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Recruitment and selection of Year Tutors: a case study

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Keywords

Year Tutors; Higher Education; recruitment; talent development

Abstract

Despite the fact that personal academic tutors are routinely assigned to students (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993), the extensive time pressures involved in monitoring and supporting students have resulted in the introduction of Year Tutors (YTs) to help students confront the various difficulties they face in the current educational context (Willmot and Lloyd, 2005). Consequently, university managers and HR professionals need to ensure that the 'right people' are in these roles, and that their personal development takes centre stage to allow them to grow and adapt to the ever-changing educational environment. However, there is a paucity of research into how YTs are recruited and developed. This study explores these areas, and thereby provides clarity to recruiters and to the people actively involved in the role. This study examines the recruitment and selection processes to employ and develop members of academic staff as Year Tutors (YTs). It presents an empirical study of the YTs system in one faculty of a large university in the north-west of England, drawing upon in-depth interviews and focus groups with students, YTs and senior management. Findings reveal that the university under study has no formal strategies or procedures for the recruitment of YTs, with allocations being made simply on the basis of staff workload. In effect, if a member of staff has a heavy workload, they cannot be a YT, and for those who *are* YTs, their own personal qualities become significant, and they effectively shape much of the role themselves. From the students' perspective, this may result in inappropriate or disengaged YTs, leaving them puzzled as to who to contact. The study's findings, therefore, have significant implications for both Human Resource Development (HRD) practice and for University management, especially those with large programmes.

Literature Review

In traditional academic positions, such as lecturers or senior lecturers, formal recruitment and training procedures lead to a restricted supply of qualified staff. These

procedures focus on qualifications, and on the interpersonal and motivational qualities of the applicants (Peters, 1997; Farkas-Teekens, 1997). The ability to recruit from a diverse and high quality pool of potential candidates is evident in recruitment and selection processes of multiple UK institutions, with diversity, experience and excellence in learning, teaching and research being at the top of their selection criteria (for example, De Montfort University, 2016; University of Reading, 2016). Despite the existence of such formal procedures, however, student support is rarely included or evaluated as part of the recruitment process (e.g. Lancaster University, 2015; MMU, 2016a), despite being crucial and integral to the overall student experience (Willmot and Lloyd, 2005).

On the contrary, in relation to personal tutoring positions and selection the educational literature has more to offer. For example, the key qualities of an effective personal tutor include self-awareness, good communication skills, credible professional standing, sound knowledge and good interpersonal and counselling skills (Charnock, 1993). Moreover, friendliness, approachability and the continuation of the relationship outside the classroom setting, as well as being a good role model for others were valued as important both by students and by tutors (Charnock, 1993; Morgan and Knox, 1987). Research suggests that students regard empathy – the ability to know and experience the emotions of another person (Duan and Hill, 1996) – as having a strong correlation with student learning, motivation and retention (Frymier and Houser, 2000). Similarly, the UCL (2015) have identified the importance of emotional aspects in the student-personal tutor relationship, and have developed five principles for an effective personal tutor, namely approachability, willingness to listen, understanding the issue, empowering the student and knowing when to refer (UCL, 2015).

Although the concept of the personal tutor has gained attention in the educational literature, there is a paucity of research into the role of the YT. The few institutions that explicitly mention ‘Year Tutor’ tend to include the role as a small part of a wider job description for lecturers or senior lecturers (e.g. Coventry University, 2015; Lancaster University, 2015). Interestingly, in each of these cases, although prior teaching experience is an essential requirement in the job descriptions, prior experience of year tutoring is not mentioned. Also, given that job description duties are normally listed in decreasing order of priority (University of Oxford, 2015; University of York, 2015), the placement of the year tutor role within the job description is also enlightening – ranging

from 1st (Coventry University, 2015) to 14th (out of 15) (Lancaster University, 2015) – suggesting that it is only of minimal importance in some institutions, but is more important in others.

Considering the above qualities, a university's activity in the course of recruiting, selecting and training may be a critical element in effectively matching the candidate with potential jobs and roles. The selection process may indeed contribute to the emergence of a psychological contract between the employee and the organisation (Anderson and Ostroff, 1997). Indeed, candidates' perceptions, as well as the organisation's context are critical for the recruitment and selection process (Scholarios and Lockyer, 1999). Therefore, a complete understanding of the people involved in the recruitment process and an appreciation of the external and internal organisational conditions in which hiring occurs, are required.

Aims and context of this study

Based upon the above literature review, the aim of this study is to examine the recruitment and development processes of YTs in education. Specifically, the emphasis of the research is placed on factors such as personality, interpersonal and general characteristics rather than on specific job-related knowledge or qualifications. The study also explores the selection methods used for recruiting YTs.

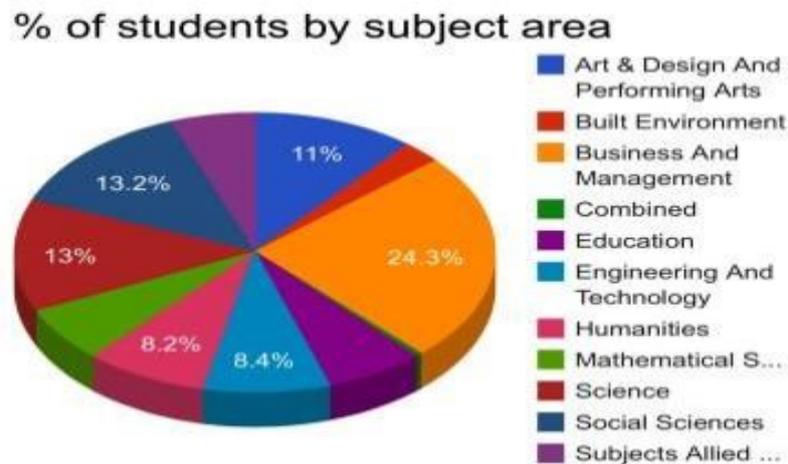
The basic research questions explored by this study are:

- *Which procedures are adopted in the recruitment and selection of YTs?*
- *Which personal qualities contribute to a successful Year Tutoring system?*
- *What mechanisms are used in ensuring the effectiveness and development of YTs?*

To address these questions, the study undertook a qualitative research approach within the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), the largest university in the North West of England, to explore the perceptions and experiences of relevant stakeholders. MMU has seen a rapid growth in its student numbers the past decade, becoming the UK's most popular university, based on its UCAS applications (Sedghi and Rogers, 2012). One of the University's largest courses is Business Management, which currently has

more than 1,000 registered students (Figure 1). Consequently, this is the course which has provided the focus for this study.

Figure 1: MMU Students by subject area



Source: UCAS, 2014

MMU's commitment to promoting high standards in learning and teaching is organised through a designated centre (CELT). There is a formal personal tutoring policy (MMU, 2016b), but no Year Tutoring system. Despite the personal support available, there was sufficient anecdotal (from our Internal Student Survey), and research evidence (Antoniadou, 2016) to suggest that students' experience of Year Tutoring was variable.

Method

An interpretivist-constructivist approach was chosen for this study, where many realities exist, both for participants and researchers, and where meanings are co-constructed via the interaction of participants and the investigator, implying a subjectivist epistemology (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This research paradigm was suitable for the purpose of the current research, due to its ability to illuminate multiple perceptions on the same phenomenon (in this case, recruitment and development procedures of YTs) that are hindered by positivistic approaches, such as understandings while doubting the rationality of taken-for-granted knowledge (Burr, 2003).

The study adopted purposive sampling – the researchers selected participants who were likely to have the necessary knowledge and were likely to reply (Saunders, 2011). The sample included three different groups: students, senior managers involved in the selection and development of YTs, and existing members of staff with YT responsibilities. The number of participants was defined during, and not at the beginning of, the study because the guiding principle was the concept of theoretical saturation, the point at which researchers no longer see new categories, concepts or dimensions appearing in the research and the data being collected appear redundant (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). As the study was an exploratory one, there was the need to continuously involve new participants until all aspects of the phenomenon had been researched. Saturation occurred after eight interviews with YTs, four interviews with senior managers and seven interviews with undergraduate business students.

Potential respondents were approached individually, were informed of the study's purpose, and were asked about their potential interest in participating in the research. After expressing an initial interest in being involved, participants were contacted again by email, which explained more fully the purpose of the study and requested confirmation of their participation. Everyone who was approached agreed to participate in the research. The core analytical method was thematic analysis. This describes qualitative data in rich detail, and is aimed at identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes (Brown and Clarke, 2006). From the findings, three main themes emerged, which linked directly to the study's research questions:

- 1) Recruitment and selection of YTs,
- 2) Skills and qualities of successful YTs,
- 3) Necessity and development of the YT system.

The findings are discussed below, and are illustrated with representative examples from the interviews.

Findings

Research Question 1: recruitment and section of YTs

The lack of a job description considerably frustrated YTs within the present study, who felt that this unavoidably affects the quality of provision of the role. However, the duties

contained in the few job descriptions issued for YTs in higher education are broadly similar to this study's findings. For instance, the role is highly administrative (Lancaster University, 2015; UCL, 2014) and involves, amongst other things, coordination of personal tutors, timetabling, and room booking. YTs are responsible for the academic progress, welfare and discipline of all students in their department, but do not have direct contact with all of them on an individual basis, except in small programmes.

An experienced programme leader acknowledged that the YTs is *'a role that is used to fill gaps in people's workload'*. He noted that his department currently had 20 YTs who *'are not recruited for, they are assigned. We recruit based on experience and qualifications. We recruit for teaching, not for YTs'*. An Associate Head within the department confirmed this:

'The programme team makes suggestions for who should be in the role, but the Associate Head has the final say. There's no involvement from programme leaders. The Associate Head prioritises teaching. Research hours are first in the workload model, then teaching is slotted in. Then we look at whoever has free time, and that's how we assign YTs'.

Indeed all YTs stated that they were assigned the role by their managers, rather than volunteering for it. A first-year YT acknowledged that *'I was told I was doing it! There was a vague pretence at asking me but we all know what that really means'*. A final-year YT added:

'I was told by my manager that "X is leaving, you've got room on your workload model, you teach on level 6 anyway", so ... they gave me the YT role'.

For each YT, the workload allocation is either 150 hours p.a. (in large programmes) or 75 hours p.a. (for small programmes). In spite of this considerable commitment, there are no job descriptions for YTs (Mitchell, 2015). Hence, YTs have taken elements from their own experiences to develop the role themselves rather than following a prescribed set of instructions (Rhodes and Jinks, 2005). This implicit, or 'tacit', knowledge (Polanyi,

1958) was present in all respondents. Typically, such knowledge only resides in the minds of individuals and is not readily shared with others (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001). Indeed, the fact that tacit knowledge is 'sticky' (Szulanski, 2003) makes it hard to transfer to other parts of the organisation. Hence, a major contribution of this study is to make explicit some of this knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), and thereby aid in the distribution of best practice across the university and beyond (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003).

Research Question 2: Qualities and skills of YTs

The second theme revealed the personal qualities and skills required by YTs. Students were in complete agreement about the qualities and skills a YT should possess. A first year student emphasised the need for comprehensive interpersonal skills:

'YTs need to be engaging, effective, listen to us, guide us, having strong rapport. They need to have good communication skills...and actually care and respond to our expectations. And they need to be accessible. They need a friendly and approachable personality toward students: a personality that says "you can come and talk to me". They should be acting as a guide and advisor.'

Another student, again from the first year, added that YTs need:

'Communication skills, people skills, planning skills, creativity skills. YTs need to see things that others don't see, such as links between units that are not obvious to others.'

Interestingly, YTs and managers focused on different qualities than those valued by students. They emphasised that YTs need to have planning skills, strategic awareness, and extensive management ability. It was also felt that flexibility is a vital asset, because some YTs noted that some issues raised by students are out of the ordinary and require quick thinking to resolve. A final-year YT outlined such a situation:

'One time a student was threatening to commit suicide and was

ringing counselling but couldn't find them. I had to get the programme leader in and deal with it. The issues that come up are endless ... You need to be a VERY organised person, good prep is vital and so is time management. You need to know the students well. Then the person needs to be able to deal with academic and pastoral work. Counselling them is the hardest part of the job'.

Another final-year YT characterised this as an ability to be good at 'firefighting', as many unexpected incidents may occur. YTs also agreed that one of the most tiring duties in the role is handholding. A first-year YT described this as follows:

'You need to be approachable, empathetic, organised especially with big volume of students. Handholding is exhausting so you need to have patience. You need integrity, and you need to be determined that you will deal with various student queries, and then try to come up innovative ideas for engagement'.

YTs identified the complexity of the role and recognised that finding the time to cover everything can be a problem. This, according to another final-year Year Tutor, requires the skill:

'...to be a good juggler! You've got lots of balls in the air at the same time. I'm a unit leader on five units this year, I'm a PT, a YT, I've got placement students and a life to lead. How do you fit it all in? That's why I've never looked for a research allowance – I've not got the time ... That's the main problem'.

A senior manager who works closely with YTs in a large programme, argued that an ideal YT:

'Should be able to take ideas, add their own ideas and present them back to me. We need people with initiative, not just someone who will do what you tell them. The YT must be an academic, not research based. They need to be interested in the

uni generally: how the university can support the students, understand where the student have to take their own experience and learning. They are not nursemaids, but someone who is very pragmatic and rational when it comes to student support. These people need to be coming with innovative ideas. So, when the student comes to see you, you need background, something like a customer relationship system, where you login and see all the information, like attendance, grades, picture, nationality’.

A programme leader held a similar view, and argued that YTs must be high-profile:

‘YTs have to be visible. Make sure they know the students, encouraging and involving them in promoting activities. Because it involves pastoral help, the YT needs to be someone who will be interested. Someone who listens, who is searching for information...and who is proactive. Before start sending letters, you need the truthful conversation with the student’.

Research Question 3: Necessity and development of the Year Tutoring system

The heavy and unclear responsibilities of YTs made it difficult for participants to conclude whether YTs are actually needed. Even more strikingly, training of YTs was completely absent, both with regard to senior management and also in relation to formal HR policies and procedures. The students at Level 4 claimed that YTs are crucial in their studies, although some final-year students were less convinced. The following comment was typical of many: *‘There are lots of year tutors. There are so many that people don’t know which one to go to. There are programme leaders, year tutors, personal tutors...I don’t know if we need them all.’*

Most YTs argued that the role is necessary, especially in big programmes, however, they emphasised the need for training and for clearer distinctions between roles. One of the current YTs mentioned the total absence of training and clear guidelines of the role and defended the importance of *‘a system of allocated roles and procedures, and an understanding of their purpose – what they’re for. Descriptions of what we do are not*

the same as why we do it.' One of the programme coordinators was critical of the role of YTs, since her experience so far (lack of engagement from the YTs in her programme) ended up with her *'doing their job'*. In her opinion, the YT role:

'...should be a role that is being advertised, so that people have a clear idea of what they are doing and that they will actually be engaged in the responsibility. There should be a clear job description created by the people involved, so that the right people apply.'

The same view was shared by a final-year YT who argued that the YT role is unnecessary:

'Being independent should be part of the degree process. When I did my first degree, I was given advice and guidance, but I was expected to find things out for myself. Now, students want everything handed to them on a plate. They're paying 27 grand and they want to be spoon-fed ... Our students are adults. They can vote. They can fight in wars. They can get married. But we are treating them like children. Some support is great, it really is, but we do far too much of it. We have so many layers of support that we're undermining the principle of independent learning. And the cost of all this support is huge too. If we create a role, but we aren't clear about what it is, then we create other roles. Those roles overlap and that creates inefficiency. And inefficiency soaks up resources... There are so many processes that it takes away from management. They can't manage the people, because they don't know what the people are doing, so they end up managing the processes instead.'

Conclusions and implications

The findings of the study provide support for the three research questions in relation to YTs. Firstly, participants demonstrated complete absence of formal recruitment and

selection processes, as their allocation as YTs relied on informal, non-validated methods of recruitment and selection. This was decided purely on the workload availability of certain people, and on informal discussions between Associate Heads and Programme leaders. The existing YTs stated lack of knowledge and clarity in what the role of the Year tutor actually is, and there is little consistency across the organisation. To this extent, our findings mirror the paucity of the academic literature in this area. However, our research will, for the first time, allow an indicative 'job description' to be developed, that will aid the human resource department specify the role's attributes.

This study has also shown that when recruiting academic staff, managers are typically concerned with ensuring that candidates are selected on the basis of qualifications and teaching experience. The need (or not) for prior YT experience is not considered at all, despite the role being included in an academic's workload. Consequently, YTs tend to be assigned from the existing teaching pool rather than being specifically recruited for the role. There is little attempt to match experience to the requirements of the role, and selection is based on a range of factors including simply having space available on one's workload model.

There is also a broad consensus within the organisation that identifies the precise skills that are required by those in the YT role. This has clear implications for recruitment – most obviously in the development of person specifications. The participants placed great emphasis on the interpersonal, personality and general attributes of the members of staff who act as YTs, and less on the specific job-related skills of the academics. Moreover, there is no attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of current YTs. The findings demonstrated that unless an academic voluntarily withdraws from the role, management will again assign the specific workload on a year-basis. The authors offer this very much as a 'first step' and would welcome comments and amendments from others in the field. This has human resource implications in terms of both theory and practice, since senior managers need to ensure that in an era of intense competition, the 'right' people are recruited and allocated to the 'right' positions in the organisation.

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