



## Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

**Title:** Peer Support: Developing our Student Leaders, University of Edinburgh

**Transition(s) the practice supports:** Through and out

**Abstract:** Peer Support started at Edinburgh as a joint venture between Edinburgh University Students Association (EUSA) and the University of Edinburgh in September 2012 and is an established strand of the Student Experience Project. The Peer Support Project is 'owned' by EUSA, as it was agreed from the outset that it must be run by students for students. Peer Support in the context of the University means a student with more experience sharing their knowledge, skills, abilities and expertise with a new or less experienced student. This is a reciprocal relationship, based on mutual respect and understanding and is usually goal focused and time limited. The project aims to support students with the transition into, through and out of the University of Edinburgh. This case study will focus on the support and development we offer our Student Leaders during their volunteering experience in preparation for graduation.

**Description:** The Peer Support Project has been running since the academic year **2012/13**. Through continued motivation, support, supervision and training by EUSA in partnership with the Schools and Support Services there are now over **60 peer support projects** running across the University. Through these projects we work in partnership with over **90 staff**, **500** volunteer Student Leaders and **33%** of the undergraduate population.

The Peer Support Project aims to build a sense of community, belonging and partnership within the student body, improving and enhancing the overall student experience. It is our hope that the projects allow senior students to grow in confidence and maturity as they facilitate the learning and positive experience of junior year students. This work contributes to the forming of an intellectual community of learners where students feel they occupy a valued space.

Peer Support is a unique model in relation to the transitions map as the higher year students, while going through a transition themselves, also support newer students to manage the change into University and settle into academic life.

The projects which facilitate this transition are run by trained Student Leaders who serve as role-models, encouraging autonomous and enquiry-based learning from 1<sup>st</sup> year students while inspiring them to play an



active role in their education. Students develop the skills needed to be independent and understand the place and benefits of collaborative learning. Peer Support encourages students to use creative, innovative and imaginative means to support fellow students to have an effective and fulfilling educational journey. The Peer Support projects have also strengthened and formed new academic and social communities, bringing together students from diverse backgrounds, subject-areas and years of study. This meets a need the students identified themselves:

*"It is a great chance to meet new friends from different years in uni. I feel I not only helped others but improved myself."* **BizPALS**

*"I like seeing the students improve across the sessions. Many more have confidence in speaking out and gaining teamworking skills."* **BizPALS**

However, for the purpose of this case study the main beneficiaries we will identify are the Student Leaders themselves. The reasons why we focused development on our 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year Student Leaders were two fold, firstly to ensure the quality of provision the Student Leaders were delivering it was essential they were trained and fully equipped to facilitate the learning of newer students, secondly we felt as volunteers it was important we offered our students the opportunity to develop and grow within their role, preparing them for life after university.

### **Developing our Student Leaders: Preparing for life after University**

#### **Edinburgh Award:**

The **Edinburgh Award** aims to help our students learn to excel, increase their impact and stand out from the crowd in whatever circumstance or role they find themselves, now and in the future.

Peer Support encourages Student Leaders to reflect, review and re-evaluate their practice, gaining a deeper understanding of their own skills, abilities and aptitudes and how they will translate into life after university. *"Through undertaking the Edinburgh Award our Student Leaders will have the opportunity to develop and strengthen their approaches to knowledge and learning, to their own development and goals. Each student will choose 3 development priorities to work and reflect on throughout the year. Through directing their own individual student experience they will benefit from the transformative nature of the University experience."*<sup>1</sup>

#### **Building a partnership model: Volunteer Training, Development and Support:**

Over the course of this year the Peer Support Team has delivered over **250 hours** training to our Student Leaders, as from the outset the Peer Support Project has been established with quality and best practice in mind. We ensure all Student Leader training is supplemented by resources, codes, policy and best practice. We also develop students through paid roles within our team as we now have a staffing structure which engages students at every level of the Project.

As the commentary below makes clear, this is a Project which benefits students during their transition out of University whether they are from humanities, medical or STEM subjects alike.

*"Another incentive for my desire to be part of the Peer Support scheme was the opportunity to develop key transferable skills such as presentation, communication, and leadership*

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<sup>1</sup> Overview and Appendices (v6), Principles and Guidelines, Edinburgh Award, University of Edinburgh Award Project, 2012

*skills. It was a great chance for me to be able to improve these skills because the focus in a Maths degree is usually on the analytical and problem-solving skills and we are not given enough opportunities to develop creative skills.” MathPALS*

### **Continued Professional Development and Effectiveness Training:**

Following their initial extensive training we continue to support and develop our Student Leaders during the duration of their volunteer role. We run Continued Professional Development sessions and coordinate a University-wide Peer Support Network twice a semester which brings together students and staff from across the University to share experiences, ideas and challenges. Also as Convener of the Scottish Peer Support Network we are in the position of being able to invite our students to share their practice with other Student Leaders from across Scotland.

We are also currently developing a **Personal Development and Effectiveness Training** course, this will be an exclusive opportunity offered to our Student Leaders, developed in partnership with Teachfirst, a leading educational development charity. The course will offer our volunteer Student Leaders the opportunity to develop their teamwork abilities, commercial awareness, leadership skills, problem-solving and negotiation skills. We have also produced comprehensive guidance documentation for projects locally including a **Peer Recognition and Reward Strategy**: <http://bit.ly/recognitiondocument> the purpose of which is to ensure our Student Leaders are offered the opportunity to develop following a planned and recognised process. Below a Student Leader shares their experience of one of our events:

*“An incredibly inspiring experience encompassing the true meaning of what being a leader is, empowering those you work with.” Student Leader*

### **Recognition and Reward:**

We have also recently developed the **EUSA Impact Awards**. These Awards recognise the inspiring and innovative projects, incredible teams, committees and the outstanding individuals that make all our projects possible. Our volunteers are also recognised by the **EUSA Teaching Awards** due to their tremendous work in supporting students and forming thriving learning communities. Our Student Leaders are also eligible to apply to the **EUSA Get Involved Fund**, £3000 was allocated from the Fund directly to students in academic year 2013/14, to fund innovative and creative new Peer Support projects, providing students with the opportunity to gain experience in planning projects, undertaking funding applications and reflecting on and evaluating their experiences.

In summary the training, development and opportunities we offer our Student Leaders supports and prepares them for life after University as well as ensuring they are valued contributors during their time as a part of our learning community, as our final comment makes clear.

*“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*

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