

Journey together through the three years:

An evaluation of the personal tutor system, a student support model embedded in a Bachelor of Nursing programme in New Zealand.

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Abstract

Student support is an important part of tertiary education with different models, systems and approaches used internationally and nationally. The personal tutor system is one such approach to student support embedded within a new Bachelor of Nursing curriculum in a New Zealand tertiary institution. Through the personal tutor system students were assigned a lecturer, an academic member of staff, at the commencement of their study, for the duration of their programme. The purpose of the personal tutor system was to offer students support with their academic development and personal guidance that involved: scheduled and ad hoc meetings; monitoring of progress; personal assistance; and directing some students to seek additional support.

Using a mixed methods design, the personal tutor system was evaluated at the time the first student cohort completed the new programme. The study focused on factors that influenced the personal tutor system experience. Third year students and lecturers were invited to participate in two-phase data collection that involved the completion of a questionnaire (third year students: n=86 and lecturers: n=19) followed by semi-structured interviews (third year students: n=38 and lecturers: n=10).

Most participants confirmed that their personal tutor system experience was positive. Interpersonal interaction between students and lecturers was a key factor, as relationships were central to the personal tutor system. Flexibility was important as the personal tutor system was not a one-size-fits-all approach to student support. At times, competing responsibilities gave rise to undue tension particularly with lecturers' availability and accessibility for support. Unfamiliarity with the personal tutor system guidelines led to different interpretations for use and consequently confusion with support expectations. However, almost all participants acknowledged the value and potential for the personal tutor system in the BN programme.

Recommendations for changes to the personal tutor system included: the creation a proportional co-ordination role for ongoing management; a review of the guidelines that linked to support resources; time integrated into the BN programme for flexible arrangements with meetings and contact; and a time allocation for lecturers' workload with resourcing for associated responsibilities.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Chapter One: An Introduction to Student Support..... | 1 |
| A Personal Context..... | 1 |
| An Overview of the Global Context | 2 |
| The New Zealand Context..... | 4 |
| The Nursing Context..... | 6 |
| Innovation within a Bachelor of Nursing | 9 |
| An Evaluation of the Personal Tutor System | 12 |
| Statement of purpose | 12 |
| Structure of the thesis..... | 13 |
| Chapter Two: A Literature Review of the Personal Tutor System | 15 |
| A Brief History | 15 |
| The Literature..... | 16 |
| The Terminology | 18 |
| The Three Models | 19 |
| Purpose and Role | 22 |
| Makes Economic Sense | 31 |
| Summary and Conclusion..... | 33 |
| Chapter Three: The Research Design and Process..... | 35 |
| The Research Design | 35 |
| Mixed methods | 35 |
| Evaluation and research..... | 39 |
| Data collection and analysis..... | 42 |
| Ethical Considerations..... | 49 |
| The Research Process..... | 53 |
| Research participants..... | 54 |
| Phase one: Questionnaire development and data analysis..... | 54 |
| Phase two: Individual interviews and data analysis..... | 58 |
| Integration of findings..... | 61 |
| Conclusion | 61 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter Four: Phase One Questionnaire Findings | 63 |
| Section One: Demographic Information | 63 |
| Section Two: Aims of the Personal Tutor System | 66 |
| Section Three: Policy and Guidelines | 71 |
| Section Four: Allocation, Communication and Time | 75 |
| Section Five: Meetings Arrangements and Availability | 81 |
| Section Six: Use of the Personal Tutor System | 89 |
| Section Seven: Student Support Options..... | 93 |
| Section Eight: Your Overall Experience | 95 |
| Conclusion | 98 |
| Chapter Five: Phase Two Interview Findings and Integration of Findings..... | 99 |
| Building Relationships: It’s all to do with ... the way you relate | 99 |
| Flexible Engagement: There’s no-one-size-fits-all approach | 106 |
| Supporting the Journey: Together through the three years..... | 112 |
| Integration of Findings: Putting it all together..... | 124 |
| Conclusion | 128 |
| Chapter Six: Major Factors Influencing the Personal Tutor System Experience..... | 130 |
| Relationships were Essential to the Personal Tutor System Experience | 130 |
| Flexibility was Integral to the Personal Tutor System Experience | 134 |
| Embedded Support Enhanced the Personal Tutor System Experience | 140 |
| Issues Related to Implementation were Important to the PTS Experience..... | 145 |
| Conclusion | 151 |
| Chapter Seven: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion..... | 153 |
| Summary of the Thesis..... | 153 |
| Research Recommendations..... | 155 |
| Issues and Limitations | 160 |
| Future Research | 162 |
| Conclusion | 163 |
| Final Personal Statement | 165 |
| References..... | 166 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 4.1. Percentage of student and lecturer respondents from the School of Nursing | 63 |
| Figure 4.2. Students' age at commencement of the BN | 64 |
| Figure 4.3. Students' highest academic achievement prior to BN..... | 65 |
| Figure 4.4. Length of lecturers' employment in education at this institution | 66 |
| Figure 4.5. Students' rating of personal tutor system in relation to aims | 67 |
| Figure 4.6. Lecturers' rating of personal tutor system in relation to aims | 67 |
| Figure 4.7. Students' rating of the personal tutor system guidelines..... | 71 |
| Figure 4.8. Lecturers' rating of the personal tutor system guidelines | 71 |
| Figure 4.9. Personal tutor system communication methods used | 81 |
| Figure 4.10. Students' year one personal tutor system meetings | 82 |
| Figure 4.11. Lecturers' year one personal tutor system meetings | 83 |
| Figure 4.12. Students' year two and three personal tutor system meetings | 84 |
| Figure 4.13. Lecturers' year two and three personal tutor system meetings | 85 |
| Figure 4.14. Initiation of additional meetings..... | 88 |
| Figure 4.15. Focus of personal tutor system discussions..... | 89 |
| Figure 4.16. Student use of the personal tutor system | 91 |
| Figure 4.17. Lecturers' experience of students' personal tutor system use..... | 91 |
| Figure 4.18. Support for Students with BN related matters | 93 |
| Figure 4.19. Lecturer referrals to wider institutional centralised services | 94 |
| Figure 4.20. Overall student and lecturer experience with the personal tutor system | 96 |
| Figure 4.21. Overall success of the personal tutor system for student support..... | 96 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 3.1. Sequential two phase data collection | 38 |
| Table 3.2 Planned analysis of data, presentation and integration of findings. | 47 |
| Table 4.1. Lecturer time and number of meetings with each student each year..... | 77 |
| Table 4.2. Students number of meetings with PTS lecturers each year | 77 |
| Table 4.3. Lecturer time and number of additional meetings for students each year | 78 |
| Table 4.4. Reasons for change of personal tutor | 79 |