Welcome
Welcome to the eleventh PASS Newsletter. Please send contributions or comments for future issues to: d.m.andrews@qmul.ac.uk. The next newsletter will be in Semester 3. Back copies can be found on the PASS webpage: www.qmul.ac.uk/undergraduate/schools/educationliaison/wp/pass/index.html

Don’t forget, all contributors receive a PASS mug...

PASS goes to the seaside

PASS student organisers Afiqah Abdul Aziz (Dentistry) and Priyank Krishnani (Electronic Engineering) represented PASS at Queen Mary at the residential National PASS/PAL Leader Conference 2011 in Brighton in November, run jointly by hosts University of Brighton and the University of Manchester (National Centre for PASS/SI). Priyank summed it up as:

…a great event, attended by PASS/PAL student leaders from different universities throughout the UK. The workshops and networking events produced innovative ideas, looking at the study patterns of first-year mentees as well as ideas to improve one's performance as a student and a mentor.

Afiqah’s picture montage represents her enjoyment of the conference. She liked the sense of energy in the interactive nature of the workshops, particularly one on voice and confidence led by Paul Moriarty (George Palmer on EastEnders). She also found it fascinating to hear about fellow mentors’ experiences in their university schemes and has kept in touch with many of them since November.

There is a wealth of ideas arising from the conference on the University of Brighton’s website:

http://student.brighton.ac.uk/ask/index.php/pass/pass-leader-conference-2011/conference-resources/

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PASS and technology in History

Leo Hansel, Warren Valentine and Hrista Dimitrova write:

This year the PASS History team have utilised social networking mediums to increase awareness of the scheme and create stronger channels of communication between the organisers and mentors, and the PASS History team and prospective mentees. We have used Facebook to create a Mentors’ Forum and Mentees’ Page, and Twitter to host a second information portal serving a similar function to the Mentees’ Page.

The Mentors’ Forum serves as an open forum where mentors can voice improvements for the scheme. They have a greater say in the decision-making process and can amend what the student organisers have decided to press ahead with. The page was created to bypass communicating through the college email system which is prone to being overlooked by mentors and mentees. It also lacks the feature-rich interface Facebook offers. Strong channels of communication between the organisers and mentors ensure the scheme runs efficiently and everyone is kept up to date. This allows the organisers to make faster and better-informed decisions, knowing anything they implement has been vetted by the team of mentors first. In addition, the organisers have successfully used Dropbox to disseminate literature to the mentors. We hope to integrate further cloud storage and networking capability into the communication apparatus.

Whilst good communication between mentors is crucial, good advertising, prior to and during the semester, ensures our services can be fully exploited by potential mentees. With the reliance on information technology so prevalent and the growing popularity of social networking, these avenues of advertisement are essential. Although Facebook discussion should not be substituted for PASS sessions, social networking allows us to share easily important updates. In addition, potential mentees are made aware of the weekly theme and briefly introduced to what may be discussed alongside their general queries. For PASS History, which is still in its infancy, Facebook has not yet yielded the best results, but we have capitalised on a modern form of advertisement in attempts better to connect with the student body.

Taking similar revolutionary steps in concert with the university’s greater use of social media and the School of History’s entrance into the ‘Twitter-sphere’, we have also deployed a @PASSHistory twitter account to establish our own rapid and reliable link with first-year History students. We can now keep in touch with students in ‘real time’ without having to rely on departmental emails, keeping prospective mentees aware of times and locations, useful resources and talking points discussed at the sessions. Furthermore, our Twitter offers the opportunity for increased networking as we communicate with other student-run bodies at the university who may be willing to tweet some publicity for us.

Social networking has been a useful tool in helping PASS History overcome some of the challenges we experienced in our first year of operation. So far, we have not received a large amount of ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ on Facebook and Twitter respectively – something we hope to correct in the second semester. We also augment our social networking activity by distributing handouts and posters, periodically addressing lecture halls and getting lecturers on board to spread word about our scheme. We feel technology has assisted our ground efforts and so will continue to push its usage during the second semester. Our advice to other PASS mentor teams: in order to make Twitter and Facebook an effective tool, make its presence known early on and hopefully it should work for you too.

Future events

The 2012 PASS Mentor Certificate Event will be held at Mile End on the afternoon of Wednesday 21 March. Email invitations will be issued nearer the time.
Alumni news

New mentors may not know about the PASS It On scheme, where former mentors (including those whose news is given below) offer advice to current mentors in their subject, particularly about their own experiences in applying for jobs or further study. For further information on this scheme, ask your student organiser or Debbie Andrews.

Jenny Gregory  (Maths PASS mentor 2006-08) writes about her experiences in accountancy:

I am still working with HW Fisher and by the time this newsletter goes out, I shall be qualified. It feels like it has been a very long three years and my exams have been very tough. When you interview for accountancy jobs they tell you that the exams are the hardest you’ll ever sit and I remember thinking that I’d been fine with my Maths degree and how much harder could it get...? How wrong I was! Saying that though, I made it through, as did all my colleagues who started at the same time as I did. Due to the way most accountancy firms work we have two new intakes each year and it is when interacting with the new starters that I found my PASS mentoring skills the most useful from answering questions on their day-to-day jobs to discussing exam solutions. I’m really glad that I became a PASS mentor whilst at Queen Mary and I’m glad to hear that the programme is still going strong.

Merott Movahedi  (Electronic Engineering PASS mentor 2008-10 and joint organiser 2009-10) writes:

Following completion of my Bachelor’s ICT degree at Queen Mary in July 2010, I started working full-time in an IT support role that I used to do part-time throughout my final year. The communication skills that I developed at PASS, proved to be immensely beneficial for me in this role. Having been to many job interviews since (typical grad!), I have always found PASS to be a hot topic to talk about, it being the best way to demonstrate my passion for the subject I studied, my capability to efficiently manage my time, and my ability to communicate with other people and get my ideas across. I am now working as a technical support engineer for a large enterprise software company, and also planning to continue my studies and start a Master’s degree in the next academic year.

Sandra Nwokeoha  (SEMS PASS mentor 2008-11) reflects on becoming a research assistant in the Medical Engineering Group and PhD student at Imperial College, London:

The transition is still quite impressive to me - now on the academic staff when only two months prior to the start of my job I was just a graduating student! Finally I know what it is like to enjoy the perks of being a member of staff and the challenges of taking on a PhD simultaneously. I have settled into an amazing team and a really cool lab where finding a spare tool of any form at all is a 30-second job! So the fun certainly hasn’t stopped at graduation, much like the learning tool! Looking forward this year to the additions on to my already big plate.

Good luck future post-PASS mentors!

James Snee  (Computer Science PASS mentor 2008-10 and organiser 2009-10) is also enjoying his PhD:

I’ve just started a PhD in Computer Science here in Cambridge, which I am finding a real challenge but great fun none the less. I’m also teaching again: I supervise undergraduates in a second-year Computer Architecture course. I have found the skills I gained in PASS have really helped me in teaching this term. I think by not just giving them the answers but helping them work towards it (like in PASS), the students I’ve taught may have a better chance in the exams. Either way I think they enjoyed the challenge a little more.
Mentoring beyond PASS

As part of this occasional series where mentors reflect on the connections between their work in PASS and other parts of their lives, Jon describes how the experience of working through his addiction with the support of others influences his practice as a subject mentor.

‘You only keep what you’ve got by giving it away’ might seem like contradictory nonsense to some, but these words are a common refrain within meetings of twelve-step recovery programs, and in the process of my own recovery I have discovered the weight of truth behind them. I am almost four-and-a-half years clean and sober now, and actively sponsor others within recovery. By passing on what was freely given to me, I strengthen and deepen my understanding of the recovery process, and can bring the new insights I gain through helping others work through the steps to bear within my own day-to-day life in sobriety.

This experience is invaluable, but perhaps the biggest lesson I have learnt is to understand the limits of what I can do. Setting in place proper boundaries is a key element of sponsorship, and one which I have found essential in the way I approach mentoring within PASS. When dealing with someone in early recovery, it is easy to become emotionally attached to the point where one becomes a crutch for the newcomer, preventing them from growing independently. To those outside, it may seem callous of me not to explore every possible option for supporting someone whose situation may be dire, but unless I remain healthy and sober, I will be unable to offer help to anyone. As one of my long-time sober friends puts it, ‘you can carry the message, you can’t carry the mess’.

In light of this experience, I find that in order to be a better mentor, I must be a better student. The more comfortable I am within my subject, the greater the proficiency I have for solving the problems within the field, the more I am able to share, and the more helpful I can be. All I can offer is my experience, so it’s up to me to experience as much as possible. I have also come to understand that whatever I feel I have to offer, the onus is on the sponsee to control the flow of information. If they do not want to hear something, it is of very little use for me to say it. Likewise with mentoring, the relationship should be driven by questions from the mentee, a resource which is reactive to an individual’s needs is far more useful than a cold, impersonal bulk source of information.

All things considered, if mentoring within PASS can aid my growth within Physics even a tenth as much as sponsorship has helped me to grow in my sobriety, then I believe I will reap benefits far outweighing what I contribute. And maybe have the privilege of helping someone along the way.

Masters students learn from PASS mentors

Kareem Khazem (joint PASS student organiser for Computer Science with Brett Osler) writes:

Computer Science PASS mentors had an interesting new challenge last term when Masters students, as well as first-years, began attending PASS sessions. The students on the MSci course generally have no experience with computer programming, but the Senior Tutor for CS graduate programmes saw an opportunity for extra programming help in the form of PASS sessions. Brett and I agreed to allow the MSci students to be mentored by second- and third-year CS students. Although PASS was originally intended for first-year students, the CS PASS mentors are all top-notch programmers and so the extra challenge of MSci students was well within their abilities.
Finding out more

Anyone reading this newsletter is likely already to be involved in some way in PASS at Queen Mary. However, if there is anything about which you would like to know more (or if you would like to contribute to the next edition of this newsletter), please contact:

Dr Debbie Andrews, Peer-mentoring Coordinator (Widening Participation Team, Directorate of Marketing and Communications): d.m.andrews@qmul.ac.uk

Below is a list of the key PASS people in schools and departments. These are the academic coordinators and the undergraduate student organisers, each of whom is a PASS mentor leading a team of mentors.

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**Plea to (a few) mentors from (some) Student Organisers**

Please check for emails from us and then reply to them!