ESS Communication Update:

As I am sure you know staff and students across the University have been working extremely hard on Peer Support over this Academic Year and I am delighted to announce every School will have some form of Peer Support available to at least one year group by AY 13/14. There are various models developing including PALS, Academic Families, Befriending, Mentoring, House System and much more. The current Phase One of the Peer Support Project will be focused on undergraduates and Phase Two beginning in AY 14/15 will extend the Project to postgraduate and online students following on from the overall ESS Project timeline.

Working in partnership with the University we have created a Peer Support Toolkit; A menu of all the research, resources, training, policies, guidelines and evaluation documentation needed to establish a successful Peer Support Project. Enabling Schools to identify a model(s), which best suits the needs of their students and providing practical guidance as to how to take these forward. You can access this at: http://edin.ac/13P5RsD

Please find below a range of best practice case-studies from across the University:

**School of Law: LawPALS:**

LawPALS is Edinburgh Law School’s Peer Assisted Learning Scheme designed to help students adapt to studying law and, for four-year students, studying at university. It aims to ease academic and social transition into Edinburgh Law School – whether students are coming from school, college, employment or university. Every first year LLB student – no matter their route of entry -is automatically assigned to a LawPALS Group which meets weekly for an hour a week during the first semester. These groups are led by trained (and paid) third and fourth year Student Leaders who are there to help them navigate life at law school through using facilitation skills and their LLB experience. The Student Leaders report to a postgraduate LawPALS Coordinator and the whole programme is overseen by The Director of the Student Experience.
Sessions follow the flow of the timetable so that students cover e.g. legal essay writing skills before their first essay is due. The sessions are embedded within the law student timetable and nothing else runs during these times. This ensures the students have maximum opportunity to participate.

There are separate sessions for our Graduate LLB students (those with a degree in another discipline who come into do the first two years of the LLB) as their study needs differ. These sessions are led by a Diploma in Legal Practice student who came through the Graduate LLB route.

With thanks to Lindsay Jack, Director of the Student Experience, School of Law

**Vet School House System:**

The primary objective of the House System is to implement an improved and more consistent quality of academic and pastoral support for students.

As part of the House System, academic guidance is provided to assist the students in improving their academic skills and performance. Pastoral advice and guidance is also provided to help them with any difficulties that are affecting their studies. In addition to this, it is hoped that the House System will help the School deal with issues such as isolation, which have arisen due to the remote location of the School as well as the demanding nature of the curriculum.

It was decided that 10 Houses would be created (each named after the Pentland Hills). Each House would be comprised of 80-90 students, 5-6 Personal Tutors and a Senior House Tutor. Each House has its own Student Committee. Each House Committee is responsible for deciding upon and organising social events and activities for their House. So far, the Houses have been for hill walks, trips to the theatre, participated in fundraising activities and held House lunches.

There has been a positive response to the House System from both staff and students:

‘Looking ahead, the School will continue to develop its Peer Support Systems and embed them into the existing House System. It is also hoped that we will continue to work closely with the Support Services and EUSA to respond to the needs of our students’: Geoff Pearson, Senior Tutor, The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies.
With thanks to Roshni Jethwa, Student Experience Officer, The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies

School of Literature, Languages and Culture: Autonomous Learning Group:

ALGs were piloted in 1995 and by 1999 were part of the core curriculum at Honors level. The main aims of ALG’s are to encourage both autonomous and cooperative learning. It places the responsibility firmly on students’ shoulders and relays a clear message that they will only get out what they put in. The ALG’s have many benefits; they work to hone students graduate attributes through encouraging investigation, presentation and reviewing skills. They also encourage communication, teamwork and summarising abilities. They help the students to get to know each other in smaller groups to try out ideas ahead of the seminar and identify issues that need to be addressed in the seminar.

The feedback from the students has been extremely positive with many rating their experiences of ALG’s as 9/10 and these are now being trialled with Pre-Honors level as well.

‘ALG’s have been excellent. They really help to tease out ideas’ ALG Participant

‘My only experience is ALG’s, but I absolutely love then! We get a lot done in a fun, pressure-free atmosphere’. ALG Participant

With thanks to Penny Fielding, Head of Department, School of Literature, Languages and Culture

EUSA International Buddies:

International Buddies aim to create a community of new and current students to help new international students transition to their life at University. This has been an extremely successful project with support from the Scottish Government Welcoming International Students Fund. The Edinburgh Buddies are students who have previously studied abroad and they are matched with International Buddies. Edinburgh Buddies will connect with their International Buddy over email in August and then meet them in-person in September when the new students arrive. Students will be asked to meet once a week at the start of the semester to make sure the new students feel at home. This opportunity will help the International Buddies grow in confidence, strengthen their inter-personal skills and develop problem solving abilities. Many Schools are now developing these systems internally.
'I love my Edinburgh buddy. She has been an excellent person to go to for advice. She has also been really great about inviting me to different events so I got to meet people when I first started here. I'm really glad I did the Buddy Project if for no other reason than I got to make a good friend because of it.' International Buddy

With thanks to Johanna Holtan, International Engagement Coordinator, EUSA

**BioPALS:**

BioPALS is a Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme set up BY students FOR students of the Schools of Biological and Biomedical Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. The Project aims to help students make the most of their degree by creating a friendly and informal environment for cross-year interaction and support. They promote active studying strategies to help students develop as independent learners, running structured group meetings based around a theme relevant to the course. These sessions are led by trained student facilitators and provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and encourage a more open, engaged, effective and responsible student community. This Project also offers a vehicle to transmit feedback from students to academic and support staff, and the BTO. This has been a hugely successful project thus far.

‘From what I see, BioPALs sessions were very well received by our first year students, many of whom felt that they benefitted significantly from the accumulated experience of their near-peers. The BioPALs facilitators themselves seem also to have developed their confidence and skills greatly through this experience and, judging by the quality of resources that they provide, have given themselves something quite substantial to make their CVs stand out from the crowd’.

With thanks to Dr Heather McQueen, Lecturer, School of Biological Sciences
The Vet School Peer Supporters:

The fundamental concept behind the Peer Supporters Programme is the awareness that many students, particularly those on competitive professional courses, may feel intimidated by the notion of revealing any personal issues, big or small, to faculty members or other support staff within the University. All students from years 2-5, plus our Graduate entry students, are eligible to join the Peer Supporters Programme. This year was the pilot year, with 31 Volunteers attending a mandatory team training Weekend and two further sessions on mental health awareness. Upon completion of the course, the student’s hold the title ‘Peer Supporter’, and are advertised as such to the student body. They are responsible for how they choose to make themselves available to other students; other schools have instituted surgery hours for drop-ins, and social events open to everyone. As Peer Supporters, they are trained to listen openly and without judgement, and to help others without falling into an advice-giving role. The Peer Supporters are given a complete directory of staff and services within both the Vet School and larger University that are available to refer students on to, should the Peer Supporters decide the problem is too big for them to handle on their own. Once monthly during term times, the team (including the Team Supervisor, an experienced member of staff) will debrief together in a mandatory 1-1.5 hour meeting, within a safe and confidential environment, to discuss any issues the Peer Supporters might be having with their role.

“The experience of this weekend has been enriching and I have learnt a lot about effective communication. More importantly, I have learnt a lot more about myself and how I react to certain situations. The context of the training was highly relevant and (it was) definitely beneficial to have heard feedback on my communication skills.” Peer Supporter

“I was in a position last year where a Peer Supporter would have been helpful, so my experience last year has fuelled my desire to be there for others: no one should be alone.” Student Peer Leader

With thanks to Stacey Spielman, Teaching Fellow, The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies
School of Nursing Academic Families:

The Nursing Society Academic Families are made up of students from all four years providing each family with a Grandparent (Fourth Year), Parent (Third Year), Older Sibling (Second Year) and Younger Siblings (First Year). Eight Families were created containing at least one student from each year group. Students were asked if they wanted to be involved and only those interested were added to a family. It was thought that involvement of all years in each family would allow inter-year relationships to develop which would provide advice and support on courses and placements as well as social support.

The Society have had an initial Family event where the individual Families got together to meet each other before meeting the other Families at a bigger event. Overall this event seemed to be very successful and allowed students to get to know people in other years. It was then left to the individual families to arrange further events, from feedback we know several families have met up since the initial event and they appear to be working well to allow inter-year support.

Feedback from the students involved in the Families has shown that the Families provide opportunities to get to know people in other years. Feedback from a first year stated that the academic families allowed them to get to know those in other years and provided them with support when starting their first placements. The third years have found it useful for gaining advice on how to arrange their clinical electives and information about the expectations for entering Junior Honours.

With thanks to Fiona Leith, Edinburgh University Nursing Society
Maths for Physics Buddies:

Maths Buddies is a scheme created with the primary aim to help and support the teaching and learning of Mathematics to Physics students. The scheme relies on excellent volunteers from the year above who, after initial instruction, run the scheme as a student-led activity. Support sessions are run on a weekly basis, allowing students to explore challenges they’re finding with Mathematics. Maths Buddies are not school-specific, but rather subject specific. Just this year we had Buddies from three schools: School of Physics and Astronomy, School of Mathematics and School of Chemistry.

All Maths Buddies are included as Teaching Assistants on the first year maths course online Learn page to access course materials with ease. They can also access the Maths Buddies Facebook group; which is set up and run by the Buddies and can be used as an online forum, where students can post their questions, discuss problems and solutions, general support and advice on study skills and problem solving methods. It can also be used as a notice board to confirm regular meetings and advertise ad-hoc meetings.

‘Because all of the Buddies had previous experience with solving such problems, it was very helpful to receive efficient, well-explained solutions, while I myself was struggling with choosing the appropriate approach’. Recipient Student

‘The Maths-Buddies scheme appears to be a success as the sessions, especially on Thursdays, were very popular. The facebook group has been used on daily basis and I have received various e-mails regarding problems from the maths course and general enquiries. As a Buddy I have contributed to the first-years’ student experience by reassuring and motivating them regarding the full degree. The scheme has allowed second-year student to develop their skills as well as supporting first-year students in their university environment’. Maths Buddy
Clinical Medicine and Nursing Studies Inter-disciplinary Peer Support:

For four years, staff and students in Clinical Medicine and Nursing Studies at the University of Edinburgh have come together to take forward a Peer learning initiative based around the theme of ‘Students as teachers’. Nursing students and medical students teach and learn together towards shared goals of patient wellbeing.

Why do it?

What we do appreciate is that as nurses and doctors we all need to: Learn and work effectively within a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) with a mutual understanding and respect for the roles and expertise of all professionals within this team (GMC 2009).

Both professional groups also realise how critical their role as mentors, teachers and facilitators will be in their professional lives and they must begin to be able to demonstrate appropriate learning and teaching skills in their student years.

What have we done:

The medical and nursing students, facilitated by academic staff from both departments, developed and evaluated a novel approach to interdisciplinary peer learning on the topic of fluid and electrolyte balance.

Outcomes & Feedback:

- Fostering of greater inter-professional understanding of experience, skills, expertise and roles
- Both nursing and medical students reported improvements in their knowledge and confidence relating to several key domains of managing fluid and electrolyte balance.
- All students felt (and were statistically supported) that they benefited from the interdisciplinary format of the sessions and would recommend the sessions to other students.
- An opportunity for senior students to ‘try out’ teaching roles/responsibilities, formal and clinical skills, in a supportive environment
- Demonstrating the importance of good communication and team working to both nursing and medical students

With Thanks to Tonks (Josephine) N Fawcett, Professor of Student Learning (Nurse Education) School of Health in Social Science
School of Informatics ‘InfBase:

InfBase is staffed with 2 tutors that look after the Informatics students, Monday to Thursday afternoons. The tutors help the students with mathematical problems or when they get stuck with their programming and other subject related problems, be it by guiding them to find the answers during their visit in InfBase or by pointing them to the right place where they can find helpful answers. InfBase is peer-based and the tutors work closely together. They consult each other when they think it is necessary and they also refer students to each other when they know the expertise of the other tutor is covering the topic of the student’s problem. The idea is not to present the students with a ready solution but with guidance towards the solution. Students using InfBase usually have urgent questions that can’t wait until their next weekly tutorial or they simply feel better asking a tutor a question when they are not in a classroom environment, because they might be shy or not confident for other reasons to ask in front of the class. Students also come if they have missed tutorials and lectures due to illness and ask for help from our tutors to be brought up to speed. We see a steady stream of students coming to use InfBase during the whole teaching term, though there is usually a rise of numbers before assignment deadlines or exams.

With thanks to Susen Rabold, Tutor Support, School of Informatics