

# Peer Support at Edinburgh

## A Guide for Staff



Peer Support Project  
Edinburgh University Students' Association

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## Summary: Peer Support at Edinburgh

Peer support at the University of Edinburgh means a *more* experienced student supporting a *less* experienced student in a formalised academic, social, or pastoral capacity. This ranges from the highly structured Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS), which focuses on academic issues, to buddying, family or house systems, whose aims and activities are more geared towards the general wellbeing of the students who take part, through social and pastoral support, and signposting.

Peer support activities may take place in the context of a school-based peer support scheme, an academic society, or a central project run from EUSA or another Student Service. The common goal between all of these projects is to build a sense of community, belonging and partnership within the student body, enhancing the overall student experience.

The projects facilitate students in their transitions into and through university, largely by forming networks within subject areas, and making trained student leaders available to actively support their peers. Importantly, peer support is voluntary, and not a remedial activity - it is designed to help all students reach their academic potential, regardless of whether they are having difficulties with any aspects of university life or not.

### Peer Support Project Highlight: UK & Ireland PALS Leader Conference 2014

*"An incredibly inspiring,  
experience encompassing  
the true meaning of what  
being a leader is:  
empowering those you work  
with"*

**Student delegate**





## The Peer Support Project

The Peer Support Project was a set up in 2012 to disseminate peer support across the university, so that some form of it was available to at least one year group in each school. Phase 1 of the project has focused on provision for undergraduate students, whilst phase 2 will work with postgraduate and online distance learners.

The Peer Support Project started as a joint venture between the university and EUSA as part of Enhancing Student Support, and currently operates within EUSA whilst reporting through the Student Experience Project. The project aims to:

- ▶ Foster a sense of belonging within the student community.
- ▶ Create a social space where students can make friends with other students who have common interests.
- ▶ Encourage the forming of an intellectual community of learners where students can exchange and discuss academic theories and ideas.
- ▶ Give new students the opportunity to ask more experienced students about their courses and university life.
- ▶ Facilitate integration between diverse student communities.
- ▶ Give senior students the opportunity to develop interpersonal and professional skills and gain confidence through facilitating the learning and positive experience of junior year students.



## Peer support schemes across 21 schools

The initial stages of the project focused on researching the good practice in peer support already taking place around the university.

After extensive consultation, several

possible models of peer support were chosen and outlined in a collection of online resources - the Peer Support Toolkit ([bit.ly/peersupport-toolkit](http://bit.ly/peersupport-toolkit)). Through working with students and staff in each school, different models were selected and adapted to the particular needs of the cohort, so that at least one type of peer support was on offer to at least one undergraduate year group in each school. In 2012 there were less than ten projects, and currently there are around **sixty distinct schemes across the university**.

The Peer Support Project (EUSA Peer Support) now supports the running of these projects, and provides the majority of training for new peer support volunteers each year, as well as development opportunities such as the Edinburgh Award (see page 12), a variety of ongoing training workshops and an annual awards ceremony.



EUSA Peer Support also convenes the Scottish Peer Support Network, which was set up in 2014. This network brings together students and practitioners working in twelve higher education institutions across Scotland throughout the year to share good practice, discuss common challenges, and generate solutions and new ideas.

Here are semester one’s summary statistics from 50 school-based and central projects:

How do you feel that your peer support scheme ran overall?	<b>76%</b> Good/Very Good
How many sessions did you run this semester?	8-12: <b>51%</b> 3-5: <b>31%</b> 1-3: <b>18%</b>
No. of students who attended some form of peer support	<b>7253</b>
No. of students that can potentially make use of peer support	<b>17543</b>
% of potential participants who have attended	<b>41%</b>
% of total UoE UG students who have attended	<b>33%</b>

## Types of Peer Support

There are several models of peer support on offer, each with a different focus - academic, social or pastoral, or some combination of two. These broadly fall into two categories:

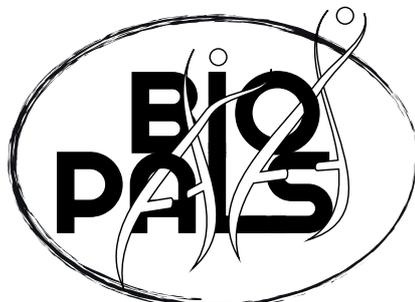
<b>Learning Groups</b>	<b>Buddying and Academic Families</b>	
Both focus on academic group support	Individual	Group
Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS)	Mentoring (academic)	Academic families (social)
Autonomous Learning Groups (ALGs)	Befriending (pastoral)	House system (social/pastoral)
	Buddying (social)	

The type of peer support available to any individual may depend on what school they are based in, what courses they are taking or what year they are in. These models were developed to provide the greatest degree of flexibility and choice to the students in a particular school. There are specific resources available for each model, but they are rarely taken directly ‘off-the-shelf’, and the models are easily adapted and combined.



## Learning Groups

There are two types of academic-focused learning groups that are aimed at two different degree stages. They are usually attached to a particular course or degree programme.



Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS): Group study sessions for first and second years facilitated by trained student leaders (usually honours students). PALS aims to improve learning by combining course content with effective learning techniques. Sessions are regularly scheduled to run alongside particular core courses, and offer a good opportunity to compare notes, clarify ideas, analyse course content and develop collaborative learning and problem solving strategies. PALS is one of the most popular models on offer, and also the most highly organised and monitored, and as such there

is more information on this model later on in this guide (see PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Schemes, from page 8).

Autonomous Learning Groups (ALGs): Study groups for Honours students. Similar to PALS, but facilitated autonomously by members of the peer group. These are usually focused around particular courses or assignments. For example: [English Literature ALG's](http://bit.ly/englit-alg) (bit.ly/englit-alg).

## Buddying & Academic Families

These schemes offer more social and pastoral support. They are only 'academic' in the sense that they group students by subject area, though some family groups offer more structured workshops alongside social activities, on topics like study skills, settling into university and course choices.

**Academic Families:** Students may opt into family units within their school or subject area. Each family incorporates two trained honours students ('parents') and two or more first years. Sometimes second year students, or incoming exchange students are also included in the families. This may expand into a house system, where many family units are grouped into 'houses', each with its own identity, committee, wider social programme and associated school support system (senior tutor and personal tutors).

Examples: [Vet House system](http://bit.ly/vet-house-system) (bit.ly/vet-house-system).

**Buddying:** This is similar to families but support is usually less formal and provided on a 1:1 or 1:2 basis. This model is related to academic mentoring and befriending, though these tend to have more structure, and are less common at Edinburgh.





### Other options

There are variations on these different models such as helpdesks, which offer academic support on a regular drop-in basis, and 'Freshers' Helpers' schemes, that make student helpers available primarily around the time of the initial transition period into university.

There are also peer support schemes and activities that are not based in schools, such as [Buddies](https://bit.ly/eusa-buddies) (bit.ly/eusa-buddies), a large buddying program for exchange students run jointly by EUSA Peer Support and EUSA Global. [Peer Proofreading](https://bit.ly/eusa-peerproof) (bit.ly/eusa-peerproof) is another popular central scheme administered by the academic advice team at the [Advice Place](https://eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice) (eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice). It provides a free, quality peer proofreading service to non-native English speakers.

**100%** of respondents said they would recommend the scheme to their friends.

**100%** felt that their proofreader provided them with high quality and understandable feedback.

**Peer Proofreading**

## The Benefits of Peer Support

Though peer support is designed around the recipient student's needs, there are benefits at many levels. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the volunteers gain a huge amount from participating in peer support, and there are significant benefits for staff and schools. In the wider context of the university, the provision of peer support aligns to strategic goals around learning and teaching and the student experience, and it may also contribute to greater student satisfaction.

"I love my Edinburgh Buddy. [They have] been an excellent person to go to for advice. [They have] 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 [Buddies] if for no other reason than I got to make a good friend because of it."

**International buddy**

### The benefits for students:

- ▶ They have the opportunity to form social and study groups from the very start of university, easing the transition and giving them a head start.
- ▶ They can receive support and guidance from students in higher years, learning from their experiences and gauging expectations of their degree.
- ▶ They feel connected to a wider academic community within the school, made up of undergraduate and post-graduate students, as well as staff.
- ▶ Improved communication, teamwork and collaborative problem-solving skills.



## Student leaders:

- ▶ Most people simply enjoy helping others, and find the experience of improving the learning of new students very rewarding.
- ▶ Volunteering in a peer support role is challenging and allows them to develop many skills: leadership, teamwork, facilitation, public speaking, project management.
- ▶ Significantly enhances their employability, with the opportunity to take part in the Edinburgh Award for Peer Support, and to gain a personalised employment reference from their supervisor.
- ▶ Enhances their own learning experience, and consolidates their knowledge base.

"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."

**Vet Peer Supporter**

## Staff:

- ▶ The ability to receive 'real-time' feedback on how their courses are being received from regular debriefs and updates with student leaders.
- ▶ Improved student interaction and understanding of difficult concepts.
- ▶ There may be significant time savings and reduction in email load when most minor queries and problems can be answered.
- ▶ Potential for increased course retention and degree progression.

## Institution:

- ▶ More support and smoother transitions for many students, and specialised support for international students.
- ▶ A greater sense of community across the university.
- ▶ Increased levels of progression may lead to higher graduation rates.
- ▶ May lead to improved student satisfaction on the National Student Survey, and internal student experience surveys.



## Staff and Student Roles

### Students

By this we mean the recipients of peer support. Currently, the primary target of peer support is new undergraduate students, first years and direct-entry to second year students. In some projects, second years are also welcome and catered for, whilst others are geared at honours students. As schemes develop, they sometimes branch out into providing support to a wider range of students, in higher years, for example, or covering more first year courses.

# 509

Student  
leaders in  
2014/15

### Student leaders

These students, sometimes called peer support volunteers, are the driving force of any project. They are usually honours students, but in some cases second years are also invited to volunteer, and tend to do just as well as their more experienced counterparts. The immediacy of their experiences to the first year students who they are supporting often makes them highly valued members of the team.

### Senior leaders

At the next level of organisation are the more experienced leaders who take a lead role in organising the activities of the peer support programme. This includes everything from planning and running the programme of events, promoting the scheme, evaluation, and recruiting new volunteers. It is essential that this person works closely with the school and is supported by staff.

### Academic and administrative support staff



It is recommended that each school-based project has at least one staff 'key contact', and usually this is someone to support the administration and running of the scheme. Commonly Student Support Officers take on this role. Other staff members that are often involved in the running of peer support include academics with an interest in learning and teaching or the student experience.

### Peer Support Project staff

EUSA Peer Support has a staff team of eleven, including eight student staff, a mixture of undergraduate and post-graduate students who are responsible for overseeing peer support activities in a school or college. Some of them take on the role of School Senior Leaders in schools who are just establishing or expanding their peer support provision.



## PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Scheme

As mentioned before, PALS is the single most popular type of peer support at Edinburgh, and is the most formal, structured and intensive form of academic peer support available. It is characterised by small group study sessions (typically 6-12 students), that meet weekly or fortnightly and are lead by a pair of more experienced students from the same subject area. The student leaders are trained in general peer support skills, but also facilitation, learning strategies and session planning. It is usually targeted at subject areas or courses that are historically difficult, to give people some extra support by getting them together in small groups to tackle the course collaboratively. Not only does this give students a platform to improve their learning and work on the really difficult topics on the course, but it also challenges the barriers between year groups and fosters a sense of community within the school.

The core elements of PALS are:

- ▶ it is student-facilitated, discipline-owned, supported centrally
- ▶ regularly scheduled, out of class, voluntary
- ▶ supplementing the curriculum with co-curricular material
- ▶ offered to *all* students enrolled on a particular course or programme

### How PALS works: Breaking the dependency cycle

In the classroom or a lecture setting, traditional teaching methods involve didactic teaching - usually a fairly passive process which involves the one-way transfer of knowledge. Breaking this cycle of dependency is the basis on which PAL sessions work.

Tutorials or seminars may appear similar to a PALS session on the outside, with their smaller group environment, however each tutorial is oriented around the teacher who leads the students through a set curriculum. In reality, PALS sessions are quite different. Whilst PALS sessions will also incorporate learning outcomes, each session will vary depending on the needs of the students who are actually in that session, and the overall goals are more broad. PALS aims to help students be successful, autonomous and self-aware learners, and is very clearly oriented around student participation. Instead of teaching course material over again, PALS leaders plan and facilitate sessions incorporating student input, and will set the agenda cooperatively at the start of each meeting, adapting it as appropriate. The sessions are designed to be varied, creative and fun. Students may review lecture topics using a variety of processing activities focused around group work, discussion, problem solving and critical thinking activities. The role of the leader within the sessions is to guide the activities and help the students get the most from the study session by steering the discussion and sparking ideas, using good questioning, and managing the group dynamics.



- A**sk questions and redirect
- S**park ideas!
- S**teer the discussion
- I**nclude and involve everyone
- S**ummarise the activities

#### The Role of a student

leader: ASSIST  
acronym used in PALS  
training to summarise  
their role as

They will also check the understanding of the group regularly by getting students to feed back their solutions and ideas and redirecting them if they need to reexamine their reasoning.

PALS leaders do not provide answers for students, but aim to arm students with the tools they need to answer questions for themselves and collaboratively with their peers. When the leader is very experienced, the students will not perceive that they are not directly providing answers, and, in fact, an emphasis is put on developing a conceptual understanding of problems rather than referring to an answer key. PALS is a participative model in which everyone is expected to contribute towards the group effort, and it works best when there is a group of mixed ability.

As well as running sessions, PALS leaders plan the programme for the year, have regular debriefs and team meetings, and take an active role in promoting, monitoring, evaluating and developing the scheme. The central Peer Support team provides guidance and support in these areas and has regular contact with all the schemes through semesterly meetings with key staff and student coordinators, attending debriefs throughout the year and observing PAL sessions on a regular basis to identify problem areas early on and provide tailored feedback.

"As a result of my participation in the scheme, I have become not only more creative and confident, but also more aware of the impact I have on others"

**MathPALS**

#### How does it work at Edinburgh?

Despite being the most structured model, there is still a great deal of flexibility and it has been adapted for lots of different subjects. Described here are some examples of the variations seen in practice.

Some PALS run one scheme for a whole school (e.g. BioPALS) and tend to focus on broader topics including study skills, course choices and exchanges or internships. Some specialise in a particular area (e.g. EngPALS is split into the four discipline areas of engineering, mechanical, civil, chemical and electrical), whilst some quite clearly align to a particular course (e.g. in semester one, EconPALS runs alongside Economics 1, and PIRPALS runs alongside Introduction to Politics and International Relations). The more specific to a course, the more focused and relevant sessions tend to be - this model has been found to be most successful.

Some schemes that cater for larger courses of three-hundred and fifty students run four or five sessions a week in different time slots. This can be useful where students have a great deal of choice for their tutorials and electives. Other PALS run a single session in a large



teaching studio every week or fortnight, and break the students down into several smaller groups to run parallel sessions, depending on numbers.

Projects may well start in Freshers' week or in week two of semester one. Some PALS schemes run for a single semester (e.g. LawPALS, InfPALS) whilst the majority run for two semesters (e.g. LitPALS, GeoPALS).

#### **A brief history**

The PALS model started out in 1973 at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) as Supplemental Instruction (SI). It was introduced onto their graduate medical and dental education programmes as a method of improving learning and academic performance and increasing retention and course progression. They wanted to do this without inflating grades, lowering standards or losing any students. The model spread across the US and UMKC set up the International Center for SI in 2002. Subsequently several regional and national centres were established around the world to disseminate the model further, and when it reached the UK, SI was adapted to better fit with our higher education system, and the name changed to PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) or PALS, as it is frequently known. It now exists in some form in over **1500** institutions in **29** countries. In 2009, the National Centre for PASS was set up at the University of Manchester, and it is from here that all our PALS supervisors are trained and connect to the national network. We partnered with the National Centre in November 2014 to co-host the 5th annual UK and Ireland PASS/PALS Leader Conference (see pg.1).

## Common questions from staff

### **How much time will I have to put in to peer support?**

Endorsement from academic and support staff is vital for peer support schemes to succeed and achieve their highest potential. However, this does not necessitate any major time commitments from individual staff members. Peer support initiatives are run by students and dedicated coordinators (typically the school's student support staff). We ask lecturers to provide assistance for our student leaders in a few areas:

- ▶ Making regular announcements about peer support to target groups. This could just be in the form of a slide in your lecture to tell students when and where they can find peer support. If a session is tailored to an approaching commitment e.g. the first lab report, or in course assessment, this might be a good time to remind students about the availability and benefits of peer support.
- ▶ Allow student leaders to make announcements in class when needed and provide them with access to course guides and Learn resources for your course (if deemed necessary).
- ▶ If needed, meet briefly with student leaders, or representatives from the group, and allowing them to keep you informed about what's happening in their peer support sessions. Leaders can be a very valuable source of early feedback on issues that



students are struggling with, and you can tap into this source of information if you wish.

### **Will student leaders just help students complete their assignments?**

Not at all! Although they might hold sessions focused particularly on an assignment, the session would not just be about students doing the work and getting help when needed. Leaders will support them to find ways to understand and tackle the assignment. Students may discuss problem-solving strategies, work in small groups on similar problems or create their own to work on.

### **Why does my subject have a PAL scheme?**

PALS are ideally attached to introductory or core curriculum modules, as well as those that are historically very difficult for a proportion of students. It is nothing to do with the capabilities of the lecturers who teach the class. PALS is geared towards helping students learn in the language of the specific discipline, acquiring the specific skills required get to grips with the most challenging subjects on the course.

### **Will I have to change my teaching style for PALS ?**

No, PALS is designed to complement your teaching style, and to help students succeed in the course regardless of what 'type' of learner they are.

### **How can students find out about what peer support is available to them?**

Students will hear about peer support in various ways depending on their subject and how the schemes choose to promote themselves or communicate. Here are just a few ways.

- ▶ Students should first hear about peer support from their personal tutor in their first meeting of the year, who should give them a generic flyer and tell them what is on offer in their school. Materials and information for this stage is coordinated by the Peer Support team in EUSA.
- ▶ Student leaders make peer support announcements in the first week of lectures or, ideally, within the school or subject induction talks.
- ▶ Volunteers are also present on each stall at the academic fair, where they can both provide a student's perspective of what it is like to study certain courses or combinations, and let new students know where they can get further support for their subjects.
- ▶ Students should receive regular e-mail updates, promoting the positive aspects of peer support and reminding them of where to find it in their school.
- ▶ Lecturers help student leaders with lecture shout outs, or may make announcements on their behalf, or make information available on their course Learn pages. It can also be very helpful if a page on peer support is included in the course handbook.
- ▶ Many peer support schemes have their own website or page hosted on the school website. They also produce their own flyers and posters, and often utilise social media to promote their activities.



- ▶ Extra information on what is available in each school can be found here: [bit.ly/findpeersupport](http://bit.ly/findpeersupport) - many projects have a brief web page with at least an outline of their scheme, a schedule and contact details.

### What does the Edinburgh Award for Peer Support involve?

The Edinburgh Award is an award programme coordinated centrally by the university's Edinburgh Award team. It aims to recognise extra-curricular activities through a series of inputs, that wrap around the activities that students are already doing. There are many strands that are run across the university and EUSA, and students leaders are eligible for the Edinburgh Awards in Peer Support or PALS. There are three workshops spaced throughout the year, and three submissions association with them, two of which have a peer assessment element to them. The

Thoroughly enjoyable session, always nice to discuss and share our experience as leaders. [The staff member] is amazingly enthusiastic and always creates a good atmosphere full of positivity and productivity.

Edinburgh Award participant

volunteers must also complete a minimum of 50 hours of peer support related activities.

### Can I have a say about the peer support initiatives in my school? Is the Peer Support Project interested in my input?

Absolutely. We welcome all feedback and input from staff. You can contact the project directly, your school's key contact or the Peer Support team. Please get in touch with the team at [peer.support@eusa.ed.ac.uk](mailto:peer.support@eusa.ed.ac.uk) with any queries. You can also contact Katie Scott, the Peer Support Project Coordinator directly at [katie.scott@eusa.ed.ac.uk](mailto:katie.scott@eusa.ed.ac.uk).

## Further Resources

### Peer Support Demystified

Peer Support Demystified is an interactive information session aimed at staff, that will be run regularly by the Peer Support Project Coordinator from 2014/15. The sessions includes an exploration of the types of peer support and the benefits, and a taster of peer support in practice, so that you can gain a better understanding of the process. More information can be found at [bit.ly/peersupport-demystified](http://bit.ly/peersupport-demystified).

### The student-facing Peer Support website

- ▶ [eusa.ed.ac.uk/peersupport](http://eusa.ed.ac.uk/peersupport)

### The staff-oriented Peer Support Toolkit

- ▶ [bit.ly/peersupport-toolkit](http://bit.ly/peersupport-toolkit)

## Credits

U:PASS Program Lecturer Guide, University of Technology, Sydney



SI Supervisor Manual, University of Missouri, Kansas-City (2006)

PASS Supervisor Manual, University of Manchester (2011)