Informatics Student Support Strategy - Discussion Document
Michael Rovatsos - Teaching Committee 6th March 2013

1. Background
Our taught students are currently supported through a variety of mechanisms, some provided by the School (Personal Tutors, Course Tutors and Demonstrators, ITO, Course Lecturers and Year Organisers, Director(s) of Teaching, Computing Support, INFBase, Ambassadors), University (Health Centre, Counselling Service, Disability Service, Advice Place, Accommodation Services, International Office, Careers Service) and some student-led (EUSA, Student Reps, various student societies, student-led social media and Web forums).
This document focuses on mechanisms that are provided within Informatics, either by the School or its students, and makes suggestions to simplify and better manage the School’s overall provision of student support. Also, it does not include schools outreach, support for potential applicants (before visits to Open Days) and alumni.

2. Current support mechanisms
2a. Personal Tutors (personalised academic and pastoral support, compulsory, delivered by teaching staff, training provided, co-ordinated by Senior Tutor)
PTs provide academic and pastoral support on a one-to-one basis for every UG student and are responsible for monitoring student progress, providing advice on developing study skills and graduate attributes, dealing with special circumstances, and acting as an interface between the student and academic administration (the scheme will be rolled out to PGT students in 2013/14).
The PT system includes a “Group Meeting” element that contains elements of peer-assisted learning as these (more or less compulsory) meetings are supposed to foster interaction and exchange of experience among students.

2b. Course Tutors, Teaching Assistants and Lab Demonstrators (course-specific teaching support, compulsory for certain courses, delivered by staff and students (remunerated), training provided, co-ordinated by Course Lecturers and ITO)
Paid (and academic staff) tutors, TAs, and demonstrators support individual courses by delivering course material, exercises, assisting with lab work, answering individual questions - e.g. on discussion groups, designing and marking coursework and supporting course organisation. They provide attendance information to PTs via the ITO, receive (paid) training currently organised by PhD students and often based on IAD materials, though IAD will not provide training sessions in the future. Tutors and TAs are supported by the School when seeking HEA accreditation. Staff are encouraged to recruit PGR students as tutors where possible, UG and PGT can be appointed in principle (UG students can be very good ad this, but is generally discouraged due to intensity of PGT and final year Hons courses). As a rule, tutorial support is provided for all Year 1, Year 2, and many Year 3 courses, with a target group size of 12 (though increased intake in the future may mean raising this to 15) and every student receiving around 80 hours of such small-group instruction. Some Year 4 and 5 courses also offer tutorials, though this normally requires an academic case to be made.
This element of student support is different from all others in that it does not address support general student learning but is viewed as an integral part of course delivery.
2c. **Student representatives** *(course feedback and input to teaching provision, participation voluntary, not remunerated, training provided (by EUSA), co-ordinated by Director of Teaching and ITO)*

Student representatives mainly gather feedback from students to the School during semester time and report problems in the day-to-day delivery of teaching and teaching support. Some of them are appointed School representatives by EUSA and participate in EUSA-level representative bodies, and one representative is a member of the Board of Studies and Teaching Committee, respectively. We currently appoint around three representatives for every year, and hold weekly Student-Staff Representatives (SSR) meetings with them which are attended by the Director of Teaching, the Deputy Director of Teaching, ITO staff, and different “guest participants”, e.g. Year Organisers, Computing Support Officers etc. An online blog is used to record the agenda and minutes of these meetings. Engagement levels of student representatives vary, ranging from sporadic attendance of meetings to proactively conducting student surveys, organising events, and maintaining online discussion forums and student pages on social media platforms. Student representatives are also often not representative of their cohort, and it may not be easy for them to relate to the problems of especially those students who are struggling.

2d. **InfBase** *(academic advice, remunerated, training provided, co-ordinated by ITO)*

InfBase is hosted in one of the Appleton Tower tutorial rooms and staffed with paid PGR students at fixed times four afternoons per week during semester time. InfBase is open to all Informatics students who need help with course material, programming (tools), etc. InfBase staff are selected based on very specific academic knowledge and skills, e.g. mathematical background, programming expertise, etc and can provide in-depth advice and support even for “tough” problems students may be facing. It has also been considered beneficial if the Inf Base tutors are also assigned to work on other courses during that session, ideally non-Honours courses. The InfBase tutors use an online Wiki to document requests they receive and to build up a long-term knowledge base, and maintain a log of the type of enquiries received. While this service is very useful, it is not used to a great extent by students, despite recent efforts to publicise its existence more proactively. Also, a pattern is emerging in terms of use where InfBase experiences peaks prior to non-Honours assignment deadlines.

2e. **Student Ambassadors** *(peer mentoring, remunerate, no training provided, co-ordinated by ITO)*

This scheme pairs students from specific countries with applicants/new students from their home country to provide advice, support and a first personal point of contact with an Edinburgh student. Current students make an initial approach to selected applicants by email, a standard text is translated into their home language. If the applicant does not respond to the initial message, no follow up is required however where an email dialogue develops it may progress to a Skype conversation.

2f. **Revision Tutorials** *(course-specific teaching support, remunerated, co-ordinated by ITO)*

We offer revision tutorials for all Year 1, Year 2, and service courses prior to the start of the resit diet aimed at students due to re-sit any of these. ITO take registration to monitor interest and set up groups as appropriate, and each tutorial is run if at least two students sign up for it. The revision sessions are staffed by experienced course tutors and take place the week prior to the examination diet and focus on past exam performance, allowing the student to view their failing script and receive detailed feedback and help to improve. These tutorials have proved to be rather popular with the students and achieve good levels of attendance.
2g. **PAVD and Open Day student helpers** *(outreach, remunerated, training, co-ordinated by ITO)*
The ITO uses a pool of students with an interest and/or experience with helping out on Open Days and similar events. These students are paid to help provide information to visitors, give guided tours of our facilities, and interact with potential applicants providing a student perspective. Although there is no specific recruitment, training, and monitoring strategy for this, ITO provide presentation slides to students for delivery at PAVDs and basic enquiry handling training. The focus is for the students to communicate their experience and not make promises outside their remit.

2h. **InfoPALS** *(peer support & mentoring, voluntary, not remunerated, training provided)*
This peer-assisted learning scheme is not in place yet, but is included as a proposal for it is currently under discussion. This is against the background of a general framework for PAL schemes which is being rolled out by the University, and is intended to ensure that there are clear guidelines for their quality and manner of execution. The orientation is similar to that adopted by Cascaders: older students have acquired valuable experience which can help younger students find solutions to common problems that arise within the University context. Although some PAL schemes are largely student-led, having a committed staff member involved seems to be an important ingredient in their success. The proposal is to start with a scheme for UG1 students, taking place mainly in Semester 1. The scheme could be expanded subsequently to encompass later years (which has recommended by some of the students who have commented so far).

2i. **Computing Support** *(technical support, compulsory, provided by computing staff, co-ordinated by ITO+Computing Services)*
Informatics Computing Support provides specific technical DICE support for students, creating student accounts, maintaining hardware and software on the DICE infrastructure, and providing help with specific technical problems on demand, through a dedicated support office in Appleton Tower (or a phone that connects to Computing Support staff in the Forum). Computing Officers also give introductory talks during Induction Week, and organise specific talks on selected topics that may be of interest to students. We observe that while the level of service provision is very good, there is very little awareness among students on how to get help and who to ask. Since the development of DICE computing needs of students have changed, and they (like staff) are increasingly relying on off-campus provision for what used to be regarded as core services, such as email, web hosting and versioning/code repositories. This has led to dedicated computing support for DICE being less and less relevant.

2j. **CompSoc** *(community & peer support, student-led, voluntary, not remunerated)*
CompSoc, the official Edinburgh Informatics Student Society, organises a broad range of activities such as industry talks, the Linux user group meetings, social get-togethers, and Student TechMeetup events with speakers from the IT industry and opportunities to exchange experiences with software development, entrepreneurship, etc. The Society also runs “Cascaders” (“Cascaded Learning”), a scheme where volunteers make themselves available to help other students while working in the labs themselves. This is a great idea, unfortunately the level of support provided has varied greatly from year to year depending on the availability and level of engagement of volunteers.

2k. **Robogals** *(outreach, student-led, voluntary)*
Robogals is the Edinburgh branch of an international student-led society that tries to get young women interested in technology. The group mainly engages in outreach activities, such as school visits.
21. **Hoppers** *(community & peer support, student-led, voluntary)*

Hoppers is a group of female students interested in technology and Informatics. They organise events, workshops, and talks by invited speakers. They have excellent industry contacts and are generously sponsored by Google and other major companies. [Add more here?]

2m. **Tardis** *(experimentation resource, student-led, voluntary, supported by School)*

The Tardis project provides a computing facility managed by a group of students which enables other students to improve their systems configuration and administration skills by using it as an infrastructure for experimentation-based learning. The School provides space for the hardware used by the project in Appleton Tower, and it is used CompSoc to host some of their services.

3. **Plan for action**

We suggest the following improvements to ensure we develop and maintain a coherent student support strategy:

1. **Establishing the new teaching administration role of a Student Support Co-Ordinator (SSC).**

   The responsibilities of this role will be:
   - to co-ordinate the School's portfolio of student support mechanisms,
   - to act as a central point of contact for students and staff who provide student support,
   - to interact with other University groups and divisions on student support matters,
   - to co-ordinate recruitment, training, and implementation of student support schemes, including the annual training of tutors, and steering PGR PCD scheme students on the teaching theme
   - to monitor the effectiveness of current support mechanisms and collect feedback
   - to maintain an online Student Support Guide and manage materials and documentation.

   In carrying out these duties, the SSC will be supported by the ITO, which helps with recruitment and contracting of helpers and trainers, organises (revision) tutorial groups, labs, PAVD/Open Days, and assists with data collection for monitoring purposes. The SSC reports to the Director of Teaching.

2. **To develop and roll out a unified, School-run Student Support Scheme**

   This scheme will define a set of specific peer-assisted support activities that students can sign up to, and which will include paid work and volunteering. Where applicable, students will be eligible for HEAR recognition for these activities and for the Edinburgh Award, though this is not expected to be part of all the elements in the scheme. Initially, the PASS portfolio will include the following activities:
   - A Cascaded Learning scheme, very similar to the currently CompSoc-led scheme, but officially run and managed by the School
   - An Ambassador scheme, which would combine the current scheme with providing support for recruitment, Open Days, alumni, etc
   - A Student Representative scheme with a more specific remit regarding duties and engagement.
   - The INFBase system, where students with sufficient experience can provide dedicated course-related support and are paid to do so.
   - Course tutoring and demonstrating, where paid students deliver more course-specific support in scheduled classes.
- (Optionally) An InfoPALS scheme, which involves a specific set of student-led sessions with set instruction materials, targeted mainly at UG1/2 students. Training should be provided for all these schemes, as well as performance monitoring. Students should be able (subject to their qualifications and experience) to provide a mix of the above by agreement with the SSC, their PTs, and the ITO based on demand and resources, and to receive official confirmation of their participation in the scheme.

3. We propose that other student-led activities remain independent, but that a procedure be defined for them to apply for inclusion in the official PASS scheme. Also, the SSC should maintain contact with these groups to ensure School support for their activities where appropriate, and to exploit synergies between their activities and the School’s PASS scheme.

4. Student-staff liaison meetings could be replaced by the regular Student-Staff Rep meetings, with Year Organisers being invited to some of these meetings which will focus on a specific year, while maintaining the current formal requirements for these meetings (feedback added to Year Organiser reports, used for improvements to be made in subsequent years, etc).

5. InfBase should be staffed with a Computing Officer, at least for part of the InfBase opening times. This would enable a more personalised provision of support, which would be useful in particular for new UG and PGT students - we find that many of them are not aware of the Support Ticket system or of Computing Support more generally at all. Also, many very basic problems like loss of DICE passwords etc could be dealt with in a more efficient manner if a person is physically present who can attend to them immediately.

6. We need to further develop the way the School provides PT group meetings. Preliminary feedback suggests that the group meetings we’ve held this year have been useful for a significant number of our students. However, from autumn 2013 onwards, we will need one group meeting per semester. It’s not at all clear if the same format would work twice a year, and different options for alternate formats need to be discussed, e.g. having the meetings more focussed on particular topics and maybe led by staff who can be trained to deliver these, rather than all PTs.

4. Resource implications
An additional administrative duty will have to be filled every year, and the initial incumbent will have to allocate an initial period of roughly a month’s worth of full-time effort to get the Student Support scheme started. IT support needs to be provided to adapt the School’s information systems so that they can provide the necessary infrastructure to support the scheme. Training will need to be resourced to the extent that the School decides to adopt the scheme in terms of numbers and portfolio elements. With the current significant changes occurring inside the ITO, providing much resource through their staff within the next few months may prove challenging.