Personal tutoring: a recognition of 'levelness' in the support for undergraduates

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Abstract

The changing terrain of higher education in the UK, and particularly the greater diversity of the student body, has undoubtedly led to the need for universities to provide greater support, both from frontline teaching staff and in the provision of extra institutional services. Added to the mix are sectoral concerns for the wellbeing and welfare of the student. It is therefore unsurprising that we are seeing a renewed focus on, and interest in, personal tutoring. Taking a qualitative approach, we set out to explore the needs of undergraduate students, on an event management programme, in relation to personal tutoring. Outlined in this paper are the different senses of personal tutoring as student transition through their course.

Keywords

Personal tutoring

The changing terrain of higher education in the UK, and particularly the greater diversity of the student body, has undoubtedly led to the need for universities to provide greater support, both from frontline teaching staff and in the provision of extra institutional services. Added to the mix are sectoral concerns for the wellbeing and welfare of the student (Mistry, 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that we are seeing a renewed focus on, and interest in, personal tutoring. Whilst personal tutoring has a long history in UK higher education, as recently as 2015, a new post-16 sector association was established as a forum for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas on issues in personal tutoring and academic advising. That association, UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT)(2019), set out a framework for personal tutoring earlier this year and, in the spirit of the conversations leading up to the release of the framework, this paper offers a reflection on a small-scale study that was undertaken with undergraduate students on an event management degree at LJMU, to get a more insightful sense of personal tutoring from our learners.

A student-centred perspective

Being able to balance the needs of students with those of lecturers and the university itself, highlights the need for clear guidelines to allow for the successful implementation of personal tutoring, at the level of both national and institutional policy. To be able to do so successfully, however, necessitates a fuller understanding of what personal tutoring means from both an institutional and a student perspective, with a particular emphasis on any gaps or differences between the two. As explained by Mynott (2016), at LJMU the policy states that the primary purpose of the personal tutor is: "to assist tutees in their academic development whilst at university, in addition to having a role in supporting their personal and professional development". The policy goes on to highlight the following three roles:

o *Academic Guidance and Monitoring of Student Engagement* – this encompasses promotion of student engagement beyond their programme of study and also introduces a monitoring role in terms of identifying and responding to "at risk students through reference to data including attendance, assessment submission, and academic background."

o *Pastoral and Personal Development and Referral* - offer pastoral oversight with referral and signposting to specialist student support and advice services.

o *Professional Development and Referral* – linking to employability and also the responsibility for writing references.

Taking a qualitative approach, we set out to explore the needs of students in relation to personal tutoring.

We gathered data from three cohorts of students – one at each level (Level 4 [first year], Level 5, and Level 6 [final year]). The questions in our online survey aimed to gather not only students' beliefs regarding the strengths and weaknesses of personal tutoring, but also to try to tease out how personal tutoring could be undertaken more

effectively, or what could be enhanced or improved in future.

Facets of personal tutoring

As a frame of understanding, we noted personal tutoring as incorporating three distinct facets:

o Traditionally, personal tutoring draws on the 'Oxbridge model' where students are provided personal, moral and academic guidance by a member of their academic staff team (Owen, 2002: 9; Wheeler and Birtle, 1993: 15).

o Then there is the 'professional model' wherein tutors refer students to specialist services immediately, such as finance officers, counsellors, academic skills teams, careers etc.

o Finally, the 'curriculum model' which 'attempts to provide support through the actual courses which students follow' (Earwaker, 1992: 115; Owen, 2002: 9-10).

Findings: Level 4

Amongst all of the first year (Level 4) cohort, there was both an expectation of one-to-one personal contact with a tutor, as well as a clearly identified need. Almost all envisioned the tutor as offering a pastoral role, with an emphasis on help, feedback,

support and guidance as they settled in to their new life as undergraduate students:

> *At the start of the degree it's mostly just settling in and getting used to systems and procedures.*

> [Personal tutors should]…*deliver feedback and help you improve as you go through uni but also as a listening ear and someone to watch out for you whilst you are in uni.*

> [Personal tutors should] *act as a support system for those who might need it, try to make themselves available for students when needed.*

That personal tutors should also offer academic support was also discussed, but this was clearly seen to be secondary – helping students to navigate the systems and other support services offered by the institution was clearly paramount:

> *Tutors should be there if you need to talk to someone, for academic advice too when needed.*

> *To mentor and look into the wellbeing of your students. To support [you at] university, whether it be about studies or not.*

Thus students saw personal tutors as direct 'conduits' between themselves and the university. Respondents expressed a firm belief that contact should be instigated by the tutors, rather than independently directed by students. Almost half of the respondents asserted that they would find personal tutoring more effective, firstly, if contact was increased and, secondly if this was done by being incorporated into the timetables:

> *I feel we could have more regular contact perhaps twice a month maybe more.*

Contact does need to be increased with more one-to-ones and more efforts [sic.] from the tutor side.

I feel more contact should be made available.

Level 4 students appeared to be drawn towards the curriculum model of personal tutoring, wherein contact is timetabled and routinised (Owen, 2002: 21). The other theme to emerge was a belief, amongst over fifty per cent of respondents, that the level of support they would require would differ as they moved through their degree:

I think moving in to second year the help I personally think I will need will be mostly academic, e.g. looking through work or finding volunteering opportunities.

…some people will need more help in the first year to help settle into the city and the course as others are likely to need it more in 2 [sic.] or third years as the pressure is more in terms of work.

I feel like I will need more help going into 2nd and 3rd years.

This was a theme that seemed to be confirmed by the second year cohort responses.

Findings: Level 5

Amongst the second year cohort (Level 5) there were a number of respondents who saw their personal tutor as being someone to provide help with accessing institutional services, but there was also an interesting and subtle shift in emphasis from 'support' to 'guidance'.

To ask for advice on assignments.

To support student [sic.] academically...

Personal tutors were also seen to be more of a 'mentor' or role model:

To chat about any personal challenges.

A mentor throughout the degree.

Guide students and be more like a friend and role model figure than other tutors.

Whilst around half of the Level 5 students acknowledged change in their view and engagement with personal tutors following their transition from their first year of study, a similar number of respondents suggested that they did not need the same level of contact with a personal tutor. If, or when, they did need help, these respondents also felt that it should be instigated by the students themselves, rather than integrated into their scheduled classes:

I don't really need a personal tutor in my opinion, I can't remember the last time I met up with them.

I feel that it should be on an individual basis rather than set appointments - only when needed.

I have enough contacts [sic.], it's just nice to know they're there if I need them.

This was a significant change between the Level 4 and Level 5 cohorts, but one that swung back the other way, once students reached the final year of their degree.

Findings: Level 6

At Level 6, nearly all participants were happy with the level and type of personal tutoring they had received throughout their degree:

> *My tutor always makes time for me.*

> *…my personal tutor has been a lot of help throughout my studies*

> *I am very grateful for all her help.*

As above, students in the final year of their degree saw the role of their personal tutor as being balanced between pastoral care, and helping with access to institutional services. However, all students, emphasised support that was focused on their research project or dissertation: dissertation:

> *Help with dissertation. Checking up on us.*

> *I have had the same tutor the whole 3 years but in this final year has been the only time I have utilised him.*

> *Only really used my personal tutor in 3rd year for my dissertation.*

> *At the start of my dissertation I needed help getting started and now near the end I need more help finishing it off.*

Conclusion: finding a focus

Our findings show that students' sense of personal tutoring is not fixed and, from this small-scale study, it evolves and meets particular needs. This offers us some sense of clarity as personal tutors, especially in relation to how conversations are framed or directed. As Mynott (2016) has asserted, the personal tutor role is multi-faceted and somewhat ill-defined with a lack of focus. This study has offered some pause for thought on whether a distinct – curriculum model – be applied in the first year of study, with the Oxbridge model being more pronounced in the second and final years of study. In short, the study demonstrates the need for a more flexible application of personal tutoring. However, the reality is that no one method is failsafe and some students – relative to their backgrounds or personal characteristics - may need more or different support than others.

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