

Making peer support work for everyone: Promoting and reimagining Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

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Fostering a sense of belonging and increasing academic preparedness, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) are shown to reduce attrition, highlighting the importance of connecting equity students with this support. However, while regular PASS attendance is correlated with improved academic success, engagement is low. Reasons include unawareness of support and stigma associated with academic help-seeking. To address the issue of awareness, peer-led promotion was introduced at James Cook University (JCU), Cairns. Findings show that as a result, attendance increased by a factor of six on that campus, while there was no significant change in attendance in the same period on the Townsville campus where the promotion was not conducted. While timely promotion raises awareness and improves access to support services, addressing stigma is more challenging. Embedding PASS within curricula, rather than as additional support, is suggested to normalise academic help-seeking behaviour.

Key Words: Sense of belonging, academic preparedness, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), equity groups, peer-led promotion, academic help-seeking.

1. Introduction

Barriers to accessing higher education persist, however global enrolment rates have increased (Vieira et al., 2020). Diversification of the student population in tertiary education due to Australian government initiatives to better represent equity groups (Grant-Smith et al., 2020, Robinson et al., 2025) has resulted in individuals entering university with varying levels of academic preparedness (McIntosh, 2019). With widening participation, universities prioritise enabling pathways into higher education for specific equity groups, including students from rural, remote, or regional areas; students with low socioeconomic status and English as an Additional Language or Dialect; Indigenous students; and students with disabilities (Bennett et al., 2024; Bradley et al., 2008). As the level of support received from a university impacts student retention and completion rates (Beer & Lawson, 2018; Chen, 2017; Collins, 2012), the Australian University Accord recommends institutions provide responsive support (Australian Government, 2024). One initiative to is the Peer Assisted Study Sessions program.

1.1. Equity groups at JCU and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

James Cook University's enabling program, JCU Prep, is a fee-free pathway into undergraduate study. A key subject in this program is Developing Academic Skills (DAS), which is designed to provide foundational academic literacy skills essential for university study. Successful completion of DAS satisfies the English prerequisite component for entry into many JCU undergraduate degrees (JCU, 2025a). The Pathways program plays a significant role in widening participation, attracting students from recognised equity groups, including those from rural, remote or regional (RRR) areas, first-in-family (FIF) to pursue higher education, and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Morgan, 2018). Pathway students often belong to one or more equity groups (Morgan, 2018) who are student populations that face systemic barriers in accessing and succeeding in higher education. In 2022, the DAS cohort across Cairns, Townsville, and online, included 190 students; approximately 56% of students being from RRR areas, 49% FIF, 19% low socioeconomic status, 17% English as an Additional Language, 9% Indigenous and 6% of students had a disability (Reporting@JCU [cognos], personal communication, July 2023). Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) are offered to DAS students as a free academic support program. The PASS program is widely implemented at JCU as well as other universities in Australia and internationally. Weekly sessions are voluntary and facilitated by a senior student PASS leader (JCU, 2025b). Typically, PASS is provided for students in first-year subjects with higher-than-average fail and withdrawal rates (Mergelsberg et al., 2021). As DAS is a core subject in JCU Prep that builds foundational academic skills and fulfils the English prerequisite for many JCU undergraduate degrees at JCU, PASS is also offered as additional support for students undertaking DAS.

1.2. Academic and social benefits of PASS

Described as a "global phenomenon in academic support interventions" (Despotovic et al., 2024, para. 1), PASS aids transition into university life. Regular PASS participation is strongly correlated with enhanced academic performance (Allen et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2021; Whitmall et al., 2020). Other benefits of PASS for regular attendees include improved final grades in respective subjects (JCU, 2025), heightened confidence, increased retention (Crosling et al., 2009), effective study techniques and social learning (Dekker et al., 2024), and reduced failure rates, particularly for equity students (Tangalakisa et al., 2017). Additionally, PASS increases a sense of belonging (McIntosh et al., 2019) to university, which is positively associated with academic achievement (van Kessel, et al., 2025) and a more successful life at university (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Furthermore, PASS increases education preparedness for both attendees and PASS leaders (Larkin & Hitch, 2019; Malm et al., 2022), hence potentially playing a critical role in improving the representation of equity groups.

1.3. High benefits, low uptake: Non-attendance of PASS

Despite numerous benefits, attendance rates for PASS are low worldwide (Cooper, 2018; Thomas & Tagler, 2019). Most students never attend PASS even once (Dancer et al., 2015), and poorly attended PASS is often cancelled (Lim et al., 2016). One reason for non-attendance is lack of awareness of PASS (Macqueen et al., 2022). Additionally, stigma around academic help-seeking behaviour limits engagement in support services (Bornschlegl, 2022). These barriers are compounded for students from equity groups, who frequently experience self-doubt, often questioning whether they belong at university (Larsen & James, 2022; O'Shea, 2021). This lower sense of belonging can make academic help-seeking feel intimidating for equity groups, thereby further reducing their access to available support (Jackson et al., 2023).

1.4. Recommendations to increase PASS attendance

To address the lack of knowledge about academic services, Bornschlegl and Caltabiano (2022) suggest just-in-time promotion by peers is crucial for raising awareness and increasing behavioural intention for academic help-seeking. Drawing from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 2005), Bornschlegl et al. (2021) recommend peer-led promotion to change students'

perception of social expectations around academic help-seeking (subjective norms) and improve negative attitudes about help-seeking (self-stigma). Educators can also help to normalise support services by contributing to students' self-efficacy (Bandara, 1986) and sense of belonging (Larsen & James, 2022).

1.5. Peer-led promotional strategies: Raising awareness about PASS

Nine promotional strategies were delivered by student peers to demonstrate academic help-seeking is supported by a social environment (Bornschlegl, 2022; Miller & Prentice, 2016) in PASS. The student peers used to deliver the strategies included PASS leaders, student mentors, previous students, peer advisors, who all provided information to raise awareness about PASS and educate students about how the program works and its benefits, which can reduce stigma regarding accessing academic support (Bornschlegl, 2022). Strategies were scheduled to provide just-in-time promotion (Bornschlegl, 2022), including reminders for PASS before assessment due dates. The PASS leaders, Student Mentors and Peer Advisors all delivered promotional strategies wearing uniform shirts as a visual reminder of the various support services. Promotion was implemented in Cairns but not for Townsville/online. Promotion was conducted in adherence to ethical guidelines approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at JCU. An overview of peer-led promotional strategies and key recommendations/theory base are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategies used to promote Peer Assisted Study Sessions in Cairns.

Week	Presenter	Time	Notes	Recommendation/Theory base
0*	Lecturer & PASS leader	5 mins each	Times of PASS displayed with narrative of accessing academic support by lecturer. Transference of study skills to other subjects promoted by leader (third year Arts, started in Pathways).	Increase awareness of support services (Macqueen et al., 2022) at an early stage (Li & Carroll, 2020). Academic-student relationship (Larsen & James, 2022). Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2005).
1*	PASS leader	5 mins	Spoke about PASS as pivotal to his university success. Reminder PASS starts next week.	Role models normalising help-seeking (Bornschlegl et al., 2021). Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986).
2	PASS leader	1 min	Reminder PASS commences after class.	Timely promotion of support by role models (Bornschlegl et al., 2020).
3	Lecturer	1 min	PASS times displayed. Reminder PASS assistance for assessment due next week.	Consistent promotion of support by role models (Bornschlegl et al., 2020).
4	Student Mentor	5 mins	Spoke of overwhelm and how PASS helped him cope with studies (second year Education student, started in Pathways).	Role models normalising help-seeking (Bornschlegl et al., 2020) from "people like me" (Li & Carrol, 2020).
5	Previous student	5 mins	Talked about how PASS supported her studies and social life (first year Science student, started in Pathways).	Sense of Belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Academic help-seeking supported by a social environment (Bornschlegl, 2022; Miller & Prentice, 2016).
9	Peer Advisor	2 mins	1-1 assessment assistance available, recommendation to attend PASS.	Consistent promotion of support by role models (Bornschlegl et al., 2020).
11	PASS leader	5 mins	Encouraged students to attend PASS to fine-tune assessment.	Consistent promotion of support by role models (Bornschlegl et al., 2020).
12	PASS leader	5 mins	Additional support for final assessment due next week.	Consistent promotion of relevant support by role models (Bornschlegl et al., 2020)

* As is standard practice for PASS delivery at JCU, orientation and week one strategies were implemented across all modes (Cairns, Townsville and online).

2. Data collection and analysis

Attendance for PASS was collected in Cairns and Townsville/online during semesters one and two of 2022. To examine the impact of promotional activities, attendance rates in semester one (before promotion) and semester two (after promotion) for Developing Academic Skills (DAS) were compared. Cairns implemented peer-led promotion in semester two, while Townsville/online did not. The PASS leader recorded attendance for each session using an online spreadsheet. Each campus offered 12 PASS sessions in total. The maximum possible attendance was calculated by multiplying cohort size by 12 (number of PASS sessions), and actual attendance was expressed as a percentage of this figure. These percentages measured student engagement and allowed comparison across campuses, controlling for enrolment size and session numbers. These percentages represent the proportion of actual PASS attendances relative to the total attendance opportunities available, and enrolment size, thus providing a measure of student engagement in PASS.

2.1. Attendance in PASS: No increase in Townsville compared to a factor of 6 increase in Cairns

In Cairns, attendance increased from 3.69% in semester one to 23.4% in semester two, representing a heartening six times increase following promotion. In contrast, the Townsville/online mode, where promotion was not implemented, attendance remained stable at 1.62% in semester one and 1.78% in semester two, indicating no significant change between the semesters. This comparison supports the conclusion that the growth in attendance observed in Cairns can be attributed to the promotional strategies. Notably, in semester two, attendance in Cairns was 13 times higher than in Townsville/online, as Table 2 demonstrates.

Table 2. PASS attendance comparison in semesters one and two 2022 between delivery modes.

Campus	Semester	PASS offerings total	Cohort number after census date	Total attendees ¹	Percentage ²
Cairns	1	12	70	31	3.69%
Cairns	2	12	26	73	23.4%
TSV/online	1	12	283	55	1.62%
TSV/online	2	12	164	35	1.78%

1. Sum of the number of attendees at each PASS offering.
2. The maximum possible attendance = number of offerings × cohort number. Percentage = total attendees/the maximum number × 100%.

3. Student peer collaboration to bridge the provision-uptake gap of PASS

Promotional strategies have proven effective in increasing attendance. These strategies are cost-effective, time efficient and encourage students to experience the well-documented benefits of PASS. Importantly, timely peer-led promotion helps bridge the gap between PASS provision and uptake by raising awareness of available support services. It is hoped that after attending just one session of PASS, students can experience the social and academic advantages that build a sense of belonging, which in turn can motivate ongoing attendance. It is also important to build a sense of belonging because research indicates a sense of belonging at university acts as “a protective factor for resilience” (Crawford, et al., 2024, p 397). For equity students represented in the DAS cohort at JCU who are new to higher education, early engagement with PASS can be vital for helping students to access peer support and feel welcomed, accepted and supported as they settle

into university life. In this section, we first look at promotional strategies as an actionable solution to increase access to PASS, before acknowledging that equity is not achieved by access alone. Finally, we explore some additional strategies that might further improve attendance in PASS, especially by students in equity groups.

3.1. Promotional strategies: Actionable solution to increase access to PASS

A well-established, but underutilised (Thomas & Tagler, 2019) academic support intervention, PASS is available to first-year students in universities across Australia, as well as worldwide (Dekker, et.al., 2024). Given the global prevalence of PASS in higher education (Despotovic et al., 2024) and the proven benefits PASS provides for all students, including equity cohorts (Allen et al., 2021; McIntosh, 2019; McIntosh et al., 2021; Whitmill et al., 2020), addressing worldwide low attendance (Cooper, 2018) for PASS is warranted (Mergelsberg et al., 2021). This paper offers nine promotional strategies as an actionable solution for universities to employ to increase access to PASS for students from equity groups who enter tertiary education with varying levels of academic preparedness (Vieira et al., 2020). These strategies are worth actioning as peer-driven promotion of PASS may help students to access crucial support for academic success in higher education.

3.2. Equality is not achieved by access alone

Although knowing about PASS can connect students to this support, equity is not achieved through access alone. Even with fee-free preparatory course incentives, equity groups continue to face systematic barriers accessing, participating and succeeding in higher education (Roche, et al., 2023; Macqueen et al., 2022). Despite decades of government reforms, students from regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas, and with low socioeconomic status (LSES) and Indigenous backgrounds consistently experience lower completion course rates (Dean, 2024). This issue needs to be addressed as equity in higher education is essential to create a more accessible and inclusive society, where all students can reach their full potential (Dean, 2024). Thus, the promotional activities reported here, which have been shown to increase attendance at PASS, can help achieve this goal as attendance at PASS is known to strengthen belonging, boost academic achievement, improve retention, thereby contributing to a more successful university experience.

3.3. Further strategies to trial: Normalising academic help-seeking by embedding within curricula

Literature indicates academic help-seeking is intimidating for equity groups, as students often have a lower sense of belonging (Jackson et al., 2023) and higher levels of self-doubt (Larsen & James, 2022; Li & Carrol, 2020), resulting in limited engagement in PASS. Bennett et al. (2024) suggest interventions be embedded in equity-focused, inclusive education, instead of expecting students to “change to survive in an unchanging and inequitable system” (p. 68). While targeted promotion improves visibility of support services, addressing stigma requires a more systemic response. To make peer support work for everyone, PASS must be reimagined, not as an optional add-on, but as a core, embedded element of curricula, accessible by design. We therefore suggest embedding PASS into subjects to normalise academic help-seeking behaviour. For example, to encourage early social connections between peers, the PASS leader could be invited into class in week one or two (physically or online) to run a 5-minute ice-breaker activity. To demonstrate academic benefits, another activity we propose is a “Study Sprint”, a ten-minute timed challenge, with students working in small groups to solve a difficult past exam question or concept. Peer-led “Mini Clinics” could also be incorporated in class, where the PASS leader facilitates a five-minute clinic on a common “pain point” (such as referencing). Additionally, podcasts or videos created by the PASS leaders providing timely advice and “Study Hacks” could be incorporated into subject materials for all students to access. It is our view that implementing such strategies into curricula is essential for building inclusive and engaging learning environments, and initiatives such as PASS represent a start in this direction. At the same time, we recognise that treating equity

groups as a single whole is a simplification and acknowledge that future work should focus on individualising approaches to meet the distinct needs and challenges of specific cohorts.

4. Fix the system to suit the students, not change the students to fit the system

In concluding this paper, we argue that supporting equity groups in university requires a holistic approach: increasing awareness of academic support through timely and consistent peer-led support, fostering belonging via social learning provided in PASS and reducing stigma by embedding PASS into curricula. In their review of equity initiatives in Australian higher education, Bennett et al. (2015) emphasise “effective initiatives shift the focus from fitting students into an unchanging higher education system, to developing inclusive higher education programs” (p. 10). Roche et al. (2023) demonstrate inclusive approaches have led to notable improvements for students from LSES, first-in-family, RRR backgrounds, as well as Indigenous learners. While PASS promotional strategies increase access to PASS, we suggest going a step further by reimagining the way PASS is run to make it work for all students. By actively integrating PASS content and utilising it in class and class materials, students would be engaged in extra support without the stigma of actively seeking it, thereby normalising academic help-seeking by giving all students equal opportunity to increase social connection and academic achievement.

Declarations

AI declaration: Copilot AI was used for refining and editing of text. Authors have reviewed all content and wordings created by generative AI, and have edited content as needed, and take full responsibility for content of the publication.

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