School of Physics and Astronomy
Update on Enhancing Student Support

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This document outlines our current plans for enhancing academic and pastoral support for undergraduate students within the School of Physics and Astronomy. The overall School strategy is to build on and enhance our current DoS system, which we believe to be fundamentally sound. This will be extended and enhanced both administratively and academically in order to meet the requirements of the new Personal Tutor system as described below.

Staff planning
The Senior Tutor for Physics and Astronomy (JH) has been appointed; they formally take office on 1 August 2012 however they are fully involved in the development and implementation of the PT system.

The system currently used to assign DoSs will continue to be used for PTs. In outline, all academic staff are expected to take on the role of DoS/PT at some point during their career, normally for a period of 6 years. In this system, students stay with the same DoS/PT throughout their time as an undergraduate. An analysis of current DoS workloads and projected student intake indicates that we need to appoint approximately 4 new PTs to replace DoSs who are finishing their term of duty. This process is currently underway as part of the annual teaching duty allocation within the School and should be completed by early June.

Administrative support for the PT system will be distributed across Teaching Office staff; The TO organisation is currently being restructured to accommodate this. This involves one new appointment at Grade 6 with responsibility for overseeing and co-ordinating support for the PT system, and two replacement appointments at Grade 4. The Grade 4 appointments have been advertised. The Grade 6 post has been approved and recruitment will be starting soon. It is hoped that all appointments will be in place by July so giving time to develop the administrative structure before the start of the next academic year.

Implementation details of tutor / tutee meetings
PTs will be expected to hold at least two individual meetings with their tutees each AY. The first of these will be in fresher’s week and will be broadly similar to the current DoS start-of-year meeting. A second meeting will be held in semester 2 once the results of the semester 1 examinations / assessments are available (for pre-hons students). This meeting will be an opportunity to provide advice in relation to tutees’ studies and use of feedback, provide feedback on examination and course work performance, identify skills gaps, ensure that new students are settling in and discuss tutees’ future plans, both academically and in the wider context of life beyond university.

As part of the additional administrative support, we will implement improved monitoring of student attendance and work patterns. This information will be communicated to PTs, who will be expected to arrange additional meetings with tutees as appropriate in order to support their study. One critical time is the first few weeks after arrival. Students’ hand-in and attendance record in core first year (and direct entry) courses will be reviewed in week 3, and PTs will be expected to arrange
meetings with any student who appears to be struggling or not engaging with their studies.

Twice-yearly group meetings will be organised across the whole School for each year of the degree programme. Because of student numbers it will probably be necessary to run duplicate sessions for each year group; these will be organised ‘by PT’ to ensure that students with the same PT attend the same session. PTs will be expected to contribute to these meetings, however they will not be required to hold additional group meetings specifically for their tutees (although clearly they may do so if they wish).

This School-wide approach will enable us to develop a set of group activities tailored for students at different stages of the undergraduate degree. We hope to involve students from higher years and alumni in the group meetings and will also draw on expertise from staff in relevant support services where appropriate. In consultation with the Careers Service we have already started to map out one strand around the broad theme of employability. We are also in early discussions with the IAD to develop a second strand focussed on study skills. In addition, the outputs of the College-wide workshop in June on peer and group activities for enhancing student support should provide useful additional resources.

The timing of groups meetings is still under discussion, but will articulate with key points within the academic timetable and/or with events in the wider University community. For example, a session for year 1 students on ‘Extra Activities while at University’ is planned for shortly before Volunteering Week in semester 1. As a general principal, we expect to hold one group meeting in each semester.

An update and planning meeting will be held with PTs/ST, TO staff and Teaching Committee once the new PTs and TO appointments have been made in early July.

Tutoring statement
As the implementation details of the new system are still under development, it is too soon to write a definitive tutoring statement. However, we will provide clear guidance to our students on the opportunities available to them within the School to develop their academic and employability skills, to engage with the academic community and the potential benefits that these can offer. This guidance will also set out the boundaries of what we can and cannot provide.

Risks and issues
One of the major risks is loss of credibility if the short timescales for the project result in ‘rushing’ the introduction of the PT system. A related issue is the staff effort needed both to develop the new system and to implement it. In steady state some of this will be absorbed into the enhanced TO support, however we cannot afford any delay in appointing the new TO staff.

It is also unclear what IT tools will be available in time for next AY. Some of this is not critical; for example, all DoSs in the School already have access to SMART hence can see the real-time marks profile for their tutees’ Physics courses (although this doesn’t extend to courses owned by other Schools). However, we currently have no central system for recording tutee ‘case notes’. Such a system would be very helpful in ensuring efficient communication and information exchange, for example when DoS/PTs are away from Edinburgh or when preparing concession requests. Confidentiality of such a system would need to be ensured.
Communication plan for new and continuing students
Over the last AY we have been developing a Student Information wiki. This provides a central point of information for students on all aspects of teaching and learning within the School, together with links to information elsewhere in the University. The wiki already includes a dedicated section on Student Support; this will be updated over the summer to include details of the new system.

New students will be introduced to the PT system at the School’s welcome events in fresher’s week and at their first PT meeting. Continuing students will be informed of changes to the system at year group meetings held at the start of the year, their start-of-year PT meetings and via the Student Information wiki.

Overview of student support in the Teaching Organisation
As mentioned above, administrative support within the TO will follow a 'distributed' model. This additional support will be provided via an enhancement and restructuring of the current TO provision. Support activities will include:

- Improved monitoring of student attendance / course work progress (especially in pre-honours).
- Provision of standard attendance / non-academic references.
- Central handling of concessions / transfers / special circumstances /progression documentations (at the moment these can be delayed or inconsistently routed through the system).
- Provide a common point of backup contact for students when their DoS/PT is unavailable or away from Edinburgh.
- Provide a common point of School contact with University student support services.
- Improve the ‘self-help’ information for students by continuing the work to develop (and keep current) the Student Information Wiki.
- Improve the administrative support for the collection and distribution of feedback, especially for large pre-honours courses.