



THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Veterinary Peer Support Programme Report 2015/16

Written by students, for students

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Introduction



The University of Liverpool Peer Support Programme has been integral in improving the wellbeing of veterinary students since its introduction in 2009. Through this scheme, selected veterinary students are trained by professional counsellors to provide confidential guidance and advice to their peers.

The benefit of peer support is that it provides a more 'informal' welfare approach, reaching students who may be reluctant to use traditional counselling services. It also provides immediate support, in contrast to other methods where there may be delays.

As well as providing their own advice, peer supporters are taught to recognise when additional help is required, and refer students to the relevant professional services.

In addition to giving assistance to individual students, the Peer Support Programme strives to induce cultural changes within the veterinary student community, to break down the stigma which surrounds mental health problems, and in doing so encourage these changes within the veterinary profession as a whole.

During their second year, peer supporters receive 30 hours of training to prepare for the role, with additional informal training and discussion being provided through fortnightly reflective practice sessions for the remainder of the role.

The *Vet Futures* report published in 2016, made it clear that the wellbeing of both students and those working within the veterinary profession continues to be of utmost importance. It is with this in mind that the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) advocates the introduction of a peer support system at all UK and Ireland veterinary universities.

The following report investigates several of the queries which have been raised by those considering introducing peer support at their universities, including the numbers of students reached and the impact of the programme on the volunteers themselves.

Methods

The information used to prepare this report came from a survey completed by 31 current peer supporters and eight graduated peer support alumni.

The peer supporters were asked to keep a record of both the number of students who they had directly supported, and all those who they had indirectly supported, during a two-week period, from 1–14 February 2016. These dates were chosen as being the most appropriate, as they were reflective of a 'normal' time in the vet school, i.e. not immediately prior or post an exam period, when use of peer support may be temporarily increased. Two peer supporters returned their surveys before 14 February; to ensure that all responses could be directly compared, the number of students helped by these peer supporters was omitted from the final results.

The peer supporters were asked to differentiate between how many students they had 'formally' supported in their role i.e. number of students who had directly contacted them as peer supporters, and those who they had indirectly supported i.e. number of students who they had helped using skills learnt through peer support training but who had not formally approached them as peer supporters. This was in order to understand more accurately how many veterinary students benefit from the Peer Support Programme.

The survey also contained simple 'yes/no' questions regarding the impact of providing peer support on the peer supporters, namely whether their participation negatively impacted either their own mental wellbeing, or their academic work, as well as whether the peer support training was sufficient for the role, and if, in their opinion, they felt that the skills learnt through the training would benefit them in their future jobs.

Accompanying these questions, the peer supporters were also invited to include any relevant comments that they saw fit, a selection of which have been included in this report, covering as diverse a range of answers as possible. All responses were anonymous.

A similar survey was sent to graduate peer support alumni, with questions focusing on whether the graduates felt that the skills they had learnt through the Peer Support Programme benefited themselves or their colleagues in their jobs.

Results



How many students have you directly/indirectly supported in your role as a peer supporter between 1–14 February 2016?

In total, the 28 peer supporters who responded to this question helped 19 students directly and 137 students indirectly using their peer support skills during the specified two-week period. In a student population of 761 this means that a total of 156 students were assisted in separate instances during this time frame – 20.5% of the veterinary student population.

What skills have you learnt from your role as a peer supporter?

This question was included in both the current peer supporters survey, and the peer support alumni survey. The main skills which the peer supporters felt they had learnt and improved upon included assertiveness, active listening skills, empathy, leadership, team work and looking objectively at situations. Alongside these personal skills, peer supporters cited that they had learnt how to encourage people to reach their own conclusions rather than dictating advice, and how to help others to develop their own coping mechanism, so promoting a sense of self-help and increasing self-confidence.

Peer supporters also learnt how to recognise when further help would be beneficial and where to direct students for professional help, as well as the importance of self-care, through good sleep, exercise, relaxation and social time.

.....

“I have learnt how to listen effectively without giving advice, just allowing that person a space to speak to someone confidentially.”

.....

“I feel that becoming a peer supporter has helped me to look objectively at situations, give realistic and constructive suggestions and empathise with other people.”

.....

“I have learnt the use of feeding back information to clarify what I have heard, the importance of not giving personal opinions but remaining objective, the use of open and closed questions in order to gather more information and the understanding that everyone finds different things challenging. Most importantly though to give a response of reassurance and [be] non-judgemental.”

.....

“I learned the value of reflective communication, listening to people when they talk and asking open questions to learn more information. I learned to read body language, how to encourage someone to talk more and when to not say anything and let someone speak. I also learnt some valuable conflict resolution skills.”

Benefits of peer support training in the workplace

The current peer supporters were asked if they felt that the skills they had learnt would benefit themselves or their colleagues in their future profession. Of the 30 current peer supporters who responded to this question, all 30 (100%) felt that their training would benefit them in their future career. The responses can be divided into two categories – skills which would benefit the peer supporter as a practising vet in terms of client communication, and those skills which would improve their working environment.

Of the former, the peer supporters felt that their skills in active listening and observation would help with diagnosing patients and taking histories. They also felt more prepared for dealing with difficult situations with clients, such as breaking bad news and guiding them through euthanasia cases with compassion, as well as diffusing challenging situations and

calming any emotional clients. Recognising signs of severe stress and depression means that the peer supporters also felt they would be able to recognise such signs in themselves and work colleagues, and know how best to respond to these situations.

.....
“I have learnt so many useful communication skills that I now do as part of everyday life. It has definitely helped me already in talking to clients, in gathering information quickly in a consult and to help ensure the client understands what I’m explaining.”
.....

.....
“I feel like peer support really enhances the communication skills course, helping to make us better communicators, which is what the veterinary career is all about. It will help us be more thoughtful and compassionate towards owners and really listen to their thoughts and what they are saying.”
.....

.....
“[Improved] awareness of the mental health issues that are common in the veterinary profession and the importance of recognising concerning signs in self and colleagues – in such cases confident in asking colleagues how they are even if the answer may be difficult.”
.....

The eight peer support alumni said that they had used the skills gained through the programme in their jobs, and seven (87.50%) felt that their use of these skills had benefited both themselves and their colleagues. These skills included the ability to raise issues confidently with bosses, to listen to colleagues’ issues and offer support, to diffuse conflict situations with clients concerning individual cases or finances, and the confidence to seek advice and help for themselves and others.

Several of the peer support alumni stated that they were able to self-refer when they recognised that they were struggling with their jobs or becoming exhausted/overly burdened, and therefore seek help before their situation deteriorated. Several responses also specified that their communication skills made them approachable within the practice, and helped to make their working environment a more pleasant, less stressful place.

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“I have been able to offer support to colleagues who are struggling inside and outside of the workplace by using the skills I learnt through peer support training. Improved listening skills have helped others to offload their worries/concerns. People have commented how much better they feel to just talk about their worries and get them off their chest and they have said they feel a sense of relief. I am in a better position to help others after realising I need to look after myself initially; this is something I learnt from peer support. I have a better understanding of how I am feeling and when I am able to help others.”

.....

“My first real job made me learn a lot practically but also mentally. I had to flag myself and self-refer for help with mental health issues. But I also found myself often sitting and talking to the student nurses who were having a bad time of it at work. I would try to help them problem solve by listening to their problems, reflecting them back and try to figure out ways of how to combat these issues between us. I would like to think I was well liked by the student nurses and was someone approachable that they could come to and talk or let off steam or be a shoulder to cry on.”

.....

“My communication with clients has improved and teamwork skills have been invaluable when working in a busy small animal practice. I’m much more accepting of my mistakes and failures and am no longer a perfectionist, I’m learning that I’m only human and cannot be right in every case, in doing so I’ve been honest with clients and have found that most of them are actually supportive when you explain you were wrong or have made a mistake.”

.....

“I am better aware of when I am exhausted and when I have compassion fatigue. Before peer support training, I probably would not have recognised these problems and carried on until the point of exhaustion. I am much more able to speak to colleagues about the more difficult aspects of working life and this helps with realising when times are stressful and has helped me manage them better.”

Has your role as a peer supporter ever had a negative impact on you i.e. mental wellbeing or academic work?

Of the 31 peer supporters who responded to the question regarding whether their role had ever impacted negatively on their own mental wellbeing, or made them feel overwhelmed, four (12.90%) responded yes it had, while 27 (87.10%) responded that no it had not. The majority acknowledged that although the role could at times be challenging, with the potential to be overwhelming, the fortnightly reflective practice sessions help keep this to a minimum, by allowing them to talk through any issues they have faced. Many also stated that the sense of community achieved through their role meant that they always felt they had someone to turn to. Some reflected that many of the issues they discuss with their peers are ones that they would be helping their friends with even if they were not a peer supporter and that the peer support training has been useful in preventing them from feeling overwhelmed. Of those peer supporters who did feel overwhelmed, the main issues cited were being contacted late at night or when their own lives were already stressful. One felt that she was 'over analysing' her own problems as a result of her training and was sometimes drained by the amount of contact with her peers.

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“Peer support has never impacted negatively on my own welfare. In life there are always up and downs, but during my time at vet school being a peer supporter has really ensured that I have been really well supported in the more difficult times.”

.....

“Sometimes peer supporting has been difficult but there has always been support in place for us as peer supporters through our Peer Support Co-ordinator to discuss difficult issues. I have not felt overburdened as a peer supporter. I feel I might have been discussing difficult issues with people even if I [wasn't] a peer supporter, but without peer support I would not have had the skills or support myself to maintain boundaries (i.e. how much time spent supporting someone) and I may have felt very alone and overburdened with other people's confidences.”

.....

“At times it can be emotionally challenging speaking to people who are experiencing difficult things or going through a rough time but my peer support training has enabled me to cope with it in a positive way. Knowing that the rest of my fellow peer supporters are there to support me is a big part of that.”

Of the 30 responses to the question 'Do you feel that the commitment of peer support has negatively impacted your academic work?', one (3.33%) responded yes, while 29 (96.67%) said no. In general, it was considered that the time commitment of 1.5 hours every fortnight for reflective practise did not take up a lot of time so did not impact negatively on work load. One peer supporter reasoned that they are spending as much time helping their peers as they would do if they were not a peer supporter, but that their training just meant they were better at helping, hence being a peer supporter created no additional time commitments. The majority of peer supporters felt that their role actually benefited their academic work, allowing them to organise their time effectively, manage their own stress levels around exams and reminded them of the importance of self-care when work-load increased. The only negative criticism regarding time commitments was that the meeting times were a little inflexible.

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"Peer support is something most people do every day with friends and family, so it's not added to my work load of stress levels. In fact, it has probably helped if anything as it has allowed me to be more effective in my peer support and has taken some of the stress away from supporting others."
.....

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"I think it has had a positive impact, I am better at time management compared to previous years and also I am in a more secure emotional state and think peer support has played an important role in that."
.....

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"Peer support does sometimes take up time. However, the skills I have learnt in managing myself (e.g. time management, and how to take care of myself during exams and difficult rotations) have definitely outweighed any additional time spent supporting people or doing reflective practise or running events (e.g. conference)."
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Do you feel that your training has prepared you well for your role in peer support?

Of the 31 responses, 30 (96.77%) replied that yes they had been prepared well, while one (3.23%) responded with no. In general, the responses indicated that the training reflected well the type of issues which the peer supporters faced in their roles. In particular, the fortnightly reflective practice sessions were deemed valuable in allowing any new scenarios

to be discussed, so that the peer supporters did not have to face new issues alone, and allow the development of further skills. Others mentioned that their peer support booklet was useful in allowing a refreshment of particular skills, although refresher sessions of the original training might also be useful. The one individual who answered no commented with 'both yes and no apply to this answer'; although they appreciated that the training was really good, their main criticism was that it could benefit from being directed more towards the issues faced by vet students specifically.

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"The 2nd year training was fantastic and definitely set me up well as a peer supporter. The best thing about peer support though is that through reflective practice you have informal 'training' every couple of weeks, I was continually learning more about how to support people and myself."
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"All the topics covered in training were thought-provoking and relevant and helpful to everyday life and supporting people."
.....

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"I feel that the training has prepared me well for dealing with most situations, as I am no longer daunted by somebody approaching me with a problem too large or to which I cannot relate. I feel that I am able to actively listen and allow the other person to explore their feelings and views on their problem without giving them advice, and to show and feel empathy. I have found that this technique has been appropriate for every situation which has been presented to me so far."
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Referral to counselling services



Part of the role of a peer supporter is to recognise when a student requires external aid for their problems, and to refer them to the relevant professional services.

In this way, many more students are likely to approach professional counselling services for help, who otherwise would not seek further assistance. This is particularly telling in the following statistics, showing the number of veterinary students who registered for professional counselling at Liverpool University over different years³:

Year	Number of students registered with the counselling service
2012/2013	21
2013/2014	26
2014/2015	37
September 2015–March 2016	21



This information shows that there had been an increase in the number of Liverpool Veterinary students registering with the Liverpool University Counselling system since 2012. When considered on a monthly basis, 3.5 students registered on average per month from September 2015–March 2016, while 3.7 registered per month during the academic year from September 2014–June 2015. When compared to the 2.6 registered per month during the academic year from September 2013–June 2014, this shows a significant increase.

Although it cannot be interpreted directly that peer support resulted in increased numbers of students seeking professional help, there is certainly a positive correlation between the establishment of the Peer Support Programme within the Liverpool vet school and increased numbers registering for counselling, and is likely to be attributed in part to peer supporters referring students.

Conclusion

Peer supporters aim to improve the working environment of veterinary students and provide assurance to students that help can easily be reached if required.

The success of the University of Liverpool Veterinary Peer Support Programme is difficult to quantify. Based on the numbers of students the peer supporters themselves say they have helped it would seem that a significant proportion of the veterinary establishment benefits from peer support whether directly or indirectly. Furthermore, since 2012 and the expansion of the Peer Support Programme there has been a significant increase in the number of veterinary students seeking professional help from the University of Liverpool's counselling services.

The survey results show that the peer supporters themselves have benefited from the programme. Many stated that they had seen improvements in their academic life or mental wellbeing as a result of the training they had received. There were several peer supporters who said that the role had some negative impacts, such as making them overanalyse their own problems, and the pressures of dealing with others' problems in times when they themselves may also be stressed. Most felt that these issues were adequately dealt with during the fortnightly reflective practice sessions, but that this could be an area where the programme directs more attention in the future.

A recurring comment from the peer supporters was that, although the role could create pressures due to the responsibility of dealing with the issues of others, they would have been helping their peers with these issues anyway, as friends, and that their peer support training helped them to approach the situation better than they would have if they had not been trained.

A general consensus was also that the skills learnt as a peer supporter would be greatly beneficial in the workplace, particularly when communicating with clients. The skills learnt would also ensure that the peer supporters could look after their own mental wellbeing as practising vets, and also the wellbeing of their colleagues.

It can be deemed from these results that, over all, the Liverpool Veterinary Peer Support Programme is of great benefit in improving the wellbeing and working environment for Liverpool veterinary students, as well as providing useful skills which the peer supporters can utilise both as students and in their future careers.

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