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Weekly group tutorials enhancing students' persistence, inclusion and community



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Context

- University Centre, part of an FE college, has ~650 higher education students. Approximately 70% are mature, 25% disabled, 55% first in family, and 35% with caring responsibilities.
- All undergraduate programmes have a weekly group tutorial session following a tutorial curriculum to build students' academic, personal and professional skills.
- ~80% continuation rate. Persistence is the student centred equivalent of the provider centred metric of continuation.
- Aim to understand factors impacting on college HE students' persistence during Covid.
- What is the impact of weekly group tutorials on students' persistence, inclusion and community?

Methods

Design

- PHEN -> quant mixed methods design.
- Insider practitioner research, using an appreciative lens.
- Exploring the utility of Tinto's (2017) model of student persistence: belonging, curriculum, self-efficacy, goals and motivation for UK college HE commuter students.

Phase 1

- 13 online focus groups during the first COVID campus closure of 2020.
- Ten participants in three groups, each participant taking part in 3-5 groups.
- Discussion around Tinto's (2017) model of student persistence and the COVID student experience.
- Descriptive thematic analysis developed themes for the Phase 2 online survey.
- Post Phase 2, reanalysis considered factors impacting persistence using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Phase 2

- Online survey in May 2021, after the second COVID campus closure.
- Items related to student experience, tutorial experience and withdrawal contemplation.
- Withdrawal contemplation is a significant predictor of actual withdrawal from HE (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011).
- 64 participants (10% response rate).
- IVs: Having a weekly tutorial - always, sometimes or never.
- DVs: Withdrawal contemplation.
- Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.



Quantitative results

Hypothesis: There will be an association between weekly tutorial and withdrawal contemplation.

	Did not contemplate withdrawal		Contemplated withdrawal		Chi-square analysis
Tutorial experience	Count	%	Count	%	$\chi^2 (2, N = 64) = 15.920,$ $p < .000$
• No weekly tutorial	6	55%	5	45%	
• Always weekly tutorial	37	79%	10	21%	
• Weekly tutorial, but not always	0		6	100%	
TOTAL	43	67%	21	33%	

- The null hypothesis is rejected, there was a significant association between always having a tutorial and not contemplating withdrawal.
- Power analysis at the level of 0.8 with a SD of 2.63 determined that a sample of 126 participants with 42 in each tutorial IV group would be required for reliable inferences from the data.
- Therefore, the results should be considered tentative and treated with caution.

Qualitative findings

To explore why always having a weekly tutorial might be associated with not contemplating withdrawal, the focus group data was re-analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The qualitative findings demonstrate the importance of student-tutor relationships:



Doing the job

Participants felt personal tutors should be knowledgeable, competent, and a source of reassurance and motivation.

- Robyn (C3, 197) "I think she just knows what she's doing, and I don't know where that comes across.... [you], never feels like she's unsure of anything and it's kind of like 'OK, I know what I'm doing'. She knows how to help us. Yeah, she knows."



Beyond the job

Participants were enthusiastically grateful to tutors who they perceived were working 'Beyond the job' and keeping them in mind.

- Kit (A3, 466) "Again the availability and the contact is incredible. You guys do need your days off...I will ping an email, but I don't expect a response immediately, but I always get one."



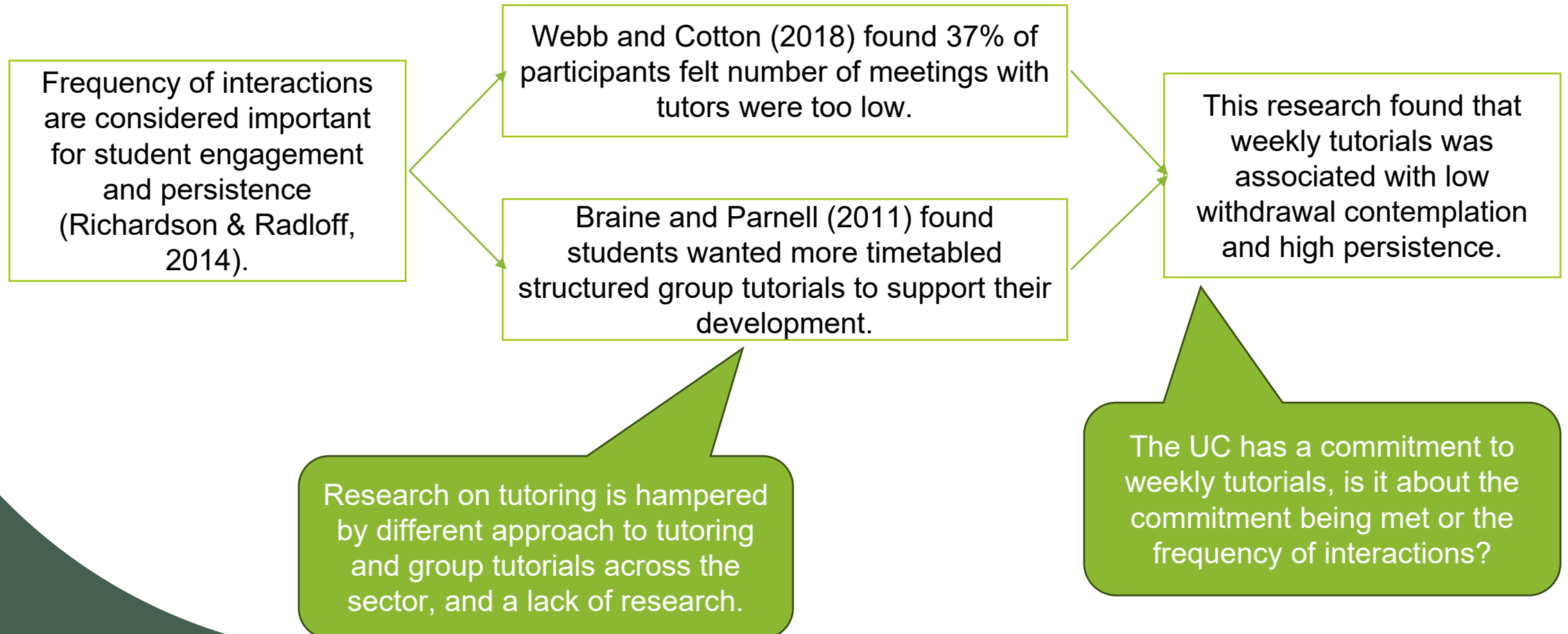
Genuine connection

Participants valued the relationship with their tutors, and felt it was based on an honesty that is genuine and not just part of the job.

- Cameron (B3, 303) "[Tutor] say like well done, you really deserved and stuff like that encouragement... Yeah, it just makes you feel like you're worth it... And the time that [the tutor] spends with us makes us feel like we're doing a good job and that we're worth it, and we are on the course for a reason."

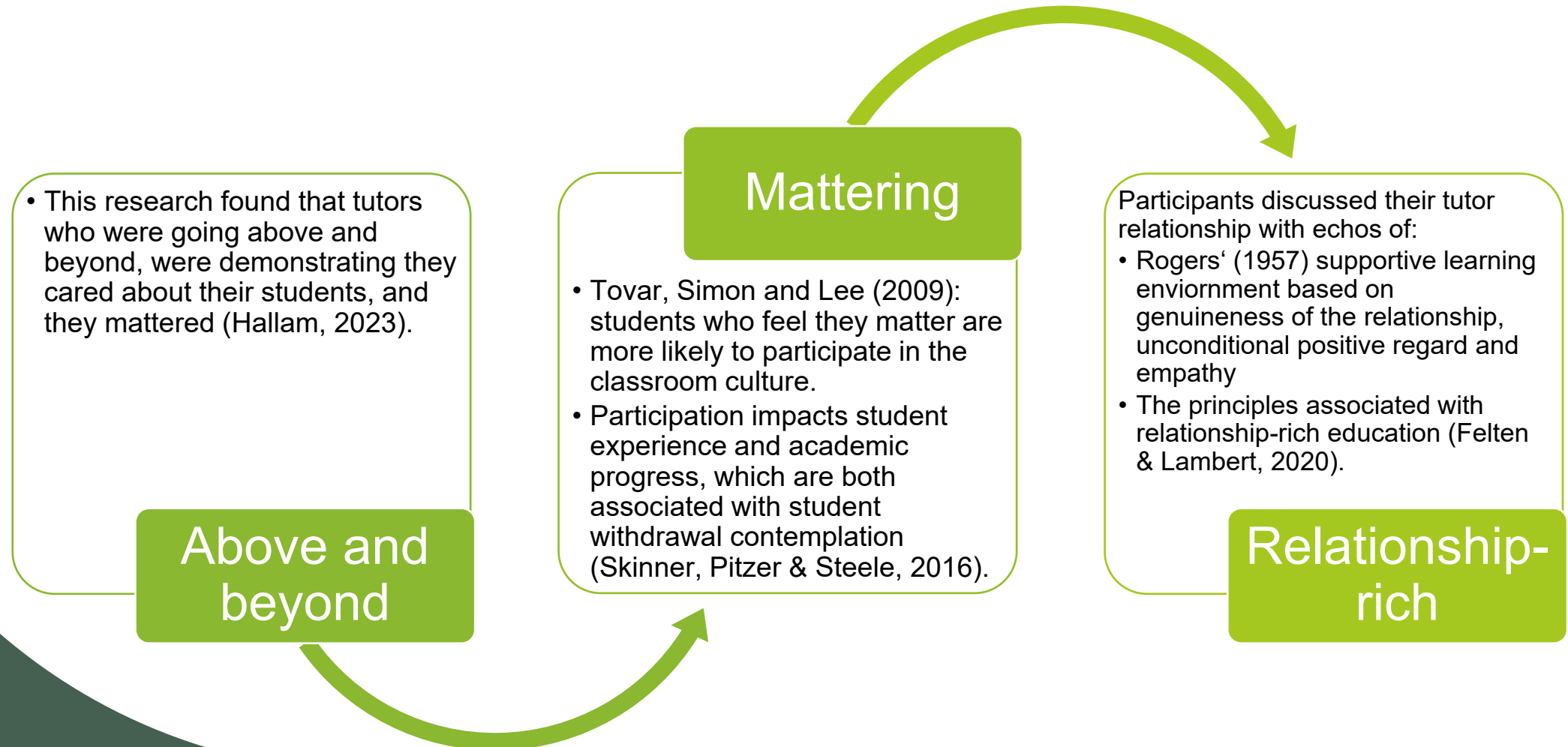
Discussion

How did personal tutors doing their job, and going beyond it, impact on college HE students' persistence?



Discussion

How did personal tutors having genuine connections with the tutees impact on persistence?



Conclusions

Limitations

Volunteer sample led to non-response bias in both phases of the research. Power analysis demonstrates that although the key finding that weekly group tutorials led to less withdrawal contemplation it was not reliable due to sample.

Recommendations

Students recognised that they mattered to their tutors and the organisation when they met and exceeded the expectation to have group tutorials. The UC and other similar providers should invest in a curriculum model of group tutorial to foster strong relationships between students and tutors to maximise student persistence.

Conclusion

This research shows *how* tutors helped to foster college HE students' persistence and reduce the likelihood of withdrawal contemplation. It was depended on how they met and exceeded the students' expectations of the role.

Tutors act as the human face of the UC, creating a supportive learning environment, and monitor students' academic, personal and professional development.

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Thank you, any questions?

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