

University of Edinburgh

# PGR Peer Support

A partnership between the Institute of Academic Development (IAD) and the Peer Learning & Support team at Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA)



Nathalie A. Vladis

Academic Developer (PGR Peer Support)

20/06/2018

## Project Background

Despite the large number of resources dedicated to supporting peer support initiatives for undergraduate students, very little is known about this topic in postgraduate research (PGR) communities.

This six month project (May – October 2018) aims at exploring the postgraduate research peer support landscape, identifying opportunities to a) re-use undergraduate schemes b) initiate new PGR centred schemes or c) supporting existing student-led initiatives. Lastly, based on the information above, we hope to gain a better understanding of the demand regarding PGR peer support which will allow us to make recommendations on how to address it.

During the first month of this project, I consulted with staff and PGR students from different Schools but also support and community structures such as the Advice Place and Chaplaincy.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

Through these conversations I identified four groups of PGR students:

- Students belonging to a doctoral training programme (such as the CDTs in Data Science and Pervasive Parallelisms), where staff facilitates social events and peer learning workshops. These students appear to be largely satisfied by their sense of community.
- Students independent of any structured doctoral programme that are satisfied by the variety of peer support, peer learning and community-building opportunities provided by their Schools.
- Students independent of any structured doctoral programme who want to run/are currently running a successful peer support and community building structure, These students often find that they are not very well supported in securing funding, organising events or increasing visibility.
- Students independent of any structured doctoral programme that do not have access to any peer support or peer learning PGR communities and do not know how to organise their own.

Having identified these four categories, I held focus meetings with staff facilitating peer support communities to learn about practices they found successful and with PGR students wanting to run/currently running initiatives to understand what type of support they need.

### We learned that:

- In Social and Political Science, there appears to be a high demand for a PhD student mentoring scheme focused around field-work.
- Other peer support schemes implemented in UG communities do not seem compatible with PGR needs & lifestyle.
- To become successful, a PGR peer support event needs **to be held in small groups, focussed, recurrent, and student-led but staff supported.**
- The type of support PGR students would need to run successful peer support initiatives involve learning how to:
  - secure and manage funding
  - plan and promote events
  - facilitate conversations and signpost

## INITIAL PILOT OVERVIEW

### School of Informatics – Women in Robotics Edinburgh (WiRE)

- A Community of female PhD students working in robotics.
- Monthly meetings over hot drinks with different themes:
  - Guest senior academic speaker
  - Public outreach planning
  - Workshops focused on robotics topics
  - Social time & community building

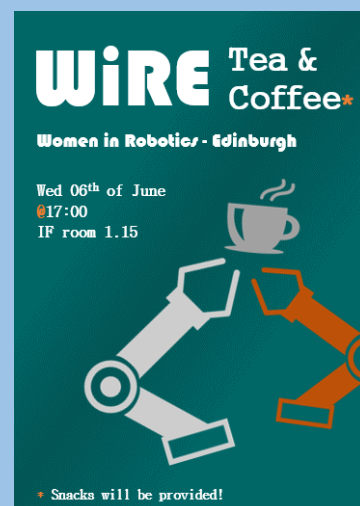
### School of Social and Political Sciences (SPS) – West Wing Coffee & Biscuits

- Will start running on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July at the West Wing.
- Weekly coffee, tea and biscuits meetings focussed around Peer support and community building.
- Initial costs (approximately £100) for beverage and snack stock supported by Shian Holt from the Student Development office in SPS.

### Deanery of Biomedical Sciences – Postgraduate Society

- Will start running mid-July at the Centre for Discovery Brain Sciences.
- Monthly or bi-monthly coffee, tea and biscuits meetings focused around researcher wellbeing topics and peer support.
- Coordinated by PhD students from the Postgraduate Society.

Individual icons used on fliers are a curtesy of [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com).



## School of Social and Political Sciences (SPS) - Field- Work Mentoring Scheme

- Early stages in the planning process.
- Collaboration between IAD, Students' Association, the Student Development Office and SPS academic staff.
- An initiative aiming to bring together:
  - Students that will go on fieldwork with students that came back from fieldwork
  - Students that just came back from fieldwork with students that came back a long time ago and can offer advice and support during the re-adaptation period
- We will also explore options for online communication during the fieldwork

### With that information in consideration, future work will focus on:

- Collaborating with Schools and organisations (such as the Advice Place and Chaplaincy), interested in developing a mentoring scheme around field-work.
- Continue supporting pilots at the Schools of Informatics, Social and Political Sciences and the Deanery of Biomedical Sciences, and evaluate these.
- Organising small tea & coffee sessions with more Schools to introduce or reinforce a culture of 'social time with peers' outside of research and to understand demand for peer support.
- Final report with findings and recommendations
- Building a centralised resource that will include:
  - Case studies of successful PGR peer support groups and their past events that could inspire other PGRs to start their own
  - Toolkits with practical resources and contacts to help support existing groups but also provide a springboard for new initiatives
  - Training materials which will include advice and signposting information for students involved in mentoring

## FURTHER READINGS

Buissink-Smith, N., Hart, S. & van der Meer, J., 2013. "There are other people out there!" Successful postgraduate peer groups and research communities at a New Zealand university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(5), pp.695–705. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07294360.2013.777034> [Accessed June 1, 2018].

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