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Faculty and academic staff perceptions, experiences, and expectations of the PASS Program: A case study

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ABSTRACT

Current research largely explores the evaluation and perceptions of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) from the student perspective. The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate institutional, faculty, and academic staff perceptions, experiences, and expectations of an established PASS program in the Faculty of Business in an Australian University. A survey and semi structured interviews were used to collect responses from participants from each level of the university, including the PASS program coordinators, Dean of Faculty, Head of School, and subject coordinators. Results highlight the importance of “closing the communication loop” between PASS leaders and academics to maintain the efficacy of such programs and aid in their continuous improvement. This research contributes to the literature concerning peer learning. The findings may be used in the future development of programs such as PASS to further inform the engagement of academic staff to enhance the student learning experience in such programs.

INTRODUCTION

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), is the Australasian terminology for Supplemental Instruction (SI) programs (van der Meer & Scott, 2009). Implementations of the PASS program within universities and academic research regarding the program have gained momentum on an international level (Yu et al., 2011). Much research has been conducted on the effectiveness of PASS programs (Malm, Bryngfors & Morner, 2011; Parkinson, 2009; Yaoyuneyong & Thornton, 2011) and students’ experience of the programs (Hammond, Bitchell, Jones, & Bidgood, 2010; Sole, Rose, Bennett, Jaques, & Rippon, 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2009). Obeng (2003, cited in Ross & Cameron, 2007) suggests that three categories can be used to group potential stakeholders of PASS programs, namely “people to involve, people to consult and people to inform” (p. 537). It is clear that much of the PASS literature had a focus on the involvement of students (“people to involve”) while overlooking the importance of consulting faculty staff, especially teaching academics (“people to consult”).

Currently, literature suggests that research activity has been concentrating on understanding student expectations. While this is clearly vital in providing an effective support program such as PASS, we suggest that to move forward it is equally important to understand the expectations of staff as key stakeholders within the program, especially in the context of university

education where academic teaching staff have a high stake in the success or failure of students.. These expectations and perceptions of academics can then be used to plan and implement more effective PASS programs for faculties.

Relatively little research has been conducted that examines faculty and participating academic staff members' experiences, perceptions, and expectations of PASS. We suggest that these three elements of PASS (i.e., program effectiveness, student perception, academic staff perception) are critical and should be viewed as equal drivers for the continued and sustainable development of an effective PASS program; that is to say, an equilateral relationship should be established between the stakeholders of any PASS program, as depicted by the equilateral triangle in Figure 1.

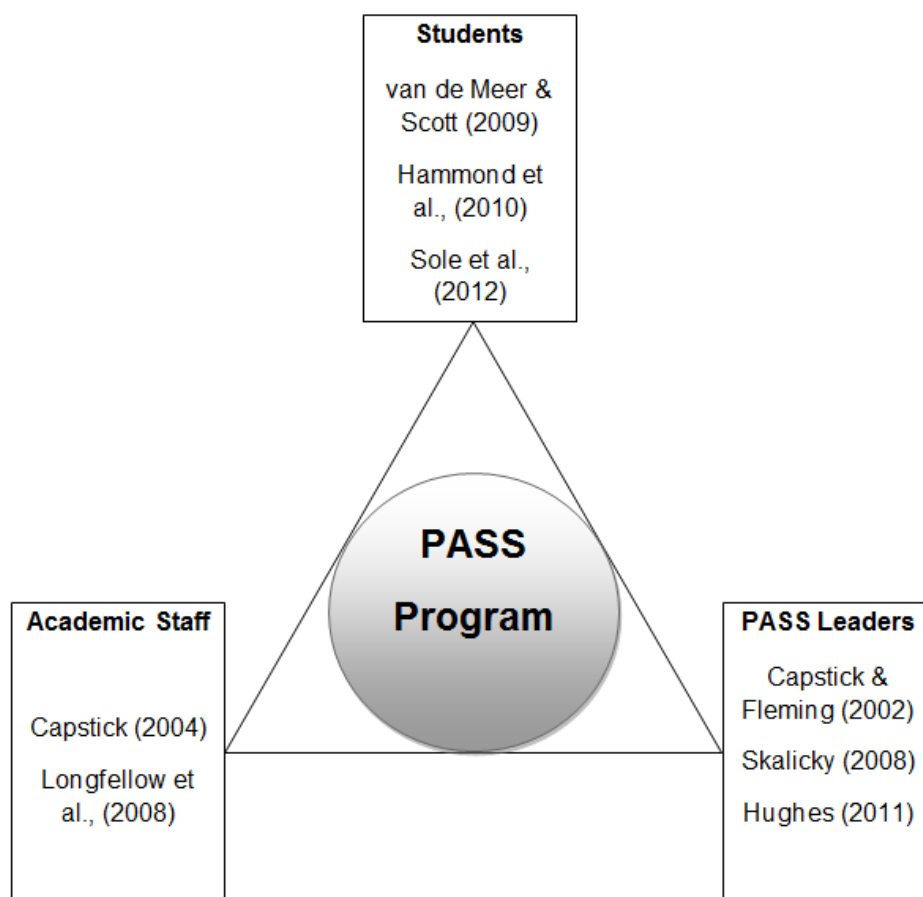


Figure 1. PASS Stakeholders' Triangle.

The purpose of this paper is to fill the void in the current literature through a study using both survey questionnaires and interviews to obtain responses from relevant staff within the Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong. Using the survey results this study explores academics' perceptions of the PASS program's efficacy within the context of business discipline based subjects, examining the experiences of faculty and academic staff that have engaged with the PASS program in an effort to provide suggestions towards

improvement of the PASS program to better cater for students' learning support needs.

Background - The PASS Program in Faculty of Business, UOW

University of Wollongong (UOW) operates the most awarded PASS Program in the world (UOW, 2013). As the National Centre for PASS for the Australasian region since 2005, UOW staff have led a major wave of implementation and development of PASS in the region after early efforts by other institutions faltered in the 1990s. UOW has provided PASS training and assistance to some 65 institutions across Australasia. As an integrated part of UOW's learning, teaching, and curriculum services, PASS has a 12 year history supporting the learning needs of UOW students. The Program is run for the entire campus from a centralised Peer Learning unit.

The PASS Program in UOW has supported students studying in the Faculty of Business since 2002. In Spring Session 2012, UOW PASS supported 13 subjects offered by the Faculty of Business, with business students the largest cohort assisted by UOW PASS. Business subjects supported by UOW PASS range across Accounting, Finance, Economics, and Management disciplines, covering both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study.

Lewis, O'Brien, Rogan and Shorten (2005) used a case study of a first year business subject offered at UOW to determine the level of effectiveness of PASS. Their findings suggest that PASS had a significant positive impact on students' academic performance in that economics subject, particularly for those students from a weaker academic background. In the early stages of PASS implementation for business subjects, significant levels of communication and relationship building took place between the then Associate Dean of the Faculty, several subject lecturers, and the PASS Coordinator. However, with the rapid expansion of PASS across the UOW campus and within the Business Faculty, there has been less indication in recent years of whether the Faculty of Business and the coordinators of subjects have had any specific expectations towards the PASS program, or how much communication has occurred between the parties apart from operational emails.

Therefore this paper sets the objective to identify the faculty and academic staff members' specific expectations towards the much larger and mature UOW PASS Program, investigating the individual experiences of academic staff with PASS in relation to the subject they teach/coordinate, assessing their level of satisfaction, and inquiring about their concerns and recommendations to assist with the ongoing cycle of review and improvement for the PASS program. In addition, this paper investigates existing support mechanisms provided by the faculty and academic staff for the UOW PASS Program, identifying any potential areas for improvements to build more effective communication and a stronger feedback loop to further enhance PASS development and its relationship with the Business Faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The PASS program utilises a peer-led group to provide additional academic assistance for students besides formal face-to-face teaching hours (lectures, tutorials, workshops, or seminars) and aims to assist students to achieve positive results. Facilitated by senior students (commonly referred to as PASS

leaders) who have excelled in the subject during previous semesters, PASS provides opportunities for participating students to strengthen their knowledge by being actively involved in group learning that is focused on reviewing material and practical problem solving (Sole et al., 2012). Recognised benefits of participating in the PASS program for students include better engagement with the university (van der Meer & Scott, 2009), better connections with other students (Longfellow, May, Burke, & Marks-Maran, 2008; van der Meer & Scott, 2009;), improved self-concept and learning behaviour (Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck and Fantuzzo, 2006), and a notably observed improvement in academic performance (Devine & Jolly, 2011, Malm, Bryngfors & Morner, 2011; McCarthy, Smuts, & Cosser, 1997; Parkinson, 2009). The program hence benefits the institution facilitating the PASS program via positive impacts on student retention (Etter, Burmersiter, & Elder, 2001; Hensen & Shelly, 2003).

PASS has traditionally targeted challenging subjects, which are commonly observed in the disciplines of Engineering (Malm et al., 2011), Mathematics and Chemistry (Devine and Jolly, 2011, Parkinson 2009), and Medical Studies (Knobe et al., 2010; Sole et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2011). In comparison, PASS literature in business related disciplines remains thin, despite the fact that business subjects can be challenging for students (Calkins, 2012; Minnaert, Boekaerts, Brabander, & Opdenakker, 2011; Zraa, Kavanagh and Hartle, 2011). Etter et al. (2001) as well as Jones and Fields (2001) both empirically demonstrated that PASS programs are effective in improving student performance in introductory accounting courses; however, they also pointed out that the positive outcomes observed may not be the result of SI techniques completely, with direct delivery of course-related content (in both voluntary and mandatory SI sessions) also contributing to better performance.

It should also be noted that although positive PASS program experiences are well recognised in the literature, the successful implementation of the PASS program cannot be taken for granted (Hodgson, Bearman, & Schneider-Kolsky, 2012). Unfavorable results such as student dissatisfaction can result when student expectations and staff expectations are misaligned in a poorly designed PASS program (Hodgson et al., 2012). This further demonstrates the importance of academic staff expectations of the PASS program. Considering that being able to pass the exam is one of the main motivations for students to participate in PASS programs (van der Meer & Scott, 2009), and that the success of the PASS program largely depends on how well the program organiser pays attentions to the needs of students (Topping & Ehly, 2005), an understanding of academics' expectations of what students are able to achieve in PASS is critical.

Longfellow et al. (2008) suggest academic staff may hold "doubtful or hostile" views towards PASS programs due to concerns over academic quality of PASS sessions and unhelpful or inappropriate re-teaching, which potentially leads to poorer performance for PASS participants (p. 95). It is clear that the concerns are associated with the question of whether the design of PASS schemes and materials for a particular subject are capable of facilitating students' learning needs in alignment with the learning objectives set by academics. Although SI philosophy emphasizes the development of generic study skills and social integration (Arendale, 1994), it is quite transparent

that being able to help with course-related materials and helping students to achieve learning objectives are considered to be the most important contributing factors to program satisfaction by both students and academics (Longfellow et al., 2008; van der Meer & Scott, 2009).

Therefore, we argue that a complete communication loop between the key stakeholders of a PASS program should be established and maintained to ensure the expectations can be investigated and understood (Figure 2).

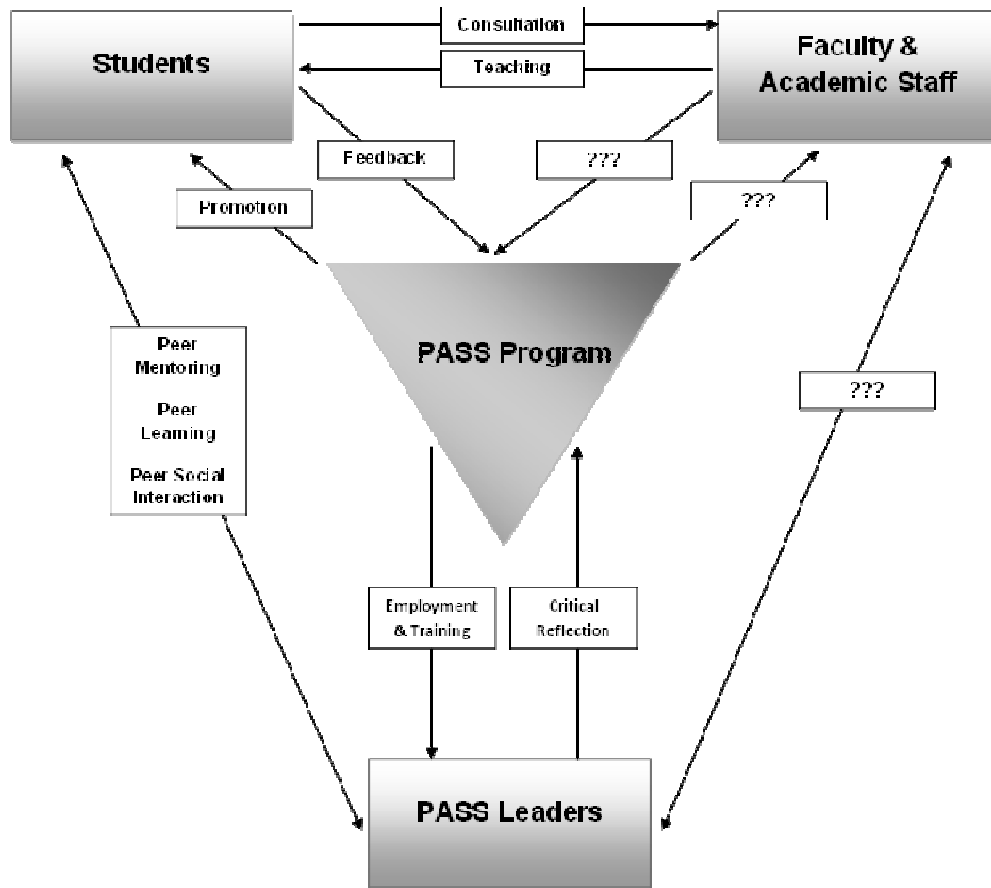


Figure 2. Communication Loop.

Many sections of this communication loop have been addressed in the literature. For instance, many studies focusing on the effectiveness of PASS programs use student feedback as an indicator of program quality (Parkinson, 2009; Sole et al., 2012; van der Meer & Scott, 2009). Another key group of stakeholders of the PASS program are PASS leaders. The communications between PASS program coordinators and student leaders are considered to be the most crucial element to enhance the program (Capstick & Fleming, 2002; Hughes, 2011, Tien, Roth, & Kampmeier, 2002, 2004). Furthermore, the social interaction between PASS leaders and participating students is also important to promote the PASS philosophy and maintain the effectiveness of the program (Fuchs, Fuchs & Burish, 2000; Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck & Fantuzzo, 2006; Kamps et al., 2002). However, the current literature does not prescribe the appropriate level of communication and

engagement between PASS program coordinators and teaching academics. A contributing factor may be that in some institutions, the roles of PASS program coordinator and teaching academic are undertaken by the same person (e.g., Parkinson, 2009; Tien, Roth, & Kampmeier, 2002). In addition, although the literature emphasises the importance of PASS leaders as the crucial factors contributing to PASS experience and performance (Skalicky, 2008), few studies have discussed the level of collaboration between PASS leaders and academics in detail. Therefore, this study will closely examine the elements of communication and engagement between PASS and academics in order to help understand the complete communication loop.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A questionnaire survey instrument was used to obtain responses from both executive and academic staff in the Faculty of Business and the PASS program. Questionnaires were distributed to 16 members of the faculty with a total of 14 responses received, resulting in a response rate of 87.5%. The questionnaire had three subsets of questions within which 5-point Likert-scale questions were used to identify attitudes towards PASS with respect to satisfaction levels and acknowledgement of effectiveness. In addition, open-ended questions were used to seek general expectations, concerns, and recommendations.

The questionnaires were administrated via both face-to-face interviews and electronic forms. A total of 17 responses were obtained. The responses were analysed in order to identify whether differences existed between the perceptions of faculty staff regarding PASS and the intended messages of PASS coordinators. Gaps identified could be used to address any issues within the communication loop amongst all stakeholders of the PASS program.

RESULTS

Faculty executives: Awareness and perceptions of the PASS Program

Responses were obtained from the Deans of the Faculty of Business, Senior Manager of Teaching and Learning, and Head of School of Accounting. Overall, all Faculty executives consider that the PASS program is a valuable addition to all other types of learning support that the institution has provided to students and has its own unique strengths and benefits. For instance, one of the executives commented that the PASS program "is designed to assist students of all academic abilities to have a better understanding of subjects and offers the opportunity for students to build relationships with other participating students and PASS leaders." One of the Deans strongly stated that the peer-assisted pedagogical approach of the PASS program uniquely enhances students' learning experiences and is capable of providing educational benefits that otherwise cannot be accessed by students in formal teaching hours. In addition, they emphasised that when consulting with poor performing students, participation in the PASS program was one of the key recommendations made.

Faculty executives: What are their concerns and expectations?

All of the executives expressed that the Faculty will always support PASS for the enormous benefits provided for business students, and they expect that the program itself can grow and improve continuously. They are very

pleased with the current feedback mechanisms the PASS program has provided to the faculty (student attendance, results, and perceptions). However, they consider that there is still potential to better use the available resources to enhance collaboration between the Faculty and the PASS program.

There are two fundamental issues that the Faculty executives consider as very important for the future development of the Program. The first is how PASS can maintain and improve its service quality with the expansion of the Faculty and increasing demand by students for PASS support. One of the Deans considers the choice of which subjects to support involves a challenging decision due to restricted resources, yet the need for PASS support continues to grow. Moreover, faculty executives recognise that there are some inherent difficulties in providing PASS programs for more business subjects, including a shortage of potential PASS leaders where the subject is part of a one year postgraduate degree. When asked, the Faculty executives suggested that an evidence-based approach should be adopted in order to ensure that the PASS program can deliver the maximum benefit for students, thus more collaboration between the Faculty and the PASS program should be planned.

The other expectation that the Faculty executives have for the PASS program is to be able to act as a communication intermediary. One of the Deans commented on her expectation that:

PASS leaders can help the subject coordinator to be aware of what students are struggling with by closely observing the students' activities and feelings and then effectively providing feedback towards both the Faculty and its academics regarding potential issues (in relation to teaching) identified in PASS sessions and communicating with the subject coordinator, and importantly NOT directly giving them solutions.

It is clear that more effective communications between the PASS leader and Faculty staff are encouraged, and are considered important inputs towards better teaching delivery in the Faculty.

Academic staff: Awareness and perceptions of the PASS Program

Responses from nine lecturers were collected and analysed. The subjects they coordinated, the type of subject (in terms of being practical, theoretical, or balanced), and their years of experience with the PASS program are listed in Table 1.

Results indicate that all nine participants in the survey had a clear understanding of the basic features of the PASS program implemented for the subjects they taught, such as the non-mandatory participation requirement and the philosophy of PASS. More experienced lecturers were able to provide a more sophisticated description of PASS, such as a "voluntary supplemental instruction program" or a "peer mentoring experience." In addition, all nine participants considered that the performance of the PASS program for their subjects was beyond a satisfactory level. The majority of the lecturers started their engagement with the program as a result of the faculty's promotion of PASS, and results

indicate that only very few of them have had frequent communications with PASS coordinators. Rather, most of the lecturers maintain both formal and informal communications with their PASS leaders. Seven out of the nine lecturers interviewed in the study stated that besides pre-session introduction emails and post-session reports provided by PASS coordinators, they had no other forms of communication with the PASS program. The reason, according to the interviewees, was their overall satisfaction with the program.

Similar to the suggestions of Ross and Cameron (2007) that PASS helps the enhancement of both students' content-specific knowledge and generic learning skills, all the participating lecturers considered that by attending PASS, students can better deal with learning difficulties and accomplish the subject's learning objectives, both content-related (e.g., statistical techniques, financial calculations, and accounting journal entries) and skill-related (e.g., developing sensible arguments, critical thinking, and enhanced communication). This finding also demonstrates the overall effectiveness of PASS programs implemented in the Faculty of Business, which satisfies the two main criteria of having a clear focus on student learning and aligning curricula constructively with learning outcomes (Biggs, 1999, cited in Ross & Cameron, 2007).

Table 1
List of subjects

Subject	Type	Experience with PASS
1st Year Accounting A	Balanced	4 years
1st Year Accounting B	Practical	3 years
2nd Year Accounting	Balanced	3 years
Postgraduate Accounting A	Practical	0.5 years
Postgraduate Accounting B	Theoretical	1 year
1st Year Finance	Balanced	3 years
2nd Year Finance	Balanced	3 years
1st Year Business Stats	Practical	10 years
1st Year Management	Theoretical	1.5 years

Academic staff: What are their concerns and expectations?

A series of questions was asked of the participating lecturers to indicate whether they have had any concerns with the PASS program implemented for their subjects (in degrees of *serious*, *modest*, or *never was a concern*). Some of the issues causing lecturers to express negative attitudes towards PASS have been identified in previous studies (e.g., Capstick, 2004; Longfellow et al., 2008) and were used to construct our questions.

As Table 2 illustrates, the majority of participants had few concerns with PASS, and not surprisingly, their level of confidence appears to increase as experience and engagement with PASS increases. In addition, seven out of the nine interviewees have emphasised that their strong confidence in the PASS

program is built upon the trust they have with their assigned PASS leaders, especially when the relationship is long standing.

Table 2
Concerns with the PASS Program

Concerns	No. responses		
	Serious	Modest	Never
Demotivate attending formal teaching hours	2	3	4
Unhelpful instruction given to students	0	3	6
Out-dated or irrelevant materials given	1	1	7
Re-teaching in PASS (leaders acting as teachers)	0	3	6
Answers are provided directly in PASS (where students should see formal teaching staff)	0	3	6
Guidance given for assignments in PASS	0	3	6
Learning outcomes are not aligned	0	0	9
Subject contents are too complicated for PASS	0	0	9

Using PASS as an alternative to formal contact hours (lecture and tutorial) is the most serious concern that the subject coordinators identified. The factors considered to contribute to this include timetabling restrictions for formal classes, students feeling more comfortable in the PASS environment, and students' possible but incorrect perception about PASS as being a "quick fix" to their learning of subject material. All interviewees confirmed that they implemented certain strategies to emphasise the importance of formal teaching hours and some formally asked their PASS leaders to send the same message to students in PASS sessions. All of them considered that their subjects and the PASS program are a very good fit; hence their concern is not about the learning quality of PASS. Rather, they emphasised that since the PASS program is not designed solely as an exam-oriented learning support, students need to obtain exam relevant information in formal lectures.

Another interesting finding is the attitudes of academic staff towards the concern of re-teaching¹. All academics asserted that re-teaching in PASS was not a major issue for them, although thoroughly avoiding re-teaching is emphasised in PASS leader training programs. They consider either that "re-teaching is inevitable as students need to be told what to do to study my subject" or "as long as the PASS program can help students do better, re-teaching is not an issue." This disparity may be due to these academics having a different understanding of the SI philosophy compared to PASS coordinators. However, this is not saying that the academics believe that re-teaching is needed, as only very few of the interviewees have ever provided formal guidance on what materials should be covered in PASS; rather, they let the PASS leaders have full autonomy. A contributing factor for lecturers'

¹ Hereby re-teaching is defined as "merely repeating contents or solutions already imparted to the students by the lecture or tutor and/or directly answering questions that maintains the passivity of the participating students" (PASS Leader Manual, UOW, 2011, p. 20).

acceptance of re-teaching may be the aforementioned more serious concern that students may have perceived PASS as an adequate alternative for formal teaching hours such as lectures and tutorials. Hence, PASS may become their “last resort” for gaining some necessary knowledge. Therefore, the key issue of addressing re-teaching is to emphasise the importance/irreplaceability of lectures and tutorials. This should be a consistent message from the lecturers and PASS Leaders and reduces any perceived need for re-teaching in PASS by both the lecturers and participating students.

What kinds of collaboration exist between academics and PASS leaders?

We asked questions to find out what kinds of collaboration exist between academics and PASS Leaders. The results provided insights to the debate on whether it is beneficial for PASS that lecturers have involvement with PASS material preparation. Although only two respondents have previously provided formal guidance to their PASS leaders on what to deliver in PASS, all lecturers stated that PASS leaders are welcome to present PASS materials to them for review. Most of the lecturers believed that the content delivered in PASS is relevant and well-aligned with the student learning objectives. However, it is important to recognise that such strong belief is based on the high level of trust lecturers had in the PASS leaders assigned to their subjects. It was very apparent that the individual quality of PASS leaders selected and recruited for the subject and a well-established and maintained relationship between the lecturers and PASS Leaders significantly contributed to the lecturers’ overall satisfaction and positive perceptions of the program.

Table 3
Academics’ collaborations

Academics’ collaborations	No. responses	
	Yes	No
Formal communication	4	5
Informal communication	9	0
Sharing of teaching material	1	8
Provide guidance to leaders	2	7
Obtain feedback from leaders	2	7
Invite/enforce leaders to attend lectures	9	0
Help with material preparation	0	9
Promote PASS in lecture	9	0

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study help to understand the communication loop between the key stakeholders of PASS programs within a faculty. More specifically, the relatively less discussed communication between academics and PASS coordinators and collaboration between academics and PASS leaders are better comprehended.

Results indicate that with very few exceptions, lecturers only maintain a minimal level of communication with the PASS program coordinating staff,

and commonly these communications are found to be informative but rather routine. Emails were the most frequently used type of communication between PASS coordinators and lecturers, which can be as infrequent as two to three times per semester. Instead, both face-to-face and electronic communication between PASS leaders and lecturers occurs more frequently. This demonstrates that a large number of communications between PASS coordinators and lecturers were actually indirectly transmitted via PASS leaders through their engagement with lecturers and reflective feedback provided to and from the PASS program. Using leaders as an integral part of the communication channel in order to ensure the closure of the communication loop is an effective strategy that the PASS program in UOW deliberately implemented and maintained via leader instructions and training.

The leaders' role in the communication loop is essential for the ongoing improvement of the PASS program. It is also a cost efficient strategic component of the operation of a large centralised PASS program where the time of full-time staff may be more limited. Evidence from this study further strengthens Skalicky's (2008) conclusion that the success of a PASS program is largely dependent on the performance of PASS leaders and their reflections and feedback. As a consequence, the role of PASS leaders and their critical functions in the communication loop must be recognised in the planning and implementation process of PASS programs. Thus, communication skills should be an essential consideration in both the initial recruitment of PASS leaders and their ongoing professional development and training.

In addition, there appears to be an expectation gap in relation to better feedback mechanisms. The expectations of both Faculty executives and academics indicated that effective communication and feedback among academics and their PASS leaders is an important means to identify student learning needs and improve teaching. According to both groups of interviewees, PASS leaders have a more intimate relationship with students and are in a better position to observe and identify learning needs of both individuals and PASS participants as a group. The faculty will benefit more if these observations can be reported to the academics in a timely manner. At present, they consider more can be done with that information. It may be that a more formal mechanism needs to be in place to facilitate this feedback to lecturers as it should be recognised that PASS Leaders may be hesitant to offer comment on this to the academic staff if they are not clear that it will be welcomed. We argue that in order to minimise this expectation gap and achieve a more completed communication loop, joint efforts from both the PASS program and faculty are needed. More forms of interaction between academics and PASS leaders should be planned and utilised with considerations of timeliness, work load, and resource availability. Although the overall positive outcomes of PASS have been observed and noted, more dynamic communication is capable of providing an enriched two way interaction to reduce the possibility of understating the PASS program's performance and contribution.

Lastly, interviews of academics identify that both the Faculty senior executive and teaching academics have very positive attitudes and perceptions of the UOW PASS program. Potential concerns suggested by Capstick (2004) and Longfellow et al. (2008) were not found to be in evidence at any significant

level. We find that two major reasons that academics have few concerns with the UOW PASS program are their appreciation of the effectiveness PASS has for improving students' performance and the level of confidence and trust they have in their assigned PASS leaders. This indicates the overall strategic effectiveness of the current PASS program's leader recruitment, selection, and training. For a rapidly growing centralised PASS program, a team of proactive PASS leaders skilled in communication will be the most valuable asset for maintaining the collaboration of PASS and faculties and enhancing the ongoing performance and contribution of the PASS program.

To conclude, this paper provides an opportunity to evaluate the PASS program from the perspective of a university faculty and its strategic core and academic staff. It argues that the faculty and its academic staff constitute an influential stakeholder group for the services that PASS provides. The findings of this paper can help to inform how a centralised PASS program can be designed and improved by incorporating faculty and academic staff expectations, including program delivery, communication, and most importantly, the recruitment and training of PASS leaders. The significance of faculty staff's input towards a PASS program should be recognised, as it constitutes important drivers for the sustainable success of PASS programs provided for large cohorts of students across multiple subjects within a faculty.

Further research

Although providing a valuable perspective on institutional and academic perceptions of PASS within a single faculty, it is recognised that this study represents a relatively small sample of academics working with PASS programs, providing a "business-centric" view. This study should be viewed as the beginning of a much larger dialogue that encompasses perceptions from multiple faculties and perhaps forms part of a longitudinal study of action research that moves towards the strategic and ongoing evolution of such programs.

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APPENDIX

Table A1
Survey Example: Staff Perceptions

	Yes, fully aware(1)	No, I am not aware at all (2)	I have some awareness in relation to my subject (3)
The purpose and objective of the PASS program (1)			
Name of the people in charge of running the PASS program (2)			
Name of the PASS leaders assigned to my subject (3)			
Frequency, Time, and Location of weekly PASS workshop (4)			
The format of the PASS workshop (5)			
The content that will be delivered in the PASS workshop (6)			
Student's attitudes towards PASS Program (7)			
Faculty communications and promotion of PASS Program (8)			
Students studying my subjects often talk about PASS Program (9)			
Other, Please Specify (10)			