Personal tutoring and key skills development in higher education – experiences and challenges

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Abstract
Personal Tutoring provides vital academic, personal and professional skills-development support to students in STEM-related subjects. This paper shares the experiences of two higher education institutions, including post-92 institution Cardiff School of Management, Cardiff Metropolitan University, and Queen's School of Engineering, University of Bristol. With different entry criteria, both institutions have unique skills development requirements but strive to deliver the right support to their students. Personal tutoring is viewed in both cases as a key approach to support student development and is in line with student expectations, especially as expressed recently by publications of the NUS.

Keywords
Personal tutoring, employability, key skills, student support

1. Introduction
Several sources and educational researchers highlight the significance of personal tutoring in Higher Education (Swain, 2008; Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006). Most recently, the National Union of Students (NUS) published a Charter on Personal Tutors (NUS, 2011), emphasising that many students see personal tutoring as a "vital lifeline to their academic progress". However, there is a realistic risk that it may be overlooked as an activity in the current climate of progressively larger class sizes across the sector. This is true, especially in an era where institutions look for efficiency savings and reducing costs of running programmes; personal tutoring may be perceived as a 'soft' educational activity that could be substituted by provision of supportive material, on-line induction and limited availability of support staff.

According to the NUS, however, there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction amongst many students about the level of academic support they receive and there has been deterioration in the quality of personal tutoring as a consequence of budget cuts and time constraints. Given the importance of Personal Tutoring in terms of improving student satisfaction, this paper reflects on two different approaches to supporting students in STEM subjects at both a Russell Group university (Faculty of Engineering, University of Bristol) and a Post-92 institution (Cardiff School of Management, Cardiff Metropolitan University). Both approaches have received wider institutional recognition, forming examples of best practice within each respective university. We consider benefits of each approach in providing vital support to STEM students, whilst acknowledging challenges that have been faced.

2. Approaches to Personal Tutoring

2.1 Student Expectations: The NUS Charter on Personal Tutors

The charter laid out by the NUS (2011) specifies a number of key requirements of personal tutors, including the need for personal tutoring systems to be adaptable to the students' needs, that support should be provided for both academic and personal development and that all students should be given a named personal tutor and that tutor should be a member of academic staff within their subject discipline. It also expresses requirements in terms of the expected frequency of contact, setting as a minimum a once per term meeting of each student with their personal tutor.

2.2 Personal Tutoring Approach at Cardiff Met's School of Management

Cardiff School of Management (CSM) consists of four departments: Accounting and Finance, Business and Management, Tourism, Hospitality and Events and Information Systems and International Studies. Although STEM-related topics run through many of the courses within CSM, this paper will focus particularly on the support of students enrolled on computer science and information systems-related degree programmes. The School currently offers a number of degree programmes across the spectrum of Computing and Information Systems, including BSc (Hons) programmes in Computing, Software Engineering, Business Information Systems and Management and Technology. There are also pathways to cater for specialization in Multimedia, Web Development, Networking and Data Security.

In September 2007, Cardiff School of Management (CSM), part of the then-named University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, established a dedicated Personal Tutoring Unit (PTU) to provide ongoing support to students in their personal, professional and academic development (Levy *et al*, 2009). The formation of the PTU was based on an existing professional model (Thomas, 2007). According to Thomas (2007 p. 26), personal tutoring "centres around the provision of welfare and academic student services by professionally trained staff who undertake this role on a full-time basis". Recognising the importance of students having consistent access to support for the duration of their studies, CSM established a permanent team of academic staff to provide one-to-one support to students in a dedicated suite of offices. Adopting an "open door" policy, students are free to drop-in and seek support or to book an appointment, typically lasting 30 minutes. Initial meetings are either as a result of staff referral or, more typically, on a voluntary basis. During the first meeting, a personal tutor will work closely with the student to identify any potential barriers to learning, as well as finding ways to minimize any potential impact on their work (Levy *et al*, 2010). The agenda for subsequent meetings is determined by the needs and desires of the student at that particular time. The overarching aim of the Personal Tutor is to ensure that the student leaves the meeting feeling more positive. Where necessary, the Personal Tutors are also closely networked with other student support services within

the institution and can help students to access additional support if appropriate. It has always been the case that a heavy emphasis is placed on enhancing employability. The Personal Tutors encourage students to consider their future plans and skills development.

The Personal Tutoring Unit at Cardiff School of Management has met with widespread support and the demand for the service has increased over time. In the year following the establishment of the PTU, the National Student Survey score for the School yielded a 7% increase (Levy *et al*, 2010), whilst anecdotal evidence also suggests that students value the service it provides.

Prior to the establishment of the unit, other members of teaching staff were expected to fulfil the role of the personal tutor when approached by students directly. Whilst this has, until recently, been the traditional approach followed in many Higher Education institutions, it presented challenges in terms of providing adequate support and feedback. Consistency of access to support was also a challenge as different members of the teaching staff had different commitments and teaching loads. By adopting Thomas's model of personal tutoring (2007) and by continuing to work closely with subject tutors, students were afforded constant and consistent access to support.

The Personal Tutoring team at Cardiff School of Management is made up of five members of academic lecturing staff. The Personal Tutoring Coordinator, who is employed on a full-time basis, two tenured part-time members of staff (0.8 and 0.5) and two members of staff who are employed on an hourly-paid lecturer basis during term time. Each member of the team is able to bring a wide range of skills and experiences to ensure that students are receiving the best possible support.

2.3 Personal Tutoring Approach at Bristol's Queen's School of Engineering

The University-wide guidelines for personal tutoring provide an excellent base from which individual tutors can start forming their own approaches, as they outline a minimum acceptable practice with respect to pastoral responsibilities, frequency of meetings etc. That, however, leaves the significant task of deciding on the actual delivery (content, format of the tutorial, tasks to be assigned to students) up to the individual and there can be significant variation in the student experience, even across the same department.

Personal tutoring arrangements at Queen's School of Engineering (incl. Aerospace, Mechanical, Civil and Design Engineering MEng programmes) involve actively all members of academic staff. Each one is assigned a small group of students (usually six), with whom they meet regularly (at least once a fortnight). There has been traditionally a strong flavour of pastoral care, although discussions on academic matters are not excluded from these meetings. Of course variations between departments and individual tutors are normal, as are the different styles of delivery of personal and pastoral care that individual members of staff adopt. On the other hand, very prescriptive guidelines would not necessarily benefit the tutor or the tutee, as circumstances may change even within the same discipline. Also, given the personal nature of the pastoral relationship this may not be appropriate anyway.

There is however significant merit in considering at a wider scale the nature of those sessions, as this can provide for a more uniform learning experience from the student perspective (Smith, 2008). The School therefore gave consideration in identifying and promoting aspects of best practice based on personal approaches, especially the one of the

Bristol author. Effort was put into identifying aspects of study that are generic enough, yet really valuable for the students and are usually not addressed directly within classes. As such, key skills development (researching sources, writing essays, giving presentations, peer-assessment, professional ethics etc.) was found to be a good platform, especially as a lot of times those are taken for granted within courses. The reality is that students can be largely unprepared from their previous study at school level to cope with what is required in HE.

It was noted that forming personal tutorials along the provision of key skills makes the sessions extremely valuable to the students, contributing also into establishing a personal relationship of trust, on the basis of provision of relevant and useful advice. It also helps students to self-assess the maturity of their skills in this respect and to develop an appreciation for their individual style of learning. And through that they can also consider more maturely whether they face learning issues.

3. Providing Support to students in STEM

3.1 Supporting Computing Students at Cardiff Metropolitan University

Within the computing/information systems related degree programmes at Cardiff School of Management, students are able to study a wide-range of technical disciplines, including low-level programming, database management systems and mathematics for computing. Given the more technical nature of some of the computing assignments, as compared with other coursework set within the School of Management (e.g. the Business and Management or Tourism courses), it can be challenging at times to ensure a consistent level of academic support from the Personal Tutors. Where the NUS Charter on Personal Tutors suggest that students should be entitled to a named personal tutor who is a member of academic staff within their subject discipline, the model implemented at Cardiff School of Management runs into difficulty.

The Personal Tutoring Unit at CSM is intended, however, to provide support that is ancillary to the care and support of subject-teaching staff. Indeed, the students on the computing courses benefit from significant support from their academic subject tutors. The PTU, however, can and does provide further academic support to students from the computing courses, particularly in relation to key academic skills such as report writing, presentation skills, critical analysis and research techniques. With a view to employability, the staff work closely with students to ensure that they are equipped with the personal and professional skills that are of paramount importance in computer related careers, e.g. consultancy-based careers, which typically require good communication skills and the ability to communicate complex material in an accessible manner. The PTU is also able to liaise with the academic tutors to ensure that students receive a high level of pastoral care.

Because of the technical nature of the computing courses, there is perhaps a tendency for some students to feel that the Personal Tutoring unit is of limited usefulness to them. The current model of Personal Tutoring at CSM, however, arguably meets many of the criteria of the NUS Charter on Personal Tutors, including supporting both academic and personal development, meeting their tutor at least once a term and the integration of understanding assessment feedback.

It is important, then, that the importance of the role of the Personal Tutoring Unit in

supporting computing students is not underestimated and that the team continues to liaise closely with subject tutors to ensure students are accessing the best possible support. The PTU are also looking at ways to extend the use of appropriate new technologies such as Twitter and WordPress to ensure greater accessibility and to further enhance communication between tutors and students, not only on the computing courses but throughout the School.

3.2 Supporting Engineering Design Students at Queen's School of Engineering

Best practice in Queen's School of Engineering is shaped around the development of key skills. The suggested programme includes both group and individual sessions where tutor and tutees work together on carefully chosen activities that include discussion on critical thinking and literature analysis, advise on writing essays, student-led seminar sessions and presentations, advise on plagiarism and even case study discussion drawing upon real-world situations (e.g. the engineering ethics case study by Fotheringham, 2007). The latter, in association with the Department's Industrial Tutoring Scheme ensures that students get early in their studies a taste of their chosen profession, so that they can decide as early as possible if this was the right choice of degree programme for them. The programme would not require more than half an hour to an hour every two weeks for students to complete, so it is not onerous to the tutees.

3.3 Preliminary evaluation and anecdotal evidence

In Queen's peer-observation of the approach, exposure to peer critique through presentation at the Faculty's Teaching & Learning exhibition, as well as solicitation of anecdotal feedback from tutees suggest that students are very satisfied with it. The preliminary feedback has been very encouraging so far and, taking student recommendations on board, the approach will be developed further to include awareness sessions on learning difficulties and pointing out explicitly other available support within the University (e.g. careers service, student counselling, dyslexia assessment etc.).

In CSM an internal annual report with statistics about student visits and the support they received is produced and is correlated to overall student performance and satisfaction (no individuals' performance is tracked). Year on year the reports indicate improvement both in performance and in satisfaction.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

It is generally accepted that Personal Tutoring plays an important role in influencing the welfare, professional and academic success of students in STEM-related disciplines. The personal tutoring approaches used at both Cardiff School of Management and Queen's School of Engineering in Bristol have distinct advantages but also have limitations. The centralised, dedicated Personal Tutoring Unit approach at Cardiff School of Management affords students readily accessed academic, personal and professional skills development support on a one-to-one basis. But this can be limited by a lack of advanced technical expertise. The Unit was set up, however, to provide support, which is ancillary to that offered by the subject tutors.

Bristol's decentralised, individual tutor-driven approach can afford students access to subject-specific knowledge, but for each tutor, being a full time member of academic staff with time divided between teaching and research, this can be difficult to manage effectively. Of course the approach structured around key skills development is a significant

improvement on mere pastoral care provision, because it focuses on employability and academic skills development in a structured fashion.

The provisions discussed here are in no way complete and they have to be also viewed in the context of each institution and their complementary efforts to support students, e.g. the on-line support for academic transition from the University of Bristol (UoB, nd). Also, such approaches are not easy to establish and institutionalise across the HE sector, as costs and economies of scale may deter universities from considering them seriously for implementation. However they can form part of successful delivery of personal tutoring, in line with growing student expectations, particularly under the new fee structure.

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