

Education for mental health case study

Academic families embedded into
personal tutoring to create a community of
practice and develop a sense of belonging

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Context

Upon arrival at University, students are faced with the new experience of integrating into their course and University life, they will meet colleagues and make friends while adapting to their new environment. In their first week at University, all students are allocated a Personal Tutor, a member of staff affiliated with their course. The Personal Tutor will offer guidance and support throughout their time at University, they will get to know their tutees, help them make connections with their curriculum and support services, all with the intention to foster a sense of belonging (1). Within the personal tutoring structure tutees often meet their Personal Tutors one-to-one; important for personal progress and development when discussion is aligned to personal challenges, their experience and assessment. In the literature, the use of the Personal Tutor group meeting is often described as one Personal Tutor that meets all their tutees within the different academic years (2-5), useful for vertical integration of information sharing, adjustment to University-life and near-peer support, as students are likely to seek advice and support from their peers (3). To further enhance this structure and develop a support network for staff and students, we introduced 'academic families' within the personal tutoring structure. An academic family in this context is: two or more Personal Tutors with their respective tutees meet and form a community of practice (CoP). This CoP (6, 7) supports the development of a peer network, social interactions and a sense of belonging within their course. For Personal Tutors, who have a variety of expertise and experience, they will have an opportunity to work together, sharing good practice as well as workload through shared responsibility.

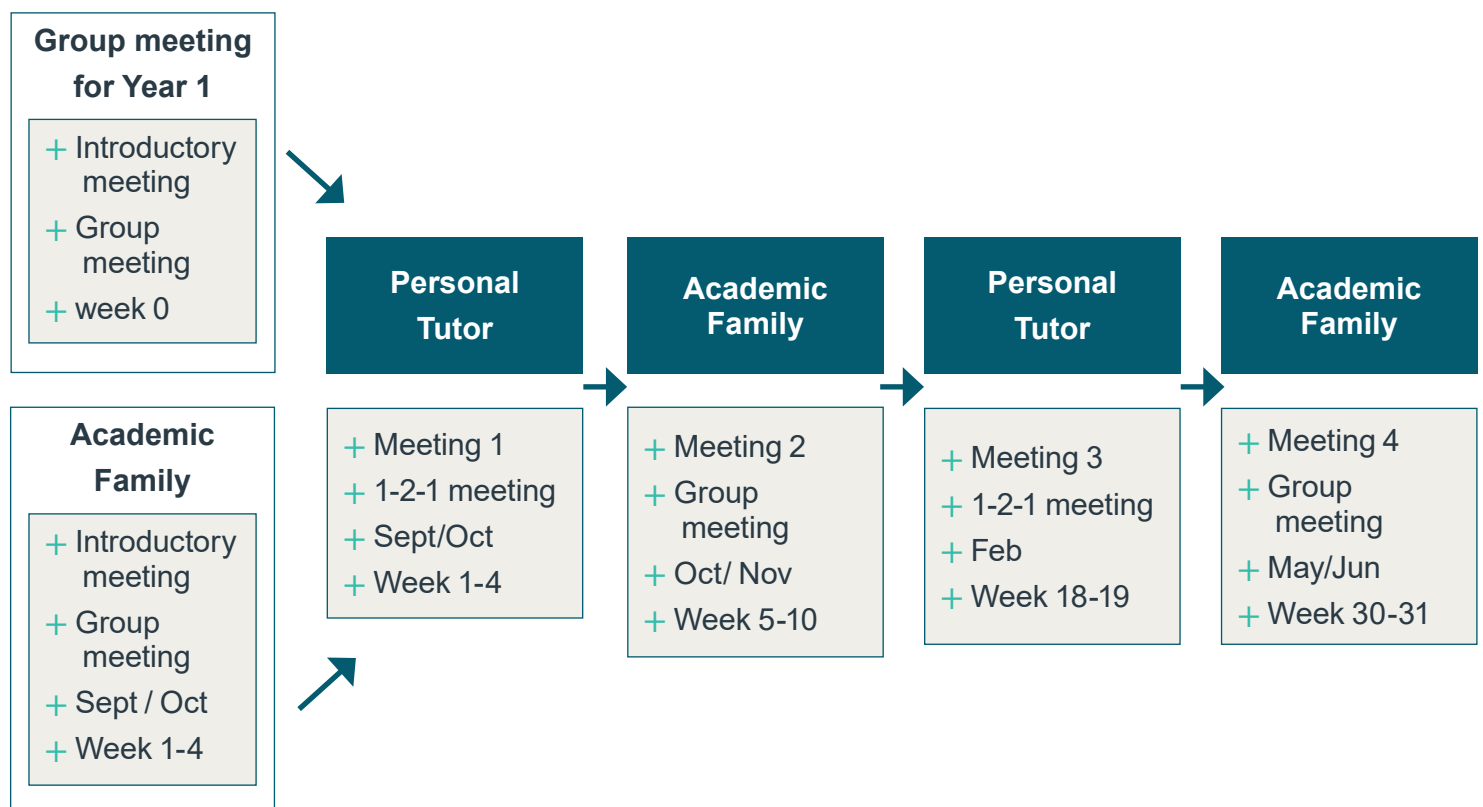
Aims of module

The use of the personal tutoring structure provides an efficient solution to generating an academic family, year one students when allocated to their Personal Tutor will automatically join the academic family. The academic family aims to:

- + Create a peer network across all years of the course, supporting all students and placement students off-site to feel part of the community.
- + Provide all students with an opportunity to share learning experiences on any aspect of their course and or University-life.
- + Support Personal Tutors to share good practice and responsibility of group meetings.
- + Encourage students to use the peer network for near-peer support.
- + Encourage further additional ad hoc meetings (student-led).

Approach to embedding module

Academic families are intended to provide an accessible, inclusive and engaging community that enables staff and students to work collaboratively to share their experiences and challenges that encourage learning in a supportive environment. Personal Tutors will first meet their year 1 tutees informally in welcome week as a group, and shortly afterwards meet with their academic family to enable introductions of all members at the beginning of the academic year (introduce year 1 students to the group). This provides the foundation of personal tutoring throughout the academic year, where Personal Tutors meet their tutees twice in one-to-one meetings, and with their Personal Tutor colleague(s) to organise and facilitate two academic family meetings.



The term 'group meeting' does not align with the 'personal' nature of personal tutoring, but does offer an additional opportunity for interaction, for developing relationships and fostering a sense of belonging to the group and course.

Challenges

- + Scheduling meetings to include all staff and student colleagues with varied timetables can prove difficult.
- + Students on placement cannot always attend in-person meetings, during the working day.
- + If one Personal Tutor in the academic family does not engage, then responsibility falls on one Personal Tutor, potentially increasing their workload and not having the benefit of sharing experience and expertise.

Advice for other academics from module leader

Embed academic families within the personal tutoring structure, so students automatically become part of an academic family, helping sustainability of the structure and meetings.

Have two or three Personal Tutors in the academic family enables shared responsibility and supports discussion in the group meetings.

Encourage (with consent), students to set up a personal, inclusive communication tool to help maintain contact of the student group.

Have a member of staff with overall responsibility, with knowledge of (or access to) the curriculum and Personal Tutors to:

- + Provide suggested dates / time in the timetable (and schedule slots).
- + Provide suggested topics for discuss based on student curriculum.
- + Allocate Personal Tutors who have different expertise and roles to work together, so they can expand their own network and share good practice.

When creating the academic families be mindful of student numbers in the group, maintain a maximum of ~20 or less students, to encourage diversity of topics and experience while maintaining an opportunity to encourage engagement and discussion.

Maintain the academic family structure (same Personal Tutors), so students get to know each other, feel comfortable and confident to speak up, share and reach out to peers (and Personal Tutors) in times of need and or support.

Referneces

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