



## PEER ASSISTED COURSE ENHANCEMENT SCHEME (PACES)



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### - Priority Focus and explanation of PATS variation

The focus is quality improvement. PACES is a university-wide initiative of Griffith University aimed at development of courses (subjects offered within a degree program).

At Griffith University student evaluations are separated into Student Evaluation of Course (SEC), which is 'public' performance data; and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), which is 'private'. As a multi-campus University, Griffith already had in place, PRO-Teaching or the *Peer Review and Observation of Teaching* project. A highly successful project providing academics the opportunity to work with peers, to open otherwise closed doors and invite the chance to have their teaching critically, yet constructively observed by colleagues. Integrity of the process was upheld by quality training workshops and guided by a dedicated and professional administration team embedded within each of the four academic Groups.

The PATS variation that was implemented (PACES) provided the opportunity to complement this teaching focus with a course focused improvement process. In this context it 'de-personalised' peer scrutiny by focusing critique on the course. Collaborations of this type proved to be very popular with an otherwise reserved pool of potential participants. It continued to build on the legacy PRO-Teaching had provided through its structured approach with regular contact between participants, with workbook tasks to capture data and ideas.

The focus, described by different stakeholders' perspectives, varies:

- **Teacher perspective:** The primary focus was to enable collaborative approaches to quality improvement of courses. Collaborators could focus on curriculum design at the course level but also micro-curriculum (activity design) at the lesson level. A secondary focus was to develop reflective practice so that academics are better able to analyse their own teaching performance and that of peers.
- **Student perspective:** The primary focus was to enhance the student experience of learning by taking control of the student experience early in the semester and implementing purposeful interventions.

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- **University perspective:** The primary focus was the provision of tools (a process) that academic managers could recommend staff to engage with to enhance course quality. The secondary focus was to provide opportunities for Learning and Teaching (L&T) leadership and enhancing capacity for leadership that could be evidenced in the Academic Staff Review and Planning process.

### Why

The PACES variation of the PATS process was adopted by Griffith University, as it was felt a process was needed that was course and curriculum focused and also functioned to offer academics an opportunity to engage in 'non-threatening' reflective practice on their courses. PACES was developed as a process that was systematic, easy to follow and one which furthered the promotion of collegiality and collaboration across the four diverse academic Groups (mega-faculties).

### People

Participants were teaching staff from all discipline areas in the university including casual, fixed-term contract and ongoing academic and professional staff. The program was made available to new staff and those on probation).

Peer partnerships were constructed as either mentor-mentee or reciprocal peer-to-peer (enthusiast) partnerships. Mentor-mentee relationships were either initiated by the university or by mutual agreement in senior-junior roles.

The modes of interaction involved either meeting face-to-face in pairs or small teams (personable approach in pilot phase), or remotely either online or by phone or skype to promote engagement.

### Timeframe

In general a one semester PATS model was used, however a couple of participants engaged over multiple semesters to ongoing effect. The Griffith variation required that participants make all curriculum changes prior to submission of their course (unit) profile due 2 weeks before o-week. Participants therefore needed to engage in curriculum design at least two weeks prior to the course profile date to enable 'real' changes are made to the course. This timeframe required that early commencement of participant engagement, partnership formation, and training was imperative.

### Scope: University

The scope of the first three semesters of this PATS variation was university wide: 91 participants engaged with 63 courses (units), involving elements from all 4 academic Groups.

## - Key Outcomes

### PATS variation – outputs and outcomes

Since program inception it has been possible to ensure that the PATS variation has been adopted and embedded as a recognised Learning and Teaching (L&T) quality improvement process broadly across the organization. Starting as an internally funded strategic L&T grant project it has since been embraced by the central academic development unit (Learning Futures) and is telegraphed widely through institutional policies and guidelines as a recognized process for L&T quality improvement.

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Teachers that have engaged with the process once invariably engage in subsequent semesters to maintain the development momentum. This suggests that the PATS process is effective in developing the virtuous cycle that is reflective practice. As experience with the program grows so more academics are able to use it effectively to make good curriculum choices and make a positive impact on student experiences of learning.

### System level impacts

Within Griffith University, PACES had impact at all *IMPEL* levels.

1. **Team members:** 145 teachers engaged in the PATS variation.
2. **Immediate students:** Approximately 9,000 students engaging in focus groups (PATS task 4) and enjoying benefits of interventions with impact on their experience of learning.
3. **Spreading the word:** Spreading the word both 'top-down' – Deputy HOS L&T engaged to promote within their Schools, and 'bottom-up' – enthusiasts of existing PRO-Teaching model were approached to be mentors and advocates of the Scheme.
4. **Narrow opportunistic adoption:** Teaching Communities of Practice (TCoPs) engage their members with the scheme. Academics (Science Group) use PATS to gather evidence for L&T citations and as evidence framework for L&T grants.
5. **Narrow systemic adoption:** Schools (Science Group) utilise it to focus development for poor performing courses.
6. **Broad opportunistic adoption:** Staff engaging a Course Improvement Plan are required to test it using the PATS process in the following offering.
7. **Broad Systemic adoption:**
  - i. Engagement in PATS recognized as evidence of engagement in L&T quality enhancement, scholarly approach to teaching and leadership in teaching for Academic Staff Review and Plan in all academic Groups.
  - ii. All (Science Group) courses to execute PATS task 4 as part of 'Taking Control of the Student Experience' (TCOSE)

## - Learning

### 1. Barriers and opportunities

At the time of introduction of this PATS variation the barriers were mainly cultural and organisational some of these have been whittled away over time.

- As much of the organisation valued research outcomes over L&T outcomes there was not a clear value statement that supported academic involvement in L&T improvement.
- Academic managers and supervisors (middle managers) lacked knowledge of how available tools such as PATS could be engaged to enhance L&T performance.
- Governance and policy structures around L&T quality not linked to institutional tools to engage staff with L&T development.

### 2. What worked well

Importantly, PACES focused on the student experience early in the semester so that proactive interventions could be focused on implementing what students identified as course related issues affecting their learning. It was noted that all academics that undertook student informed interventions improved their SECs. With L&T funding allocated to each Group based on performance indicators including the student experience the variation of PATS provided a link from individual academic performance within a course to School performance and to the broader Group's performance.

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For many academics reflection on practice was something that was unstructured and informal. PATS provided a clear structure for collecting perspectives from all participants, and along with student learning outcomes rich evidence on which to reflect. Commencing 'pre-semester' it allowed the academic to work with a colleague, reviewing course material, assessment, curriculum design etc., and right through to the end of semester and beyond; preparing the academic for the next time the course was to be taught. These were critical steps and important reflective processes that were missing from the current practices currently in place.

Participants noted that the active leadership of the process and a personal approach to engaging them with the process were keys to the success of the pilot of this variation.

Enablers identified were:

- Positive pilot results (of the 12 courses, 9 showed improvement in their SEC)
- Positive feedback from participants – opportunity to have inter-disciplinary contact, ability to giving students a platform outside of SET/SEC, weekly coffee and open door with my mentor and chance to peer review
- Groups all coming on board – Deans willing to cover the cost of the coffee card incentive
- Active leadership of the process and personal approach to engagement of staff
- Informing schools and groups that staff requiring course improvement plans this was a process which could help – linked to school performance not just personal/individual performance
- Staff formally recognised in their training records, with performance development 'points' accrued when involvement was evidenced (all worksheets completed)
- The variation was focused on courses not teaching – impersonal vs personal – took the 'threat' away and therefore removed a barrier to engagement
- Organisational processes and policies were developed to recognise PATS evidence in L&T grant and award applications

### 3. What didn't work well

A negative trajectory of involvement started when active leadership of the process fell away during organizational restructure and redeployment of staff.

Feedback from participants regarding paperwork, burden of finding time, difficulty in recording everything on worksheets, coffee card process and teaching schedule conflict with PACES timeline (when peer observation occurs for example).

### 4. What was learnt

Once mastery (SMART) goals are set (PATS task 3) it is helpful to revisit those goals to focus engagement with each subsequent task.

It is important to ensure that at least one participant in a team has some L&T credentials so that interventions have educational substance and impact.

Small teams (larger than pairs) were highly effective in providing a greater range of development ideas and approaches. Future involvement would encourage teams of first year course conveners, conveners of vertically aligned courses and participants from multiple discipline areas. Deputy HoS (L&T) or academic champion is a key role to engaging academics.

### 5. National System Impact

IMPEL Level 5: Systemic changes at participating institutions leading to changes for all relevant students.