

**EXPERIENCE IN IMPLEMENTING A STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME BASED
ON THE “PASS” MODEL FOR BSc UNDERGRADUATES AT THE OPEN
UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA**

G. Bandarage^{1*}, G. W. A. R. Fernando², C. N. Nupearachchi², P. K. D. Peiris¹,
J. C. N. Rajendra², K. D. V. F. Siriwardena⁴, R. U. Tantrigoda¹, J. Wattavidanage³,
and S. R. Weerakoon⁵

¹*Department of Chemistry*, ²*Department of Physics*, ³*Department of Zoology*,
⁴*Department of Mathematics & Computer Science* and ⁵*Department of Botany*
The Open University of Sri Lanka

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 (Power, 2010). 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. PASS 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 (Topping, 1996).

The PASS group of the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the Open University of Sri Lanka (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 student support programme, based on the PASS model, consisted of the number of face to face study sessions. The capability of the 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 (Bandarage *et al*, 2010). 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 PASS with OUSL BSc graduates of good academic standing who were employed in academic departments as temporary staff, hereafter called Young Mentors (YM), assuming that they can play the role of senior students. These study sessions are called Study Sessions with Young Mentors (SSYM).

* All correspondence should be addressed to Dr. G. Bandarage, Department of Chemistry, Open University of Sri Lanka (email: gband@ou.ac.lk)

Following guidelines were used in designing an SSYM.

1. Each SSYM is of two hour duration, held on a weekday, every fortnight during the semester.
2. YMs inform the students the lesson material covered in a particular SSYM, in advance, by word of mouth or through SMS.
3. In an SSYM students work in small groups on activities given by the YMs.
4. YMs give a summary of subject material if necessary. Total time allocated for presentations by YMs is half an hour. In the remaining time in SSYM they facilitate the discussion in student groups.
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. By counter questioning they guide the students in finding out the answers themselves.
9. YMs should be enthusiastic, empathetic, understanding, caring and friendly
10. YMs motivate students through narratives of their own experience.

A two day 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. As with PASS training programmes, the training topics included motivating techniques, leadership skills, team work, communication skills, time management, and effective group management, learning styles and teaching techniques. Two SSYM simulation sessions (half a day each) 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.

Since almost all the students entering the BSc programme have no prior experience in distance learning the most appropriate level in instilling good distance study habits is level 3. Hence, SSYM were implemented for four level 3 courses; BOU1200 (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 (two hour) SSYMs during the second semester of the academic year 2010/2011. The students were registered in the SSYMs by calling applications by post. Participation in SSYMs was not compulsory and free of charge. In order to encourage participation, the students and YMs who participated in 5 or 6 SSYMs in a course were issued a certificate of participation and certificate of appreciation respectively.

Research data 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 student perceptions, on a 5 point Likert scale, at the last SSYM. YM feedback was obtained through a questionnaire and interviews. An academic staff member sat through the last SSYM in each course and recorded his/her observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Number of students registered in the SSYM in BOU1200, CMU1220, PYU1161 and ZLU1280 were 34, 68, 29 and 38 respectively (5.1%, 7.5%, 9.5% and 5.8%, respectively, out of the total number of students registered in each of these courses). The number of students who attended the last SSYM was 4, 31, 8 and 8 respectively which formed the student sample (size = 51) where the feedback questionnaire was administered. Table 1 summarises the age, gender, employment status and marital status of the students in the sample. Most of the participants were young unmarried females who were not employed.

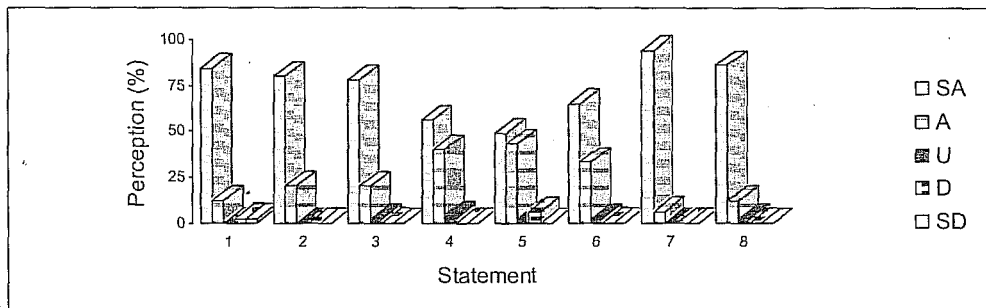
Age (years)		Gender		Employment status		Marital status	
< 25	25 – 35	Male	Female	Employed	Not employed	Married	Not married
86	14	13	87	30	70	6	94

Table 1: Information of the students in the sample as percentages.

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

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.

Table 2: Statements used in recording student perception of SSYM.



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

Figure 1: Student perception on statements in Table 2.

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 have motivated the students 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.

Feedback was obtained from seven YMs out of the eight who conducted SSYM in the above mentioned courses. Analysis indicated that acting as a peer was a not a difficult exercise for most of them and all of them have enjoyed conducting SSYM. Majority of them have observed an improvement in advance preparation and participation in discussion at SSYM by students as the SSYM programme progressed. All of them believed that the students have learned some study techniques during SSYM and SSYM have motivated the students for study. Majority of them believed that they themselves have benefited from the SSYM programme by improving their communication skills, leadership skills, understanding of the subject, time management skills and confidence in public speaking.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The student feedback indicates that the students who participated believe that they have benefited from the SSYM programme. YMs are also of the same view. However, despite the benefits only a small fraction of the students who registered in the SSYM programme regularly attended the SSYM. 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 learner 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the following:

The encouragement given by Prof. G. R. Ranawaka, Dean/Faculty of Natural Sciences, in trying out this novel approach of student support. The help given by Mr. B. K. L. Wickramasinghe, Mr. M. R. M. Haniffa, Dr. V. P. S. Perera and Ms. E. A. D. N. D. Edirisinghe, the coordinators of the above mentioned courses, in organising SSYMs. The support given by Dr. T. K. Weerasinghe (Head/Botany) and Dr. N. Nilakarawasam (Head/Zoology) in implementing the SSYM programme.

REFERENCES

- Bandarage, G., Bopage, N. S. and Fernando, R. T. S, (2010), Motivating students of the Open University through narratives of past students; The BSc programme as a case study, Proceedings of the OUSL 30th Anniversary International Research Conference, 20-21 August 2010, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 95-98.
- Power C. (2010), Peer assisted study sessions (PASS): through a complexity lens. *Australian Journal of Peer Learning* 3(1): 1-11.
- Topping, K. (1996), The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: a typology and review of the literature, *Higher Education*, 32(3), 321-345.