

Introduction to the Role of the Personal Tutor

Students arrive at University to begin a new and challenging experience. Some students will arrive and easily take to University life, with few questions or problems. Others will find the transition more difficult. They may be unclear about the standards of work expected of them, and struggle with what seems to be a more flexible model of University life compared to school or college and may wish to speak to their personal tutors about the aspects of their course they find challenging. Others may experience difficulties in personal relationships, with illness or with problems at home, or there may be a declared disability. In some cases, speaking to a personal tutor can resolve the problem. In other cases, there is a need to refer the student to other services within the University. Increasingly Schools are adopting 'student support centre' models which may mean that appointments with the personal tutor is made through the centre, and in some cases it may be appropriate for referral to specialist non-academic support is made direct by the centre and not via the personal tutor.

Academic issues can usually be addressed within schools either with the support of personal or module tutors, or with study skills support from schools' academic skills tutors/Learning Quality Support Unit. In addition, tutors can work with students to introduce strategies to help with their studies. Student Services run disability specific training for staff and there are guidelines for staff working with students with specific learning disabilities on the Student Services website. Specialist support for students on welfare and disability issues is provided by Student Services based in the Student Centre. Students are also able access support here from the Student Finance Officer. International Office provides support to overseas students on the full range of immigration, finance and support issues.

Students often feel embarrassed about expressing the need for additional help or the fact that some aspects of University life are a greater challenge than they expected. Sometimes students conceal difficulties in the mistaken belief that they will either go away or will rectify themselves. It is often the case that what appears to be a substantial problem to a student is actually something that a personal tutor has seen many times before and can offer a quick and simple solution to. To access this experience however, it is important that students and their personal tutors have an ongoing relationship and there is sufficient confidence to be able to raise issues in the knowledge that help is at hand.

All our taught students are allocated a personal tutor, but it is inevitable that the types of support offered will vary according to their mode of study. The following guidance applies to full-time undergraduate students; it should be varied according to context for distance-learning, collaborative provision and CPD students where their engagement on campus departs significantly from the norm for taught students. In particular, contact via collaboration tools in Unilearn, or via Skype, or by telephone may be most appropriate.

The first tutorial

The most important aim of the first meeting between personal tutor and tutees in Freshers' Week is to establish a basis for a good relationship. It is also important to spell out the boundaries of the relationship right at the start. This includes: -

- **Supporting the student:** Students are legally adults and should be treated as such. They should be encouraged to take responsibility for communicating their needs and for seeking appropriate support.
- **Identifying the problem:** Try to establish the nature of the problem and do not assume that you know what the problem is in advance. If you have requested to meet with the student always explain your reason for calling the meeting to the student. Remember; listening and asking the student what they want are the main tools for getting a full picture of the situation.

- **Offering Support:** Personal tutors often choose to offer support to students themselves but at all times remember to never take on more than you can handle and refer the student to appropriate support when needed.
- **Confidentiality:** The nature and limits of confidentiality need to be made clear to students who seek support. In some instances it will be necessary and appropriate to refer issues to other agencies within and outside the University and whenever possible this should be done with the knowledge and agreement of the individual concerned.

If there are any doubts about what is being disclosed, you are advised to stop the conversation and take advice. The Data Protection Policy and the Disability Disclosure Policy deal specifically with confidentiality in relation to student matters and are a good starting point for delineating what type of information can be disclosed to whom.

Summary guidance document for personal tutors

A well-planned personal tutorial system can be of enormous value to an institution for various reasons in that it can:

- Create and build professional relationships between staff and students.
- Give the student valuable feedback in their subject area and about the institution.
- Support the student's personal and academic development.
- Provide information to support retention and progression.

The role of the personal tutor

- To provide a personal contact for the student within the institution.
- To act as a liaison between the student and course leaders to seek any improvements required.
- To offer guidance, assistance and support in helping to manage the student's academic experience.
- To recognise when the problems presented are beyond the tutor's competence and control and seek guidance and support for the student through the appropriate institutional referral processes.
- To work with students to review and reflect upon their own progress and if necessary on ways to improve it.
- To take part in supportive training events.

The responsibilities of the personal tutor

The personal tutor should:

- Introduce themselves and meet their new tutees before the end of the first week of a new academic year
- Invite their tutees to contact them regularly and, at a minimum, twice during the winter and spring term and once in the summer term.
- Ensure tutees know how to contact their tutor at short notice in the case of emergencies and make themselves available to students for some specified period every week. Dates and times of availability should be displayed clearly and be lodged within the Departmental Office.
- Be aware of any special learning needs of their students.
- Help the tutees allocated to them overcome any problems of adjustment to University life.
- Respond to tutees' requests for advice on matters and refer, as necessary, to the correct department or service, ensuring that appropriate help is offered to the student.
- Encourage tutees to come and see them in the event of needing to seek information or advice or to talk things through with a friendly listener.
- Complete appropriate records of dates, times and outcomes of meetings with tutees.

The responsibilities of tutees

Tutees should:

- Respond promptly to requests to see their personal tutor.
- Aim to respect the specified times at which tutors make themselves available to see students.
- Ensure they know how to contact their tutor at short notice in the case of emergencies and, at all other times, try to see their tutor at the specified time.
- Keep tutors informed of any relevant circumstance which may have an effect upon their studies.
- Complete appropriate records of dates, times and outcomes of meetings with tutors, and store in their PDP.