

## **G11.4 Denbigh 2 Thursday 6 December 9.00 - 11.00**

### ***Personal Academic Tutoring: Moving from a Deficit Approach (0363)***

**Dr Tamsin Bowers-Brown**<sup>1</sup>, David Lochtie<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>*University of Derby, United Kingdom* <sup>2</sup>*Union of Students, University of Derby, United Kingdom*

Between December 2017 and February 2018, academic and professional services staff alongside representatives from the Union of Students at the University of Derby worked together as part of a personal tutoring task and finish group to develop a new institutional approach to personal tutoring. The group shared experiences and evaluated evidence in order to recommend a new approach to personal academic tutoring. The group was informed by expertise beyond personal/professional experience in order to make judgements on best practice. The evidence base included research contributed from: the University of Derby Student Rep conference; the Union of Students' survey on personal tutoring (Hill, 2017) national research undertaken by colleagues in wellbeing (Byrom & Hughes, 2018) and an internal review of the institution's Joint Honours programmes (Martin, 2017). The use of evidence to inform practice as well as involvement from colleagues across colleges and professional services demonstrated a will and a necessity to improve practice in this important area of student engagement.

Discussions within the group highlighted that practice across the institution but also within colleges was disparate; there was not a consistent approach to how tutors undertook their role or indeed how this role was communicated to students beyond a programme level. Between programmes, practice also varied, tutoring embedded in modules, in some instances student engagement with personal tutoring was assessed and in other programmes personal tutoring sits outside modules and tutors arrange when and how often they meet with their tutees. This lack of consistency was particularly problematic for Joint Honours students who under previous guidance were required to engage with two personal tutors who may have employed a different set of requirements to engagement with the tutorial system.

The lack of consistency across the institution did not mean that practice was poor, there are many examples of how and why personal tutoring works well. However, there was evidence that some staff and students regarded personal tutoring as a service for those who require support; this can lead to over burdensome expectations of the personal tutor. Indeed, Byrom & Hughes report that the obfuscation between the academic and pastoral nature of the academic role can lead to 'increased risk for students, staff and universities' (2018:1). Where staff do not feel adequately equipped to deal with issues that students might disclose, the relationship can become problematic.

This paper discusses the institutional changes that were developed to address all of the concerns highlighted above as evidenced in the student and staff discussions.

### **The Derby Approach to Personal Academic Tutoring**

The Student Experience Framework (2017-2020) advocates proactive engagement between academic staff and students through the personal academic tutoring system in order that students are able to realise success and articulate their academic ambition, allowing them to 'be distinct'. A clearly defined personal academic tutoring scheme was central to the 'be distinct' aim and placed at the centre of successful student learning; empowering students to accept and take on challenge, to engage in their university experience and to graduate with a clear understanding of how to articulate what it is about their personal university experience that makes them distinct.

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, under the assessment measures for the Learning Environment: Personalised Learning (LE3) requires that 'Students' academic experiences are tailored to the individual, maximising rates of retention, attainment and progression (Department for Education, 2017:25). The new policy aims to provide this level of excellence through Personal Academic Tutoring to engage students in the intellectual pursuit of their discipline as well as to challenge and motivate them to succeed beyond their own expectations in both their academic and professional outcomes.

Groves & Burden (2017:np) identify the reported benefits of personal tutoring as: 'development in confidence, promotion of student voice and engagement, a growing sense of belonging, as well as an increase in student retention, improved academic performance and employability'. Whilst these benefits are associated with a positive personal tutoring experience, research suggests that a poor personal tutoring experience can have a detrimental impact on students' engagement with the institution (Owen, 2002; Dobinson-Harrington, 2006; Yale, 2017). The importance of 'getting it right' in personal academic tutoring is therefore paramount to the student experience and requires clear expectations of both the student and staff role in this relationship- this must be clearly communicated to both parties.

The first key change which supports the development point outlined in Groves and Burden's (2017) work and Byrom & Hughes research (2018) is signified by the change in title from 'Personal Tutor' to 'Personal Academic Tutor' (PAT). This change reflects the ethos in which the tutor/student relationship should be framed and shifts the emphasis from what has been viewed in the past as a deficit approach to tutorials to one of empowering students to take ownership of their learning. The name change acknowledges that the academic tutor is often the person who a student will feel most comfortable approaching for advice and guidance but that the core component of this role is academic rather than pastoral.

Personal academic tutoring offers academic staff the opportunity to engage with their students at an individual level, to foster academic challenge and to ensure that students feel stretched but confident to achieve their academic/professional goals. Personal academic tutoring is the ideal environment for the student experience to be felt as an individualised offer; uniquely tailoring opportunities to encourage transformational learning.

Empowering students to take ownership of their learning should not be misconstrued as the institution relinquishing accountability by placing the responsibility of learning solely on students, nor should it be perceived as a model that places the students in deficit through a

notion that students just need to work harder in order to be successful (Lombardi, 2016). The model proposed here acknowledges that the institution, and in particular, the tutor will be the person who collaborates with their students to co-construct academic challenge and ensure that this is manageable.

Tutorials should not be seen as 'where I go when I need help' but as an opportunity to discuss how the university and in particular the tutor can work with students in achieving the most from their time at the University of Derby. Tutorials should be an opportunity to encourage students to draw out what is meaningful to them about their programme of study and to identify where they can make progress. Purposeful engagement with progress goals, creates an opportunity for students and tutors to reduce the bigger picture of the programme into meaningful individual outcomes (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Personal academic tutorials will offer students the opportunity to make connections between different elements of their programme and provides the opportunity for staff and students to co-construct a unique overarching narrative that expresses the student's sense of purpose within the institution. Personal academic tutoring is fundamental in ensuring students understand their programme of study, the inter-relationship between their programme and the academic, personal and professional development services within the university. Staff will provide guidance to students on how they can make use of these services to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging, that they matter and that they are able to engage with their university experience holistically.

This paper draws on models of student support to demonstrate how and why the evidence points to a requirement to reframe the personal tutoring role to ensure that students feel empowered rather than infantilised and equipped for success in and beyond their academic journey.