share their experience and provided detailed and in depth answers to all the questions. The interview data is discussed in relation to the emergent themes and the research questions.

What attracted postgraduate international students to participate in PASS?

In the interviews, all the participants suggested that they joined PASS as they felt they needed extra support to do better in their study. Three of the students wanted to improve their grades and one student just wanted to pass the unit, which is illustrated in their answers below:

I was worried and confused about the study...also I wanted to get a good mark. (Ali)

Improving scores is important. (Bec)

I needed some support. Especially with the technical words. (Cindy)

It is the first time I am studying accounting at a university level... It was a good opportunity and I could increase my marks. (Donna)

These answers are similar to the findings of the study with undergraduate students (van der Meer & Scott, 2009).

Three participants (Ali, Bec, and Cindy) conveyed that their expectations of PASS as international students were related to improving their English and their ability to communicate, both orally and in writing. Two participants (Ali and Bec) explained that their initial decision to join PASS was prompted by the leaders who came to their class to invite them to join and they felt that they “could communicate with her and relate to her well” (Bec) and were

“happy to go with her as she was very kind” (Ali). Interestingly, none of the participants indicated that interacting with other students was the reason they initially joined PASS.

Learning in PASS

All the students spoke about a strong contribution of PASS to their learning. Two participants (Bec and Cindy) mentioned the impact PASS had on their “academic results (score).” But mostly, the participants talked about the importance of the development of thinking skills, the techniques of study, and understanding the content, as illustrated by the quotes below.

Understanding something more than in lecture...what is meaning of this... give you how you can think about this problem...you can maybe divide into small parts. (Ali)

PASS is more thinking and understanding. (Bec)

Not giving knowledge - understanding the themes - this is what you need to address. (Cindy)

Discover new techniques of learning... how to study the content of the course - you don't have to use the whole textbook but you can just use it as a resource when you don't understand your lecture notes. You can refer to the textbook. (Donna)

PASS provided the students with the study skills that were essential for their development as independent, self-regulated learners (Vygotsky, 1997). All the students clearly appreciated the possibility of developing what Ashwin (2003, p. 159) describes as “an increased awareness of the assessment demands of the course” and a “more strategically orientated” approach to studying. Two students (Ali and Cindy) particularly appreciated the focus of PASS on the assessment tasks, not just on general understanding of the content.

When talking about the benefits of PASS all the participants pointed out the importance of the learning environment in PASS that supported their confidence as non-native speakers to ask questions and participate in discussions. According to Ali and Cindy, this was very different to their experience in lectures and tutorials where they felt hesitant to talk. For example, Cindy explained:

Doing it in another language it is very difficult ... [In lectures and tutorials] I couldn't ask ... because there are people who will think you are a fool...in the large classes normally international people do not speak... most of the time they are just listening.

In PASS, international students had more opportunity “to interact and ask questions” (Cindy), particularly given that fellow international students constituted the majority of students in postgraduate PASS classrooms.

Ali shared a similar point of view saying that in his lectures or tutorials he was not comfortable participating in discussions, but in PASS he felt confident doing so:

[In PASS] we can discuss, we can hear each other or listen to each other. But in lecture we have to just listen to our teacher. Sometimes

we can discuss but they discuss with each other, with local people ... often I can't understand.

All the participants appreciated a "relaxed and informal" atmosphere in PASS where "they could express themselves" and "ask any questions."

The role of the leader

All the participants mentioned the role of the leader in creating a safe learning atmosphere free from judgement and the authority of a lecturer. According to all the participants, the leaders actively encouraged the students to ask questions and express their opinions. Participants appreciated that the leaders were experts but at the same time "were students themselves" and therefore they could explain the ideas in an approachable way. The students demonstrated appreciation of their leaders being enthusiastic, accessible, and kind:

For all of us, especially international students, we never think that she is a lecturer - so as a colleague we can ask her questions. (Cindy)

[The leader] played a good role model. They have the right personality and the right attitude and they have confidence within themselves as well as the confidence in knowing the subject. (Donna)

In spite of general consensus in relation to the highly positive effect of the leader on the students' study, one participant (Bec) reported that the leader in her group was not always well prepared and developed her leadership skills gradually during the semester. This is valuable feedback in terms of leader preparation. It demonstrates that by participating in the voluntary program the students expect a level of "service" and whilst it is a peer relationship, there is an expectation that the leader be prepared and adequately trained to ensure they can facilitate the sessions appropriately. The comments made by Bec reinforce the importance of ongoing professional development and mentoring. The expectation of preparedness may be an interesting area for investigation, such as comparing postgraduate expectations with undergraduate expectations.

All the participants recognised that the role of the leader was to support them in reviewing the content and assisting them to gain a better understanding of the content by facilitating a peer learning environment but not to teach the subject matter or check the assessment tasks. For example, they explained:

We don't discuss directly the [assessment] questions because you have to create some ideas about the whole information, not about just the questions. And she said we couldn't discuss this assessment question with you. Just I think we brainstorm, something like this - about the whole subject or chapter. Each week we study one chapter. (Ali)

She [leader] didn't look at our assignments - she said it is not her duty. (Cindy)

Other participants also reported that the leader was there to guide peer group communication rather than answer assessment questions. Yet, two

participants (Ali and Cindy) repeatedly commented on the importance of PASS activities being directly related to the assignments in the unit.

Learning with others

Learning with other students who studied in the same unit and had similar needs was probably the most important PASS benefit repeatedly mentioned across all the interviews. They all agreed that the ability to take part in a discussion and ask questions allowed them to advance their learning. Characteristic examples are presented below.

Often, I don't understand something ... but when I went to PASS I met classmates and they also international students. They feel the same problem like me. (Ali)

You need to become a team and help each other to figure out the question. (Bec)

...when we have some problems ... I can interact with each other and find it. That is the most important part because the PASS program given us the opportunity to interact with each other and find solutions for our problems. (Cindy)

During lectures I just go there ... but it is not often interactive. PASS session has enabled me to interact with other students and to get to know students... Interacting with other students has made me learn better. (Donna)

While the students appreciated being in a group with other international students who shared similar problems, communicating with "native" students who also attended PASS was very helpful, particularly for learning academic language, such as the words used in the unit (technical jargon). The students extensively commented on the importance of participation in the discussions for their language learning. Some comments are exemplified below.

Also the main benefit from this also English language ... it is a good chance to communicate with other people and ... learn some new words in English language because I feel free to ask {leader} or to ask my classmates. (Ali)

Good for my hearing and practicing English with academic terms (Bec)

Here every time I am developing language - the PASS program is really helping that. Interacting in English and talking with {leader} and the native speakers. (Cindy)

...even though I did my undergrad in NZ it was 10 years back. When I interact with a native speaker/ native PASS leader it really helps. It helps me in my English, in my communication and in my understanding the subject. (Donna)

Meeting with other students in an informal situation was also of importance for some of our participants as part of their cultural experience.

Connecting to others

There was a clear presence of comments in regard to informal interactions and connections with peers that were formed through participation in PASS. Interestingly, through the interviews the participants specifically mention the

relationships formed with domestic students as being significant to their learning, both about academic matters and general living. For example, Ali summed it up as follows:

I think this is the main use for PASS also ... make friendships. Because I think we sometimes face problems to contact and communicate with people here ... maybe because we are foreign people or foreign students or they also busy. PASS is a good solution. And also sometimes as an International Student we discuss some problems outside and also we get some benefit from local people who come to PASS and sometimes give us some advice about something inside or outside the university.

Ali also provided examples of sharing resources and being given information on university services by peers. Another three participants also mentioned PASS as a place to make friends and meet other students from the University, both international and domestic. This ability to provide a connection between domestic and international students is a constant issue in higher education (Neri & Ville, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the findings of an investigation regarding the perceptions of international postgraduate coursework students who participated in the PASS program at an Australian university. The aims of the study were to explore the perceived benefits for the students in attending PASS and particularly the role of social interactions in forming these perceptions.

The findings of our study indicate that participating in PASS was beneficial for the international postgraduate students. In spite of being enrolled in a postgraduate degree, they felt they needed assistance in their academic study. There was a level of consensus across the online survey and interviews that the participants were motivated to attend PASS to practice skills associated with the study in the unit, to understand the content better, and to get a pass grade or earn higher marks. This is similar to findings in relation to undergraduate students who enrol to improve their grades rather than just pass the unit (van der Meer & Scott, 2009). In addition, postgraduate international students were motivated to improve their English language.

Reflecting back on their participation in PASS, the participants found it highly beneficial for both their learning and social engagement at the university. In relation to the academic study, PASS was beneficial to our participants not only for understanding the content but also for the development of their learning skills, such as approaching the assessment tasks, planning the sequence of the study, and searching for information.

An important finding of our study is that PASS provided international postgraduate students with a learning environment suitable to their unique needs related to the difficulties in understanding complex material in a foreign (to them) English language and their lack of confidence in participating in class discussions. When looking back at their experience of participating in PASS, all the participants pointed out the significant differences in their learning compared to lectures and tutorials in the unit.

There was considerable mention of the environment in PASS being a non-threatening environment, or an environment in which questions could be asked with ease. This seemed to be particularly linked to confidence, as international student participants felt hesitant speaking and contributing in large classroom situations where there is a majority of native English speakers and where speaking would mean interrupting the flow of a lecture or tutorial. This barrier can be amplified by the debilitating factors of cultural transition that affect the academic confidence and self-esteem of international students (Guilfoyle, 2006; Sawir et al., 2008).

The view of PASS as a safe environment is aligned with many peer learning studies that argue that communications between peers are less threatening than those involving supervisors or authorities. Whilst some lecturers and tutors will try to be as approachable as possible, there is an inherent level of respect and power involved in the teacher-student relationship that can be uncomfortable at times for questioning.

All the participants mentioned the caring, welcoming, and supportive nature of the leaders and the value in being able to share their experience as a student. This aligns with social constructivist theories that highlight the importance of socio-emotional aspects of learning and interactions with others (Mahn & Steiner, 2004). Further, this demonstrates the importance of modelling, a key component of the PASS essential elements, in which the leader can demonstrate how to break down complex tasks into their component parts and form a relationship based on positive reinforcement (Hurley, Jacobs, & Gilbert, 2006), thus creating a safe learning environment. The participants appreciated that the leaders were students themselves and therefore they could explain the ideas in a way different to the lecturer that made sense to the students. This indicates that the leaders were able to tap into the students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1997).

Whilst it is clear that many students were aware of the boundaries surrounding PASS leaders and assessment, the multiple requests for support directly related to assessment tasks (10 students in the survey and two in the interviews) may be an area for exploration. Whilst indicated as potentially desired by the students, there is a question whether the role of the PASS leader extends to this level of support or if these skills are better offered by faculty teaching staff. However, by teaching to assessment there may be a risk of lowering the quality of teaching generic study skills. It also reinforces the importance of the PASS program being embedded into a particular unit and the importance of a high level of support and endorsement for PASS being offered by the teaching team.

There was a clear presence of comments in regard to the interactions and connections with peers that were formed through participation in this program. Interestingly, international students specifically mentioned the relationships formed with domestic students as being significant to their learning, both about academic matters and general living. This ability to provide a connection between domestic and international students might be a feature of PASS worth exploring.

There was substantial comment around the effects of social interactions forged in PASS on English language development, particularly in regard to the use of social language (slang) and academic language (technical jargon). This may reveal that PASS is able to offer a very important link to peers, as well as providing academic support for this specific cohort. This is an area that would greatly benefit from further investigation.

There are a number of limitations that must be recognised as part of this study. There was a relatively small sample size. The research is biased as only international students who participated five or more times were invited to respond. It may be interesting to also gain insight into the perceptions of those who attended once or twice and did not return and those who chose not to engage with the program at all.

This research provides an important starting point in understanding the specific relationship between international postgraduate students and the PASS program. There is certainly more work to be done in this area internationally, particularly in understanding the difference in dynamics in peer learning programs that have a high level of international students. Further research will be particularly important as the university continues to explore the benefits of utilising PASS as a strategy to build discipline specific learning communities and also to address academic challenges in the study of units with high proportions of international students. Finally, the importance of peer relationships, the level of support, and the value of the PASS program to this cohort may be anecdotally demonstrated through both the online survey and the interviews where 100% of participants indicated that they would recommend PASS to a friend—an overwhelming response.

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