

Education for mental health case study

Development of a college wide personal
tutor programme designed to aid
transition into higher education

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Context

Aston University has a very diverse cohort, with the majority of our students coming from under-represented communities, with one of the highest Black, Asian and minority ethnic UK Higher Education (HE) communities. Within the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (CEPS), we have approximately 1000 year one and foundation year students, spread across three Schools and nine Departments, studying a range of Science, Engineering, Mathematics and Technology (STEM) based programmes.

Over the past five years there has been increasing diversity of prior qualifications within our student cohort, which has led to more students entering university with a variety of pre-learning experience and also expectations for HE study. Within the college, some departments have looked to address this diversity in academic ability by providing support to their students on how to address diversity in teaching design, preparing for assessment tasks and how to work independently. However, this transition support was sporadic and, in some departments, non-existent. Furthermore, the level of personalised student support varied greatly across the college, resulting in some students being given excellent personal and academic tutoring, whilst other students were not even knowing who their personal tutor was.

Therefore, in September 2020, the college developed an innovative personal tutor programme aimed to support our new undergraduate (UG) students' transition into Higher Education. This personal tutor programme was introduced to all our new students, with the following objectives:

- + To increase student's awareness of the role of the personal tutor within HE and to build a working relationship with their personal tutor.
- + To ensure all new UG students were provided with the same study skills support to help aid their transition into university study by educating them on the different types of curriculum and assessment delivery, how to effectively study when not in the classroom and the development of self-management, combined with more effective signposting.
- + To provide an environment where tutees develop a social community, building a peer network of academic and personal support.

Development of module

This programme was designed to be delivered throughout the academic year with a series of online, personal tutee group meetings aligned to different areas of student support, with all ~1000 year one and foundation year academic personal tutors required to deliver each of these set sessions on the same week, to their group of personal tutees. Each personal tutor: tutee group meetings were added into both staff and student timetables, to ensure awareness of meetings and availability of the students.

For each session's content, teaching material and lesson plans had been designed centrally by a small group of college academic and professional service staff. The academic members of the team represented different departments across the College to ensure the different practice already occurring within programmes were not duplicated within the new personal tutor programme and to feed-in their experience of student support requirements. The professional services staff were staff that managed student support, with a range of experiences of dealing with student issues from administrative problems to students presenting in crisis. This combination of skills, experiences and expertise enabled the team to design a series of group meetings that looked to address areas of student support and health and wellbeing at key times within the academic year.

An online setting was chosen initially, because this new tutor programme was introduced in the Covid pandemic where the majority of teaching was having to be conducted online. However, this online setting has been kept for 2021-22 as the majority of student feedback was positive around using a virtual setting and it also enabled numerous personal tutor meetings to be scheduled at the same time without the constraints for room availability.

The programme content (shown below) has been adapted slightly from 2020-21 to 2021-22, in response to staff and student feedback, with 1:1 meeting introduced and introduction of a bespoke session around exams. Furthermore, for 2021-22 we also involved our Engineering and Physical Sciences students to help design and develop some of the material, to further enhance its inclusive design.

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Semester 1

Week 0: Initial introductions and role of personal tutor

Week 1: Ice breakers/Meet & Greet and 'Setting student expectations'

Week 2: How to study at University

Week 4: Combined re-run of meeting 1,2 and 3 for new students ONLY

Week 5: Tips for your assessments & Putting things back on track

Week 8: 1:1 meetings with your personal tutees

Week 11: Revision tips and undertaking exams

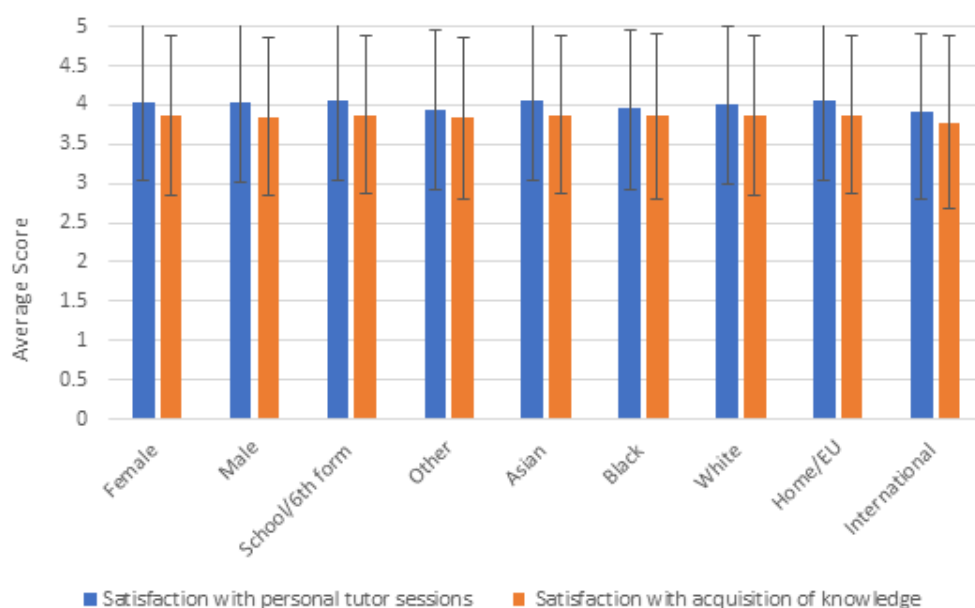
Semester 2

Week 18/ Week 4 TP2: Moving forward: reflection of your learning to date and how to enhance your performance for next year of study

Week 19 onwards: 1:1 meetings with your personal tutees

Outcomes of module

Student satisfaction with the personal tutor system was positive regardless of the student's personal background (see graph for more detail), indicative of a successful inclusive design. Students were overall happy with the subject content being delivered in the sessions, with sessions related to academic malpractice, support mechanisms and assessment support rated as the most relevant. A real success of this initiative was how students were very satisfied with their tutor, with an average Likert score of 4.5/5.



Analysis of student attendance indicated that most areas had between 50-75% student attendance, although this did vary between departments, personal tutors, and sessions. This level of attendance was significantly higher than previous departmental led initiatives, with timetabling of this tutor programme seen as the key component to this increase. That said, student engagement with the more interactive aspects of the sessions were limited, even when the opportunities for more individual student interaction and more group activities were increased. This limited interaction could be related to using an online setting, however experience within the Personal Tutor team have found similar limited engagement with on-campus personal tutor sessions. Due to this reluctance to interact in this session the building of a student peer network did not happen.

Academic staff were also generally happy with the initiative, saying the tutor sessions addressed content that was not always taught the programme and found the pre-prepared material well designed and easy to deliver. Although time capacity and lack of student engagement was highlighted as areas of concerns, it felt the positive benefit of building a relationship with their tutees outweighed the negatives.

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