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# PERSONAL TUTORING ENHANCING STAFF AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the review of a personal tutoring policy in one United Kingdom Higher Education Institution. In order to review the policy a stakeholder group was set up and some empirical data was collected and analysed alongside a literature review. Whilst there were a range of data sources this paper will focus on the data that was collected from individual and focus group interviews with 19 academic staff and 34 students. The themes that arose from the data included allocation of personal tutors, the role and process of personal tutoring, other sources of support, record keeping and references and staff development and recognition. Overall there were many positives findings in relation to personal tutoring but there were some suggestions that would enhance this process further. These were mostly to provide further clarity over around the whole process and provide additional support for the role in relation to record keeping and ensuring staff had the knowledge to undertake the role competently. The paper concludes with an overview of the recommendations and changes to the policy which are now in place.

Keywords: Personal Tutoring, Student Support, Role of Personal Tutors, Staff Development.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Personal tutoring is important for student support and success as well as retention (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Students value the personal tutor relationship and see their tutor as a first point of contact for support (6) and many would prefer to turn to them for advice rather than other services (4). However the role of the personal tutor has changed very little since the original implementation of this role based on the traditional Oxbridge model of student support despite the many changes over the years in Higher Education (7, 8, 9). The National Union of Students (10) noted that whilst overall satisfaction with personal tutors is still high, there are some issues around the amount and quality of support students receive.

The author in her role gains a range of feedback through annual programme evaluations, student satisfaction surveys and, nominations for teaching and learning award schemes that clearly indicates the majority of students receive excellent personal tutor support but there has been some indication that this is not consistent. Additionally from time to time some personal tutors have raised concerns about the process. Coincidentally the personal tutoring policy was due to be reviewed and so this provided an opportunity to implement a project which explored current school practice and the literature about the process, examined the data that was already available and collected further empirical data about the actual experiences of both personal tutors and students. An across institution group was set up to oversee the project which is chaired by the author and had staff representation from all schools across the institution and from professional services that provide front line services to students such as academic skills support and counselling as well as student representation with the Student Union President and Vice President Education.

This paper will firstly examine some of the literature on personal tutoring and discuss the methodology of the project. The paper will then focus on the findings from the data collected about academic staff and student experiences of this process from one institution in the United Kingdom and, outline the implications of this research and the recommendations that have been implemented. The paper will then conclude with future plans to evaluate the revised policy.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Defining the personal tutor role is not easy particularly as student needs have changed over time but Jacklin and Robinson (11) identified three key themes for the support that students usually seek out. These are academic, procedural and pastoral support. In terms of academic support students want help with their assessments around exam technique, essay writing and referencing as well as personal development planning and career advice (7, 9, 12, 13, 14). Procedural support is usually focused on negotiating University regulations and policies (11) and pastoral support covers a range of

areas such as housing, finance, advice and help related to illness or personal issues and referral to others who can provide support (7, 11, 12). As a personal tutor the complexity of issues faced do lead to questions about how one person can provide appropriate support (15). Many institutions have recognised this and created additional support services that students can be referred to for appropriate specialist advice around disability, dyslexia and academic writing as well as advice about a range of other issues such as accommodation and finance (16).

It is well known that there is a clear relationship between good personal tutoring provision and student retention but there is still limited research on successful personal tutoring processes (2, 3, 5, 17). It is common practice for students to be provided with a named personal tutor for the duration of their programme and the aim of this is to support their transition into University and foster a sense of belonging. It is also known that having the initial meetings between students and personal tutors early in the first term is crucial to the development of the relationship (5, 6, 17,18). Successful personal tutoring is also dependent upon the personal tutor's understanding and commitment to the role, their ability to listen, approachability and the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment (4, 17).

However whilst some personal tutors might be willing to undertake the role others are often reluctant due to other factors such as the increasing numbers and diversity of students impacting on staff-student ratios and the complexity of issues that personal tutors have to deal with (3, 13). Personal tutors are faced with more mature students, and an increase in students who reside at home whilst studying which can lead to difficult personal and health issues needing addressing (7). In addition the increase in international students studying in the United Kingdom brings with it the need to also address language and culture issues as well as feelings of isolation and home sickness. Whilst it is known that early intervention is essential the initial allocation of personal tutors can be delayed whilst workloads are scrutinised and negotiated and, sometimes students do not have the information about who has been allocated (7, 15). There are issues around personal tutoring practice and the variability and inconsistency students meet with some tutors just signposting students to specialist services, some offering "drop-in" sessions and, others providing individual or group sessions (3, 7, 17, 19, 20). Whilst "drop-in" sessions suit some students McVitty (21) raised concerns about this because not all students with issues will feel that their problem warrants using this time and so may not seek appropriate help early enough leading to issues being missed. There is also evidence that some personal tutors lack clarity about their role and the expectations of them (7).

In some institutions there has been a move to explore different models of support from the traditional personal tutoring model. This has been supported by the need for institutions to reduce financial costs but still excel in teaching and research and gain top student satisfaction scores. These models include moving some of the personal tutor functions to non-academic staff (20), having a centralised personal tutor unit (22) and a more formalised approach of support which is mandatory and counts towards the students grade (4). Innovation around technology has also led to new approaches for staff and students to keep in contact through the use of mobile phones, e-mail and technology supported forums to enable remote meeting (23). Technology has also helped with record keeping as e-mails can be retained, documents shared online and e-portfolios used for personal development planning. Staff development and recognition are also seen as important for the success of personal tutoring (15). It is no longer enough for those new to personal tutoring to just meet with a more experienced colleague to learn about the role. The issues mentioned earlier that personal tutors now face require some staff development activities that cover what the expectations of the role are and the institutional process but also what specialist help and support is available both for students to be referred to but for academic staff to gain advice. Many institutions provide specific professional development modules or study days and others provide handbooks and webpages.

The literature provides an overview of some issues around personal tutoring but also some examples of approaches to enhance this process.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The aims of the research and project were to:

- Explore staff and student experiences of personal tutoring
- Identify any barriers for staff and students of providing and accessing a good, effective system
- Examine any suggestions to enhance the personal tutoring process
- Identify and share good practice across the institution and beyond

The focus of the evaluation was on exploring experiences so the data needed was primarily qualitative so that rich descriptions of practice and experiences could be gained to meet the aims of the project (24). This project also needed to take account of the differing professional and disciplinary contexts within the institution. The institution was an inner city university with five schools which included Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Health Sciences, Law and Mathematics, Computing Science and Engineering. Lincoln and Guba's (25) naturalistic inquiry approach to evaluation recognises that the context within which research takes place is central to understanding the reality of the situation and that as the project progressed changes might be needed to be made to support emerging data and the data collection approaches.

As noted in the introduction there was some data already available in the form of anonymised student voice award data from 2014 and 2015 and there was anonymised qualitative data that mentioned personal tutoring from student surveys such as the your voice survey (used with first and second year undergraduate students), the National Student Survey data (used with third year undergraduate students) and, the Postgraduate Teaching Evaluation Survey. All this data was available in various documents and could be analysed using thematic approach (26). The data from those involved in the process also needed to be qualitative to gather actual experiences and so semi-structured audio-taped individual and focus group interviews with academic staff and students were felt to be the most appropriate approach. A research assistant undertook all the interviews although the author did sit in the few interviews of both academic staff and students to gain a sense of the themes that were emerging. The research assistant transcribed all the interviews verbatim and the author undertook all the data analysis again using a thematic approach.

Ethical approval was granted for the project and all those who participated in the interviews were provided with an information sheet one week prior to the interview and all signed consent forms at the beginning of the interview including agreeing to being audio-taped. There was a mix of ten individual interviews and focus groups with 19 personal tutors (see fig 1) and six focus groups with 34 students which included those on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study (see fig 2).

| Schools   | Numbers |
|---|---------|
| Cass Business   | 4       |
| City Law school                                       | 3       |
| School of Arts and Social Sciences                    | 3       |
| School Computer Sciences, Mathematics and Engineering | 3       |
| School of Health Sciences                             | 6       |
| Total   | 19      |

Figure 1 Staff Interviews

| Schools   | Undergraduates | Postgraduates | Total |
|---|----------------|---------------|-------|
| Cass Business   | 6              | 3             | 9     |
| Law school  | 10             | 2             | 12    |
| School of Arts and Social Sciences                    | 6              | 0             | 6     |
| School Computer Sciences, Mathematics and Engineering | 1              | 0             | 1     |
| School of Health Sciences                             | 3              | 3             | 6     |
| Total   | 26             | 8             | 34    |

Figure 2 Student Interviews

#### 4 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Due to the scope of the project, the amount of data collected and, the restriction on the length of the paper and the presentation only the interview data will be presented here. The other data will be the subject of a future publication. This data will be presented using the themes that arose from the data which included allocation of tutors, the role of the personal tutor, the personal tutoring process and

meetings, other sources of support, record keeping and references, staff development and recognition and suggestions for future changes. The academic staff and student data will be discussed together using these themes and, some of their views will be illustrated with direct quotes taken from the interview. There will also be reference to the literature where appropriate.

#### 4.1.1 Allocation of tutors

Both academic staff and students had positive views of the allocation process but there were suggestions to enhance this. Many students had really good experiences with their personal tutors meeting them at the beginning of their programme as noted by this one student *"We were introduced to our personal tutor at the beginning of first year, like what he does, what his specialities are, it was more about getting to know us..."*(FG1). This is key to the students and personal tutors building a relationship early on in the programme and students who had this experience spoke about how they felt they knew their tutors really well (5, 6, 17, 18). However some students felt that they did not always get the information about who their tutor was until quite late and sometimes they had to find the information for themselves through checking the virtual learning environment they used (7, 15).

Academic staff views also varied with some believing it was organised in relation to workload, capacity and equality as noted by this tutor *"...allocated by senior personal tutor, so all the academic staff has an equal number"* (L5). However other staff felt this was not very organised and said that this was *"... just allocated ....almost a random allocation...decided by the course office"* (L1).

Allocation of students was in the majority of cases well managed and matched against workload and knowledge of the programmes. There were however some occasions where there did appear to be a delay which was often linked to an increase in student numbers, academic staff leaving and awaiting the arrival of new staff.

#### 4.1.2 Role of the Personal Tutor

Many academic staff and students discussed the role in really positive terms such as a student in the first focus group who said *"she is a really great personal tutor, and she has made it very clear what personal tutoring is about"* (FG1). However there were examples of both academic staff and students lacking clarity about the role (7) and so this did not enable either party to be sure about what they should do as one student noted *"I think the main thing for me personally is a lack of clarity of what their role is and what I can expect from them and what I'm comfortable asking them for"* (FG1). This sometimes meant that students looked to others for support or did not seek guidance early enough. In addition international students were not always familiar or used to this role because it did not exist in their country.

The issues around clarity of the role and purpose were discussed at length because the existing policy did already have a definition of the role and of the student's role. It was felt that as this was a policy it had not been originally written to the student and that the language therefore may not always be clear. In addition the policy was a word dense document which was not appealing to students.

#### 4.1.3 Personal Tutoring Process and Meetings

Academic staff and students had mostly positive experiences of meeting together such as the student who said *"we talk about the topics on the form, so how you are settling, your grades, if there are any other things, if you do part time work. More or less going through the questions plus anything you want to discuss"* (FG6), and the tutor who felt that the meeting and process should focus on *"everything from how to study better, from what letters to choose, what career to choose, how to apply for jobs, how to write an application letter, help with their CV, ...personal issues and rent"* (L14). However some students felt that the purpose of the meetings was not always clear and so they did not attend these. Non-attendance at the meetings frustrated tutors who felt they were then wasting time booking these appointment slots in their diaries. Additionally there was much discussion amongst both students and staff about the variability in the process (3, 7, 17). One of the students in the first focus group said *"there's a huge contrast ...so I would kind of try to put some baseline in place"* (FG1).

The original policy did mention meetings but no further guidance in terms of frequency and content of the meetings was provided. It was felt by some of the staff that clarifying this would promote consistency in the process.

#### 4.1.4 Other sources of support

Academic staff and students discussed other sources of support that students could be referred to but also where staff could gain advice. These services included academic skills support, counselling and career development. Staff in particular mentioned *“if people are struggling to cope, or with depression, or anything like that we direct them to the student centre and then follow it up”* (L11) but many students also cited the careers service *“for me it is careers, I’m on a careers focused course, so knowing where to go, the careers service has been very good”* (FG3). In addition students also mentioned the student union, their student representatives for their programme and the library staff. In terms of support beyond the personal tutoring process students all knew a range of services and what support they offered. The author’s institution has spent time and both physical and financial resources developing a full range of services to support students both with their studies but also with personal issues such as physical and psychological issues and conditions that might need some adjustments made to the environment and elements of their study in order for them to fully engage in their programme and succeed (16).

#### 4.1.5 Record Keeping and references

Record keeping of tutorials appeared to be variable thus making monitoring of this process difficult and time consuming. Some staff reported completing a form which laid out specific questions that they asked their tutees; they then gave this to a course administrator such as this tutor *“we’ve got a form...standard questions; any issues, how is the student settling in, financial problems, housing problems, academic problems. Goes to course office”* (L1). Whereas others used word documents, e-mail trails and other forms of notes. Retention of these records varied from giving them to course officers, keeping a physical file or saving them to a folder on their computer. Academic staff also raised concerns about what they should record particularly around students with issues and there were anxieties about confidentiality. There were a surprising number of students who no idea their tutors kept any record at all with all students in focus groups 1 and 3 stating this. Others however such as this student in focus group 2 were very aware their tutors kept records. *“When we first went into our meeting the tutor took photos of us all on her phone and then she said she would print them off, and we each have a file with our details and she puts the photos in, and every time we send her an email she adds it to the file”* (FG2).

Linked to record keeping was also the issue of references and both academic staff and students mentioned these. It is usually practice that if students require references then the personal tutor should provide this. Academic staff felt that, in the main, as the references they are required to provide are very focused on student attendance, the programme and the student’s grades this could be provided by a course administrator rather than them. However, conversely some academic staff from the School of Health Sciences focused on the importance of the personal tutor reference in terms of professional attributes and so there were mixed views about responsibility. As with the record keeping there were also concerns about what to write in a reference. Where students did not regularly see their personal tutor student would then approach module or programme leaders to provide references because they knew these staff and felt the staff had a better view of their capabilities as this student notes *“I would rather go to a module teacher who knows me better, as the personal tutor has only met me once and doesn’t know me”* (FG4). Additionally staff raised concerns about

In terms of record keeping the existing policy stated that a record should be kept but no further guidance was given. There is also at present no across University system for recording and retaining these records which has contributed to variable practice existing. References are seen to be a role of the personal tutor but there is no guidance about the content of these references which has led to concerns about what to write.

#### 4.1.6 Staff Development and recognition

Most academic staff who participated in the interviews reported that they had no training for the role and were unaware of any. They did not receive any guidance and often they did the role by asking colleagues what they did. However some schools did appear to provide a workshop *“all new personal tutors would get some guidance and we run a staff workshop every September, and very often there will be an element of personal tutoring tied into some of the workshops that we run”* (L13). There are no regular workshops focused on personal tutoring but if requests to run workshops came from schools then the author’s department provide these. There is however a Student Support and

Personal Tutoring module that the author's department provides each year and some academic staff has mentioned in the interviews. This module is part of the MA Academic Practice programme and over the last five years more than 100 staff have undertaken this either as a "stand alone" module or as part of a programme. There was however at this time no other regular workshops or guidance. When asked about the focus of any further specific staff development that staff would like a range of areas were suggested such as this tutor's response "*I would quite like more factual knowledge about housing and how much help is available, so many of our students have got family responsibilities and to sort of have a little bit more information about the sort of work the student services do ...and I feel inadequate with overseas students*" (L16).

The issue of recognition also arose in the interviews with some academic staff said they felt that this role needed to be valued more and taken into account when looking at an individual's workload (15). Personal tutoring is included in the workload modelling of schools but this is not always as transparent to all staff. There are opportunities currently for students to provide feedback on the role of the personal tutor through a range of student satisfaction surveys and through programme evaluation and this provides some excellent data around good practice in this process. In addition at the author's institution her department and the Student Union have been jointly running a student voice award prize scheme for staff for nearly a decade. Within this scheme one of the prizes is given for personal tutoring and staff really value this when they have been nominated or win the award.

#### 4.1.7 Suggestions for change

This question was asked so that as the review of policy was taking place account could be taken of suggestions to enhance this process. Both academic staff and students provided suggestions, with one of the most common being to ensure the process was valued by all. The second most common related to the purpose and process of personal tutoring with a lecturer saying "*I think clarification of the aims and the objectives and the limits of the role would be much more helpful*" (L8), and students in one of the focus groups said in terms of the meetings and role "*I think that they could make it more compulsory and so you would have to meet them once every three or four weeks and they have questions prepared so when you turn up you do something productive in that half an hour*" (FG5). One further area that there was some discussion on was around the name and whether personal tutor was the right term but whilst there were some suggestions such as academic advisor most felt that personal tutoring was right.

The findings from the interviews were positive in terms of hearing that both staff and students generally felt the process was working well and many had excellent experiences. It was also positive that both academic staff and students knew where additional sources of support could be found. The areas that the findings demonstrated needed attention were the allocation of personal tutors, the definition of the role and process, the purpose of the meetings, the process for record keeping and writing references, recognition of the role and the provision of staff development. This provided the personal tutor stakeholder group alongside other evidence with the information needed to review the policy.

## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The personal tutor stakeholder group drew on the findings and identified some key recommendations for revising the policy which are discussed first followed by reference to some implications for both staff resource and finance. The recommendations follow the key themes presented in the findings section.

In relation to the allocation process all schools needed to review this and make these clearer to staff as well as ensuring all students know who their personal tutor is as early as possible in the programme. This has already been undertaken. The personal tutor policy needed to be made much clearer using language a student would understand and be written in a manner that addressed the student which was completed prior to the 2015/2016 academic year start. In addition to the actual policy a colour leaflet which took key aspects of the policy and used pictures to illustrate aspects has been produced and is available on a website to be printed. The frequency of meetings has been outlined in the policy as minimum requirements and takes account of both individual and group meetings as well level and length of study of the student. The content of meetings was also discussed and for each of the suggested key meetings in each year of the undergraduate programme and for the

postgraduate programme there is a list of potential topics provided which are intended as a guide rather than as an exhaustive list.

In terms of record keeping it was agreed that there should be a statement added that these records should be electronic which would enhance the process of monitoring but it was recognized at this point there was no one system that the institution had that would support this. This therefore needs to be addressed over a longer period of time whilst an appropriate system is scoped, developed and delivered. This will also involve engaging staff in a needs analysis and require expertise to develop this which there is an institutional commitment to but the exact timing has yet to be confirmed. In the interim it was agreed that all electronic records such as registers of attendance, e-mails and notes could be held by the programme administration team so that monitoring was easier to undertake and this is being reviewed at present. The concerns about what to document and confidentiality have been discussed and an agreed approach to keeping record has been agreed. So that all staff can feel confident in what they do it has been suggested that a one page guidance sheet should be developed and this is being done now. Additionally a similar guidance sheet will be produced for writing references in the next few months.

As noted previously there is a reference to personal tutoring in the schools workload model and so staff can clarify this with their line managers. Also there are already processes for the students to feedback about their personal tutoring and for students to nominate their tutor for an award but the awards nomination process will be highlighted further.

Lastly there were issues around staff development and support. The stakeholder group felt that if we created a new webpage for personal tutoring then all information and resources could be placed here as well as links to other information. This page has now been created and the colour leaflet is there. Currently the one page guides are being developed for this page as well as meeting templates that can be used to keep records. There was also a request for additional workshops and so these are being planned and will be provided in all school locations and register kept for schools of who attends these. These too are being added to the page. Once all this is in place the page will be launched for all staff. Future planned additional resources are some case studies for staff on how to manage a range of issues and some videos form personal tutors with tips on how to make the process work for all. There is also a plan to have resources for students such as videos from students about how to make the most of the personal tutor process.

In terms of implications of these recommendations there is clearly a staff time commitment from the author's team to provide the workshops but also from the academic staff to attend. It is however felt that this is time that is important to our continued enhancement of personal tutoring and the student experience. In terms of the development of a system for record keeping this requires both staff time but some specific expertise related to systems but also some financial investment. This is recognized as important and is currently in the planning phase.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

The findings reported here only relate to one of the data sets collected for this research however it is felt that these are important findings because they have been collected from those experiencing the personal tutoring process. The numbers of academic staff involved in the interviews was a small percentage of the overall staff but all schools from the institution were represented which is important in terms of ensuring we gathered views from across the institution and from a range of disciplines Likewise the student numbers were small but both undergraduate and postgraduate students were encompassed in the study and again they represented all schools. It is however acknowledged that the small number of participants could be seen as a limitation of this research. The author however having access to the broader data is confident that the views reflected here are also representative of the other data sources.

The revised personal tutor policy is now in place and this will be reviewed at the end of the first year in relation to how this has supported further enhancement of the process. Each School will be asked to provide a view about the policy from their learning and teaching committees and there will be student feedback sought from the student staff liaison committees as well as the data that will gathered again this year from student satisfaction surveys and the learning and teaching award schemes. Also two

additional projects within two of the schools have been funded for this year to explore some pilot schemes around personal tutoring. The additional data will be examined during the summer and from this we will look to develop some case studies of good practice which can be shared both within the institution and beyond.

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