Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Digital Tools, Pastoral Support and Covid-19: A Match Made in A Global Pandemic?

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: In a climate of accountability, 'value for money,' larger numbers of students demonstrating wellbeing issues, and an emphasis on 'belonging' in higher education, the personal tutor role is instrumental in supporting wellbeing, retention, and progression. Whilst effective relationships with personal tutors are known to enhance degree outcomes for students, there is a time implication both for tutor workloads and familiarity processes. Separately, with the recent rise in usage of online tools for pedagogy, digital approaches for pastoral support needs further investigation. This study, conducted in an English university with 156 undergraduate students, explored the usage of a digital form embedded with pastoral-related questions in order to accelerate both tutor insights and to 'fast-track' a relationship with individual students. The digital form proved to enhance the student experience, with the findings reflecting four themes: Sense of belonging, role of the tutor, mental health and wellbeing, and the impact of Covid-19.

Paper: Universities currently operate in a climate where they are expected to deliver a service that not only offers an opportunity to gain a degree but also actively supports students. Previous research has considered ever-expanding student numbers (Yale, 2019) who demand 'value for money' via a specific service under the guise of being customers (Modell, 2005). This is against a backdrop of greater time pressures, competing demands on academic staff (Por & Barriball, 2008), and larger student numbers demonstrating wellbeing issues (Universities UK, 2020). In this context, digital tools can bridge the gap between expectations and the student experience.

Prior research encompasses digital tools for pedagogy (Williams, 2012), however, digital approaches in pastoral support have not been fully explored outside of the remit of formal counselling (Situmorang, 2020) and distance learning (Hilliam & Williams, 2019). Universities generally centralise wellbeing and other support services, requiring signposting for non-academic support. Despite this, the personal tutor is the student's first point of contact and it cannot be underestimated how this relationship shapes the student experience. Hence this study adds something fresh to the existing body of research. During the research, the unexpected advent and subsequent impact of the Covid 19 pandemic further highlighted the vital role of personal tutoring particularly for student wellbeing, retention and progression.

After ethical clearance, this study was conducted in a university on the south coast of England with 156 students enrolled in a suite of four full-time 'traditional' face-to-face undergraduate social sciences degrees. Within a study skills module, students are allocated a designated academic 'personal tutor' to address academic and personal matters. Whilst this module design has historically

allowed for a holistic approach to study skills and pastoral support, it has relied on students being confident enough to approach their personal tutors in order to articulate needs. This was something that many were often reticent to do.

This research examined whether the dynamic usage of digital tools could enhance personal tutoring practices whilst aiding the development of a sense of belonging for students. The key question addressed in the research was: 'Could relationships characterised by open conversation and 'belonging' develop more quickly by using a digital form'? Prior to each individual tutorial throughout the academic year, individual students addressed a series of pastoral-related questions within the form which the tutor received. This approach allowed the tutor insights into the world inhabited by the student and enabled a 'fast-tracking' of a relationship. Students did not have to voice concerns within a 'cold' meeting as these had already been recorded on the form. All students were informed of the right not to have their responses shared outside the research project. The responses of the students who agreed to participate were collated in a singular document. This was then analysed using a ground theory approach. Four key themes emerged: sense of belonging, role of the tutor, mental health and wellbeing, and the impact of Covid-19.

Whilst the pandemic impacted the ability to attend classes on campus, this analysis of the data highlighted that students did not feel lacking in support. Students reported the importance of regular contact with their personal tutor significantly eased the pressure on their mental health and wellbeing particularly when they were feeling isolated because of the impact of Covid-19. The findings suggest that stronger tutor-student relationships can be developed through usage of digital forms, including for those students who may drop off the radar because they are not proactive in seeking support. As the students on these undergraduate degrees did not sign up for a 'remote' learning course, the usage of the form has aided a sense of belonging and an ability to raise concerns with a key person that they have a relationship with. Whilst the findings suggest that the impact of Covid 19 has been largely negative on the holistic student experience, the dynamic usage of the digital form resulted in students' overwhelmingly positive feelings of belonging at the university.

The implications of this research highlight that students both want and need a strong relationship with an empathic tutor who understands them and their individual needs. With digital tools, personal tutors are able to reach larger student populations, combat reluctance to approach personal tutors from some students whilst being time-efficient. The study has highlighted that digital tools should span the breadth of higher education practice, and used in a dynamic way, can aid student wellbeing, retention, and progression, remedying the challenges associated with the current consumerist climate.

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