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A Systematic Review of Academic Personal Tutoring using a Design Thinking Methodology

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: A Systematic Review of Academic Personal Tutoring using a Design Thinking Methodology

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the review and revision of Academic Personal Tutoring within the Faculty of Business and Law at Coventry University. In addition, the Design Sprint process by which this initiative has been undertaken is discussed.

A three-pronged approach to support was created including Progress Coaches: to replace existing personal tutors and a Digital solution (Chat Bot)offering 24/7 triage support, signposting students with generic issues/concerns. The Sprint process saw initial discussion to implementation in less than nine months. A comprehensive review of the year since implementation is being undertaken at the time of writing, and evaluation will be presented at the Conference.

Paper: Presentation Format: Individual Paper

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Key Words: Student Experience, achievement, attainment, academic support.

Introduction

This paper presents an overview of the review and revision of personal tutoring within the Faculty of Business and Law at Coventry University. In addition, the process by which this initiative has been undertaken is discussed. The purpose is two-fold, firstly to disseminate a creative and inclusive approach to personal tutoring, and secondly to share the innovative process by which the project was undertaken, and suggest how this method may be applied elsewhere.

Background

The importance of effective support mechanisms for students in higher education is well documented in the literature. There exists an increasingly diverse student population with growing numbers of first-generation students, students with caring and /or work commitments which limits time for social engagement, students with customer informed expectations of support, underpinned by a drive to enhance the student experience (Mcfarland, 2016; Owen, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

In Coventry University's Faculty of Business and Law, the Academic Personal Tutor (APT) system was predicated around workload whereby all academic staff were allocated hours to undertake personal tutoring, resulting in around thirty students per person. It appeared that practice varied widely in terms of the priority given to this role by staff, compared with other academic responsibilities – notably teaching and research. Anecdotal evidence suggested significant differences in access, contact and support offered, which was of concern given the desire to offer a consistent and positive student experience, and support student attainment. The decision was taken to review the process, and do so using the 'sprint' method.

The Design Sprint Background

Systematic approaches to problem solving are well documented in the literature. The notion of design has evolved from relating to development of new products to an increasingly sophisticated concept advocating multi-disciplinary, multiple-stakeholder, team-based approaches (Lindberg, Noweski and Meinel, 2010). Support has grown for problem solving methods involving customers and other stakeholders (Liedtka, 2018).

Google Ventures' Design Sprint was created by Jake Knapp in 2010 and has been used extensively with business start-ups. In essence, Sprint is a time limited (< five day) process for solving business problems incorporating the design, prototype and customer testing phases. The underlying principle is to expedite the process to achieve greater efficiency and determine whether further investment is worthwhile. At Coventry University, colleagues from the Disruptive Media Learning Lab have developed a higher education focussed version of the Sprint.

Coventry University Sprint to address Academic Personal Tutoring

A three-day sprint was planned with the core team comprising the Faculty's Associate Dean for Student Experience and four Associate Heads of School (Student Experience), Faculty Student Voice co-ordinator and two colleagues from the university's Disruptive Media Learning Lab. Timely forward planning ensured all relevant stakeholders were available to participate during the Sprint.

Day one (Monday). The first day focussed on identifying the perceived issues with the existing

personal tutor system with input from undergraduate and postgraduate students, Course Directors, and colleagues from professional services and the wider university teams. Outcomes from the day were a thorough review of the issues seen through the prism of these different stakeholders. An additional output from this day was clarification of the extent of existing support for students, captured in Fig.1.

Day two (Tuesday). Informed by discussion from day one, the core team focussed on developing a framework of physical and digital support to better enhance the student experience.

Day three (Thursday). Undergraduate and postgraduate students, and colleagues from professional services and the wider university teams, were invited to give feedback on the outcomes identified. This feedback was incorporated into the proposed solution for a new system for personal tutoring.

The Sprint was followed up with two half-days to consider the implementation of the Progress Coach and Chat-Bot initiatives

Fig.1 Sources of Student Support
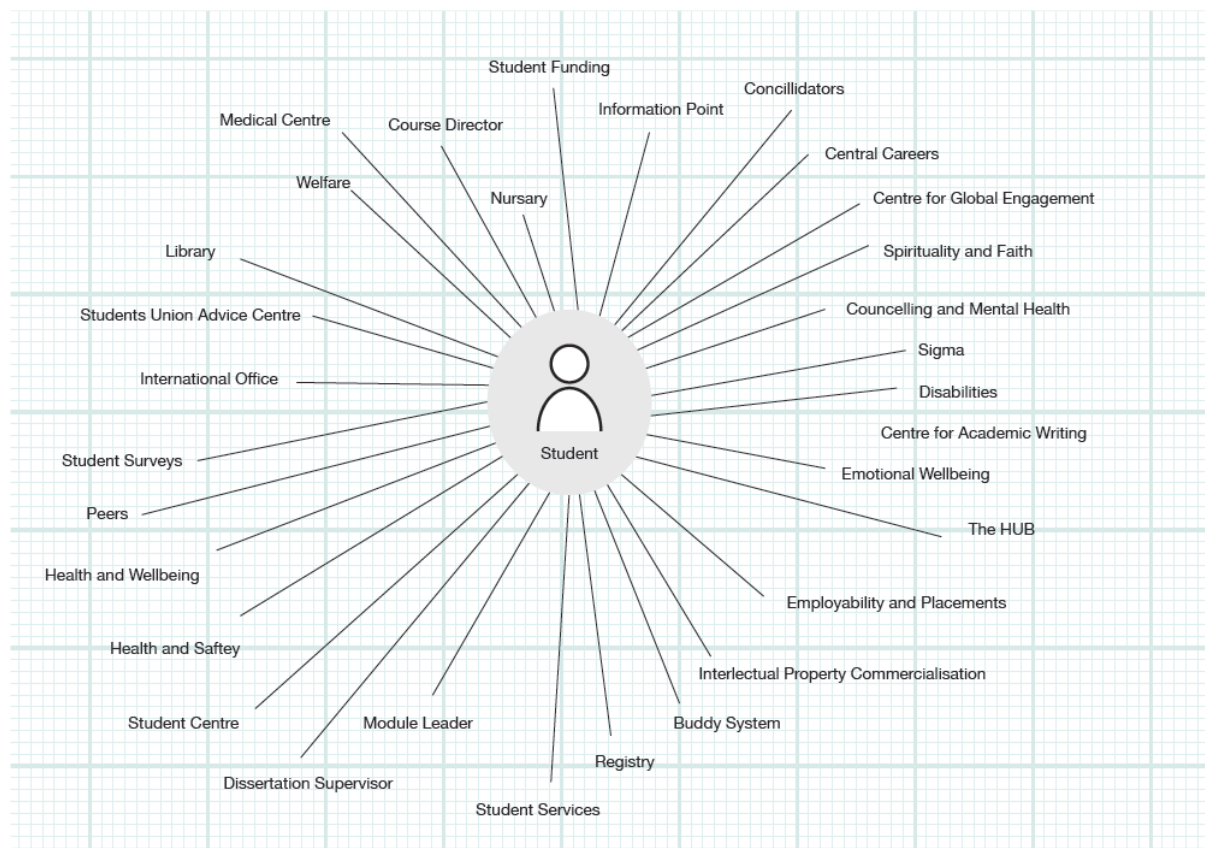
The Proposed Solution for a New Approach to Personal Tutoring (see Fig.2)

A three-pronged approach to support was created comprising:

Progress Coaches: to replace existing personal tutors. These would be a subset of self-selecting academic staff who, alongside pastoral care, would offer reactive and proactive academic interventions to support students. Progress coaches would offer a drop-in session and bookable appointments.

Academic Office Hours: retaining the existing model of module specific 'surgery hours' for academic support

Chat-Bot: Digital solution offering 24/7 triage support, signposting students with generic issues/concerns

Fig.2 CU Triad of Student Support
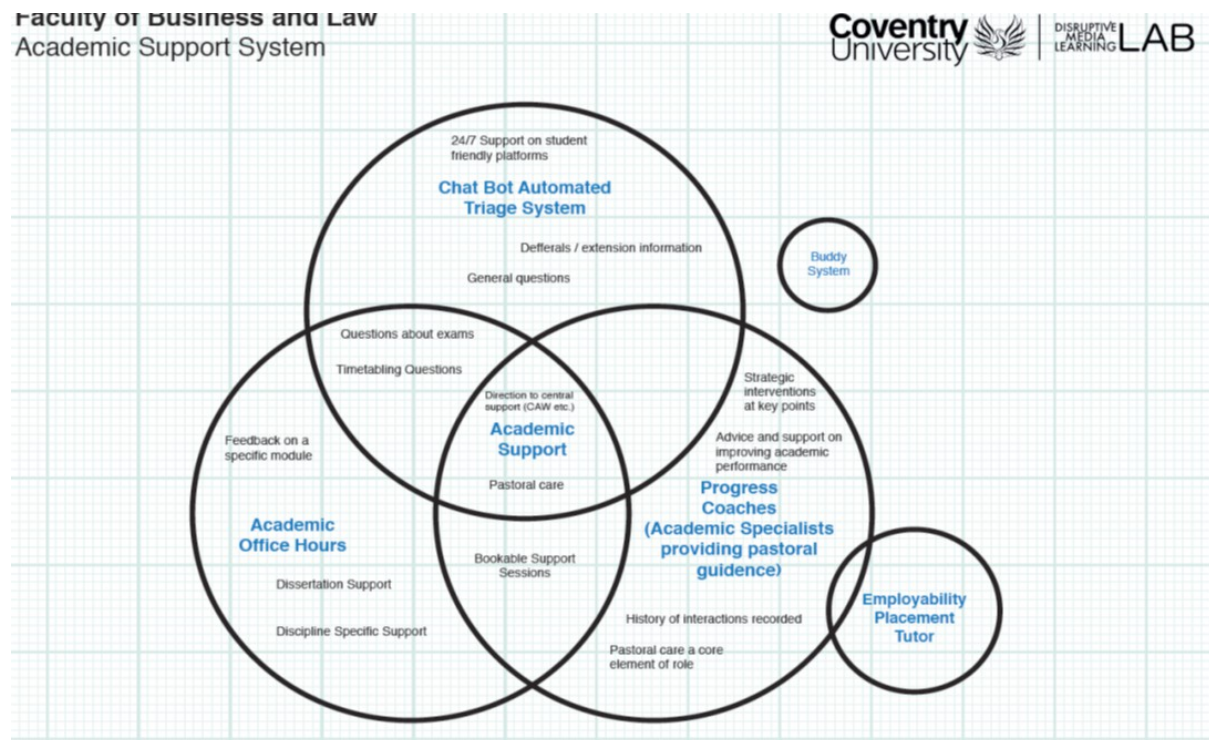
Implementation and Initial Response

- The system was launched in September 2018. And the interim review saw the Chat bot record 8319 'chats' in period launch – mid Dec 2018.
- Feedback from Progress Coaches at the interim review identified additional training suggestions.
- During this academic year a drop-in room has been available, staffed by Progress Coaches 9-5, Monday-Friday.
- Progress coaches advertise their availability for bookable sessions – these can be booked via the ChatBot and moodle.
- A number of direct interventions have been trialled, offering focused support (students identified as borderline, late enrollers, students who have switched course).
- A review of the year since implementation is being undertaken at the time of writing, and evaluation will be presented at the Conference.

Review of Sprint Process

Feedback from those involved is that this is a highly effective method to address an issue and develop a solution. Forward planning is critical as colleagues need to be able to clear diaries for the time required (including those beyond the core team). It is recognised that the process and outcomes

would be compromised by intermittent attendance, hence, for example, the venue needs to be appropriate (to create physical distance from normal workspace). Subsequent to this project, the Sprint approach has been adopted to address course design. The team at Coventry strongly endorse the process and are considering its application elsewhere.

Audience: This presentation will be relevant to academics and the wider groups across universities in showcasing an effective and efficient way to address problems with input from multiple stakeholders, and to design solutions.

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