

Personal Tutoring: Staff Guide

Introduction

Being a Personal Tutor is both a rewarding and demanding role. For many, the personal contact of helping tutees with their personal and academic development, and being able to offer help and support is enjoyable and satisfying. But equally, the difficulties of managing the role, in having the experience to address a students' development and in knowing how to handle some of the problems tutees present can be challenging.

This guide is therefore provided to help Personal Tutors:

- Understand the role and what is expected of them
- Appreciate and employ effective personal tutoring skills
- Manage the role effectively

It is recognised that there are many examples of practice in personal tutoring across the university; for example, some programmes offer individual personal tutorials and others have personal tutorial systems that include group tutorials linked to the curriculum.

Whatever your system, it is hoped that this guide contains useful advice that is helpful for all.

University Guidance on the Role

Overview of Personal Tutoring at the University of Plymouth

The University is committed to providing an excellent learning experience for all our students. This involves first-class teaching, high quality learning resources and also a good standard of academic and pastoral support. We recognise that this support and guidance can be important in enhancing academic achievement, promoting personal development, dealing expeditiously with problems and encouraging students to take full advantage of the wide range of social, sporting, cultural, community, work experience and volunteering opportunities offered by University life. The University's procedures for academic and pastoral support are intended to promote achievement, well-being and through-life learning and to help ensure that each individual student is known and valued and that their needs are recognised.

Who is a Personal Tutor?

A key role in the provision of personal support for students is played by personal tutors. These are typically academic members of staff who, alongside their other roles (teaching, research, etc.) provide general academic guidance and personal support for a number of identified students normally drawn from the programme(s) on which they teach. The precise details of how personal tutoring operates will vary depending on the needs and circumstances of particular Schools and programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate). In some smaller programmes the personal tutoring role may be undertaken by programme or stage (year) tutors. More commonly, however, Schools will choose to devolve this area of activity so that it is shared by all/most academic staff, each one working with a number of named individual students.

Personal Tutoring Systems

The precise arrangements for personal tutoring are at the discretion of Heads of School, who will be mindful of resource constraints and possible implications for staff workloads. Nonetheless, it is expected that all students should have the opportunity to benefit from personal tutoring.

It is acknowledged, of course, that some students will make more effective use of personal tutoring than others. However, information on the general procedures and expectations should be provided to all students at induction and in programme handbooks. The University will offer relevant support/CPD opportunities for staff unfamiliar with personal tutoring or who need guidance to enable them to undertake this role confidently and effectively.

Defining the Role

The role of the personal tutor should typically include some or all of the following:

- (a) Being an important port of call for general academic advice on matters such as personal academic achievement, module/pathway choice and project/dissertation selection.
- (b) Monitoring overall academic performance and offering appropriate guidance.
- (c) Signposting services that students might access to support their further development.
- (d) Encouraging students to becoming reflective learners, to engage in Personal Development Planning and to give timely consideration to their career plans and other future aspirations.
- (e) Ensuring that meetings/opportunities for discussions are arranged at appropriate intervals and that students have the necessary staff contact information.

Skills of the Personal Tutor

Building Rapport

Students need to feel at ease with their personal tutor in order that they are sufficiently comfortable to discuss their development and any personal issues they may have whilst at university. Personal tutors need to be mindful of verbal and non-verbal signals they project. Some advice on environmental factors and body language has been given below in relation to [listening skills](#). It is also important to remember that what we say and how we say it will impact on how approachable our tutees find us. In conversations with tutees be respectful and non-judgemental of their circumstances through your language use. For students, having an approachable tutor who displays a genuine interest in their development and welfare is extremely important. A skilled tutor, even when they are extremely busy, has the ability to make the student feel valued and supported.

Active Listening

Active listening involves a combination of attentive listening coupled with the asking of relevant and useful questions in order to facilitate discussion.

Listening

When students are given the opportunity to talk, this gives them the space to reflect on their own circumstances and develop a clearer picture of their own situation. Being listened to also helps the student feel that they are valued and understood. This is very important in terms of motivating learners and in raising the self-esteem of those who are experiencing problems.

In order to listen effectively we need to be in a suitable environment. Ideally this should be private, and free from external disturbance.

Our body language is also important. Our tutees will be put at ease and be reassured we are listening if we do the following:

- Face the person we are listening to
- Make and maintain comfortable eye contact
- Lean towards the person
- Keep our posture open (i.e. don't use posture such as folding your arms across your chest)
- Reduce power differentials (e.g. if possible, come out from behind a desk)
- As we listen we can show we are paying attention with verbal prompts such as 'I see', 'mmm', 'yes' etc. and with nods of the head.

Questioning

To support our listening, a good questioning technique helps to initiate and develop in-depth discussion. By asking the right types of question tutors can help their tutees explore and reflect on their circumstances, be this in relation to their academic progress, their personal development or any problems they may be encountering. Questioning puts the emphasis on the student, getting them to develop their own ideas and work out their own course of action. In this way, a good questioning technique helps personal tutors avoid offering solutions themselves.

It may be useful to start a conversation by setting an informal agenda. You can be clear about what items you need to cover and it gives your tutee an invitation to raise items they want to discuss. When talking with your tutee, it is ok to use closed questions – these are questions that lead to single word or short phrase answers and can be used to establish facts and opinions quickly. However, in order to develop a meaningful conversation, these will need to be followed up with open-ended questions that draw out information from the student. These are questions that begin with who, what, where, why, when, and how.

Examples include:

- “How do you feel about ...?”
- “What could you do to improve?”
- “When did this happen?”

Open-ended questions can be followed up with probing questions. These help to unpick what the student is saying in more detail.

- “Tell me more about what happened next”
- “Describe the circumstances in more detail”
- “What else would help improve the situation?”
- “Can you give me an example?”

Throughout a conversation it is useful to stop at intervals and summarise the conversation in order to show you have been listening and clarify that you have understood.

For example:

- “So, what you are telling me is ...”

At the end of a meeting with a tutee, recap the conversation again and establish and/or confirm any action points. Make an agreed record of these (e.g. via an email between you and the student). You could suggest that your tutee records the action points as this will help to ensure they take responsibility and engage with what is required. If it is appropriate, set up a further meeting. This type of clarity is good practice but is particularly helpful for students in distress who may be anxious and confused.

Personal Tutor Skills and Qualities

Leeds Metropolitan University conducted a survey of Teaching Fellows which asked about the qualities of the Personal Tutor (Race, 2010, p18). The survey found the most frequently cited qualities were as follows:

- Knowing about different services across the University in order to help students in the best possible way
- Showing by actions and words a personal interest in students' welfare and a desire to help them to succeed rather than catch them out
- Being a good listener
- Genuinely caring about the students
- Empathy
- Knowing how to ask the right questions
- Approachability
- Accessibility
- Friendly nature, able to gain a good rapport with the students, but able to be firm where necessary
- Knowledge of the subject
- Sensitivity to each individual student (background, intellect, experience)
- Calmly helping the student to keep things in perspective
- Personal awareness of what you can manage (and cope with)
- Helping tutees, right from the first day, to look out for and care about one another and trust you enough to tell you if they are worried about a fellow student
- Convincing tutees that requests for help are genuinely welcomed, otherwise too many students just don't ask
- Experience to spot when someone is clinically depressed, suicidal, or just anxious
- Being non-judgemental

Table 2. Leeds Metropolitan University survey of Teacher Fellows – the qualities of the Personal Tutor most frequently mentioned (Race, 2010, p18).

Managing the Role

First meetings

Your first meeting with your tutees, normally held during induction week or the first week of the autumn term, is the most crucial as first impressions will determine whether you establish a good relationship with your tutees. Remember that your tutees may very likely be feeling disorientated, overwhelmed, and isolated. As their personal tutor you will be one of the few, maybe the only, members of staff that they have had any significant personal contact with since they have arrived. It is therefore important to be friendly and approachable in your demeanour (see advice on [Building Rapport](#)).

[Personal tutoring systems](#) vary across the university with some Schools choosing to meet with tutees on an individual basis and others operating mainly group tutorials. With respect to the first meeting, a group tutorial has a number of advantages. When students start university they know very few people. Lectures can be anonymous affairs and it can take students a long time to establish relationships with their peers. Having a group tutorial as early as induction week allows students to get to know a small group of people on their course. This can be vital in helping them settle in. From a tutor 's perspective, holding a group tutorial can be an efficient way to work, saving time in repeating the same information to each new tutee.

What should the first tutorial cover?

1. [The role and purpose of personal tutorials](#) – Make clear to students that your main role is to help them with academic achievement and personal development and also to help them address any problems they may have.
2. [Clarify expectations](#) – Explain how the personal tutorial system operates in your programme area, share contact information, and explain your personal preferences, [expectations and boundaries](#) in relation to how you conduct your tutorial arrangements.
3. **Re-cap on Induction** - You do not need to provide lots of detail repeating what has been said during induction. Students will already be reaching information overload. However, it is useful to ask some probing questions to establish if there is any remaining confusion e.g. with respect to module choices, timetabling, knowing your way around campus, submission practices etc.
4. **Bonding** - Whether you are operating an individual or a group tutorial it is helpful to ask some appropriate questions in order to get to know each other (see Table 1). In a group situation, students will likely be nervous and may not initially feel comfortable sharing personal information and their anxieties with strangers. It is a good idea to use a short and simple ice-breaker activity before asking any questions. You may also find you get better responses from a group if you get students to discuss the

questions in pairs first, or get them to put responses on post-it notes. Post-it note responses can then be used to initiate discussion around particular questions whilst preserving the anonymity of the respondents.

5. **Invite questions** - at the end of the meeting invite questions in order to clear up any remaining issues e.g. about the course, settling in etc. If you are in a group setting you can let people stay behind afterwards if they want to talk to you individually.

- Why have you chosen to study Subject X?
- Why did you choose to study at the University of Plymouth?
- Tell me something about yourself
- How are you feeling about being here?
- How do you think university is going to differ to college?
- What do you expect from your time here?
- What do you think we expect from you?
- What do you think are going to be the best things about being at university?
- What extra-curricular activities do you hope to become involved with?
- Is there anything that you are anxious about with respect to being a student?
- What qualities do you have that might help you to settle in?

Table 1. Sample questions to help you establish a relationship with your new tutee(s). Taken and adapted from Wheeler and Birtle (1993, p24).

Scheduled Meetings

Meet Early in the Academic Year

Whilst precise tutorial arrangements differ across the University, it is good practice to make sure that you follow-up after your [first meeting](#) with a further catch up session early in the academic year. This advice applies to new stage one students, direct entry students and to progression students (i.e. students who may be joining the course at stages 2 or 3). Having a second meeting early in the academic year helps build the bonds of your personal tutoring relationship, and will enable any persistent problems that your tutee may be having settling in to be addressed.

According to research by the University of Reading and Oxford Brookes University (2010):

“relationship building between staff and students is key to ensuring student success” and “students considering withdrawing found interaction with their personal tutor helpful; this relationship therefore has a positive impact on retention”.

Set an Agenda

For all scheduled meetings it is beneficial to set an agenda. This will help you:

- focus on what you want to achieve,

- demonstrate to the student the purpose of the tutorial,
- help your tutee to come prepared for the meeting.

Your [Personal Development Planning \(PDP\)](#) system can help guide the agenda, the questions you ask, and suggestions for follow-up activities that you give. The best tutorials will also be designed to be in tune with the rhythm of the academic year (settling in, preparing for examinations, reflecting on results, choosing options for next year, what will I do after graduation?). Think about these when considering the content of tutorials as well as how often and when to meet. You may be able to get your tutees together as a group to discuss common concerns. This may be a more efficient way of handling some tutorials than individual meetings.

Follow-up on Non-attendance

It is not uncommon for some students to fail to turn up for tutorial meetings, particularly when these lie outside the taught curriculum. It is important to follow-up on non-attendance. By letting non-attendance go un-checked, we send out messages to students that personal tutorials are not significant. Find out if your programme has a procedure for this in order to adopt a consistent approach between personal tutors

Unscheduled Meetings

Sometimes a student may want to see you outside of scheduled tutorial meetings. This is typically because they are experiencing a problem of some kind that they need advice on. As a Personal Tutor you need to consider how you want to manage unscheduled meetings. This is in order that you balance your responsibility to support your students with the need to manage your own work without unacceptable interruption. Some tutors are happy to operate an open-door policy, others use 'drop-in' or 'sign-up' sessions, and others expect tutees to email or telephone to make an appointment. Whatever your system, make sure your tutees are clear about how you operate and how you prefer them to communicate with you (see [Expectations and Boundaries](#)). There are advantages and disadvantages to both open door and managed systems so this is something you will need to consider.

"It is important that students feel cared for as individuals but this should not undermine their autonomy and sense of personal responsibility (or indeed your own entitlement to a manageable workload)."

Centre for Learning & Teaching (2009, p24)

If you do run 'sign-up' or 'drop-in' sessions it is good practice to be mindful about when these are scheduled in order to establish mutually convenient times. This is particularly important for part-time students, students who may have care responsibilities and disabled students.

Expectations and Boundaries

In your first meeting with your personal tutees it is necessary to make clear what you expect from them and what they can expect from you. This will be a combination of:

1. The requirements as defined in the [university guidance on the role](#).
2. The [personal tutoring system](#) operating in your School
It is good practice for Schools to have written guidance on their tutorial system in order that staff and students are clear about expectations and to ensure a reasonably consistent experience for students between tutors.
3. Your own individual personal tutoring style (e.g. mentor, supervisor, coach etc.)
Have a think about your own personal style and your previous experience of being a tutor/tutee.
 - What personal qualities, values and habits do you bring to the role?
 - How do these affect your interactions with tutees?

For example, if your own experience as an undergraduate was of a personal tutorial system that was there only to deal with students with problems, you may bring this expectation to your position, sending messages to students to only come and see you if they have a problem whilst down-playing the personal and academic development aspects of the role.

It is also helpful to clarify:

- How often you will meet
- The purpose of each meeting (see [Set an Agenda](#))
- Whether you operate office hours, have an open-door policy or expect students to email you to make an appointment (see [Unscheduled Meetings](#))
- Speed of email response (some students expect instant replies)
- What will happen if they fail to attend a meeting (see [Scheduled Meetings](#))
- The limits of [confidentiality](#)
- The parameters to the personal support you can offer - make clear that it is not the role of a personal tutor to solve the problems of their tutees, nor act as a counsellor.

Referral

What is Expected?

One of the central functions of the Personal Tutor is that of referring students to appropriate support services (see [University Guidance on the Role](#)). Sometimes it can be difficult knowing when and to whom to refer students to. It is therefore important that you recognise the limits of the advice you can offer – you are not expected to have all the

answers. However, you are expected to be familiar with the range of support services to which you can refer students and how to access them.

Diagnosing the Issue

Use the [Active Listening](#) technique to listen to and question your tutee in order to work out what is concerning them, what support they are requesting, and their expectations of the support they need. Problems can occur when student expectations of support are not met. It is therefore helpful to outline what the student may expect from you. Familiarise yourself with the [types of problems](#) that students typically encounter and be aware that sometimes student may present one problem to you which masks (either intentionally or unintentionally) a hidden issue. Whilst there are limits to what you can do, being aware of this and using questioning to probe the problem may help. Certainly, if the problem is serious and complex a tutor should not hesitate to seek advice from specialist student support services on how to proceed. Further information is given with respect to [handling problems and distress](#) later in this guide.

Who can help?

Knowing who to advise students to seek support from is an important personal tutor skill. Experienced tutors will have built up this knowledge over time. New tutors can prepare themselves for this role by familiarising themselves with the types of student support service offered by the University and talking with more experienced colleagues. Personal tutors need to be able to explain the types of services available to students and know enough about these to assist their tutee in making an informed decision as to who they might be best placed to see.

Information about all University of Plymouth student services is available at:
<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-services>

Managing Referral

In the majority of cases your role is to signpost services to your tutee but it is their responsibility to act on this advice if they so choose. If your tutee chooses not to seek further help then respect their decision and provide information on support options should they change their mind. Because of [confidentiality](#), it is unlikely that you will hear anything from a support service unless there is a good reason for them to disclose information to you. It is therefore a good idea to ask your tutee to keep in touch and let you know how they got on. This has the benefit of encouraging your tutee to go through with the referral advice; it will allow you to follow-up on your support; and it also makes the student feel cared for and valued.

In rare cases – for example, where a student is [at risk](#) of serious harm to themselves or others or is in a highly distressed state - it may be necessary for you to make the referral on behalf of the student. Explain to them why you are doing this and who you are contacting. Discuss the information that you will be sharing and ask for their consent to do this. If you have serious concerns about a student who refuses to get specialist help then a way forward

is to contact the appropriate service to ask for advice, remembering not to disclose any personal details.

Handling Referral Sensitively

Suggesting to your tutee that they may need to talk to someone else needs to be handled diplomatically and sensitively. Approach referral by asking if they think it would help to talk to someone else rather than directly telling them that you want to refer them. It is important to explain why you are making this suggestion – that there are limits to your expertise and that talking to a specialist would be more appropriate. This will also avoid the student feeling that you do not care and that you are trying to off-load them. Take a few minutes to talk to your tutee about how they feel about seeking further help. It is common for students to feel embarrassed or nervous about doing this. Chatting this over may help dispel some of their fears and make them more likely to follow-up on getting help.

Confidentiality and Disclosure

Under the terms of the Data Protection Act, students have the right to request access to most information held about them. Tutees should be able to trust that tutors will respect their wishes with regard to confidentiality, unless there is a requirement to disclose.

Sometimes a tutor will need to disclose details to another person or agency that is better placed to help. This is normally because a tutor has concerns about the wellbeing of the student (or others), the student has a disclosed condition, or the tutor suspects a criminal offence. It is preferable to come to an agreement with the tutee about to whom the information may be passed. Where such agreement has been difficult to reach, it is wise to confirm this in writing. Ultimately, tutors need to balance the right to confidentiality against other obligations and should not hesitate to consult a senior colleague if in doubt.

Record Keeping

It is important to be in the habit of keeping a record of personal tutorials. This is a helpful way of summarising your conversations with tutees and clarifying any agreed action points. Notes should be concise, factual and non-judgemental. Where it is necessary to record an opinion it should be made clear that this is opinion, not fact.

Remember that students have a right to see any notes held on them. Ask if your tutees are happy for you to keep notes. Explain to them what you write down, where you keep your records and what you do with them. It is good practice to involve your tutees in summarising tutorial discussions and agreeing on actions. In this way fewer difficulties will arise as a result of misunderstandings; students will have greater involvement with their personal development; and you will also be demonstrating that you expect your tutee to take responsibility for accomplishing the action points. These can then be followed up by email or in the next meeting.

Handling Problems and Distress

Spotting Problems

There are a number of signals that may give you cause to suspect that a student is experiencing difficulties whether this be an academic matter or a personal matter. The Office of the Dean of Students has produced guidance on how to deal with a student for whom you have concern (<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=36541>). They identify the following signals that you should be alert for:

- the student told you about a problem
- recent changes in behaviour
- significant changes in appearance/mood (weight; hygiene; withdrawn; hyperactive)
- you have smelt alcohol or cannabis on the student on a regular basis
- others have voiced concerns
- academic performance has changed dramatically
- poor attendance

If you have any concerns about a student's well-being it is important that you do not avoid the situation. Engage the student in general conversation. Ask them how things are going and, if necessary, use your [questioning skills](#) to probe a bit further. Raise your concerns about them sensitively. A listening ear may be all that is needed. If, after approaching your tutee, you feel there may be some difficulties then you will need to approach the issue of [referral](#).

References

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