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Personal Tutoring : Using student experience to drive institution-wide change (0235)

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## **Introduction**

This paper discusses a process of institutional change which began with a review of personal tutoring provision in a large London post-92 institution and resulted in a new Personal Tutoring policy that was radical in its ambition for university-wide consistency, transparency and resourcing. We analyse this in terms of establishing and moving from espoused theory to theory-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974), with student experience and ownership as a key driver. By making student entitlement transparent to students and staff alike, we were able to achieve previously unachievable university-wide baseline consistency and resourcing.

## **Context**

Our own institutional research, conducted from 2011-12, showed areas of good practice but also identified significant disparities in existing provision and student experience. Our findings were consonant with sector research on the importance of personal tutoring and its potential to enhance student experience and achievement, in its twin aspects of individual pastoral tutoring and developmental group work. It confirmed the importance of personal tutoring for addressing retention issues, also seen in sector research (e.g. Robbins 2006, Yorke & Longden 2008, Laycock 2009, Thomas 2012, Yorke & Thomas 2003) and for supporting new students through transition (Cook and Rushton 2008).

Sector research argues that institutional commitment to retention support needs to be mainstreamed, not targeted (eg Jardine 2005, Stone 2005, Tinto 2006-7), institution-wide, collaborative and properly resourced (Tinto 2002, White 2011) and frontloaded (Andrews & Drake 2011). Developments within the sector suggest that effective personal tutoring could be self-financing (Hixenbaugh & Thomas 2006, Thomas 2011, NUS 2011) and provide evidence that personal tutoring is becoming an arena within which universities are increasing investment to establish differentiation in their competition for students. (Porter, 1980)

## **Our institutional challenge**

Our research presented the challenge of extending existing excellent practice, which is clearly impacting positively on student experience, across a large, very diverse and geographically dispersed institution. The recommendations emerging from our research were accepted by the university; we were asked to draft policy which was endorsed in March 2013. It was easy to establish the desirables for the policy and these were drawn directly from student and staff views in a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' manner, informed by sector research. Policy is at risk of being 'espoused theory' which does not translate into 'theory-in-practice' and the real challenge was to frame these

desirables in a way which was achievable and would get buy-in from all the stakeholders; consistency, transparency and resourcing are problematic in a large and diverse university.

### **Meeting the challenge**

The need for improved and consistent personal tutoring provision was accepted; 'espoused theory' was established, including the notion of baseline university-wide entitlement for students. The policy was strategically aligned both to KPIs around retention and achievement, and to institutional direction and policy. Accepting the need for local ownership and implementation, the policy builds upon university-wide baseline entitlements with discipline- and School-based tailoring and enhancement.

This was sufficient to take the policy through the approval process.

To translate the policy (espoused theory) into theory-in-use we pursued two themes, entitlement and responsibility, in an even-handed way for both students and staff. Students have entitlements but also responsibilities; staff have responsibilities but also entitlements. Furthermore, written into the policy was institutional responsibility for putting into place the conditions required to make the policy work.

To ensure that this took place, we proposed that students should have as much knowledge as anyone else about their entitlements. Working with the Students' Union, we proposed an awareness campaign for students at the start of term.

The corresponding information dissemination to staff, in the early summer, brought to a head the issue of institutional resourcing and support for personal tutors. Whilst staff welcomed institutional recognition of the value of personal tutoring, they had urgent questions about what that recognition meant in practice; their concern was that the principle of equal entitlement would not be the same as the practice of equal entitlement. This threatened the successful roll-out of the policy, and we will be reporting on the outcomes to date.

Having an even-handed collaborative approach with students, transparency of information and the increasing emphasis on student experience gives change agents/champions a way of exerting leverage with management to move the organisation from espoused theory - the rhetoric - to theory-in-use, the practical outcomes.

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