PASS at Refreshers Fair

PASS mentors took a table at QMSU’s Refreshers Fair on 14 January in the Great Hall.

For anyone who doesn’t know about it, this event is for first-years who were still rather overwhelmed at the newness of things at the time of Freshers Fair in September.

The table was set up and decorated by SEMS mentors and organiser Dipej Patel, Thiaga Edirisinghe and Mel Gabriel. They were later joined to staff the stand throughout the day by organisers Joanna Piddock (SLLF), Serap Gonen (SBSCS) and Helena du Toit (Electronic Engineering – pictured right). Serap commented, ‘It was a very productive day for SBSCS as there was a lot of student interest we have been able to follow up.’

These comments are from two new mentors in Computer Science who, modestly, wish to remain anonymous:

We found that the training for becoming a PASS mentor (because all departments are trained together) mainly focused around learning how to interact with the students and assist them with problems outside of work. However, the truth was that PASS sessions for Computer Science focused entirely on work. Students often attended sessions during periods where coursework was given and exams were forthcoming. Nonetheless, the PASS sessions were brilliant and highly enjoyable since the students were very smart! They were often dedicated enough to want to remain ahead of schedule, which was always a nice feeling. Overall, we felt that the PASS experience was valuable in helping us with our teaching and interpersonal skills, and it is certainly something that we will definitely want to continue for the second semester and third year (if we are invited to return!).

I thoroughly enjoyed this semester’s PASS sessions. Although initially I felt that the responsibility would be too much for a person to bear, since I had other mentors with me, it became easier. I found that the first-year students were very enthusiastic group of people who enjoyed turning up even if they had no problems! I found this experience very useful in helping me develop my teaching and learning skills (since I learned new material that we weren’t taught ourselves). I am very much looking forward to continuing this next semester.
Mel Gabriel, student organiser for SEMS, was filmed talking about PASS (with Debbie Andrews) earlier this semester.

This was part of a series of short videos made by Giles Martin, Learning and Teaching Development Adviser in Educational and Staff Development, for the use and interest of lecturers and tutors at Queen Mary. A clip from our film, PASS at Queen Mary, featuring PASS academic coordinators Dr Caroline Brennan (SBCS) and Dr Robert Johnson (Maths), former academic coordinator Dr Rachel Ashworth (Dentistry), PASS organiser Helena du Toit and former PASS mentor Chris Gungaloo (both Electronic Engineering) are also included. If you want to see what Mel had to say, go to: www.screencast.com/NjMxZDU3Njt (This is a temporary location and an updated link, when settled, will be given in the next newsletter and from the new PASS webpage.)

James Snee, as PASS student organiser in Computer Science, heads up the team which contains the mentors from the previous piece. He reflects on the importance of good relationships between PASS mentors and organisers and academics in their departments:

Every department that decides to take part in PASS has an appointed academic coordinator who acts as the go-between for PASS organisers and their department. The relationship that is held between the organiser and academic coordinator is an important one and can go towards defining the success or failure of the department’s PASS scheme. There is another set of relationships equally important to the success of PASS: that between the PASS organiser, mentors and the first year students’ lecturers. They are the ones who write and present the material to the students; they are marking the students’ exams and ultimately know what they want from a student in order for them to pass the course.

In Computer Science we have worked hard over the past year to lay down the foundations of this relationship between the PASS mentors and the lecturers. We are especially lucky because all of the mentors are excellent outgoing people and already have a good rapport with the academics. We see the relationship working in two ways. First of all, the lecturers are able to inform us of impending coursework or mid-term exams as well as material that they see students struggling with. We can then take this information and feed it into how we carry out our PASS sessions. Something that became very useful over the past semester was running what we called ‘themed’ sessions. These were PASS sessions that were aimed at answering questions on a particular topic. We found that given the information we gathered from the academics, we could more accurately give help to struggling students. We were also able to timetable in mentors who were more able to answer the types of questions we anticipated, again furthering the effectiveness of the session.

As I said above, this is a two-way relationship. The second important part of the discussion with lecturers is the mentors feeding back what they have found when running sessions. It is well known that students prefer to talk to other students and this makes them more likely to tell one of the mentors that they are finding a particular topic difficult. This information is invaluable to lecturers. With it they are able further to explore certain areas in order to cement the students’ understanding and without it they might not know what students are finding hard.

So far we have had good feedback from students and lecturers. It is only the second semester we have tried it in Computer Science but it has already proven to be a useful and rewarding resource. It can help students air their worries and lecturers find out what students are finding particularly difficult.

Dr Tassos Tombros comments:
As both the academic coordinator for PASS in DCS and a first-year lecturer, I have found that having these communication channels between lecturers and PASS organisers/mentors open is extremely helpful, and it gives me a very good indication of what aspects of my module the students struggle with. This is something that we will certainly encourage and that we hope to continue seeing in future years.
Alumni news

Three of the PASS alumni featured were last year’s SBCS PASS organisers; they graduated in the summer but have all continued to study...

(All the alumni in this section, along with others, are part of the PASS IT ON scheme, offering advice to current mentors. Ask your student organiser or see last semester’s newsletter for details.)

Khaled Abid says that the juggling skills developed when he was a PASS mentor and organiser are useful now he has to balance paid work with his studies on the graduate entry medical scheme at Whitechapel. He writes:

‘I am also running the London Marathon with the Read project (part of QMUL) this April, so waking up at 5:30 in the morning given the current climate has been an enjoyable challenge!’

Nina Farah says that she also looks back on her PASS mentoring with pleasure and that working on PASS helped her develop her ability to ‘multi-task’. She writes:

‘I liked being able to explain a concept to first years and seeing their reaction when they understood. I am currently studying for an MSc at Barts while working part time in central London and volunteering. I hope to continue studying afterwards.’

Nuzhah Gooda Sahib (former PASS mentor and student organiser in Computer Science, now a doctoral student at Queen Mary) thinks PASS mentors are just the sort of students she is looking for a new voluntary project on campus, SIFE (see below):

SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) is a volunteering organisation run by students. For more information, visit www.sife.org. QM SIFE was set up in summer 2009 and we are currently carrying out a number of projects in the local community. Our team has recently been awarded a grant from HSBC to carry out a financial literacy project, so now is an exciting time to get involved! If you are interested, please email us: Sife@qmsu.org

Tendai Dzvuke writes:

‘I am currently studying dental surgery at the University of Aberdeen. At first I was quite scared making such a big move and being so far away from home but now that I am here I am having a fantastic time. The course is graduate entry and is very intense, but so far I am enjoying the fast pace. I think being a PASS mentor was an impressive aspect of my personal statement so I encourage all you budding medics and dentists to continue in the scheme. Also the skills I picked up organising the sessions have helped me in many areas of my studies.’

Tendai, in gown and mask, was recently pictured on the Aberdeen University website with Scotland’s First Minister Alex Salmond at the official opening of the Aberdeen Dental School.

Finding out more

Anyone reading this newsletter is likely already to be involved 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, Corporate Affairs):
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.

Established PASS schools and departments

Biological and Chemical Sciences
Academic coordinator: Dr Caroline Brennan; student organisers: Serap Gonen, Silas Mellor, Kostadin Stoichev

Computer Science
Academic coordinator: Dr Tassos Tombros; student organisier: James Snee

Dentistry
Academic coordinator: Dr Sahar Mohsin; student organiser: Prina Patel

Electronic Engineering
Academic coordinator: Dr Janine Lajudie; student organisers: Helena du Toit, Merott Movahedi

Engineering and Materials Science
Academic coordinator: Professor Julia Shelton; student organisers: Mel Gabriel, Mohamed Kadir

Mathematical Sciences
Academic coordinator: Dr Robert Johnson; student organiser: Rishi Shah

Schools and departments running PASS as a pilot this academic year

Languages, Linguistics and Film
Academic coordinator: Dr Kirsteen Anderson; student organisers: Steph Murray, Jo Piddock

Plea to (a few) mentors from (some) student organisers

PLEASE stick to the mentoring sessions you have put yourself down for and don’t think a last-minute text to say you can’t come is much (or any) use!