

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME IN THE B.Sc. DEGREE PROGRAMME OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA USING THE PASS MODEL**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is a well established supplemental instruction scheme practiced in various forms in more than 1000 higher education institutions in 29 countries<sup>1</sup>. The objective of a PASS programme is to render support to students in a group setting where they share their educational experiences, problems and successes. In this process they build confidence and develop to be independent learners who excel in their courses. The group discussions are lead by one or two senior students of high academic standing who have gone through a similar study programme. The role of such a peer leader is to show how a good student learns by guiding the students in finding out solutions to subject related problems. The environment of a PASS session is deliberately made informal so that students are able to admit ignorance and misconceptions and seek information, advice and remedy, without fear of jeopardising their academic performance<sup>2</sup>.

The PASS group of the Faculty of Natural Sciences at OUSL was formed in 2010 to develop a student support programme using the PASS model. The objective was to provide an opportunity for the students in the BSc (Natural Sciences) programme to develop and practice good study habits while learning the subject. It was assumed that through such a programme it will be possible to motivate the students for study, push them towards deeper learning and thereby increase the quality and quantity of the output of the BSc programme. In this communication we present the experience gained in developing and implementing such a programme.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The capability of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) BSc graduates of good academic standing in motivating new entrants to the BSc programme has been demonstrated in a motivation camp conducted by the Faculty of Natural Sciences<sup>3</sup>. There, the new entrants had shown an interest in making contact with such graduates to learn more about the study techniques they employed while studying at OUSL. As such, in developing the present study sessions, we replaced the peer mentors in traditional PASS sessions with OUSL BSc graduates of good academic standing who were employed in academic departments as temporary staff, hereafter called Young Mentors (YMs). These study sessions are called Study Sessions with Yong Mentors (SSYM).

Following principles were used in designing an SSYM.

1. Each SSYM is of two hour duration and held every fortnight during the semester.

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2. YM informs, in advance, the students the lesson material covered in a particular SSYM.
3. YM gives a summary of subject material if necessary. Total time allocated for talks by YMs is half an hour.
4. Students work in small groups on activities given by the YMs.
5. Activities should be chosen so that the students realise the importance of developing good study habits in working them out.
6. Students are encouraged to ask questions and express their opinion.
7. No pressure to cover subject material and no subject material outside the course material is discussed.
8. YMs do not give direct answers to student queries. They guide the students in finding out the answers themselves.
9. YMs are enthusiastic, empathetic, understanding, caring and friendly.
10. YMs motivate students through narrative of their own experience.

A training programme for the YMs was conducted in December 2010 to give them a better understanding of the PASS model since it is very different from the model of a typical day school, tutorial class or a lecture. The training topics included motivating techniques, leadership skills, team work, communication skills, time management, effective group management, learning styles and teaching techniques. Two SSYM simulation sessions by role play were also part of the training programme where the OUSL graduates acted as students and senior academic staff acted as YMs in one session and in the other the OUSL graduates acted as students and YMs.

SSYM programme was implemented for four level 3 courses; BOT1200 (Diversity of plants), CMU1220 (Basic principles of chemistry), PYU1161 (Basic electromagnetism) and ZLU1280 (Animal life and diversity). SSYMs were conducted only in Colombo Regional Centre as a pilot project. For each course there were 6 SSYMs during the second semester of the academic year 2010/2011. The students were registered in the SSYM programme by calling applications. In order to encourage student participation and encourage YMs, the students and YMs who participated in 5 or 6 SSYMs in a course will be issued a certificate of participation and letters of appreciation respectively.

The information on the implementation of the SSYM programme in each course was gathered through student feedback, YM feedback and observations. A questionnaire was administered to get participant perceptions, on a 5 point Lickert scale, at the last SSYM. YMs maintained journals in recording their observations and perceptions on each SSYM they participated. An academic staff member sat through the last SSYM in each course and recorded his observations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Number of students registered in the SSYM programme in BOU1220, CMU1220, PYU1161 and ZLU1280 were 34, 68, 29 and 38 respectively. The number of students who attended the last SSYM was 4, 31, 8 and 8 respectively. They form the student sample in this study. Table 1 summarises the age, gender, employment status and marital status of the students in the sample. As is evident there, most of the participants are young unmarried females who are not employed.

Table 1: Some information of the students in the sample as percentages.

Age (years)		Gender		Employment status		Marital status	
< 25	25 – 35	Male	Female	Employed	Not employed	Married	Not married
86	14	13	87	30	70	6	94

Figure 1 illustrates the student perception of the statements, on some important aspects of SSYMs, indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Some statements used in recording student perception of SSYMs.

No.	Statement
1	I am <u>more comfortable</u> in asking questions from YMs than asking academic staff members in the department.
2	I <u>understood</u> that an <u>objective</u> of the SSYMs was for me to learn how to study at the OUSL.
3	I have <u>enhanced</u> my understanding on how to study at OUSL by attending SSYMs.
4	I have started <u>spending more time</u> studying the course material because of the SSYMs.
5	I have started <u>doing group studies</u> (outside the SSYMs) because of the SSYMs.
6	I have started <u>reading the course material more carefully</u> because of the SSYMs
7	I wished I had more SSYMs in this subject.
8	I am satisfied with the way the YMs conducted the SSYMs.

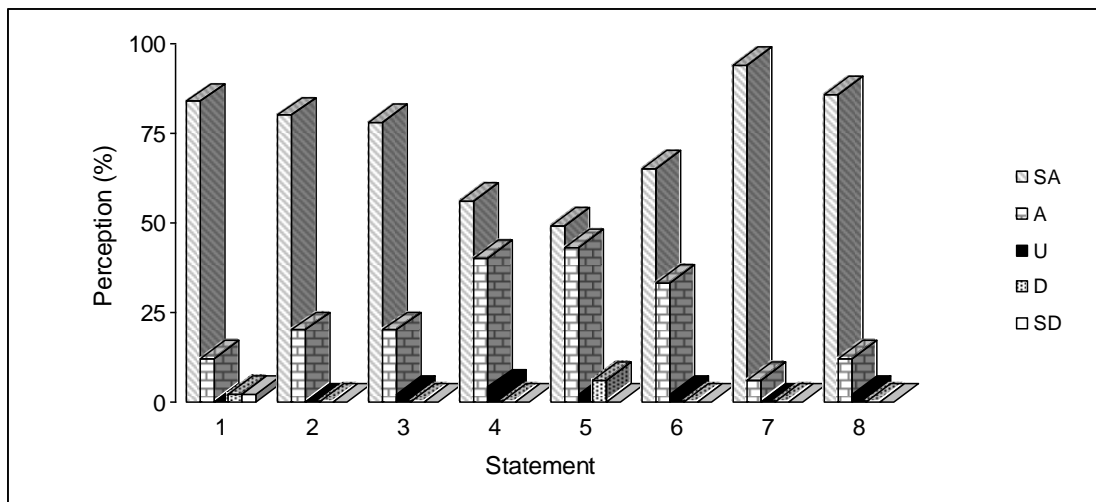


Figure 1: Student perception on statements in Table 2.

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree and SD = Strongly Disagree.

Perception on statement 1 indicates that the YMs have been successful in creating the informal and friendly atmosphere in the SSYM which is a hallmark of the PASS model.

Statements 2 – 6 involve the development good study habits. Perception of them indicates that SSYM has been largely successful in developing such attributes in students. This result is interesting since the development of good study habits is essential to become a good distance learner and not much research in utilising the PASS model in distance education is reported.

Perception of statements 7 and 8 indicate that the students are satisfied with SSYM.

The number of YMs who conducted the SSYMs in BOU1220, CMU1220, PYU1161 and ZLU1280 courses were 2, 2, 1 and 3 respectively. Interviews with YMs have indicated that they have benefited from the SSYM programme by improving their communication skills, leadership skills, teaching skills and understanding student centred learning.

## **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

The students feed back indicates that the students who participated have benefited from the SSYM programme. However, despite the benefits only a small fraction of the students who registered in the SSYM programme regularly attended the SSYMs. The authors are of the view that the drop out can be minimised by communicating the scope and benefits of the SSYM programme to the students. Work is underway to achieve this objective during the SSYM programme in 2011/2012.

Measuring the success of learning support in a systematic and scientific way is a difficult task. This is mainly because many of the perceived benefits are in fact intangible. For example, it is easy to measure academic results of students who participated in a SSYM programme, but it is much harder to identify the extent to which those results can be attributed to their participation in such a scheme. In spite of this difficulty, the authors have planned to conduct a more in depth research study during the SSYM programme in 2011/2012.

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