

Levelling the academic playing field: U:PASS

1. Summary of the impact

Most undergraduates, including those from key widening participation groups, such as those with low socioeconomic status (SES) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, often struggle in their first year of study. Lack of confidence, knowledge and support sometimes results in mental health challenges, high drop-out rates and an overall negative study experience.

U:PASS is a facilitated study program in a range of high risk first year subjects that offers weekly study group sessions with peer leaders. Both leaders and participants develop personal and professional skills such as critical thinking, independent learning and communication skills.

The program has significantly contributed to improved student retention and success, and has also seen students achieve higher marks on average.

2. Problem

One of the greatest challenges a prospective undergraduate can face is being first in family. Young people who do not have a family history of higher education often do not consider university as an option or place where they could fit in. Even if they decide to try, they struggle to meet the expectations and some of them fail due to the absence of a support network.

Another key barrier to student retention and success is the disparity between high school exit requirements and university entry expectations. Given the pressure high schools face to ensure students succeed on standardised tests, they often focus efforts on test-taking abilities and memorisation of specific information. As a result, students often remain unprepared for university-level core subjects and have not acquired essential academic skills, such as independent learning and critical thinking.

The disconnect between high school and higher education is further exacerbated in disadvantaged and rural communities which lack the resources to fully support the students in their academic development.

The high first year dropout rates in this demographic is especially troublesome when considering the numerous benefits of an education, most importantly its ability to transform lives and futures.

U:PASS was introduced specifically to level the playing field for these students to have a fair chance at succeeding in higher education.

3. Beneficiaries

The U:PASS program is designed to target first year university students in key widening participation groups, including low SES and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduates. Students often come through other transition programs such as UTS:INSEARCH or programs run by the Equity and Diversity Unit's widening participation team.

In 2016, the first year student cohort enrolled in U:PASS included approximately 14% low SES students as well as 21 indigenous students. Many students are also the first in family to attend higher education.

In terms of U:PASS peer leaders, indigenous students and low SES students made up a third of the group in the same year.

4. Approach to impact

Based on the Supplemental Instruction program developed at the University of Missouri (Kansas City) in 1973, U:PASS targets subjects that are historically known to be difficult and have a high failure rate.

Through peer-mentoring, the U:PASS program employs cooperative learning methods in small student groups who collaborate in order to improve their own independent learning skills. These methods are based on various theoretical perspectives including behavioural learning theory, social interdependence theory and cognitive-developmental theory.

The mentoring team is comprised of "Peer Leaders" who are former U:PASS participants themselves. According to U:PASS Manager Georgina Barratt-See, this is particularly important as first-year students are more likely to relate to a mentor who has been through the same process very recently and is of roughly the same age or stage. Peer Leaders are experienced, high achieving students who receive leadership, facilitation and mentoring training prior to facilitating sessions.

The leaders reach out to first year students who are enrolled in one of the over 60 subjects covered by the program. Participation and attendance are voluntary, and the classes are scheduled to fit in with the students' timetable where possible.

In a typical one-hour session, students compare notes, work through difficult literature and review past exam questions. Peer leaders can share study tips and discuss course material with the group. However, unlike a traditional tutorial, the session is primarily aimed at developing independent study and learning skills. The ethos is not about providing answers but rather about equipping students with the tools required to find the answers on their own. In addition, the sessions involve a number of team-building and social activities for students to form friendships and feel less isolated on campus.

Ms Barratt-See firmly believes in this approach because one of the key differences between high school and university is critical thinking and independent study. The aim of the program is to help students in this transition so that they can move on to subsequent semesters with the skills required to manage their own workload. For the same reason, U:PASS does not support upper year subjects.

Aside from nurturing first-year students, Ms Barratt-See also has a heartfelt passion for the professional development of U:PASS Peer Leaders.

Many of the Peer Leaders struggled in their first year not only with the workload but with a lack of confidence in their own ability and potential. Ms Barratt-See explains that her faith in the program is continuously reaffirmed when these same students overcome their fears and submit applications to be Peer Leaders. Importantly, the leaps in their personal and professional development are evident in the excellent delivery of classes and often leaders go on to mentor new leaders.

As such, the U:PASS approach does not only support the transition from high school to university, but also from university to the workplace.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

The benefits of the program have been evident in its growth and consistent positive results among students who participated. Since its development, over 40,000 students have attended the U:PASS program, and it continues to help around 4000 first year undergraduates per semester. In 2016 alone, U:PASS leaders facilitated a total of approximately 3170 classes, with up to 20 participants each.

All students eligible for U:PASS are surveyed to measure whether the program has improved their higher education experience, helped them understand the content and expectations of their core subjects and assisted them in managing their workload. Students who attended U:PASS performed significantly better overall than students who did not attend. In recent years the average mark achieved by students attending U:PASS has been 12-15% higher than those not attending.

Most importantly, the program has led to improved student transition to university. An overwhelming majority (81%) of the students who indicated they were thinking of dropping out reported that U:PASS had helped them stay at UTS.

Students also mentioned that the group environment was beneficial, and that they feel the Peer Leaders genuinely care about them as individuals. It is not unusual for testimonials to read “I would have failed my subject if it wasn’t for my U:PASS leader”.

5.2. Impact

While it is undeniable that U:PASS is increasing retention at UTS, the program has had impact beyond the rising figures. According to Ms Barratt-See, students are overall simply “happier to be here”.

From the student feedback, it is evident that U:PASS is not simply an extracurricular study program, but also an opportunity to make friends, feel comfortable and build confidence in their own abilities. Moreover, it creates communities, friendships and support groups that extend beyond the year spent at U:PASS.

Ms Barratt-See also considers the social impact of her Peer Leaders. As they have first-hand experience of struggling as an undergraduate, they gain a deeper understanding of the value of support and building resilience. Not surprisingly, many of them have decided to become educators and continue the mentoring in some form through their careers.

Even those who do not choose a career in education enter the workforce with a sense of social justice and the benefits of peer support. As a result, Ms Barratt-See is hopeful that workplaces will become more inclusive, collaborative and supportive as more graduates leave university having been taught the value of these attributes.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

With almost 20 years’ higher education experience under her belt, Ms Barratt-See possesses the knowledge and expertise required to mentor her U:PASS Peer Leaders and ensure the continued success of the program.

Her work is inspired by her own experience as an undergraduate in which she grappled with the new demands of living on her own, being responsible for her own workload and tackling academic tasks with very little support and guidance.

The Peer Leaders she chooses possess the personal qualities which make the program successful, and she has built a team of excellent mentors over the past nine years – a team of people who are kind, relatable and inclusive.

6.2. External enabling factors

With a commitment to social justice and widening participation, the UTS Equity and Diversity Unit has been supporting the U:PASS program through the funding granted to UTS under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.

In addition, the program receives funding and support from individual faculties for new subjects.

7. Challenges

Although the program has been overwhelmingly successful, there are still a number of challenges.

As the program is voluntary, it can be difficult to encourage students to attend regularly to truly reap the benefits of the program. However, Ms Barratt-See maintains that students already deal with pressure, and it is important that the sessions continue to be delivered in a non-pressure environment. She believes that by involving warm and welcoming Peer Leaders, students are likely to return to sessions and see the process through until the end.

Ms Barratt-See also considers the recruitment process challenging to her personally. Because she has a limited number of Peer Leader positions available per semester, it often means rejecting applicants who she knows could greatly benefit from the program. However, she remains committed and offers constructive feedback, advice and suggestions to all applicants who were unsuccessful. In this way, she hopes to guide them on the right path to improve their skills through another program, activity or initiative.

8. References

<https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/support/upass/upass>