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# Exploring PASS leadership beyond graduation

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# **Exploring PASS leadership beyond graduation**

**Lucy Chilvers and Joseph Waghorne**

## **ABSTRACT**

Developing University graduates' employability is of increasing strategic institutional focus in the UK. Existing research evidences the role of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in supporting students to develop personal, professional and employability skills. This research explores the impact of the PASS Leader role on graduates' job application experiences, their employability and effectiveness in their current roles. PASS Leader graduate survey (n=62) and interview (n=12) findings demonstrated participants referred to their PASS Leader Role significantly on their CVs, application forms and in job interviews. Respondents said that PASS Leadership, aided by reflection, enabled them to clearly evidence their development of employability skills, which they perceived as enabling them to stand out from other job candidates. Interview participants explained their PASS Leadership informed their development of a range of employability skills and attributes, including communication, confidence, teamwork, facilitation and leadership. PASS Leadership was regarded as addressing gaps in their course curriculum for developing skills they perceived as important for their current roles, highlighting the value of co and extra-curricular programmes, such as PASS.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Universities are operating in an increasingly competitive climate and the importance of demonstrating the potential employability of students has never been greater. Following the change of government in the United Kingdom (U.K.) in 2010, all universities were required to produce an employability statement which provided a summary of what universities offer their students to support their employability and their move into employment (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010). This has brought the idea of graduate 'employability' to the forefront of university strategies.

The concept of employability is highly contested and a consensus on the meaning of the term has not been reached. Broadly speaking the term refers to a set of skills and attributes which improve a graduate's chance of finding employment. What it means to be employable varies depending on the industry, the state of the labour market, and the requirements for an individual job (Griffiths, 2012). However, whilst a degree is seen as a necessity for many professions, research has shown 'soft skills' help to distinguish between candidates of equal educational background (Nilsson, 2010). In addition to the course curriculum students are offered a variety of opportunities, through co- and extracurricular activities, in order to help boost these soft skills. Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS), or the American equivalent Supplemental Instruction (SI), can be viewed as one such opportunity.

There is a large body of literature that has developed over the last 30 years evidencing the positive impact of the PASS scheme on students who attend (Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky, & Cowley, 2014). However, the influence of peer learning schemes, such as PASS and SI, on the student leaders' own

development has been underestimated (Skalicky & Caney, 2010). Consequently, there is a growing body of literature focusing on the leaders' experience and the beneficial impact of the role for their own learning, personal and professional development and employability (Ford, Thackeray, Barnes, & Hendrickx, 2015; Malm, Bryngfors, & Mörner, 2012; Stout & McDaniel, 2006; Zacharopoulou, Giles, & Condell, 2015). However, despite this increased focus, apart from a few studies (Congos & Stout, 2003; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Malm et al, 2012), this body of literature focuses on the perceptions, experiences and achievements of current undergraduate student leaders, and there remains little evidence for the impact of experiencing the PASS leader role (referred to throughout the paper as 'PASS leadership'—not to be mistaken for a focus just on leadership skills) on graduates' employability. This exploratory research seeks to address this gap in literature, particularly in the UK context, by researching what impact PASS leadership had on graduates' job application experiences and how they perceive their PASS leadership role to have impacted their employability.

### **Aims of the study**

The principle aim of this paper is to explore the impact of PASS leadership on graduated leaders' employability after leaving university. This paper will address two research questions:

- 1) Has their PASS leader experience impacted their job application experiences so far? If so, how?
- 2) What skills or attributes from their PASS leader experience have they used in their employment since graduation?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Employability**

Developing university graduates' employability is of increasing strategic institutional focus in the UK, due to the context of the changing Higher Education (HE) landscape, increased tuition fees and the highly competitive UK labour market. Research has highlighted the current 'skill shortage' in the UK, with employers unable to recruit for one in five vacancies due to under-skilled and unsuitable candidates (UK Commission for Employment and Skills [UKCES], 2016). In a seemingly contradictory finding, employers also report three in ten employees are 'under-utilised', having skills beyond those required for the role (UKCES, 2016). The government's Higher Education Green Paper highlighted this and asked questions around the job readiness of UK graduates which resulted in the prominence of the employability agenda in the recent HE white paper (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016).

Definitions of employability are highly contested, and employability literature identifies the complexities of defining and distinguishing between actual employment and employability, recognising there are external factors contributing to an individual's employment status (McCowan, 2015). Yorke's oft-cited definition of employability seeks to define the concept as "a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment" (Yorke, 2006, p. 8). Supporting this, research suggests employers are increasingly looking beyond qualifications and focusing on a candidate's employability skills and attitudes (Archer & Davidson, 2008; Griffiths, 2012; Pennington, Mosley, and Sinclair, 2013).

Graduates are now expected to package together both their hard (qualifications and experience) and soft (skills and attributes) currencies into an overall narrative of their employability (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Those who adopt an

approach of favouring meritocratic achievements over soft currencies will likely fall behind in the employability race. Therefore, the job application process itself is an important step in graduates' employability as those who can articulate this narrative gain an advantage. Research commissioned by Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) identified that employers expect graduates to be able to perform confidently at interviews and effectively articulate their skills and attributes; however, the findings showed many graduates did not feel they could do this by graduation (Pennington et al., 2013).

### **Employability skills**

Research by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) shows that attitudes and aptitudes are the highest priority sought by businesses hiring graduates, more crucial than even employment experience, degree choice, and degree classification (2016). The research comments on how merely gaining a degree is not enough in a competitive job market and graduates need to ensure they have developed the correct skills. The report goes on to highlight how a significant number of employers are dissatisfied with the graduates' skills in communication, team working, and self-management. Griffiths (2012) looked at the skills most valued by small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and found self-management and communication skills as the two most highly sought. This suggests the skills most highly prized by employers are the ones they often feel dissatisfied with in graduates. The UK commission for employment and skills found amongst companies with at least one skill shortage vacancy, "the ability to manage own time and prioritise tasks" was lacking in almost half of these vacancies (UKCES, 2016, p. 44).

Employers' views on extracurricular activities highlight the potential impact on a graduate's employability. Pennington et al. (2013) found half of employers felt a candidate needed extracurricular experience to be taken seriously. The CBI makes clear the need for graduates to find opportunities outside of their degree to develop the necessary skills employers are looking for (CBI, 2011).

### **The role and development of PASS leaders**

PASS leadership provides opportunity for extracurricular experience and breadth of professional development for students. PASS leaders are typically volunteer second and third year undergraduate students who have either offered, or been invited by staff, to facilitate weekly small group study sessions for first year students. PASS leaders are trained, equipped and supported in their role by staff PASS supervisors and student ambassadors (experienced leaders) through regular debriefs and session observations. The PASS leader role involves a variety of responsibilities and activities that stimulate leaders in developing a range of skills transferable to the workplace (Stout & McDaniel, 2006). For example, leaders work in pairs to plan, organise and facilitate engaging sessions which revisit (not reteach) course content, develop students' learning strategies and foster peer relationships (Chilvers, 2016; Dawson et al., 2014).

As previously explained, the majority of PASS leader studies explore how current undergraduate students perceive the role to have impacted their development. Findings include: increasing leaders own learning and academic performance (Alberte, Cruz, Rodriguez, & Pitzer, 2012; Arendale, 2014; Capstick, 2004; Ediger, 2007; Guyon et al., 2015; McPhail, Despotovic, & Fisher, 2012); feeling a sense of satisfaction from helping their peers (Gill & McConnell, 2016); a sense of belonging and enculturation to their course community

(Alberte et al., 2012; Edgier, 2007); developing positive peer relationships (Couchman, 2009; Edgier, 2007; Stout & McDaniel, 2006); increased retention and graduation rates (Alberte et al., 2012; Arendale, 2014). Literature highlights the PASS leader role informing students' personal and professional development including: time management and organisation (Capstick, 2004; Ford et al., 2015); team work (Donelan, 1999; Saunders & Gibbon, 1998; Zacharapolou et al., 2015); confidence (Capstick, 2004; Ediger, 2007; Malm et al., 2012); written and verbal communication and presentation (Skalicky & Caney, 2010; Stout & McDaniel, 2006; Zacharapolou et al., 2015); cultural awareness (Ford et al., 2015); planning and preparation (Skalicky & Caney, 2010); self-efficacy (McPhail et al., 2012); professional identity (Arendale, 2014; Guyon et al., 2015; Stout & McDaniel, 2006); and group facilitation and decision making (Ediger 2007, Skalicky & Caney, 2010). However, comparing these findings is challenging due to the variety of measures and definitions used for these 'skills' and 'attributes'. For example, while many report on PASS improving students' leadership skills (e.g. Arendale, 2014; Ford et al., 2015; Malm et al., 2012), Skalicky and Caney (2010) argue these are not a detailed measure of 'leadership' and provide a more in-depth analysis exploring 12 aspects of 'leadership' including "organisation, facilitation, support, attitude, relationships, role model, collaboration, communication, responsibility, decision making, pedagogy, and session management" (p. 24). Many of these aspects of leadership are identified in other studies as skills in their own right, thus demonstrating the complexities of defining and measuring students' development of such skills.

While a small number of studies have suggested exploring PASS leader graduate progression, using Destination Leaver Survey data (Ford et al., 2015) and interviewing current leaders (Zacharapolou et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2015), the three studies known by the authors of this paper which actually researched graduates' experiences of employability skills gained from peer mentor leadership are as follows. Congos and Stout (2003), within the context of SI in the United States (U.S.), surveyed 27 graduates and highlighted a range of skills gained from their SI leadership experience used in current employment. These were under five main skill categories of interpersonal relations, learning, leadership, work-related and content knowledge. Also in the U.S., Gafney and Varma-Nelson's 2007 cross-institutional survey (n=119) evidenced graduates reporting their SI leadership attributes and skills they found useful in the workplace included confidence, perseverance, presentation skills and team work skills. Finally, Malm et al (2012) surveyed SI leaders at a Swedish University. Graduates (n=20) reported SI leadership had a positive impact on their attaining employment; 80% of respondents felt they were making some or good use of the skills gained from SI in their current employment. Graduates shared examples of their abilities to coach, motivate and interact with colleagues as being informed by their SI experience.

Caution should be taken by PASS practitioners in not assuming that students always realise the skills they are developing, how to articulate them or how transferable these skills can be in the work place. Facilitating multiple opportunities for reflection is considered a key aspect of PASS leader training, support and ongoing supervision (Couchman, 2009; McConnell & Chilvers, 2014; Skalicky, 2008) and professional development modules for PASS leaders are being increasingly used to provide students with opportunities for critical reflection (McConnell & Chilvers, 2014). Zacharapolou et al. (2015) prompted leaders to self-assess their development of a range of skills. They found that, although PASS leaders, compared to non-PASS leaders, generally considered themselves more competent in these skills, at the second point of self-

assessment some leaders decreased their measure of skill. This might result from an increased awareness of what it entails to actually have and practice these skills.

It must also be acknowledged that students may have possessed these skills before becoming PASS leaders, or other factors and life experiences may have contributed to the acquiring and developing of these skills (Zacharapolou et al., 2015). Additionally, questions arise over methodologies used for investigating PASS leaders' acquiring of these 'employability skills', where studies often use closed-question surveys which prompt leaders' self-assessment, thus limiting findings (Congos & Stout, 2003). Therefore, open-ended qualitative methodologies are an essential component for exploring students' and graduates' perceptions of the impact of PASS on their own development.

## **METHODS**

The study used a mixed methods approach with an initial survey followed up with semi-structured interviews. The survey was informed by relevant literature and the host institution's employability framework, and helped to identify participants to interview. The interviews included open-ended questions to build upon the survey responses, also allowing for deeper exploration of themes from literature and exploratory discussion.

### **Institutional context**

The research was conducted with alumni from a single British university which has been running the PASS scheme since 2009. The PASS scheme runs over 23 modules, with approximately 130 students facilitating sessions as leaders. During the 2016/17 academic year 5,643 students had access to the scheme, which means 53% coverage of all first year students. There is also a level five, ten credit PASS leadership module which is non-compulsory and typically undertaken voluntarily by approximately 15% of the leaders each year. The module supports students to critically reflect on their practice and professional development as PASS leaders, and to develop an online portfolio evidencing their PASS leadership experience (McConnell & Chilvers, 2014).

An analysis of institutional data showed that over the last three years, PASS leaders have had a higher chance of being in work or further study six months after graduation than the institutional average. A minimum of 96% of PASS leaders have been employed six months after graduation, with the latest year available showing that 100% of PASS leaders were in work or further study (see Figure 1). When viewed as a three year average, PASS leaders were 5.62% more likely to be in work or further study.

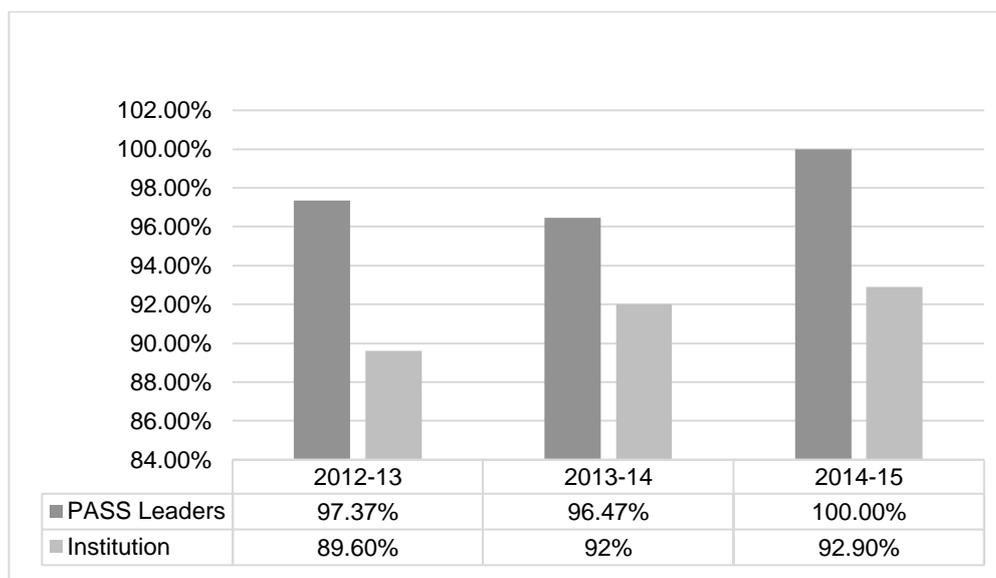


Figure 1. Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) outcomes for PASS leaders

**Survey**

The initial survey was sent to all PASS leaders from the host institution who had graduated in the past three years (2013-2015) (n=187). The survey received a 33.15% response rate (n=62) with there being a steady decrease between each cohort going back in time (see Table 1). Survey respondents were more likely to have gained a first class degree than national average. 33.9% (n=21) of respondents received a first, which is significantly higher than the national average of 24% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017).

Table 1  
Survey response rate

Year graduated	2013	2014	2015	Other	Total
Number of respondents	9	17	35	1	62

The majority of the respondents were in full-time employment (69.4%). Out of the 19 respondents who were not in full-time employment 15 reported they were studying for a post-graduate degree. On the whole the respondents reported they were working in a field they wished to be in (86%), however the numbers reporting they were working in a field related to their degree was significantly lower (65.1%).

In response to the highly contested nature of defining employability skills developed by PASS leaders, and the exploratory nature of this study, institutional research was drawn upon as a starting point. The host institutional employability research (Griffiths, 2012) and the institution’s Employability Framework (University of Brighton [UoB], 2015, [since updated]) informed the research design, identifying an initial set of employability skills to be used including:

- Communication

- Enthusiasm
- Innovativeness
- Risk-taking
- Self-management
- Teamwork

The list of skills were presented to the graduates on the survey and they were asked to rank their development of each skill in relation to their PASS leadership and also whether or not they use the skill in their current employment.

Drawing upon the work of Ford et al. (2015), confidence was also included in the list; Ford et al. included confidence as an employability attribute although it does not appear in any of the employability literature. They acknowledge it is challenging to include confidence as a distinct employability skill and their findings showed confidence as developing as a result of proficiency in other employability skills rather than being a skill itself. Confidence is also a common theme in PASS leader evaluation feedback at the host institution, therefore confidence was included to investigate further whether it is an employability attribute or only resulting from proficiency reached in the other employability skills.

### **Interviews**

At the end of the survey participants were asked if they would be willing to take part in a short one-to-one interview. From those who agreed, twelve former leaders were selected from the three year groups and a number of different disciplines to provide a range of individuals (see Table 2). In order to be representative of the number of respondents who were still studying, some were also selected as interviewees. Those currently working were not asked for their current job title before arranging interviews in order to avoid selection bias for successful graduates.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was sought from the host institution's ethics panel and aligned with BERA's requirements (British Educational Research Association, 2012). The host institution's Alumni Office coordinate all contact made with graduates through the Destination Leavers' Survey, and were therefore gatekeepers to the research participants. Due to concerns of survey and email fatigue, methods for contacting the PASS graduates were designed in partnership with the Alumni Office, and sent with a personalised email from the PASS Scheme Coordinator. Due to the sensitive nature of graduates' employment status, and in order to avoid a self-selection bias of only graduates with 'successful' employment experiences responding, the initial email was designed to be supportive and developmental, including signposting graduates to a variety of employability support available, regardless of their participation with the research.

Table 2  
*Interview participant details*

Participant #	Course	Graduated?	# of paid roles since graduating?	Current Position?	Done/doing further study?
P1	Biomedical Science (2:1)	2015	0 (about to start her first teaching job)	Studying	PGCE Secondary Chemistry
P2	Maths (2:1)	2015	1	Trading platform	-
P3	Maths (2:1)	2014	4	Evaluation executive	-
P4	Podiatry (2:2)	2013	2	Lecturer/Podiatrist	-
P5	Podiatry (2:1)	2013	3	Lecturer	Did MA, currently doing PG Cert in L&T
P6	Primary Education (2:1)	2015	1	NQT Primary Teacher	-
P7	Sport and Exercise Science (1st)	2014	1	Technical Assistant	Starting PhD in Oct 2016
P8	Biomedical Science (1st)	2015	1	Clinical Research Assistant	Starting Medicine in Oct 2016
P9	Biomedical Science (2:1)	2015	2	Database administrator	Starting Masters in September 2016
P10	Education (2:1)	2013	3	Health care assistant	-
P11	Digital Media Development (2:1)	2015	3	Web Developer	-
P12	Social Sciences (1st)	2014	1	Mother	-

## FINDINGS

### Research question 1: Has their PASS leader experience impacted their job application experiences so far? If so, how?

PASS leaders who completed the survey for this research (n=62) showed they were using their PASS leader experience when searching for employment. 85.5% of the respondents had their PASS leader experience listed on their CV (Figure 2); this number dropped for cover letters/job applications and interviews, although still above half of the graduates spoke about their PASS experience in interviews. Of these graduates, 97.1% reported feeling confident in articulating their PASS leadership experience to employers in an interview.

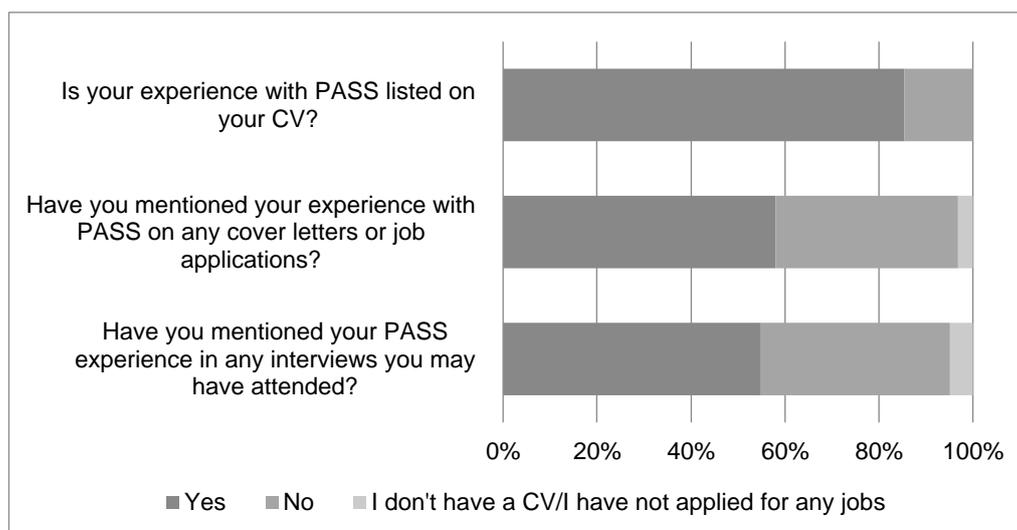


Figure 2. Survey responses for PASS leadership in job applications

The survey findings were reflected in the interviews with many of the participants speaking favourably of PASS leadership giving them added value for distinguishing themselves from other job candidates. For example:

“There were three of us that went for my job who were pretty much identical on paper so they were looking for things that stand out, give that extra edge which it [PASS] definitely did. When you train to be a teacher we all train to do exactly the same thing, you need that extra something to make you stand out.” P6, NQT Primary Teacher

Many of the participants explained how being a PASS leader enabled them to ‘stand out’ by evidencing employability skills when applying for jobs:

“We had to write nine massive paragraphs on different skill sets for the TA position and experience of how you fit that ... I mentioned it [PASS] in pretty much every box, everything that you do as a PASS leader fits in with a lot of different skill sets.” P7, HE Technical Assistant

“They [employers] asked for an example of when I had led a team ... I explained how I had trained to

be a PASS leader and we had a group of first year students and we talked them through it rather than saying ‘do this, do that’, we would discuss it and then push them in the right direction, rather than being bossy.” P11, Web Developer

These examples demonstrate the experience boost PASS leadership gave graduates, and the range of skills they could evidence in applications and interviews. Additionally, these graduates were able to recognise the skills they had gained, even if the roles being applied for were not overtly similar to PASS leadership.

**Research question 2: What skills or attributes from their PASS leader experience have they used in their employment since graduating?**

Emerging from the survey, the skills and attributes which graduates perceived to be most developed through PASS leadership were also perceived as most useful in the work place, and this was reinforced in the interviews. Furthermore, a number of other skills emerged in the interviews in addition to those included in the survey.

Relating to the skill set informed by literature (CBI, 2016; Griffiths, 2012; UoB, 2015), graduates were asked in the survey about the skills developed through their PASS leadership experience and also the skills they use in their current employment. As shown in Figure 3, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed their PASS experience helped to improve all of the skills with the exception of risk-taking. As expected, due to the nature of the PASS leader role, communication was the skill with the most agreed responses, followed by team work, confidence and self-management.

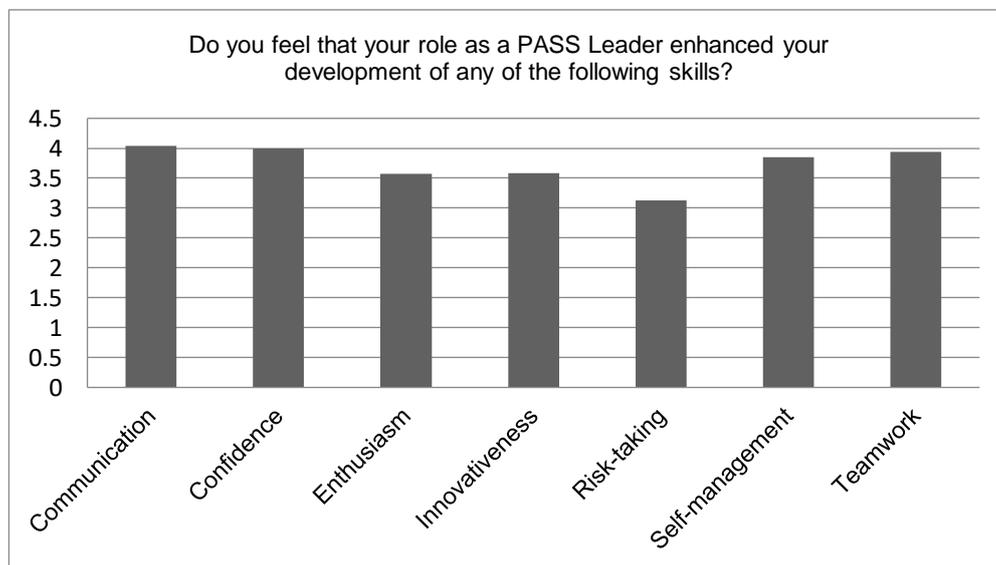


Figure 3. Mean scores for each of the skills asked in the question ‘Do you feel that your role as a PASS leader enhanced your development of any of the following skills?’. 1 Strongly disagree – 5 Strongly agree

The graduates in full time employment (n=43) agreed all of the skills are important in their current employment (Figure 4), with risk-taking again being the lowest, although, it should be noted, a majority still agreed it was

important. Communication was again the highest skill, followed by self-management, team work and confidence, suggesting being a PASS leader is effective for developing skills employers are both looking for, and are dissatisfied with graduates' abilities in (CBI, 2016).

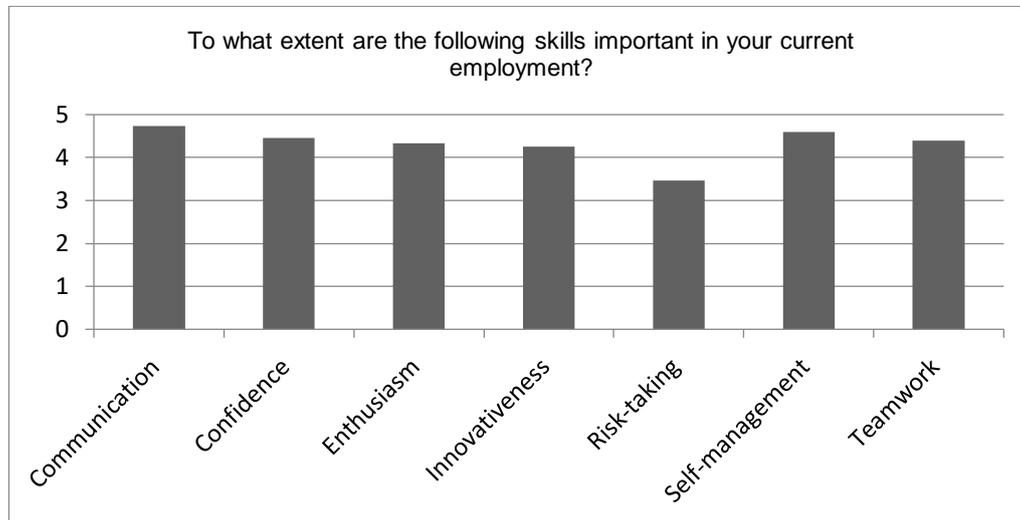


Figure 4. Mean scores for each of the skills asked in the question 'To what extent are the following skills important in your current employment?'.  
1 Extremely unimportant – 5 Extremely important

1 Extremely unimportant – 5 Extremely important

Exploring the survey findings further in the interviews, PASS leader graduates gave detailed examples of how this variety of skills and attributes, enhanced through PASS leadership, were now being applied in their employment. The three skills from the survey ranking highest from PASS experience and important in their current roles also emerged most strongly in the interviews including communication, team work, and confidence. Additional to the survey skill set, two strongly emerging skills included facilitation and leadership. PASS graduates did provide some examples of applying the remaining skills from the survey (risk-taking, self-management, problem-solving and enthusiasm) but of significantly lower focus. Therefore, the strongest emerging findings shall now be discussed in-depth alongside key quotes from the graduates.

### Communication skills

PASS leader graduates described a range of communication skills developed through PASS, now proving useful in job applications and the work place. For example, P7 explained the value of being able to clearly communicate key information to students and colleagues within the context of the classroom and more formal board meetings:

“From being a PASS leader I’ve found it a lot easier to speak to people that I don’t know ... at disseminating hard information into easier terms which is really good for the job I’ve just got ... it was a very large factor to why I got the job...We had a teaching staff board meeting the other day of which I’m the TA representative ... to give views of what the students have said are the problems ... I

did feel myself chipping in.” P7, HE Technical Assistant

The challenge of public speaking came up with the majority of participants, each explaining how the opportunity PASS provided them in developing their presentation skills was proving very useful in a variety of contexts such as leading meetings with colleagues and senior staff, classrooms full of school children or students, and conference presentations:

“Standing up in front of people and taking control—I’ve got a meeting next week to about four heads of departments and...they’ve said ‘you’re going to take the meeting yeah?’ ... I’ve got to be confident in front of people about what I’m saying, know that I’m right ... with PASS I had to make sure that I did know my stuff before because they’re looking at me thinking, ‘is this right?’” P2, Trading Platform Analyst/Maths Tutor

A few of the participants had completed the PASS leadership module for critical reflection on their practice and professional development. They referred to the training they received in module sessions on active listening techniques as being a skill they had not fully appreciated the importance of, which particularly for P4, listening skills were proving particularly important for her role when interacting with patients:

“The listening skills were not necessarily something I lacked but something I hadn’t appreciated quite how important they were ... where you actually have to shut up and let someone talk. Key for a podiatrist is questioning, open listening and actually hearing, and the ability to interpret body language.” P4, Podiatry Lecturer/Podiatrist

### **Team work/interpersonal**

Participants referred to team work and interpersonal skills being important in their roles. For example, P8 talked about the sensitivities involved in interacting with children taking part in clinical trials and drawing on her interpersonal experience of interacting with people in PASS:

“Some of them [child patients] are really quiet and you have to tease them out a bit, some are really hyper so you have to calm them down ... my course gave me good background knowledge of the body but it didn’t actually teach me how to work with the patients and people, especially adolescents and my managers ... like PASS gave me ... like you might have a long conversation or a confidential thing but you know you need to report it to someone, you need to keep records, I think PASS taught me that as well.” P8, Clinical Healthcare Assistant

This previous quote also refers to PASS leadership plugging gaps in P8’s course experience for developing the interpersonal skills required for her job - an

interesting finding to have emerged from this research. This also came up for P6 who explained how she felt her Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) did not spend enough time preparing her for working with adult colleagues:

“PASS definitely helped me to work with others my age and older because when you train you focus so much on speaking to children and how you can work with children, you don’t get how to work with other adults and how to help each other as a team.”  
P6, Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), Primary Level

In terms of overcoming challenges with colleagues, P12 applied the experience of working with her PASS co-leader as being helpful with team members at work:

“When I started there was a new manager and she really wasn’t my kind of person and, not that I didn’t like my co PASS leader but she was a very different kind of person and I definitely had to take a step back and just be professional ... I felt my co-leader kind of taking over, becoming quite teachery ... for me personally to manoeuvre that was a challenge ... it was a good experience for working life.” P12, Mother/previous Charity Administrator

Participants also described the cultural awareness gained through having international students participating in their PASS groups as being useful for working with others. For example, for P6 when interacting with patients:

“My PASS group were very varied ... I used to have peers for whom English wasn’t their first language and there were some who were rougher ... you can’t have the same facial expressions or the way you talk to someone so I think you have to adapt to that ... the same with children I work with now who need drawing out.” P6, Clinical Research Associate

For others PASS impacted their mindfulness of how to interact with international people in the workplace. For example P7 still supporting students in her role explained how she is aware of the support needed by some students studying in English as a Second Language:

“For the international students ... it was a really eye-opening experience regarding their language skills, so I had to direct them to the Academic Study Kit where they write their essays ... and can get someone to proofread it.” P7, HE Technical Assistant

### **Leadership**

Despite being absent from the institutional employability framework informing the research design, leadership emerged as a key finding from the interviews. Participants described their current leadership in a variety of contexts including small teams, one-to-one, mentoring colleagues, making

leading decisions on behalf of a team, and having the confidence and motivation to seek out leadership roles in addition to their main responsibilities:

“It definitely encourages me to go for leadership roles. Before I did PASS I would always shy away from things ... but I think now I’ve started my job I’m keen to get that extra responsibility and leadership ... having done PASS it was so rewarding having that responsibility it could now be in my job, so I take that extra step up.” P6, NQT Primary Teacher

Participants described some of the challenges in their leadership roles, such as leading colleagues who are more experienced than themselves in particular areas of their work. For example, P9 refers to drawing from the more democratic, participative leadership style developed through PASS leadership as a useful approach for feeling equipped to support and lead colleagues with a variety of skill levels and experience compared to himself:

“I was put in charge of our front end team which is a little difficult because the other two are slightly more advanced technology-wise ... PASS was very useful for learning key leadership skills that are useful when you’re trying to teach a group of staff ... about a database that they’ve been using for longer than you ... PASS helped because it put me in front of people I don’t know ... in very different levels of what they can do and it showed me ... I can help push them in the right direction.” P9, Database Administrator

### **Facilitation**

In addition to the university employability skills framework, another emerging finding common to most participants was facilitation skills. Participants described the process of facilitating students’ learning and interactions with one another in PASS and how they use a similar approach working with colleagues. For example, P10 described her inclusive approach to enabling colleagues to clarify understanding and share knowledge, P1 and P7 making learning activities in the primary and HE classroom context active and participatory for students’ engagement, P2 clarifying understanding when handing over work to colleagues:

“I flick through the PASS facilitation strategy cards and use them in my class...they give me a lot of ideas on how to get them thinking ... I had an advantage having done PASS because I knew what facilitating was, whereas a lot of my peers went in thinking you’re just going to talk at them.” P1, PGCE Student

“PASS facilitation made me think about tutoring in a completely different way ... instead of ... ‘this is how you do it’ ... it’s a case of giving them little hints then they figure it out ... in work now I have

to put together a daily processes and hand it over ... or when you go on holiday and you have to hand your work over to someone that may have been in the business six years longer than I have so you don't want to patronise them." P2, Trading Platform Analyst, Maths Tutor

Similar to leadership, some participants referred to their facilitative PASS leadership style giving them confidence and strategies for leading a team of colleagues, some being more experienced or older which they found intimidating.

### **Confidence**

The results showed confidence as both an attribute enhanced through PASS leadership and also resulting from the development of proficiency in the other skills identified. Whilst it might be assumed PASS leaders are already confident people due to the voluntary nature of the role, some of the participants described themselves as initially being very low in self-confidence, and PASS contributing to either a gradual, or for others transformational, improvement in developing their self-confidence:

"Who I am now is a completely different person to the person that stepped into uni four or five years ago ... which is really good. [PASS] has been a great stepping stone ... I think it does contribute a lot to how my confidence has grown up over the years." P7, HE Technical Assistant

Other participants described PASS leadership providing opportunities for stepping out of their comfort zone, thus developing their confidence to do the same in their jobs. P11 reflected on the confidence gained from overcoming the challenge of becoming a PASS leader which she applies in her team leadership role, and P6 built upon her PASS leadership achievements to seek out new challenges:

"I was severely bullied and that really knocked my confidence ... ever since then it's been a battle to get back to that level of confidence ... PASS was one of those things I was thinking even though it's freaking me out, I've got to become a PASS leader because it's going to help me ... at work ... I remember back to ... PASS, all that sort of stuff, and I do know what I'm doing and I know how to act confident because I did it at PASS and nobody thought I was nervous so I know I can do this." P11, Web Developer

"It [PASS leadership] has definitely given me the confidence to try new things, especially being an ambassador as well, some of the situations it put me in, it did make me think if I can do that what's holding me back from doing other things? Even just moving across the country I've thought why not, why can't I do it?" P6 NQT Primary Teacher

Reflection played a key role in this for some participants (through the PASS leadership module or other professional development modules on their course), in enabling them to realise, and articulate, the personal and professional skills gained through PASS leadership, thus increasing their self-confidence in their employability:

“I think [reflection is] alien to most scientists to be honest, I don’t think we have that mind set ... it’s a life skill most people should have, you should reflect—What do you do? Why do you do it? Why does it help you? ... It raised my confidence because I had never thought of myself in that way before.”  
P7, HE Technical Assistant

However, for some, confidence was not discussed as a distinct skill, but rather evidenced as developing as a result of their increased proficiency in other skills, such as public speaking and organisation skills:

“There are things that I didn’t even realise until I started work that PASS had taught me. Being confident about ... giving presentations, I can’t believe I’ve got to give that presentation [to Senior Managers] on Tuesday ... it’s exactly the same as PASS, you have to ... look confident and they believe you’re confident...if you walk in to PASS and you’re nervous ... people stop showing up ... convince yourself you’re confident by knowing your stuff and that’s only something I’ve learnt by doing PASS.” P2, Trading Platform Analyst/Maths Tutor

## DISCUSSION

In response to research question 1) ‘Has their PASS experience impacted their job application experiences so far? If so, how?’, institutional DLHE data and the survey data from this research indicated the majority of PASS leaders from the 2012-2016 cohorts were in employment or study six months after graduation, and were using their PASS experience during their job applications, indicating a positive influence of PASS leadership on the job application process. Contrary to findings from the BIS report by Pennington et al. (2013), when including PASS experience either on their CV, during job application forms, or in interviews, PASS leader survey respondents reported feeling confident in their ability to accurately articulate their experience. In the context of the increasing importance employers are placing on extracurricular activities to enhance graduates’ employability (Pennington et al., 2013), interview participants demonstrated an awareness of how having extracurricular activities, and their PASS leader role specifically, enabled them to ‘stand out’ from other candidates. Echoing Brown and Hesketh (2004) the graduates spoke in terms of using their PASS experience (hard currency) to speak about the skills and attributes gained (soft currency), combining the two into an overall narrative of their potential employability which they used in their job applications. However, one aspect this study did not address was to discover if the graduates were aware of the importance of articulating a narrative of their own professional development prior to volunteering for PASS. Whilst motivation for becoming a PASS leader was included in the interview questions, many participants spoke about other motivations, employability seemingly a

secondary consideration which they realised in hindsight. Research from Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) shows students from working class backgrounds have less awareness of the importance of extracurricular activities for their future employability. This highlights the importance of PASS Supervisors taking an inclusive approach to communicating the benefits of PASS leadership when recruiting new leaders to ensure students from a wide range of educational and demographic backgrounds are motivated to take part.

In response to research question 2) 'What skills or attributes from their PASS experience have they used in their employment since graduation?' both survey and interview data supports findings in peer learning literature that graduates felt their PASS leadership experience had informed their development of a wide range of employability skills and attributes. It was noteworthy the three skills and attributes ranked the highest in the survey—communication, confidence, teamwork—were also the skills perceived by research participants as most important in the workplace. Within the context of many employers reporting dissatisfaction in graduates' skills (CBI, 2016; Griffiths, 2012), this research demonstrates the contribution PASS leadership makes to students developing skills important to employers. The institutional Employability Framework provided a useful starting point, and although the skill set it informed brought limitations, findings were built upon by open-ended interview questions which allowed the strong emergence of two further skills not included in the framework—leadership and facilitation.

The graduates expressed value in, and evidenced, ways that their leadership and facilitation skills gained from PASS were being applied in the workplace, both skills being notably interconnected in nature and application in employment. An emerging theme was the graduates' current use of facilitation skills in the context of their leadership responsibilities at work, which they described as an invaluable skill particularly when leading a team of colleagues, some of whom they felt intimidated by due to colleagues being more advanced in age, experience or knowledge in a particular area of their work. Graduates also reported finding the democratic participative PASS leadership style as useful for leading team work and engaging all team members in an inclusive, supportive manner. This study seems to support findings from Skalicky and Caney (2010) and highlights the multifaceted nature of leadership, which includes facilitation. A theoretical model of leadership such as Zaccaro, Kemp, and Bader's (2004) model of Leader Traits and Attributes could be used to investigate this more rigorously in further research.

Supporting both the institutional Employability Framework (UoB, 2015) and findings from literature (Ford et al., 2015; Malm et al., 2012), 'confidence' emerged as a key attribute, both overarching and resulting from the development of many of the skills developed through PASS leadership, as well as being considered an attribute in its own right. Participants explained how skills and experience gained through PASS leadership had a positive impact on their self-confidence, consequently giving them confidence in job applications, seeking out additional roles, responsibilities and challenges in the work place, and feeling confident in being skilled and effective in their jobs. For graduates who had the opportunity to critically reflect on their PASS leader practice, either through the voluntary PASS leadership module or another professional development module, graduates reported reflection playing a key role in improving their self-confidence through realising their employability skills and attributes. This reinforces the benefits of reflection on PASS practice (Zacharapolou et al., 2015; Couchman, 2009; McConnell & Chilvers, 2014;

Skalicky, 2008) as key in supporting students to develop their own overall narrative of their employability skills (Brown & Heskeith, 2004), which has implications for embedding reflection in professional development within the curriculum.

Another key finding from this research was participants (a Primary School Teacher, Clinical Research Assistant and Technical Assistant), explaining PASS leadership had addressed gaps they perceived to exist in their course curriculum, affording them opportunities to develop interpersonal skills now proving essential parts of their jobs. This highlights the value such co- and extracurricular programmes such as PASS can play for preparing students for their future professions. This demonstrates the value of both students' and graduates' feedback of their course and work place experiences for informing course teams in the ongoing enhancement of the curriculum.

### CONCLUSION

This exploratory research has provided insights into graduates' applications of the skills and attributes developed through PASS leadership in the work place, with communication, team work, leadership, facilitation and confidence emerging as particularly valuable to the participants in their employment experiences. Graduates indicated that they demonstrated their ability to reflect upon, realise, articulate and evidence this development gained from PASS, to employers. The development was influential both in their securing employment, and being effective in their roles.

Further investigation is needed on a larger scale, ideally cross-institutionally, and with a deeper analysis of accompanying DHLE data. Employer perspectives could also be considered. Beyond the scope of this study, but emerging from this research, is the potential to explore discipline differences in the skills and attributes gained by PASS leaders, and perceived as most useful in their employment. This may illuminate discipline-specific skills and attributes proving most valued and applied by graduates. Further exploration of the impacts of critical reflection on practice and professional development for PASS leaders beyond graduation would also be valuable. Findings from both avenues would be useful for informing curriculum design and enhancing PASS leader training and support. Also for consideration is the further use of the institutional employability skills framework, which provided a useful contextual framework for this initial exploratory research, but additional frameworks should be considered.

A final point to share was that some participants reported on their continued contact with students from their PASS groups via Facebook and email, and mentioned the ongoing advice they offer these students voluntarily around job applications and CV development. This demonstrates the value of PASS leader graduates having continued involvement with students. Related to this, a PASS alumni mentoring scheme is under development at the host institution of this research.

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