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Dixon, L, Fletcher, T and O'Gorman, V (2019) Personal tutoring: a recognition of 'levelness' in the support for undergraduates. Innovations in Practice, 13 (2). pp. 18-23. ISSN 1757-921X

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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; pastoral support; transition; progression

Please cite this paper as:

Dixon, L., Fletcher, T. and O’Gorman, V. (2019) ‘Personal tutoring: a recognition of ‘levelness’ in the support for undergraduates’, *Innovations in Practice*, 13 (2): 18-23



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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:

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

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.

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