**Re-valuing the role of the Personal Tutor: Face to face meetings to engage student teachers in professional conversations**

**A research summary working paper by Ruth Sutcliffe, Rachel Linfield and Gaynor Riley**

The context

The National Student Survey, (NSS) provides data for UK university league tables. It is completed by final year students at all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in England, Northern Ireland, Wales, and the majority in Scotland. In 2014, there was a particularly low satisfaction score relating to feedback given by students on the BA (Hons) Primary Education programme, leading to Qualified Teacher Status at Leeds Metropolitan University, (now Leeds Beckett University). In a desire to understand why students did not value feedback that we as lecturers otherwise considered rigorous and helpful, nor always recognise the range of what could constitute feedback on a degree course which includes professional placements, we began to investigate. Informal conversations with staff and anecdotal comments from students encouraged us to undertake an ongoing longitudinal study to inform our understanding of what students perceive to be helpful feedback.

The research

Our key questions were: • What do students perceive as 'helpful feedback'? • Is there a notion of 'readiness' for students to engage with and understand feedback? • How can tutors provide effective support to enable students to engage with, and use, feedback? • Is it possible to achieve 100% student satisfaction with feedback in Higher Education?

Data was collected at the start of the students' second year of study, (Level 5 students), when they had already experienced receiving feedback from one year of the course, using a questionnaire.  It was then repeated with the same cohort of students at the start of the third, and final, year of their undergraduate degree, (Level 6), in September 2017. The questionnaire asked for both quantitative and qualitative responses regarding feedback.

The Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the questionnaires from year one of the study showed an overall 75% satisfaction rating for 'helpful' feedback and this rose to 91% in the second year. What could account for this important increase?

Whilst the longitudinal study addresses a range of research questions, key to this 'think piece' is the increased number of qualitative comments which valued oral, face-to-face feedback and discussion.  We believe this, in part, is a result of strengthening the role of the Personal Tutor in helping students to access, engage and use feedback. This role was strengthened in two ways. Firstly, an additional one hour per student per year was given, for the express purpose of exploring feedback in greater depth. This additional time augmented the existing meeting times allocated across the academic year. Secondly, this was supported by the introduction of a focussed Academic Action Plan.  It was designed to scaffold and enable students to engage with, understand and use, feedback received cumulatively over the course. The proforma encourages students to recognise both positive elements of received feedback as well as areas for development.  Crucially, there is an expectation that students will

prepare for a scheduled Personal Tutor meeting by engaging provisionally with the action plan; this preparation can ensure more effective dialogue. For example, students are encouraged to explore their interpretations of academic language used within the feedback. In this way, subsequent informed conversations with known tutors, "brokers the space between the meta-language of feedback in all its forms … and the meaningful developmental messages it contains."
(Sutcliffe et al, 2019)

Strengthening the role of the Personal Tutor underpins the improved overall satisfaction ratings. There are additional considerations, however, important for a professional course such as those which lead to Qualified Teacher Status where written feedback on assignments is a relatively small proportion of the wide range of feedback provided.  In Year 1 of the study, comments on feedback tended to relate to summative written feedback following an assignment. For this reason, prior to completing the research questionnaire in the second year, students were reminded explicitly, to recognise that feedback was not only this but also significantly, verbal and written feedback from professional teaching practice placements. We suggest that this recognition also contributed to the increase in

overall satisfaction ratings between the two years of our longitudinal study.

We hoped that this improvement in overall satisfaction with feedback within our internal study, would impact on responses given to

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the formal, National Student Survey. Results from the NSS in 2018 do indeed seem to bear this out, with an increase from 2017 to 2018 of 24%, resulting in an overall score of 84%. It is suggested that the increase in overall satisfaction with feedback in both this longitudinal study and the NSS score is clearly related. Students are now supported more effectively in understanding their feedback through the enhanced Personal Tutoring system and appreciate that feedback, on a professional course such as teaching training, goes beyond mere written comments on assignments.

Conclusions

Our research and broader findings show that rather than search for a perfect type of feedback (oral, written, peer) to improve student satisfaction, we should work towards changing the way that students engage and

respond to the variety of feedback offered. An extra hour at designated times across an academic year and structuring the meetings through the use of an academic action plan, appears to have had a significant impact. As was concluded within The Search for 100% satisfaction with feedback, (Sutcliffe, Linfield, Riley, Nabb, and Glazzard, 2019) "… ensuring positive engagement with a range of feedback through active discourse with students on this professional course, forces the notion of student 'readiness.' … Speaking with students is key in helping them to reflect upon the variety of feedback, understand its relevance and consequently to act upon it in practical ways.'

Face-to-face, Personal Tutor meetings are key in providing a valuable space for nurturing professional conversations which may ultimately lead to increased growth and development, both academically and professionally.

References

Office for Students, (2019) National Student Survey https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/adviceand-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/ (Accessed 1 February 2019) Sutcliffe, R., Linfield, R., Riley, G., Nabb, D. & Glazzard, J. (2019) 'The search for 100% satisfaction with feedback', TEAN journal 12(1)