Learning and Teaching Enhancement Project Report, May 2016
Project Title: Peer Mentoring.
Department: Student Induction and Transition Office, Student Support and Transition

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2	*Key words: peer mentoring, transition, retention.*
3	*The problem being addressed, with background and context:* *The problem being addressed is the need to further develop transition support for new students (both first year and direct entrants). Successful transition and integration into the academic and social life of university is key determining factor in student retention, progression, achievement and the quality of the student experience more generally. There are many ways in which universities can successfully manage student transition: pre-entry guidance, relevant, interactive and welcoming induction programmes, inclusive teaching and learning strategies, accessible advice, guidance and support are examples. A key, and increasingly significant, element of supporting the student transition is the deployment of current students. As stated in the original proposal document: "(c)urrent students can draw on and articulate the experiences and challenges of student life in a way that new students can particularly relate to and identify with." Current students are central to pre-entry events and to new student induction. SITO already runs a successful E-Mentoring programme for incoming students, who are paired with a current student in a similar discipline who they can call on for information, advice and support by e-mail.* *The peer mentor project seeks to further develop the support provided for new students by current students.*
4	*Project overview & aims:* *The project was designed to pilot peer mentoring for new students in selected subject areas. In doing so, more would be learned about the model and delivery of peer mentoring that would best suit the transition needs of our new students.*

5	**Activities and details of project steps taken to achieve aims:**
	Current students in selected subjects were e-mailed and asked to contact the project organisers if they were interested in being a peer mentor, they were then given training which detailed the role and covered issues of facilitating with small groups, topics for meetings as well as boundaries and referral. The scheme was also promoted among new students (both year 1 and direct entrants) through the Student's Union website, short presentations at the start of lectures, electronic noticeboards and by e-mail. In all 31 peer mentors were trained across SML, SLS, EGIS and MACS. We had identified Chemistry as a suitable subject to involve in the project but a scheme had already been established by the Chemistry Society. Peer mentors participated in a review meeting at the project's mid point and were also invited to complete an online questionnaire at the project's conclusion. In all there were 29 mentors, mostly working in pairs, and 56 mentees in 12 mentor groups.
6	**Key points including challenges your team may have encountered:** *Peer mentees identified a number of areas where peer mentors supported them, these included:* • *How to write lab reports.* • *Understanding a particular topic.* • *Accessing advice on internships.* • *Accessing accommodation advice.* • *Guidance on what to expect in future years of the programme.* *The review meetings conducted with peer mentors mid-way through the project revealed a number of challenges, in particular:* • *A lack of engagement from a proportion of mentees. Some mentees signed up and did not come to meetings and some came to meetings with no real understanding of what they had signed up for.* • *Regular group meetings proved to be difficult to arrange and this became increasingly the case as the project continued.* • *Peer mentors felt that their commitment and enthusiasm was not matched by that of the mentees.* • *Finding free slots in the timetable to arrange meetings was a problem, particularly as other one off events would be scheduled according to those gaps in the timetable.* • *Mentees were sometimes reluctant to admit difficulties or ask questions in front of others. One mentor remarked that students viewed asking questions as a sign of weakness in front of their fellow students who they feel they are competing against. Breaking down the barriers to sharing questions and partipation required time and effort.* • *Finding the balance between a structured programme of mentoring and a mentee driven agenda was problematic as the mentees often did not articulate in the early stages what they really wanted or needed.*
7a	**Describe specific project outputs so far:** 1) *A model for organising peer mentoring which can be more widely applied in the future.*

	Features of the model include: the mutual support of two peer mentors with a group of mentees, with the flexibility for one to one advice and guidance as appropriate. A flexible programme of themes or topics for meetings should be drafted and but modified as appropriate according to the needs, and with the agreement, of the mentees. Peer mentors should receive training and be paid for it. Aside from training and meetings with staff (for evaluation or review) peer mentoring can be voluntary. The hours, commitment and value added to mentees' experience are difficult to quantify for payment, plus monetory gain is a relatively minor benefit that peer mentors receive from participating in the scheme (see 8 below). Peer mentoring should be available from semester 1 and introduced to new students in Welcome Week. *2) Ways of promoting peer mentoring.* *Peer mentoring should be promoted by gathering potential mentors and mentees together for an initial meeting. Web resources including testimonies from mentees and mentors should be developed.* *3) Techniques for peer mentoring were utilised which formed models of future good practice.* *a) Problem solving: rather than provide model answers or solutions to engineering problems, peer mentors helped the mentees break the problem into its constituent concepts and highlight the resources required to understand them. The idea being to encourage students in the application of their knowledge and to allow them to feel more comfortable in practical problem solving activities, confidence they would not get by being given an answer.* *b) Understanding a topic: by encouraging students to explain a topic to other students it helps them to conceptualise the topic themselves.*
7b	*Media output? No*
8	*Please describe how your project has contributed to the Heriot-Watt University strategy and priorities for Enhancement in terms of* changes brought about to date, which may be described in terms of combinations of strategy, policy or practice (as relevant)*:* *1. Shorter time to completion for Post-graduate Research students (PGR) (strategy, policy, practice)* *2. Improved retention and progression of undergraduate students (strategy, policy, practice)* *3. Graduate attributes (strategy, policy, practice)* *The project is designed to contribute to both the improved retention and progression of undergraduate students and the development of graduate attributes.* *Peer mentoring provides an accessible support mechanism for students in the early stages of their study, it also helps mentees to form mutually supporting social networks. Both factors are significant in supporting retention and progression. However, participation for the mentees is voluntary. It relies on students having a full appreciation of their general and specific needs as students, a willingness to seek to address those needs and being convinced that peer mentoring would help them. It is not a given that undergraduates in their first year of study will do all three,*

so we have to accept that 1) mentee participation in any future scheme may be on a small scale 2) the mentees may not be the students with the greatest need, analogous in medical terms to the "worried well" who may or may not have a capacity for accurate self-diagnosis. Peer metoring can add value but it cannot substitute for the mainstream support mechanisms that the University needs to develop to improve retention and progression, for example, high quality induction programmes for new students and committed and proactive personal tutoring. Also, experienced lecturers will appreciate that there is scope for building social solidarity among their students and creating an environment for peer assisted social learning through their everyday learning and teaching practice. It may be productive for peer mentoring to become more of a mainstream activity but this would require it to be integrated into the curriculum rather than a stand alone phenomenon outside it.

The development of graduate attributes is evident in the end of project reflections of the peer mentors. They identified areas of skills and experience they developed during the project which clearly relate to HWU's graduate attributes: confidence, communication, flexibility and adaptability, listening skills (for inclusive communication), team work and collaboration and taking on greater responsibility. All peer mentors who responded to the online survey (11out of 29) saw the experience of the project as being valuable to them in the future.

9	**Describe how you are sharing good practice within Heriot-Watt and beyond. In particular, give details of any liaison with other universities in Scotland (e.g. plans for papers, attendance at conferences):** *The experience of our peer mentoring project will be shared within Heriot-Watt via the Student Learning Experience Committee and beyond through the Scottish Peer Support Newtork and the Cross University Induction and Transition Network (which includes HWU, the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University).*
10	**Next steps:** • *Developing peer mentoring for new undergraduate students joining HWU in September 2016.* • *Developing student facing web resources and other promotional materials on different media platforms.*
11	**Additional information:**

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