



## Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): Enhancing transitional experiences of first year psychology students

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### ABSTRACT

Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is an established pedagogical scheme which facilitates group learning by using the experiences of higher year students to support the learning of lower year peers. It has been implemented on a global scale in tertiary education settings and is based on the pedagogical framework of Supplemental Instruction (SI-PASS; Martin & Arendale, 1992). This case study focuses on the implementation of PASS into the first year BSc Psychology Degree Programme at Queen's University, Belfast. The main objective of this study was to evaluate first year psychology student perceptions of the PASS scheme across three domains of interpersonal skills, academic skills, and social adjustment. A mixed methods approach was taken which merged quantitative survey data measuring these three domains and qualitative data which captured the student voice of PASS students and PASS leaders. Results demonstrated participation in PASS enhanced students' understanding of the subject matter, student confidence, and positively impacted class attendance and overall engagement. A thematic analysis of student survey comments produced themes of improved peer connection and social integration, skill development, and academic reassurance amongst first year students. The pedagogical significance of these results lends support to the enduring value of peer support in large first year student cohorts and provides a model of good practice and recommendations on how to enhance first year student experiences.

**Keywords:** peer learning; psychology students, pedagogy, transitional experiences, peer-assisted study sessions

### Introduction

Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is built on the pedagogical framework of Supplemental Instruction (Martin & Arendale, 1992) which consists of peer-led sessions that offer support to historically difficult courses. This allows students in higher year groups, PASS leaders, to be trained to deliver experience-led and pedagogically rich sessions on a regular basis to students in lower year groups, PASS students. The primary purpose of PASS schemes in higher education institutions (HEIs) is to help students better integrate into university life and provide a safe and supportive environment, thus 'demystifying' the student experience. Indeed, PASS differs from more traditional peer mentoring programs: rather than simply teaching content, PASS leaders *empower* PASS students through facilitated group discussion and activities regarding course-specific learning objectives and general academic skills (Dawson et al., 2014; Miller et al.,

2004). These pedagogical methods ultimately allow students to experience learning interactions beyond commonly used didactic methods which are characteristic of larger degree programmes.

### Context of peer-led learning in the UK

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Peer-led learning programmes in the UK have been established for many decades and have taken many different forms of delivery. An Advance HE mapping report conducted by Keenan (2014) focused on well-established practices, which, at that time, largely focused on PASS/SI programmes underpinned by the '21 principles of SI-PASS' (Ody & Carey, 2009). In the last ten years, there has been a noticeable shift in UK HE literature in response to the rapidly changing nature of students' needs and increased focus on supporting all aspects of the student experience— academic and non-academic. This has led to the evolution of alternative peer-led learning programmes, for example, Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) (e.g. Schaffer et al., 2021), Peer-to-Peer Models (Chilvers, 2025), and 'Paired Peers' approaches (Lewis et al., 2021) ( for review, see Andrianoff et al., 2024). However, despite the subtle differences and nuances of delivery between these formal models, they are united in their overall aim of supporting first year students as they navigate their way through new environments (Ragavan, 2014). In a review of peer learning literature, Rohatinsky et al. (2017) reported that peer learning supported students to become part of communities and reduced feelings of isolation when they transition into the University environment. Findings such as these add considerable, favourable support to degree programmes aiming to foster a sense of belonging and community which is very often high on the agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

#### *Supporting transitions of first year students*

More specifically, previous literature has demonstrated significant improvements in academic performance, confidence, understanding of subject matter, and integration into university degree programmes who have implemented PASS (Collings et al., 2015; Hryciw et al., 2013; Pugliese et al., 2015). Interestingly, a systematic review of PASS-related sessions found support for benefits of attendance on academic course grades (Dawson et al., 2014). These findings have been more recently built upon in an empirical study which explored psychological mechanisms that mediate the PASS-performance relationship (Spedding et al., 2017). Researchers found that PASS attendance led to heightened levels of self-efficacy over the semester compared to non-attendees (Spedding et al., 2017). This led to the general conclusion that students' confidence to utilize self-directed learning techniques may explain the positive relationships between PASS attendance, self-efficacy, and performance outcomes (Spedding et al., 2017). Other empirical findings have targeted specific cohorts of students which have indicated PASS schemes decrease stress and situational or short-term anxiety for undergraduate nursing students (Kachaturoff et al., 2020), and improves professional and personal development, stress, and transition to university for first year medical students (Akinla et al., 2018).

#### *Dual Benefits of PASS*

One of the most significant aspects of peer learning programmes such as PASS, is the dual benefit to both PASS students *and* PASS leaders. In a recent Advance HE literature review on student-led peer learning and support, Andrianoff et al. (2024) found skills acquired by leaders come through in a range of studies such as communication, particularly verbal skills via talking in front of others, and explaining things (Bates et al., 2016; Chilvers & Waghorne, 2018; Curtis, 2016; Drake, 2014; Hayman et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2021;

McConnell & Chilvers 2014; Ramm et al., 2015; Rashid et al., 2019; Varghese & Zijlstra-Shaw, 2020; Wareing et al., 2018) also noting improvements in time management and organization, teamwork, leadership and confidence. Another interesting point of student development by leaders has been evidenced in areas of employability— leaders are able to make clearer connections between their skills and career paths/professional values (Drake, 2014; Maccabe & Fonseca, 2021).

#### *The current study*

The aim of this study is to evaluate the newly implemented PASS scheme in the School of Psychology at Queen's University, Belfast (QUB). This study is responding to a call of action by the UK Quality Assurance Code's guiding principles to 'conduct comprehensive evaluations to draw conclusions on impact for advice and guidance' (Quality Assurance Agency, 2024). Indeed, evaluative work of PASS has been completed by a neighbouring HEI in Northern Ireland, Ulster University, which has provided evidence that PASS contributed to an improvement in student performance across a range of subjects, an amelioration in student attrition data, the establishment of improved student support networks, and the promotion of employability (Giles et al., 2016). Therefore, the scope of the current study wished to build upon previous evaluative work by exploring first year psychology student perceptions of the PASS scheme across three domains of interpersonal skills, academic skills, and social adjustment. In keeping with previous literature that has focused on dual benefits to both PASS students and PASS leaders, experiences of both will be included in the current study.

### Implementation of PASS

The institutional context of peer-led learning at QUB largely follows two models: (1) The Peer Mentor Scheme or (2) The Peer Assisted learning (PAL) model. In QUB School of Psychology, a peer mentoring scheme was implemented for many years as a co-curricular channel of peer support which sat outside the main curriculum. This programme largely operated on a 'drop-in' basis with peer mentors available to first year students should they need any advice or guidance. Since this was not embedded into student timetables and/or the curriculum, attendance and engagement with this programme was relatively low, often with students not seeing the value of this to their learning and overall student experience. Given the additional support needs which students are presenting with, coupled with the sector-wide surge in first year students studying psychology degree programmes, an integrated peer-support system rooted in pedagogical principles was necessary to enhance students' transitional experiences.

#### The PASS process in QUB School of Psychology

The success of PASS relies on the comprehensive training of PASS leaders (students from higher year groups), regular debriefing sessions with PASS coordinators, and student feedback to allow for changes in future roll-out years. PASS is coordinated by two academic staff members and School student support officers who combine unique academic and student support expertise. A three phased approach was taken when implementing PASS:

- **Phase 1: Consultation.** An initial consultation was carried out with colleagues from Ulster University who have successfully implemented PASS programmes on numerous degree programmes. This was an important part of the PASS process which ultimately provided a framework of implementation

and many helpful good practices, particularly around encouraging student engagement/attendance with PASS.

- **Phase 2: Review of Curriculum.** Based on experiences from Ulster University and other HEI's (for review see Andrianoff et al., 2024), it became clear that the success of the PASS scheme hinges on being embedded in course content and students' timetables for visibility. It was decided a Level 1 introductory psychology module 'Foundations in Psychology' was best placed to host PASS sessions. This module includes a tutorial scheme which meant PASS sessions could be timetabled on alternative weeks alongside academic tutorials which first year students attend with their personal tutors. This allows for a 'flow' of both academic support (with personal tutors) and peer-led support (with PASS leaders) each week during term time for first year students.
- **Phase 3: Development and Training.** The process formally began with recruitment packs being circulated to prospective PASS leaders in higher year groups (all Level 2 and 3 students were eligible to apply). Students from higher year groups were interviewed by PASS coordinators to ensure suitability for the role of PASS leader. As this is a voluntary role, students were asked to ensure the time commitment of being a PASS Leader (approx. two hours per week) can be facilitated alongside their current study routines/volunteering roles/part-time jobs. Following appointment, PASS leaders began formal training which is facilitated by PASS coordinators who are skilled in the principles of SI— this is a compulsory one-day training course. Following training, PASS leaders were assigned to a tutorial group comprising 10-12 first year psychology students.

#### *Developing PASS sessions*

Aligning with recent recommendations in a review of student-led peer-learning and support by Advance HE (Lochrie et al., 2024), a partnered approach is taken to developing PASS sessions with PASS leaders. PASS coordinators co-develop initial PASS sessions with PASS leaders which are based on areas that current first year students are currently finding difficult. PASS coordinators provide academic resources/materials and sign-posting sheets to assist PASS leaders to develop these first sessions. These sessions typically focus on key milestones on the first-year curriculum, for example, academic writing and referencing, assignment support, navigating group work, lecture reviews, etc. PASS leaders ultimately make final decisions on what they deliver to their PASS students which is often tempered by the unique needs of their groups.

PASS sessions are monitored closely by PASS coordinators. A fortnightly de-brief session takes place between PASS leaders and PASS coordinators which allows any issues/concerns from PASS leaders to be resolved. They also provide an opportunity to identify topics for future PASS sessions and share good practices of engagement during their PASS sessions. The PASS leaders' commitment and participation in the scheme is celebrated in two celebration events (one at the end of each semester) and is an accredited route for the QUB 'Future Ready Award' which allows students to gain formal recognition for extracurricular experience gained.

## **Methods**

This evaluation within QUB School of Psychology assessed student's perceptions of the PASS scheme. A purposive approach to recruitment was taken, targeting first-year psychology students and PASS leaders who had participated in the PASS programme during the previous academic year (2024-25). The evaluation

included 105 total participants (n=105) aged 18 years and older, comprising 97 first year PASS students (mentees) (n=97) and 8 PASS leaders (mentors) (n=8). Participants also answered several open-ended response questions on the PASS programme based on work by Hryciw and colleagues (2013).

PASS leaders and first year PASS students both provided informed consent before completing the online survey through the Pavlovia platform. The evaluation gained ethical approval by the QUB Engineering and Physical Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Analysis of quantitative data was conducted in SPSS version 29.0. Nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were utilised to analyse data. For short answer survey questions, common themes were identified among mentee and mentor experiences, separately.

### Measures

1. **Mentee PASS evaluation** (Hryciw et al., 2013): The mentee PASS evaluation contains 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* (see Table 1). One item from the original mentee survey was removed as it related to students who study multiple subjects, which was not relevant to the current sample. The evaluation assesses a variety of aspects related to student success. First year students also answered three open-ended questions (see Appendix 1):

**Table 1.** Mentee PASS evaluation survey questions answered using a 5-point Likert scale

Question Number	Question prefaced with “Attending PASS sessions this academic year has...”
Q1.	Helped My Confidence
Q2.	Helped My Knowledge
Q3.	Shown Me Different Ways of Studying
Q4.	Made Me Feel Positive About Attending Classes
Q5.	Increased My Friendship Networks
Q6.	Given Me Ways to Tackle Studies in General
Q7.	Proved Helpful in Managing My Time
Q8.	This Program Has Been A Positive Experience

2. **Mentor PASS evaluation** (Hryciw et al., 2013): The mentor PASS evaluation contains 7 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* (see Table 2). The evaluation assesses development of personal and professional skills related to mentoring. PASS leaders also answered 7 open-ended questions (see Appendix 1):

**Table 2.** Mentor PASS evaluation survey questions answered using a 5-point Likert scale

Question Number	Question prefaced with “Being a PASS leader has helped me ...”
Q1.	Develop My Speaking Skills
Q2.	Develop My Understanding of Psychology
Q3.	Develop My Presentation Skills
Q4.	Develop My Confidence
Q5.	Feel More Connected to the University
Q6.	Meet New People
Q7.	Feel More Motivated To Study

### Evaluation results

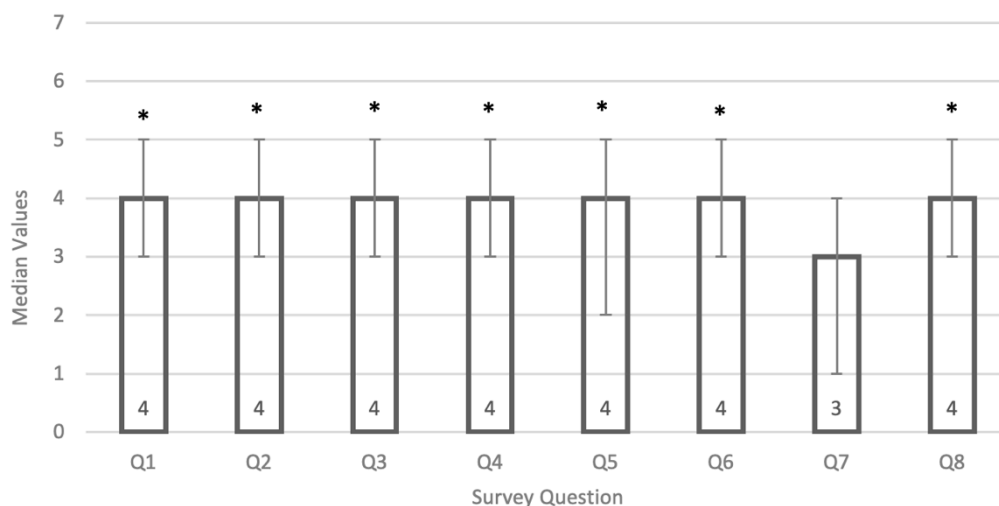
Student participation in this study was voluntary, and completion of the surveys was not required to participate in the PASS programme. Approximately 50% of first year PASS students completed the survey (n= 105) and 44% of PASS leaders (n=8). Student surveys were completed at the end of the 2024-2025 academic year having completed two semesters of the PASS programme, approximately 8 PASS sessions in total.

#### *PASS students (mentee) opinion surveys*

Having completed the PASS programme during their first year studying Psychology, 74% of mentees who responded to the survey indicated that they had a better understanding of psychology and a positive experience overall. Related to academic adjustment, 53% specifically stated that their knowledge had increased and 70% believed PASS sessions provided them with effective ways to study in general. In terms of social adjustment, 54% of mentees indicated PASS sessions increased their friendship networks with 64% agreeing that PASS sessions made them feel more positive about attending classes. In the area of interpersonal skills, 61% of mentees indicated attendance at PASS sessions helped with their confidence.

The median and interquartile range from mentee student responses from closed-ended survey questions are shown in Fig 1. A Wilcoxon-signed rank test was used to determine if significant differences existed between the sample median and the hypothesized median of 3. The hypothesized median value was based on the survey’s scale point of 3 (undecided). In general, first year psychology students strongly believed that the PASS Programme helped them gain confidence in their understanding (median= 4,  $p<0.001$ ) and knowledge in the subject (median=4,  $p=0.007$ ). Additionally, students believed that PASS helped them understand different ways of studying (median =4,  $p<0.001$ ), feel more positive about attending classes (median= 4,  $p<0.001$ ), and helped increase their friendship networks (median= 4,  $p=0.042$ ). PASS students also agreed that PASS provided ways to tackle their studies more generally (median=4,  $p<0.001$ ). The question which did not yield a significant response related to students’ view of PASS sessions helping them

with time management (median=3,  $p=0.509$ ). Overall, most PASS students agreed PASS was a positive experience (median= 4,  $p<0.001$ ).

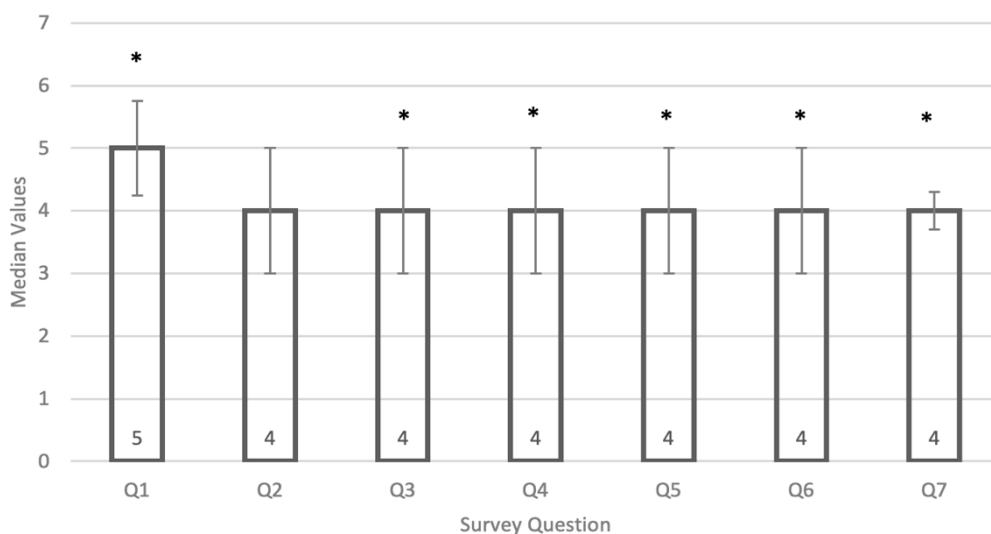


**Figure 1.** Mentee responses (median  $\pm$  interquartile ranges) to close-ended questions on the mentee opinion survey (see Table 1). \* $p<0.05$  based on the difference in median values from the scale point of 3 (undecided) using a nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

#### *PASS Leaders (mentors) opinion surveys*

After completing one full academic year as a PASS Leader, 88% of PASS leaders who responded to the mentor survey indicated that being a PASS Leader helped them develop their speaking skills, with 100% agreeing they have also developed presentation skills— both key markers of employability. Beyond these communication/employability skills, social aspects of the survey found that 88% of PASS leaders believed that PASS has helped them meet new people and 100% feel more connected to the University. On an interpersonal level, survey responses showed that 100% of PASS leaders indicated their confidence has improved and 88% now feel more motivated to study having been a PASS leader.

The median and interquartile range from mentor student responses from closed-ended survey questions are shown in Fig 2. Similar to mentee survey responses, a Wilcoxon-signed rank test was used to determine if significant differences existed between the sample median and the hypothesized median of 3. PASS leaders strongly believed being in this role helped them develop their speaking skills (median= 5,  $p=0.011$ ), and presentation skills (median=4,  $p=0.009$ ). Additionally, PASS leaders believed they have developed confidence (median=4,  $p=0.009$ ), feel more connected to the University (median=4,  $p=0.008$ ) and being a leader helped them meet new people (median=4,  $p=0.015$ ). PASS leaders also believed they felt more motivated to study having completed a year in this role (median=4,  $p=0.034$ ). One item in the survey which did not yield a significant result related to PASS leaders' development of understanding Psychology (median=4,  $p=0.102$ ).



**Figure 2.** Mentor responses (median ± interquartile ranges) to close-ended questions on the mentor opinion survey (see Table 2). \* $p < 0.05$  based on the difference in median values from the scale point of 3 (undecided) using a nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

*PASS Students (mentee) responses to open-ended questions*

Student responses to the three open-ended questions were analysed using a semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This focused on identifying themes on a surface level, based on the explicit content of student responses. Themes highlight the positive benefits of PASS on students learning experiences and social integration— these are summarised in Table 3 below:

**Table 3.** PASS Students (mentee) responses to open-ended questions with themes and reflection quotes

<b>Academic Support</b>	“ PASS improved my knowledge about assignments and gave me reassurance on what to do when completing exams”
	“Sessions helped me to gain a better understanding of the course content and additional resources to use”
	“I have more knowledge to write lab reports, how to answer exam questions, and a better grasp of the subject overall”
<b>Peer Connection</b>	“ I really liked how I got to know someone who has just completed their first year”
	“It helped me make friends with my tutorial group because we were in an informal setting and could talk more freely”
	“ The friendly dynamic improved in the group because it feels more relaxed and we opened up to each other more”
<b>Social Integration</b>	“ I feel like I fit into the course better having been to PASS sessions this year”
	“ It helped ease my mind to speak to someone who had experienced the year already”

	“It was just lovely knowing you weren’t the only one feeling nervous starting the course and could talk about it to the older students”
<b>Confidence and Reassurance</b>	“I have more confidence in my studies and I learned ways to approach University based on what I need to do and how”
	“I am more confident in writing my assignments with the great help from my PASS leader who shared their mistakes”
	“I have gained confidence in my own ability with my PASS Leader being so supportive”
<b>Learning Skills</b>	“I now know how to manage reading and find good resources for essays”
	“I actually know how to cut word counts in essays down now thanks to my PASS session!”
	“I learned different study techniques and how to navigate our Virtual Learning Environment”

*PASS Leaders (Mentor) Responses to Open -Ended Questions*

PASS leaders’ qualitative responses to open-ended questions in the survey were also analysed using a semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes emerged around personal growth and confidence, but also career/employability benefits and leadership skills. These themes are outlined in Table 4 below:

**Table 4.** PASS leaders (mentor) responses to open-ended questions with themes and reflection quotes

<b>Personal Growth and Confidence</b>	“I believe I am more confident talking in front of a group”
	“Being a PASS Leader has made me more understanding of other people’s needs and personalities”
	“I am more open to trying new things as a fellow psychology student!”
<b>Helping and Supporting Others</b>	“I developed how to change my way of thinking from advice seeking to advice giving”
	“I am able to show evidence of advocacy skills in an educational setting thanks to being a PASS Leader”
	“It felt rewarding being able to give back and help others with any concerns”
<b>Sense of Community</b>	“The best thing about being a PASS leader was being able to offer insight and guidance that I wish I had been given or told as a first year student”
	“Being able to work with the lecturers and support the first-year students was great”
	“It also helped give me a more structured routine this year, as well as become more involved and closer to the School”
<b>Employability Skills Development</b>	“The skills I’ve developed I can use for a future job role. I would be more confident in roles where I would be speaking in front of a group.”
	“PASS has made me a more competitive candidate for post graduate employers”

	"I think it will help support my CV in showing that I have a broad range of experience outside of traditional roles and jobs of university students"
<b>Leadership and Mentoring</b>	"It helps with your leadership and communication skills. It also helped me to become a better listener, as well as a quick problem solver when a student had an issue"
	"I think my confidence in being able to lead a group which has grown, as well as my ability to plan and present lessons"
	"Getting to lead and develop these new skills which I haven't had the experience of before. I very much enjoyed being able to help the level 1 students with issues"

### Overview of findings

Findings of the current study begin to address a recent recommendation by Advance HE to "...ensure rigorous and ethically robust quantitative evaluations" of student-led peer-learning and support in HEI's (Lochtie et al., 2024). It was also important to include the student voice in this initial evaluation (via open-ended questions) since this is a central Institutional and School focus to enhancing student experiences. The quantitative findings largely support previous literature which has evaluated PASS across other HEI's. For example, benefits to PASS students in the areas of academic skills development, social adjustment and interpersonal skills align with those findings from prior studies which have also highlighted improvements in academic performance, confidence, and understanding of subject matter (Collings et al., 2015; Hryciw et al., 2013; Pugliese et al., 2015). Findings related to academic skills/performance indicate how PASS helps provide students with tools necessary for a thriving first year on the programme. The success of PASS as a peer-led learning scheme appears to be an enduring one, and likely due to the active role students have in their learning when attending PASS sessions (Hryciw et al., 2013). The collaborative learning model of PASS means that its impact is felt beyond supporting first year students with their academic adjustment at this early stage, but rather, in those aspects which are increasingly linked to successful student transition into HEIs— social resiliency and self-efficacy (Cassidy, 2015). These findings should be considered in the wider context of the first year student experience; PASS appears to fill a void in UG programmes which largely build on supporting students' academic skills, with less focus on these key transitional skills of social resiliency and self-efficacy. PASS students now have a greater belief in their abilities and confidence to achieve the demanding academic goals set in HEI's from their first year on a degree programme. Furthermore, dual benefits that have been highlighted in previous research are also supported in the current quantitative findings. PASS leaders reported significant gains in confidence, motivation, presentation, and leadership skills. Despite the small sample size of PASS leaders in the current study (n=8), these findings support those cited in a recent review by Andreatoff et al. (2024). This review summarized the wealth of skills acquired by leaders such as communication, particularly verbal skills via talking in front of others and explaining things, and teamwork, leadership and confidence (Bates et al., 2016; Chilvers & Waghorne, 2018; Curtis, 2016; Drake, 2014; Hayman et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2021; McConnell & Chilvers 2014; Ramm et al., 2015; Rashid et al., 2019; Varghese & Zijlstra-Shaw, 2020; Wareing et al., 2018). Therefore, the current study contributes to this growing body of evidence within the discipline and adds a new, contextual focus of psychology students studying in Northern Ireland.

Qualitative findings from the current study provide an important spotlight on the student voice as part of this evaluation. Responses from PASS students highlight the benefits of participating in the scheme in relation to academic support, peer connections, confidence, social integration and learning skills. These themes align with findings from PASS students survey responses and provide a unifying thread of key aspects of the PASS scheme that are most beneficial. When linked to the first year student experience, it is clear this scheme is impactful across academic and social aspects of the first year student journey. This proves significant given the widely held body of research on student adjustment highlighting these as building blocks to support transition (for review, see Ruihua et al., 2025). Similarly, qualitative findings from PASS leader open-ended questions built on those from the survey, and highlighted benefits in personal growth and sense of community. They also shed light on the key employability skills PASS leaders believe they have developed. This supports the qualitative findings from Ulster University's evaluation which found PASS contributed to the establishment of improved social networks and promotion of employability (Giles et al., 2016). Almost ten years since this evaluation at Ulster University, similar benefits for PASS leaders are highlighted by attributing their experiences to their employability. This adds precedence especially for degree programmes, like psychology, which are becoming increasingly popular despite limited places within professional career pathways.

### Challenges and lessons learnt

When considering the main challenges faced whilst implementing PASS into QUB School of Psychology, a common issue over the last two academic years are the practical arrangements of the scheme. Since PASS leaders are mostly recruited from Level 2 (second year of study), their lecture times conflict with the tutorial times of Level 1 (first year) students. To work around this, PASS leaders arrange a separate meeting time with their PASS groups and PASS coordinators book meeting rooms. Most of the time, this new PASS session time is clearly communicated to first year students, but since the updated time/room does not appear on their formal timetables (as an ad hoc booking), attendance at PASS initial sessions can sometimes be impacted. Future plans to better align Level 1 and Level 2 timetabling are currently being considered. Another challenge relates to differential experiences of PASS students depending on PASS leaders. Common feedback we received from PASS students during the first year of implementation, is that some students believe their peers in another group are receiving 'more support' than their PASS group. Whilst this is an inevitable consequence of having such a wide variety of PASS leaders, this was something that PASS coordinators wanted to mitigate against. Therefore, the PASS Leader training day now includes a workshop on quality assurance of PASS Leader resources and mock PASS sessions to help instill in PASS leaders how to enhance the quality of their sessions to ensure student engagement. Finally, it can be incredibly difficult to show evidence of a causal relationship between a peer-led scheme and educational outcomes, one reason why this was not a focus of the current study. However, there is scope to consider a mixed methods longitudinal study which tracks the quantitative academic outcomes of students in final year who completed PASS during their first year on the programme whilst also using interviews/focus groups to gather reflections on any enduring impacts of PASS. Indeed, this is an important consideration cited in the Advance HE review of student-led peer learning and support with several authors having suggested that more longitudinal studies would be beneficial to be able to report positive findings with more confidence (see Andreanoff et al., 2024). The second phase of the current study will focus on a pre- and post -PASS evaluation of psychosocial and educational outcomes with first year students to begin to unpack any causal links between PASS and student outcomes before and after completing the PASS scheme.

## Recommendations for practitioners

Having successfully implemented PASS for three academic years and given the robust evaluative work now ongoing in QUB School of Psychology, initial recommendations for practitioners have been developed in an attempt to share good practices:

**1. Embed Peer-Led Support within Curriculum.** A common issue reported with other peer-led student support schemes is a lack of student engagement amongst first year students (for review see Garratt et al., 2025). PASS differs from other schemes since it is embedded within the curriculum, often attached to an academic module and aligned with curriculum learning. Indeed, this is one of the primary reasons that can be attributed to the continued levels of student engagement in QUB School of Psychology — PASS students are aware their attendance and involvement with PASS is a fundamental part of their student learning experience. PASS students are also aware of the additional assignment-related support they will receive from PASS leaders which drives a precedence to attend. It is recommended to encourage PASS leaders to develop at least two PASS sessions (one per semester) on assessment support as deadlines approach.

**2. Build Student Partnerships.** The recent shift to developing student partnerships to enhance student experiences in HEI's cannot be undervalued. PASS provides a direct opportunity to harness this potential of student-led peer learning and support. In QUB School of Psychology, this is evident in the successful approach taken to developing PASS sessions with PASS leaders (outlined above). This provides a unique synergy of academic staff and student input to develop the correct 'pitch' of PASS sessions that are not only engaging but academically stimulating so that first year students can see the value for their learning.

**3. Encourage the Student Voice.** At all stages of developing, implementing, and evaluating the PASS Programme in QUB School of Psychology, the student voice was very much placed at the center. It is well known how the success of student experience initiatives is contingent on active involvement and feedback from students and the PASS scheme has indeed benefitted from this. For example, changes and modifications have been made each year to the PASS scheme based on PASS student and PASS leader feedback. Therefore, providing PASS students and leaders with an opportunity to provide their feedback and ensure the student voice is heard, both formally and informally is a key recommendation. Informally, this can and has been completed via debrief sessions or pulse surveys delivered by PASS leaders. More formally, feedback from PASS has been acted on based on points raised at student voice committee meetings, and the current evaluation.

**4. Combine Student Support and Academic Staff Expertise.** The successful implementation and running of the PASS scheme is undoubtedly due to PASS coordinators' blend of academic *and* student support expertise. The School's student support officer brings a wide and varied set of expertise in student wellbeing, and student progression which is combined with academic staff's expertise of student learning and curriculum-based content. Together, this ensures PASS leaders are being trained and supported in all aspects of the student experience, and first year students are benefiting from sessions which are aligned to both aspects of their first year. This approach comes highly recommended to HEI's considering implementing PASS.

## Conclusion

PASS has now been successfully implemented in QUB School of Psychology for three academic years, with 60 PASS leaders trained and over 450 first year psychology students supported via this peer-led student

support Programme. Plans are afoot to expand vertically (into other year groups on the BSc Psychology Programme) and horizontally (with other Schools at QUB). Based on the current study, the benefits from PASS continue to span decades since its first inception into HEIs in the UK, with many of those initial benefits focusing on academic and social adjustment still reported in current findings which are central to supporting first year student success and overall experience. The study provides further evidence of the benefits of peer-led learning in HEI's, including larger degree programmes such as Psychology, and its ability to successfully complement curriculum delivery and positive first year transitional experiences. It is hoped recommendations here will act as a guide for other HEI degree programmes to develop their peer-led learning and support offerings.

## Biographies

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## Ethical Statement

This case study obtained ethical approval from QUB Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Approval Code: EPS 25\_67). All primary data was collected and stored in keeping with these ethical procedures and those of the British Psychological Society Code of Human Ethics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Mentee Survey Open-Ended Questions:

- a. What three things have you gained by attending the mentoring sessions?
- b. What three things would you like to see change in future mentoring sessions?
- c. Any additional comments?

#### Mentor Survey Open-Ended Questions:

- a. What were the best things about being a mentor?
- b. What were the worst things about being a mentor?
- c. In what ways do you think you have changed personally as a result of mentoring?
- d. Did you believe that mentoring would change you in any way?
- e. Has being a mentor been a worthwhile experience? If so, how? If not, why?
- f. In what way do you think being a mentor can help in your future career?
- g. Any additional comments?