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(2017) Building Relationships: A Personal Tutoring Framework to
Enhance Student Transition and Attainment. *Student Engagement
in Higher Education Journal*, 1 (2). pp. 88-99.

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Building Relationships: A Personal Tutoring Framework to Enhance Student Transition and Attainment

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Dawn Walker is a final year History student at the University of Hull and spent 4 months working as a student intern on the project described in this case study.

Now at York St John University, David Grey was an academic at the University of Hull and the academic project manager for this work. His interests lie in the field of personal tutoring.

Summary

The University of Hull recently revised its policy on personal tuition. This paper outlines the revised approach, and discusses the student partnership project which was used to facilitate its implementation. It focuses particularly on the creation of a framework for a structured and purposeful programme of activities which tutors can use to support transitions and encourage student development. The structure of the framework is explored, together with a discussion of its implementation through the provision of guidance, structured activities, and Learning Management System (LMS) resources. A preliminary evaluation was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the framework in supporting the goals of the personal tutoring policy, and the results of this evaluation are discussed.

Description of the project

During the summer of 2015, the University of Hull revised its policy on personal tuition in response to student concerns raised through the Student Union. National Student Survey (NSS) and UK Engagement Survey (UKES) results, together with the Student Union's Education Survey, drew attention to the need to improve the student experience and perceptions of key issues relating to personal tutoring. The aims of the revised policy are to provide a stable, consistent point of contact and to provide academic support for every student through a strong and meaningful tutoring relationship. The goal is to ensure that students receive the support they need to explore their potential and have an 'exceptional student experience' (University of Hull, 2011). The revised approach seeks to delineate academic and pastoral support following the professional model identified by Earwaker (Earwaker, 1992), and mandates both individual and group tutorial meetings. Tutors are responsible for monitoring academic progress, providing a link between the student and university, and facilitating development of academic, personal, and professional skills. The policy requires tutors to signpost or refer students to central student services for support with pastoral issues.

The Academic Support Tuition Project – A Student Partnership

The revised policy requires personal tutors to provide a minimum of two individual and two group meetings in each semester of a degree programme. Through these meetings, tutors are required to offer tutees a 'structured and purposeful' (University of Hull, 2015) programme of activities. These activities should assist students in action planning, and in interpreting and using assessment feedback to improve their academic performance.

Offering both individual and group meetings was a challenge for all academic Schools. Previously, schools had offered either individual or group tutorials, but not both. Providing a purposeful programme of activities was also a challenge because the policy did not provide any guidance on what this programme should be.

Following the approval of the policy by Senate, an institution-wide project was established to assist academic Schools in implementing its requirements. The implementation project was a partnership between the university and the Students' Union. The project ran for a period of one year and was led by an academic on part-time secondment, with the bulk of the work being undertaken by eight student interns recruited from across the university.

The project implemented a personal tutoring evaluation process to ensure ongoing effective provision of personal tutoring. It also provided a coordinated approach to setting students' expectations of personal tutoring, tutor training and resources for tutors to create a structured programme of activities. The student interns were responsible for gathering student feedback, creating video case studies of student experiences, defining the evaluation process, designing the framework activities and creating resources for tutors.

Supporting Transition through Personal Tutoring

High quality personal tutoring can support transition to university study and positively impact student retention, progression, and performance (Thomas 2006) . The project team decided from the outset that the implementation of the revised policy should focus on supporting student transition, attainment, and the enhancement of graduate attributes. The approach taken was informed by the literature on transition, retention and engagement, and in particular, the findings of the What Works project (Thomas, 2012) and the HERE Toolkit (Foster et al. 2012). Key principles identified in the literature were

- Supporting students 'at risk' by monitoring engagement and providing access to additional student support
- Helping students to become effective HE learners by building beneficial study practices and habits, improving assessment literacy, and using feedback effectively to improve performance
- Valuing students as individuals
- Developing supportive personal relationships with staff as early as possible
- Fostering a sense of belonging to a learning community through small group activities and peer support
- Developing motivation by showing students how their programme can help them achieve their future goals

Due to its focus on individuals and small group activities, personal tuition can help address many of these principles and has a key role to play in supporting success and transition (Thomas et al. 2017). These principles offered guidance for the creation of the structured personal tutoring framework, and the activities and resources that support it.

A Personal Tutoring framework to support Transition

The purpose of developing a framework was to provide a suggested programme of group tutorial activities which tutors could use with their tutees to build beneficial study skills, foster learning communities, and enhance the articulation of graduate attributes. Barrie (Barrie, 2007) identifies a complementary concept of graduate attribute acquisition in which graduate attributes are developed outside of disciplinary content and the core curriculum, and are instead developed through a 'secondary curriculum' offered to students. The framework developed through the work reported here followed Barrie's complementary approach. Creating a set of resources to support the framework enables tutors to easily implement a secondary curriculum and offers consistency of opportunity to the student experience.

Important transitional points in the student journey were identified and staff and student focus groups were formed to identify key themes and principles which the framework would address in each transitional phase. Guiding aims and outcomes were specified for each phase, and the full framework is described in Table 1. The primary foci of the first year are helping tutees adjust to university level study, develop academic skills and assessment literacy, and engaging with extra-curricular activities. The focus of the second and final years is enhancing employability, professional skills and preparing for graduation. It was considered important to include a theme to encourage engagement with students and the building of student-tutor relationship pre-arrival, as there is evidence to indicate that this is effective in enhancing a sense of belonging and supporting transition (Thomas 2012; Foster et al. 2012). The themes identified in the framework are considered as effective practice recommendations which tutors may follow. Adoption of the framework is not mandatory, it simply provides guidance to tutors on how to structure tutoring activities to provide a useful and meaningful experience for students.

The student interns reflected on their own experience, and that of other students, to identify small group activities which could be used within each theme to achieve the intended outcomes. For instance, in the 'Getting Connected' theme there is an activity to help students develop library skills and find information relevant to their discipline. In the 'Enhancing Your Future' theme, students create CVs and job applications in preparation for graduation and/or finding placements. First-year activities focus on developing the necessary academic skills and study habits to succeed in higher education, whilst activities in later years increasingly focus on transitioning out of university. For instance, the third-year Employability Audit identifies whether students are acquiring and evidencing the graduate attributes which enhance their employment prospects.

A schedule for delivering the framework was also proposed which left sufficient space for the inclusion of discipline specific tutorials and skill building activities. This was created with the intention of the framework being incorporated into the existing academic tutorial programmes. In this way, the personal tutoring activities appear to

the student as a seamless part of the curriculum, echoing Earwaker's (Earwaker, 1992) curriculum model of personal tutoring. Tutors are also free to produce their own activities to meet the suggested aims and outcomes.

Implementation

A library of tutorial activities and learning resources was created to promote the use of the framework. These were made available to staff to enable tutors to deliver the tutorials easily and consistently. Each tutorial was documented using a standard template which outlined its aims, activities, and a follow-up call to action. This provided guidance to tutors on preparing, delivering, and sequencing the activities to address the intended outcomes. The main learning points were clearly identified for the benefit of tutors and any additional resources required to deliver the tutorial were also described and documented.

The tutorial documentation and learning resources were packaged as re-usable learning objects and published to staff via the institutional learning management system (Canvas). Additional online activities, such as diagnostic quizzes, were included in these learning objects. An online site was created for each tutor group within Canvas to allow tutors and tutees to interact online. Tutors could add the re-usable learning objects created by the project to this site. This had the effect of adding all the resources and activities necessary to support the group tutorials along with guidance notes for the tutor. The resources and activities were visible to students, whilst the guidance notes were only visible to the tutor. Many of the follow-up calls to action were implemented as online activities, allowing the tutor to monitor student engagement with these through the learning analytics built into Canvas. Tutor group sites were also used to maintain student attendance registers as an additional proxy for engagement, as attendance has been identified as a predictor for achievement (Newman-Ford et al. 2009; Davis 2011). These features enable tutors to identify students who are disengaging, and to follow this up by contacting those students and/or addressing their level of engagement during individual tutorial meetings.

There were several advantages to this approach. The Canvas LMS used by the institution provided a more robust mechanism for communicating with students using their preferred communication media (including email, SMS, Facebook and Twitter). The ability to communicate with students using their preferred medium was a key factor in the institution adopting Canvas. The project team anticipated that providing online personal tutor sites within Canvas would allow greater communication reach and could improve staff-student communications (Neville 2007; Foster et al. 2012). Canvas offers a convenient way to package and reuse learning resources. Using this feature made the resources and materials for tutorials more accessible, making the process more inclusive (University of Hull, 2016) and efficient. The calendar features of Canvas allow students to request appointments and enable staff to schedule tutorial meetings, making the tutoring process more proactive (Schwebel et al. 2012). This was an important consideration because the university was unable to schedule tutorials through its central timetabling process.

The original intention was to use Canvas to facilitate easier and more inclusive pre-arrival interaction (Foster et al. 2012) between tutors and tutees, allowing them to introduce themselves using text, audio or video messaging. This would allow online

tutor-tutee and peer-to-peer interactions, enhancing a sense of belonging and fostering the development of social and learning communities before arrival at university. Diagnostic quizzes could also be used to learn something about new students and identify those who may be most in need of support upon entering the university. Although this is all technically feasible, it was not possible to implement these pre-arrival interactions because new student computer accounts are not created before registration on campus. The account creation process is being revised and the intention is to use Canvas for pre-arrival interaction as soon as this becomes possible.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

Although not mandatory for use by all tutors, the project team wanted to ensure that the personal tutoring framework was widely applicable, beneficial to students, and helped to achieve the aims of the personal tutoring policy. An institution-wide evaluation of the framework has not yet been carried out as it has only been introduced during the current academic year. However, the framework was trialled by integrating it into the first-year personal tutoring framework of the Computer Science department. The group tutorial activities provided by the project were interspersed with discipline-specific tutorial activities and delivered by all tutors in the department throughout the first semester.

This department was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it had abandoned the use of first-year group tutorials 12 years earlier, so it was effectively starting again in introducing group tutorials to comply with the institutional policy. Secondly, it had benefitted for several years from a pilot programme which provided a dedicated student success advisor to offer additional support to students, but this pilot had recently ended. The results from that pilot revealed that students used the student success advisor as the first port of call and took issues to her rather than raising them with academic staff, with the result that student engagement with personal tutors had declined. The intention of piloting the personal tutoring framework in this environment was to see if it would help in building relationships with academic staff and making personal tutors more approachable.

A key aim of the University's personal tutoring policy is to build supportive staff-student relationships. The pilot deployment of the personal tutoring framework was evaluated to examine what effect, if any, it had in promoting staff-student relations. At the end of the semester, all students who had experienced the framework tutorials were invited to participate in an evaluation survey. The survey included open free-text responses and closed questions. Of the ~280 students involved in the pilot, only 50 responded to the survey but the responses received were encouraging. 66% of respondents indicated that they had found the group tutorial sessions useful, with free-text responses indicating that the most positive aspects of the tutorials were getting to know their tutor and getting to know other students. Help with general study skills and disciplinary specific skills (not part of the framework) were listed as the least positive aspects of the group tutorials.

More encouragingly, 74% of respondents commented that they find their tutor more approachable because of the relationship that they have built with them through the group tutorial activities. 64% of respondents believe they are more likely to seek help

from their tutor if they encounter problems in their studies. These results suggest that, even if the specific activities were not considered particularly useful, the very act of engaging in group tutorial activities is beneficial in building the supportive personal relationships that the revised tutoring policy encouraged.

Reflections on the project

The personal tutoring framework pilot integrated general academic skills support into group tutorials alongside discipline-specific activities. It was expected that students focused solely on their discipline might initially resist the academic skills support or find it less useful. Interestingly, our evaluation revealed that both the general and disciplinary activities were considered the least positive aspects of the group tutorials. This suggests that students did not see the relevance of any of the activities provided, even those relating directly to their discipline. This could be because the pilot was conducted with first-year students who had only just commenced their course and had not yet experienced any summative assessment. As such, these students were still in the transition from post-16 to Higher Education study and perhaps could not see the applicability of such skills to their learning or the wider discipline. It would be interesting to undertake a longitudinal study to evaluate the impact of the tutorial activities on student confidence and attainment over the course of their programme.

The students did see the benefit of the small group working in breaking down barriers and making staff more approachable. Small group working has previously been identified as useful in building peer relationships between students (Cook & Rushton 2008). In our evaluation, 24% of respondents found getting to know other students one of the most positive aspects of the tutorial system, whilst 16% found getting to know other students one of the least positive aspects. This suggests that a significant proportion of students did not value the group tutorials for building peer relationships, although this may be an artefact of a discipline which is known to attract a high proportion of students with conditions such as Asperger's and autism that impact on their ability to socialise (Rosmaita, Deibel, Cohen, & Egan, 2006).

No formal evaluation of staff views on the tutorials was conducted, but staff reactions reported verbally to the project team were mixed and generally less than positive. Tutor comments suggested that they were resistant to the tutorial activities because they were not discipline-specific, or because they thought the activities unnecessary for their students. This perhaps also reflects Barrie's observation regarding the complementary approach to the teaching of graduate attributes, in that it is seen as secondary and unrelated to the teaching of the standard curriculum (Barrie, 2007). However, the choice of tutorial activities was informed by specific student requests for coverage of such topics in feedback from the induction process in previous years. The intention of providing documented tutorial activities was that it would reduce the tutorial preparation time for tutors. In practice, the tutors were rather critical of the activities on their first encounter with them, although more constructive suggestions for improvements were offered once they had trialled the activities with their tutees. The resistance of the tutors to the activities was perhaps influenced by their overall resistance to changes in the tutoring process and the introduction of group tutorials at a time of significantly increased workloads and institutional change.

Follow up and future plans

The pilot of the personal tutoring framework initially suggests that it is the small group environment rather than the specific tutorial activities, which are of greatest value in supporting the aims of the institution's personal tutoring policy. It is recognised that the evaluation is limited by only being performed at one specific point in the student journey, and within one discipline. Further studies are required to assess the impact of the framework across disciplines, and at subsequent stages of the student journey. By the time of publication, the authors will have moved on from the University of Hull so further evaluation within that setting may not be possible. Several other UK universities are exploring combined group and individual tutorial processes which use a structured framework of activities. Through the auspices of cross-institutional research facilitated by the UK Advising and Tutoring group (UKAT), the authors are working with these institutions to explore the effectiveness of structured tutorial activities within blended group and individual settings. The investigation is being conducted across several disciplines and aims to determine whether providing a structured framework increases the equality of outcome for students across an institution. It will also consider the most appropriate balance between group and individual tutorials.

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Table 1 - Aims, outcomes and activities in the personal tutoring framework

Journey Point	Theme	Aims	Outcomes By the end of this stage, students will ...	Activities
Pre-arrival	Getting to know YOU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships • Easing the transition to university • Identifying 'at risk' students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know who their tutor is and how to contact them • Outline broad goals for their time at university • Identify issues and areas of concern about moving to University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Video) messaging with tutor via Canvas LMS • Complete pre-entry (predictive) survey via Canvas LMS
Certificate Stage S1 – First 4 weeks	Getting Connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships • Social integration • Settling in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the purpose and value of the personal tutorial process • Understand their timetable • Find their way around the campus • Know how and where to find information about their course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ice-breakers and team building • Note taking • Finding information and library skills
Certificate Stage S1 Week 5 onwards	Preparing for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing the rhythm of the student year • Support tutees to be prepared for their assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be familiar with communication processes, information systems, absence and attendance processes • Know how to submit coursework • Understand how to prepare effectively for exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and writing assignments • Using references and avoiding plagiarism • Revision guidance and exam technique
Certificate Stage S2 – First 4 weeks	Making the most of University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working effectively • Action planning and using feedback • Engaging with extra-curricular opportunities to develop graduate attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on feedback on assessed and work and use to plan for improvements • Know how to manage their time effectively • Understand the range of extra-curricular opportunities for developing graduate attributes available within the university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using feedback for personal development – reflective learning and action planning • Time management and organisation • Exploring sources of information on extra-curricular opportunities • Managing your digital identity

Journey Point	Theme	Aims	Outcomes By the end of this stage, students will ...	Activities
Diploma Stage	Enhancing your Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability • Developing graduate attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the importance of engaging with extra-curricular opportunities which develop graduate attributes • Have developed a CV and covering letter • Understand the process of finding and applying for jobs or future study • Engage with the Careers service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CV and job application exercise • Career choice exploration and/or presentation
Honours Stage S1	Becoming a Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for the future • Selling yourself/your skill set 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a plan for what they intend to do after graduation, with clearly identified actions for implementation • Have a professional online profile and an effective CV • Have provided information to their tutor to facilitate the production of effective references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability audit – to identify students who would benefit from interventions
Honours Stage S2	Moving On	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitioning out of university • Staying connected • Providing feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the graduation process • Appreciate the importance of providing feedback on their student experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining graduation and opportunities for remaining connected to the institution as Alumni
Pre-arrival	Getting to know YOU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships • Easing the transition to university • Identifying 'at risk' students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know who their tutor is and how to contact them • Outline broad goals for their time at university • Identify issues and areas of concern about moving to University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Video) messaging with tutor via Canvas LMS • Complete pre-entry (predictive) survey via Canvas LMS

Journey Point	Theme	Aims	Outcomes By the end of this stage, students will ...	Activities
Certificate Stage S1 – First 4 weeks	Getting Connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships • Social integration • Settling in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the purpose and value of the personal tutorial process • Understand their timetable • Find their way around the campus • Know how and where to find information about their course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ice-breakers and team building • Note taking • Finding information and library skills
Certificate Stage S1 Week 5 onwards	Preparing for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing the rhythm of the student year • Support tutees to be prepared for their assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be familiar with communication processes, information systems, absence and attendance processes • Know how to submit coursework • Understand how to prepare effectively for exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and writing assignments • Using references and avoiding plagiarism • Revision guidance and exam technique
Certificate Stage S2 – First 4 weeks	Making the most of University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working effectively • Action planning and using feedback • Engaging with extra-curricular opportunities to develop graduate attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on feedback on assessed and work and use to plan for improvements • Know how to manage their time effectively • Understand the range of extra-curricular opportunities for developing graduate attributes available within the university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using feedback for personal development – reflective learning and action planning • Time management and organisation • Exploring sources of information on extra-curricular opportunities • Managing your digital identity
Diploma Stage	Enhancing your Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability • Developing graduate attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the importance of engaging with extra-curricular opportunities which develop graduate attributes • Have developed a CV and covering letter • Understand the process of finding and applying for jobs or future study • Engage with the Careers service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CV and job application exercise • Career choice exploration and/or presentation

Journey Point	Theme	Aims	Outcomes By the end of this stage, students will ...	Activities
Honours Stage S1	Becoming a Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for the future • Selling yourself/your skill set 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a plan for what they intend to do after graduation, with clearly identified actions for implementation • Have a professional online profile and an effective CV • Have provided information to their tutor to facilitate the production of effective references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability audit – to identify students who would benefit from interventions
Honours Stage S2	Moving On	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitioning out of university • Staying connected • Providing feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the graduation process • Appreciate the importance of providing feedback on their student experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining graduation and opportunities for remaining connected to the institution as Alumni