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Title: Do students in UK Higher Education Institutions need personal tutors?

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses the role of Personal Tutoring (PT) as a mechanism for providing student support in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. The discussions presented will draw on the experiences of PT at City University, London (City), as well as the author's own experiences as a student, to establish a better sense of what PT means today. Focus will be placed on the benefits and challenges of typical PT systems in HE, as influenced by widening participation policies and strategies to improve retention rates. In carrying out this analysis, this paper will conclude by arguing the case for PT to remain a necessary process, rather than be replaced entirely by central support departments.

Key words: personal, tutoring, student support, university, retention, PDP, personalisation

Context: Personal Tutoring at City University London and Beyond

The PT systems in the UK today have essentially evolved from a long-standing tradition that universities were obliged to be *in loci parentis* for most university students who were living away from home for the first time. Very recently the PT system in UK HE has been under scrutiny, with some literature reports describing it to be "in crisis" (Grant, 2006, p. 11) and "under strain" (Laycock, 2009, p. 7).

At the outset, the perceived role of a personal tutor in HE may seem straightforward: 'personal' meaning to offer pastoral support, and 'tutor' meaning to provide academic guidance. When both the 'personal' and 'tutor' roles are blended, the number of functions that are required of a personal tutor then become quite substantial, as Wheeler and Birtle (1993) point out:

- Listener
- Confidante
- Advocate
- Disciplinarian
- Counsellor
- Careers Adviser
- Teacher

- Mentor
- Assessor
- Adviser
- Referee

It is easy to see that the number of roles that a personal tutor must manage can pose a significant number of challenges, particularly since the personal tutor role is typically allocated to lecturing staff who already juggle research and teaching responsibilities (Laycock, 2009). Many of these difficulties are cited in the literature and have been anecdotally expressed by student-teachers on City's MA in Academic Practice (MAAP) programme.

It is important to stress that PT should not be confused with the individual tutorial systems common to collegiate institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge and are necessary as part of a wider "learning system" (Ashwin, 2005). Oxbridge students do, however, have personal tutor equivalents, sometimes called "supervising tutors" (P Cox, 2009, pers. comm., 30 April) who oversee academic development throughout the students' entire university experience.

In most UK HE institutions, including City, it is standard practice that every student has a personal tutor assigned to them. To ensure this, it is likely that most lecturers will be allocated a number of students that they will be personal tutor to. Policy guidelines for PT at City are available for all staff in the 2009 version of the Academic Handbook. This policy recognises that the personal tutor role is "a complex one that incorporates academic, professional and pastoral elements". Essentially the policy requires that personal tutors oversee academic development and be friendly 'first ports of call' for all student concerns, only advising on issues that fall under a professional remit and signposting to other sources of support where appropriate. Helpfully the policy sets out responsibilities that a personal tutor is *not* expected to do, such as mark a student's work or provide specialised academic advice.

Rationale: Do students at UK Universities need personal tutors?

Whilst PT at UK universities is common-place, PT in universities in countries such as France, Australia and Canada is virtually unheard of. How are these countries and their students able to manage without PT systems? Given that they do manage perfectly fine, do we actually

need PT systems in the UK? In order to answer these questions, I set about investigating the challenges and benefits of PT, referring to the literature and anecdotal experiences of PTs at City, in addition to my own experiences as an undergraduate personal tutee between the years of 2001 – 2004 at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Personal Tutoring Challenges

To explore the challenges of PT at City, I requested that a PT discussion board be set up on the MAAP Academic Development for Students (ADS) module¹ on CitySpace² during February and March 2009. The responses from City's teachers that referred to their PT challenges can be summarised as follows:

1. Experiencing difficulties in balancing the pastoral and academic facets of the role. This problem is very common and has been described in the literature by Race (2001).
2. Lack of know-how in terms of establishing 'ground rules' to clarify the role of the personal tutor and tutee, such that student expectations are appropriately managed.
3. Feeling inadequately trained to deal with student problems, particularly those relating to pastoral care which often require some counselling skills.
4. Knowing exactly when to refer a student to a specialised student service and lack of knowledge about specialised student services for referral purposes.
5. Feeling isolated, overburdened, under-resourced, unrecognised and unrewarded.

Case studies and personal tutor accounts published by Barfield, Hixenbaugh and Thomas (2006) and Neville (2007) also emulate the challenges described by City's personal tutors. A further challenge that was not described on the discussion board but has been described elsewhere relates to the fact that widening participation measures and increasing student diversity circa 1992 have increased the breadth of student needs, meaning that personal tutors may feel overstretched and further out of their depth than ever before (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006).

PT challenges as voiced by students are explored in depth by Neville (2007) and mainly relate to students being unable to access help and advice from their personal tutors when they require it. A PT researcher at City found that "gaining and sustaining access is a way of opening up the passage to developing a relationship with the (personal) tutor" (Dobinson-

¹ This module was revised and replaced with a Student Support and Personal Tutoring module in 2010

² CitySpace was City's previous Virtual Learning Environment in 2009

Harrington, 2000). Students can feel frustrated or rejected if they contact their personal tutor and receive little or no reply for some time (Dobinson-Harrington, 2000). Additionally, the literature points to the importance of personal tutors in sustaining a proactive relationship with tutees, rather than a reactive one, as 'open door' policies do not always have the desired effect (Neville, 2007). Instead, actively checking up on student's wellbeing by allocating time for compulsory tutorials can unearth problems that students would otherwise not be forthcoming with (Simpson, 2006).

Relating in part to the third challenge listed regarding pastoral care and counselling, City's PT policy in 2009 did recognise that "not all academic members of staff will necessarily be used as Personal Tutors". This is interesting because there tends to be a pervasive expectation that anyone who is a lecturer can naturally assume the role of a personal tutor, without any sort of guidance (Owen, 2002). Indeed, the ability to empathise well with students was recognised by the policy as an important trait of a personal tutor, yet this quality does not always come naturally to some and even trained counsellors need to learn coping strategies to deal with the emotional demands of being empathic (Egan, 2001). Although a personal tutor's role should not be confused with that of a trained counsellor, the incidence of personal tutors acting as "quasi-counsellors" has been identified at City (Dobinson-Harrington, 2000). This probably happens because personal tutors tend to act as front line support for students with mental health problems (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2002). City's prevalence of quasi-counsellors is consistent with a study published by Easton and Van Laar (1995), who found that amongst the personal tutors questioned, nearly all had given some form of 'counselling' to distressed students, despite most of them having received no formal training in this area. There does appear to be a strong argument to support the teaching of basic counselling skills to all personal tutors to help them manage the emotional and psychological demands of their role, so avoiding the frustration of feeling under-qualified when confronted with student problems.

Given the number of challenges faced by personal tutors, it is questionable why a PT system should exist at all. Indeed, universities in France, Canada and Australia do not have PT systems, and in these countries HE tends to be a much more anonymous experience for students (Attwood, 2009). An interview with a former undergraduate student at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia reveals that all functions of a personal tutor are essentially 'farmed out' to a wide range of student services, all of which are explained to new undergraduates during their orientation week. The former QUT student explained that

this system of providing centralised student support worked well for her, particularly on one occasion where she needed advice on changing degree course. In France “the great majority of undergraduate students will never experience the sort of individualised and personalised support now widespread and often formalised in British HEIs” (Lomine, 2006, p 25), with most French lecturers maintaining an detached relationship with their students, never exchanging informal dialogue and certainly not disclosing their first names. There is an expectation that by going to university in France, students learn to become independent learners, and an absence of a PT system may actually shape this way of thinking (Lomine, 2006).

Benefits of Personal Tutoring

Currently, massification in HE, worsening student-to-staff ratios, declining contact hours and the “accompanying mantra of ‘research, research, research’” (Evans, 2009, p. 36) in addition to the challenges stated previously are all to blame for PT becoming a “system in crisis” (Grant, 2006, p. 11). Yet it is argued that PT forms the basis of “the intimate pedagogical relationship between students and academics that sets UK universities apart from the rest of the world” (Attwood, 2009, p. 33). The true benefits of PT systems are effectively revealed when the threat of potentially losing the personal touch that they offer are considered.

The literature describes several benefits of PT, which can be broadly categorised as follows:

1. **Important for student retention.** There is a potential positive link between PT and student retention. Recent literature reviews on the matter of PT and retention are provided in some detail by Laycock (2009). However, a very interesting article by Simpson (2006) describes the events following a decision to abolish the previous PT system of tutor-counsellors at the Open University (OU) in 1996. Essentially, the counselling aspect of the tutor role was replaced by full-time staff in the OUs thirteen regional centres, with tutors retaining their role to provide academic and course advice. Interestingly from 1996 onwards the rate of student retention decreased appreciably on previous years. Whilst this cannot be fully attributed to the elimination of tutor-counsellors, it is likely given that no other significant changes to the OU took place during that time. Albeit initially expensive, Simpson found that re-introduction of a PT system within the OU in 2004 was a financially sound decision, since it gave a 550% return on investment.

2. **Important for student experience - facilitates a sense of 'belonging' to the institution.**

It has been argued that a personal tutor can help to foster a "relationship with others and with the institution itself" (Hixenbaugh, 2006). Some of City's student-teachers on the ADS module also agreed with this sentiment.

3. **Acting as a 'stabilising force'.**

As an undergraduate tutee I remember feeling very assured to know that my personal tutor was committed to looking out for me and was genuinely interested in my academic wellbeing. I was fortunate that he remained my personal tutor until I graduated. Some of my friends were not so lucky as their personal tutors were replaced as staff left the department - I think that had a negative effect on their progression, with some commenting that they felt a bit lost or even rejected by the experience. Again discussions on the CitySpace ADS module discussion board supported this sentiment.

4. **Cultivating an academic mindset, analytical skills and knowledge away from the classroom.**

My personal tutor would frequently dedicate time to develop analytical skills by critiquing journal articles in small group tutorial sessions. I found these tutorials to be challenging, engaging and valuable since I was able to transfer these skills into other learning situations, such as laboratory work. My personal tutor was an effective academic role model for me, particularly since I was the first in my family to go to university. My experience is consistent with reports that UK students' attitudes toward learning tend to differ compared with students of other countries in that they are more open and questioning (Attwood, 2009).

The benefits of UK PT systems have drawn attention from the University of Canberra in Australia, who are now implementing a Personal Adviser³ scheme for international students following a successful pilot towards the end of 2008. Canberra's PA scheme is based on PT systems of 7 UK universities. The rationale for introducing the scheme was to assist in attracting and retaining students (in Australia first year undergraduate attrition is a particular cause for concern) and also to increase students' sense of belonging and academic success. Feedback from Canberra staff and students involved in the PA pilot have been

³ The term 'Personal Adviser' (PA) is preferred over Personal Tutor, since "tutor" implied that staff would have to provide subject-specific tutoring (M Fleming, 2009, pers. comm., 29 April).

generally very positive. Complete evaluation of the PA scheme at Canberra is currently underway, the results of which are due to be published (M Fleming, 2009, pers. comm., 29 April).

1.1 Conclusion

On balance, there is a strong case to support and maintain the system of PT, rather than have personal tutor functions replaced entirely by centralised student support services. The latter situation has the potential to exacerbate the impersonal and anonymous learning experience that students may already be experiencing due to HE massification. Linked to this is the recognition that the PT setting can offer an effective (and some would say natural) framework for focusing PDP (personal development portfolio) activities for students (Miller *et al.*, 2009). It has been further recognised that linking PDP to a PT system brings about the benefits of personalisation to students as well (Miller *et al.*, 2009).

Interestingly, as part of a PT review at City, staff on the Academic Practice, Programmes and Standards Committee (APPSC) were initially asked if City should move to a system of using trained non-academic Student Advisers to deal with student pastoral problems and thereby unburden overworked personal tutors. The majority of members were not in favour of this approach, mainly because they felt this would remove valuable contact time where they would otherwise learn about the issues facing students in academic and other areas (APPSC, 2008). The argument for PT here does not discount the challenges identified, however the challenges can be solved if measures are firmly established and formally implemented to improve the support and resources offered to personal tutors. One way of doing this might be to strengthen the relationships between departmental PT systems and central student services (Grant, 2006). A recent April 2009 publication by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) sets out several recommendations for a robust and well-supported PT system, all of which consider the challenges and benefits of PT in UK HE today. For example:

- A proactive personal tutoring system,
- From personal tutor to personal development tutor, and
- A staff development and reward programme for PT (Laycock, 2009)

At this stage it may be in City's best interest to align the SEDA recommendations with its own as it revises its PT system. Doing so may help to reduce the PT challenges as identified

by City's teachers, whilst also maintaining and improving on the benefits of PT as an effective means of offering personalised student support.

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