

# Enhancing belonging, confidence and academic development through meaningful Personal Tutoring

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a SoTL funded project which sought to examine and develop the role of personal tutoring at Level 4. Research suggests that a highly structured, proactive personal tutoring system which supports students' academic development is essential in easing the transition into HE, developing students' academic confidence and sense of belonging to the institution, which in turn reduces their chances of early withdrawal (Thomas, 2012:42-44). However, while various reports claim that students would prefer increased contact time with their personal tutors, there appears to be a mis-match between such reports and actual engagement with personal tutoring systems.

In this paper we present survey and focus group findings evaluating students' experiences of the personal tutoring in the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. The findings suggest the importance of quality, familiarity and consistency in the delivery of personal tuition, and emphasise the significance of the personal tutor role, and in turn institutional support, in achieving this.

## Background to the Project

The purpose of this project was to examine and develop the role of personal tutoring as a strategy to ease Level 4 students' transition into HE, develop their academic confidence and sense of belonging to their course and institution. Personal tutoring is identified as a key factor in nurturing belonging and academic confidence, and for these reasons is particularly crucial for Level 4 students to support their transition into HE (Thomas, 2012). However while research such as NUS' *Student Experience Research 2012; Part 1: Teaching & Learning* found that 41.9% of respondents would like more contact time with their personal tutors there appears to be a gap between

such reports and students' actual engagement with personal tutoring systems.

Within the Sociology Department at Manchester Met, attendance at personal tutor meetings peaked at around 40% in 2014/15; one of the aims of the research was to explore strategies to improve student engagement with the system. Effective personal tutoring is also a key strategy in student retention and success; a survey of early leavers undertaken across four Higher Education Providers (HEPs) found that for 43%, 'not being given helpful academic support by my department' was a contributing factor in their decision to withdraw (Thomas, 2012:42). This research focuses on student experiences of personal tutoring at Level 4, when issues of non-continuation, transition into higher education and academic integration and belonging are particularly pertinent (Yorke and Longden, 2004).

In the UK 8% of students leave HE during their first year of study; however extensive research carried out across four institutions found that between 33% and 42% of students think about withdrawing (Thomas, 2012:4). A highly structured, proactive personal tutoring system that supports students' academic development is essential in easing the transition into HE, developing students' academic confidence and sense of belonging to the institution, which in turn reduces their chances of early withdrawal (Thomas, 2012:42-44). This is particularly important for stay-at-home students, who may struggle to develop a sense of belonging, which is reflected in higher withdrawal rates (HESA, 2015). Building a sense of belonging in students has been promoted as a strategy for institutions to enhance student engagement (Krause, 2007), and this project attempts to develop personal tutoring as one method of achieving this.

Originally the aims of personal tutoring were to provide personal guidance and support (Watts, 2011). However, in the changing higher education environment, personal tutoring can now be seen to adopt a more holistic approach. (Thomas, 2006; Watts, 2011). In beginning to look at the significance of personal tutoring to aid belonging and ease transition, it is evident that a number of key arguments exist. Taking the starting point that the institution is responsible for providing an environment which makes learning possible (Krause and Coates, 2008), the role of the student and the tutor both need to be considered.

Upon arrival in the higher education environment, students are expected to shift from their previous experience of education, which is usually planned, pre-organised and monitored, to that of the higher education environment where independent learning is required. This shift in both culture and norms and the lack of familiarity and preparedness that students have towards higher education (Wilcox et al, 2005 and Stephen et al, 2008), results in students being required to manage their own learning. For this a structured set of transitional activities may help to promote a successful transition period (Wingate, 2007). Research around personal tutoring suggests that “proactive, structured personal tutoring may enable students to progress” (Watts, 2011).

Research conducted on social support systems in the first year of higher education suggests that students experience problems which lead to withdrawal, such as finding independent study problematic, university life not being as expected, unhappiness with the choice of course/subject and a failure to connect with their personal tutor (Wilcox et al, 2005). From a thematic perspective, this suggests that social support and independent learning and culture adaptation, amongst others, are common problems that students encounter. It may be argued that the role of the personal tutor alongside other support systems in the university can be a way of intervening to ensure students are less likely to withdraw.

In enabling and embedding positive relationships, the role of the tutor is significant. Despite the personal tutoring system not flourishing in UK higher education institutions (Vinson et al, 2010) many institutions adopt the system as a way of providing support and guidance to students, despite the unwillingness by some staff to actively participate (Wingate, 2007). A view that pastoral work and student retention issues are not part of the academic role, as well as a need for academic staff to establish a balance between research, teaching and administration (Wilcox et al, 2005 and Wingate, 2007) when facing an already increased and unmanageable workload. In translation to how this is perceived by students, their relationships with personal tutors will include a lack of willingness or interest from tutors, a perception that tutors are too busy to engage as well as a feeling of guilt for taking up their time (Stephen et al, 2008). In summary, in order for personal tutoring to be successful, particularly in helping to establish belonging in the transition stage for first year



students, attitudes towards the development of student learning and support need to be holistic (Wingate, 2007) with a commitment from the institution, academics and students alike.

### **The Study**

The findings presented here are based on mixed methods research into the experiences of personal tutoring of the 2014-15 Level 4 Department of Sociology students at MMU. Action research was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach for this study. Action research has become established as a popular technique in educational research as it bridges the gap between academic research and more practical applications (Nolen and Vander Putten, 2007: 403). Action research is designed to enable the practitioner to bring about an improvement in their own practice, with research findings feeding directly into improvements in teaching and learning. It is necessarily participative, and is designed to capture the student voice in order to bring about change (Rowland, 2002). As such, methods of data generation should reflect this endeavour. For this research project we selected a mixed methods approach of online questionnaires and focus groups, and informal interviews as the most appropriate methods; these were supplemented with feedback from Staff-Student Liaison Committee meetings to give as comprehensive a picture as possible. The questionnaire was designed to give the quantitative figures necessary to provide generalisations about engagement with the personal tutoring system, and was live on Survey Monkey between December-May 2016. Out of cohort of 192; Sociology (51), Criminology & Sociology (58) & Criminology students (83), we had 35 responses to survey, which was approximately twenty per cent of the Level 4 cohort. This was despite frequent email and in-class promotions of the survey, and the students being given time in lab sessions to complete the questionnaire. While a twenty per cent response is reasonable we had hoped for more given my access to the students – the rate perhaps speaks to the ‘questionnaire fatigue’ that students suffer from early on in their time in HE which makes it difficult to research their experiences.

A focus group of five students was also held in order to provide a qualitative insight into the meanings behind the statistics generated.

A focus group is defined as 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research' (Powell et al, 1996:499, cited in Gibbs, 1997), which makes it particularly appropriate as a method in participatory research. Because of the difficulties with timing and recruiting students for more than the single focus group, tutors were also asked to informally interview their tutees about their experiences of personal tutoring (with the tutees' full knowledge and consent), and in this way the qualitative experiences of a further ten students were recorded.

### **Findings**

Generally the findings were positive, with students appreciating a personal tutoring system that provided access to tutors who were available, approachable and familiar. For most of the students at Level 4, their personal tutor was also a seminar tutor, and this appeared to greatly improve students' experience of the system, with 63 per cent agreeing that they knew who their personal tutor was, and 89 per cent agreeing that there is at least one member of staff they can talk to.

This is particularly crucial at Level 4, and is supported by other research demonstrating the links between a proactive personal tutoring approach and students' development of academic confidence and sense of belonging to the institution, which in turn reduces their chances of early withdrawal (Thomas, 2012).

In our analysis of the data, three ~~strong~~ themes emerged:

#### **Consistency**

Consistency emerged as something highly valued by students. They were particularly appreciative of staff who were reliable and provided clear expectations and structure. Extracts from the focus group support this:

'he emails me and I never have to email him'

'she has kept a record of everything I have done and everything like that. I've looked back at what I've achieved since starting in September'

'you should be able to see them on your own terms, have one session at the beginning of the year that we all have to go to.'

'he gives me awkward times like when I finish at 1 he says 2 or 3 or 5, so I don't bother going'

One of the major complaints from staff about the implementation of a resource-heavy, highly-structured personal tutoring system was lack of student engagement. However, what came through strongly in this research was the importance of a personal tutoring system that worked for students for them to engage with it. A consistent approach/message from the department is key to establishing a student-friendly model.

### ***Familiarity***

The departmental system was designed so that tutees are taught by their personal tutors for at least one seminar (although with students moving seminar groups due to timetabling issues this could not always be accommodated). Although challenging to organise, this is seen to be a particular success; students felt like they know who their tutor is, and where they are even if they do not always attend all of the meetings, as reported in the focus groups and informal interviews:

'I know I can go to them, obviously I know people are different and don't feel the same but with my personal tutor I know that if I had a problem I could go to someone, it's not just like I am left in the lurch'

'I like having a personal tutor as I like a designated person that I know that if I need help with I know there is someone there'

70 per cent of survey respondents suggested that at least one member of staff knew who they were aside from their personal tutor. 80 per cent of those surveyed suggested that they knew where to turn if they encountered a problem or issues. In terms of belonging the overall integration and ultimately their familiarity with the personal tutor and the department is important in helping to establish institutional awareness (Kember et al, 2001)

Where this didn't happen, lack of familiarity provides a barrier to establishing a successful tutor-tutee relationship for the following focus group participant:

'You only see them once a term, I'm not just going to pour my life out for you'

34 per cent of respondents were unsure if a personal tutor was important to them, which may contribute to any potential limitations towards forming a meaningful working relationship.

This underlines the importance of tutors being familiar to their tutees; students reported that they were more likely to turn up to meetings with academics they were familiar with. As personal tutoring in our department is focused on personal development planning rather than pastoral support, it is also useful for tutors to have a sense of their tutees' academic progress through their role as seminar leaders.

### **Quality**

The quality and content of the meetings was of particular importance to students; in our qualitative research findings they emphasised the importance and value of meetings that were useful to their academic development and integration:

'he always says that if I have any specific work or problems then bring it to him and he will go through it with me'

'mine really helps me with my essays, without him I would be lost, but that is because I make the effort to go up to him and ask him'

'mine are really good like, she tells me where to go and what I need'

'he always says that if I have any specific work or problems then bring it to him and he will go through it with me.'

One participant describes how her personal tutor had improved her sense of academic confidence through encouraging meetings and signposting her to appropriate support, which is hugely important to retention in the first year (Thomas, 2012). The extract highlights the value of personal tutoring in easing the transition into Higher Education:

'My PT when I met her advised me all different things, she's even told me of her experiences and stuff to overcome it. I can't remember the name of the guy down stairs but he does exam prep classes and PowerPoint. I've been and spoke to

him and he said I can do one to one with him. He's given me advice that I need. Now that I have been here longer they have advised me of loads of different steps that I can take and now I feel more confident.'

However, students also received a negative experience from tutors who they felt were disinterested:

'He never asks me about my work he just asks if I am enjoying it, am I OK, right you can go now if you want'

'They don't really talk about relevant things, they just ask how are you, how is your time here and its awkward'

Structured meetings focussed on academic progress were what students found most useful in our research.

Participants also admitted that they were not always engaged in personal tutoring:

'I don't think enough people make an effort to meet their personal tutors'

'perhaps people are just lazy and can't be bothered, me included'

In order to design and maintain a system that engages students, meetings have to have outcomes that they can see the benefit of, for example a review of feedback, help with referencing etc.

A further important point to note here is the responses by students in terms of their enjoyment and happiness. 83 per cent suggested that they enjoyed their chosen course of study, alongside 80 per cent expressing feelings of happiness towards their course. In terms of retention, both the quality of individual processes such as personal tutoring as well as overall integration into the environment and surroundings (May, 2011) will encourage more persistence in students with their studies and ultimately less withdrawal from the learning environment (Kember, et al, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

With personal tutoring at the forefront of institutional and departmental priorities, this research into Level 4 sociology students' experiences of personal tutoring has highlighted the need for a



system that is integrated with wider learning, that both students and staff are invested in. Lack of student engagement is seen as an issue in personal tutoring, however the students we surveyed reported that to fully participate in a personal tutor system they would have to see the benefit to their academic or personal integration. In particular, participants identified a number of issues that were particularly important to them as personal tutees.

For the students surveyed, consistency emerged as something that was highly valued. They were particularly appreciative of staff who were reliable and provided clear expectations and structure. The departmental system was designed so that tutees are usually taught by their personal tutors for at least one seminar, and where this was not the case, lack of familiarity provides a barrier to establishing a successful tutor-tutee relationship. This underlines the importance of tutors being familiar to their tutees; students reported that they were more likely to turn up to meetings with academics they know. The quality and content of the meetings was also of particular importance to students; in our qualitative research findings they emphasised the importance and value of meetings that were useful to their academic development and integration. In order to design and maintain a system that engages students, meetings have to have outcomes that they can see the benefit of, for example a review of feedback, help with referencing etc.

This research into student experiences of personal tutoring has highlighted the benefits of a structured personal tutoring system that supports students' academic development, the importance of the tutor role, and in turn institutional support, in achieving this.

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