



Journal of Hospitality, Leisure,
Sport & Tourism Education

Vol. 8, No. 2.

ISSN: 1473-8376

www.heacademy.ac.uk/johlste

PRACTICE PAPER

Enhancing the student experience by embedding personal tutoring in the curriculum

Nancy Stevenson (stevenn@wmin.ac.uk)

School of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Westminster,
35 Marylebone Road, London, NW1 5LS, UK

DOI:10.3794/johlste.82.218

©Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education

Abstract

This paper evaluates an initiative to improve the effectiveness of personal tutoring by embedding it into the curriculum. Structured group tutorials help students make the transition to learning in higher education. These tutorials are delivered within a core module and focus on enabling students to develop study skills, reflect on their learning and plan for their future. The tutor has a role in familiarising students with the practices, norms and skills required for learning at university. The system developed provides a structure and rationale for the interaction of tutors and students, with a clear place and value within the curriculum.

Keywords: personal tutoring; curriculum; personal development planning (PDP)

Introduction and Context

The decision to review personal tutoring at the University of Westminster (UoW) arose in the environment of a national agenda which is focused on widening participation in higher education (HE). This agenda has resulted in a student population which is increasingly diverse, has wide-ranging experiences and which sometimes lacks understanding of the demands of learning in an HE environment. Initiatives have been developed with the aim of improving the student experience and student progression/retention (National Audit Office [NAO], 2002) and have recommended investment to support students through the early period of their studies (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), as cited in Hixenbaugh, Porter, & Williams, 2008). In this context many institutions are reviewing their support processes to ensure they enhance the experience of a diverse cohort of students and enable them to participate and achieve in HE learning (Dunne, 2005; Luck, 2005; Palmer, 2006; Stevenson, 2006 & Strivens, 2006).

Initiatives to review student support are motivated by the aim to improve the student experience and to improve progression/retention. In studies by the NAO (2002) and Wickens, Forbes and Tribe. (2006), lack of understanding of the demands of HE was identified as a key contributor to underperformance and dropout. Hixenbaugh et al. (2008) undertook a survey over 3 years to investigate factors that enable students to succeed. Students' perceptions of their physical and mental health, social and academic integration, and lifestyle variables such as the educational experience of parents, were considered. Significant differences were identified between the perceptions of students who had seriously considered abandoning their course and those who had not. Those who had considered

Nancy Stevenson is the senior tutor of the School of Architecture and the Built Environment (SABE) and the undergraduate tourism programme leader at the University of Westminster (UoW). As senior tutor she manages the personal tutoring systems on all courses within the School and is engaged in research and practice to develop and integrate personal tutoring into the curriculum.

leaving felt less integrated into the university, with less social support, lower satisfaction with their courses and greater concerns about their own well-being. The educational achievement of parents was a significant factor, which the researchers connected with socially acquired beliefs about studying at university. It appears that “the less realistic the expectations [of new students,] the more of a shock the reality and the more effort required to adjust and adapt” (Hixenbaugh et al., 2008, p. 7).

The development of a new university-wide personal tutoring policy reflected the contextual changes outlined above. It was focused on improving the student experience by improving mechanisms to support and integrate students into the HE environment. The author was engaged in a working group which was set the task of developing the policy and created a pilot study to apply the policy prior its formal adoption. The pilot study was developed on the undergraduate tourism courses and provided a basis to inform practice in personal tutoring for students of the School of Architecture and the Built Environment (SABE) and more widely in UoW.

University policy on personal tutoring aims to improve the student experience and to improve retention and progression. It sets out minimum requirements for tutoring and entails the provision of “a programme of regular personal tutoring sessions in the first semester of study” for all new undergraduate students in order to provide students “with the opportunity to integrate academically and socially at an early stage of their studies” (UoW, 2005). The policy clearly identifies the importance of personal tutoring in assisting students to make the transition to university and in developing group identity.

The UoW policy reflects the findings of NAO (2002) research, which suggested that individual learning skills for 16 to 18 year olds are not well developed in the UK education system. These findings imply that more needs to be done to explore and develop study skills when students first arrive at university. Accordingly, the policy makes a link between personal tutoring and study skills by identifying potential activities for group tutorials to include “undertaking a skills audit (to identify where they need support), drawing up individual action plans, information on referencing and plagiarism, use of Blackboard (the virtual learning environment), time management, exam procedures, practicals, review and revision” (UoW, 2005).

Embedding personal tutoring into the curriculum

The development of a new system was supported by discussion with personal tutors across SABE about their understanding and experience of tutoring. Owen (2002) drew from the work of Earwaker (1992) and identified three models of personal tutoring support: pastoral, professional and curriculum.

The pastoral or “Oxbridge” model entails a specific tutor being assigned to each student to provide support throughout their study on a range of issues including personal and moral issues. This approach involves students meeting to talk with their tutor several times a year and is most effective where they are in regular contact with their tutor in small-group teaching situations. The system is used in a variety of HE institutions in the UK, but is more difficult in the context of increasing numbers, more diverse intakes and large-group teaching which characterise much of the sector.

In the professional model, students may seek academic advice from tutors but are referred immediately to professional counsellors for advice on wider personal issues. This approach provides different paths for students who wish to discuss academic performance and problems, failing to recognise the interrelationships between the two.

The curriculum model ties the tutoring process into a part of the main curriculum, where “learning skills, information about the operation of the university and the allocation of a personal tutor are incorporated into an accredited course/module” (Owen, 2002, p.10). This approach gives personal tutoring a place in the timetable, facilitating regular group meetings, and familiarising students and tutors from the beginning of the course.

In SABE, tutors had experienced personal tutorial support systems around different mixes of these three models. Most tutors considered the pastoral model the ideal, but many felt that it was difficult to implement in the context of larger and more diverse groups of students. This model was reliant on effective communication between tutors and students and was difficult to develop where tutors did not teach first-year students. Tutors stated that they required more support and training to deliver this model. The professional model was perceived to be inadequate on the basis that it disconnected academic and other experiences and issues. However, several tutors felt that in an environment where students only came to see them when things went wrong, their tutoring practice was moving in this direction. The curriculum model was seen as having advantages, and many tutors identified possible connections between emerging PDP systems and personal tutoring.

From initial discussions with tutors, it was clear that they were supportive of a system that was clearly specified and developed from the curriculum model. This involved delivery of personal tutoring via structured group tutorials for the first semester followed by individual tutorials twice yearly. The advantages of this system were that it:

- identified the roles and responsibilities of students and personal tutors and was clearly integrated with teaching and learning
- was supported by structured tutorials and was less open to varied interpretation by new tutors
- provided tutors with a role in the support mechanism for the PDP process and required them to engage with the process (which offered a way of structuring ongoing interactions with students)
- enabled more positive tutoring relationships with students via regular and focused meetings.

The potential problems were:

- identifying space in the curriculum for PDP and personal tutoring activities
- concerns that the inclusion of these activities in the main curriculum might prescribe and constrain communication between students and tutors
- concerns that academic roles might be perceived as outweighing wider pastoral roles

A focus group was convened with existing tourism students to evaluate personal tutoring, and it emerged that they made clear links with PDP and their personal development, and welcomed a system that enabled them to see tutors regularly, regardless of whether they had problems or not. They reported that personal tutoring was particularly effective when it was supported by PDP in Year 1 and welcomed the idea of their personal tutors providing support and formative feedback on the PDP process and their skills development more generally.

Developing a pilot on the tourism programme

The tourism programmes at UoW are characterised by their diversity. The current cohort comprises over 35 nationalities, aged between 18 and 47, with a variety of work and life experiences. They arrive at university with diverse experiences of education, wide-ranging expectations of HE, and different attitudes to learning, all of which affect the nature of their engagement.

Some of the implications of the complex and wide-ranging learning needs of the group were recognised in the late 1990s when a 15-credit core module, "Tourism skills and techniques", was created to develop learning skills, and establish and discuss norms in the HE environment. Teaching on this module was linked to a PDP system, with the aim of providing a structure for students to reflect upon their learning, and actively plan for their academic and career development. This module included lectures, seminars, discussions and workshops to develop a range of transferable skills and knowledge about university systems, services, and procedures.

Many of the tutoring activities identified in the new tutoring policy were within the remit of the module, and the development of the pilot project enabled consideration of how personal tutors might be directly involved in skills teaching to support the preparation of the assessed PDP. Consultation with the senior tutor from the School of Biosciences provided detailed information about the operation of a successful tutorial system, which was delivered through a series of structured, task-based tutorials (Luck, 2005). This system had improved interaction between personal tutors and their tutees and had gained the ongoing commitment of personal tutors.

Following discussions with tutors and students, a new system was designed which provided group tutorials to formalise, intensify and enhance interaction between students and their tutors in the first semester. This was achieved by creating tutor groups in induction week and developing a series of group tutorials which were structured around tasks to improve understanding of UoW. Each tutorial had a defined task and opportunities for discussion. Topics included the expectations of HE students, the development of some aspects of PDP (i.e., skills evaluation and auditing, setting learning objectives, group working, essay planning, and referencing). The sessions required the students to discuss ideas about their expectations, aspirations, experiences, and the skills and knowledge they brought with them to university. They also provided opportunities to discuss any questions and identify difficulties associated with university life. Students were required to hand in draft skills audits and essay plans, allowing tutors to provide some individual guidance and formative feedback.

This system reinforces the importance of tutoring by embedding it in the curriculum and actively engaging personal tutors and students in the process in their first semester. Students regularly meet their tutor and their tutor group and are given the opportunity to undertake and discuss tasks together. This regular interaction supports the development of a learning network and sets the context for a professional and supportive tutoring relationship. Tutors are given clear guidance on setting tasks and providing feedback in the meetings but are also given space to explore other questions and issues as the students experience them. Other service providers such as counselling and advice and the careers service have been brought further into the module to enable students to make connections between their broader experiences and their learning at UoW.

The implementation of the new system

Research by McPherson (2005), Nixon and Vickerman (2005), Solomonides and Swannell (1996) and Strivens (2006) demonstrated the benefits of integrating academic learning, personal development and tutorial support systems. By linking tutoring into the curriculum, the new system brings tutors into mainstream learning activities, providing a clear place where the attitudes of students and their learning experiences can be explored and discussed. It provides a structure to ask questions about learning in HE, to share ideas and to practise skills in a supportive group environment.

The system has improved engagement in the personal tutoring process and improved communication between students and tutors. This is particularly important in the context of research by Hixenbaugh et al. (2008) and Palmer (2006), who identified the connection between effective tutoring systems, good tutor–student relationships, and the progression and overall experience of students. The group tutorials have clarified the role and responsibilities of the tutor and ensured that students have frequent and formal opportunities to meet and discuss issues with their tutor. The use of PDP assists students to present a broader and more thoughtful picture of themselves, drawing from a range of experiences. This wider picture enables personal tutors to provide advice to students, to refer them to other services where necessary and to be proactive in supporting their personal development.

The advantage of this system for tutors is that it provides a supportive structure for interaction and enables them to provide academic guidance based on a better understanding of their students. It does this by collecting information at an early stage from students about their achievements (from their perspective) and by developing an awareness of their

personal objectives and priorities. Feedback from students indicates that they feel more able to approach their tutor and the tutor is able to be more proactive in providing support and guidance. Improving communication between tutors and students develops relationships and enables effective individual tutorials during the rest of their studies.

The tutorials foster a sense of group identity and develop the capacity of the group to work together and learn from one another. These relationships and networks of students are an important means of providing mutual support throughout their studies. Strong student networks provide a basis for students to discuss academic work, clarify tasks, share resources and engage in group work together. They are a means of making groups more cohesive and motivating students, and are important for progression and retention (Wickens et al., 2006). The tutor groups meet regularly and enable students to ask questions about UoW and their learning in an informal setting. This process encourages students to support and learn from one another and to discuss their work in small groups.

In the light of the experience of the pilot study, an integrated approach has now been adopted in the undergraduate tourism programmes and has been adapted to inform tutoring on a range of courses including architecture, property and construction. The implementation of the system is reviewed annually across SABE to identify any emerging themes, tensions, inconsistencies and best practice. SABE has consistently performed well in university-wide monitoring and its results in the National Students Survey (HEFCE, 2007, 2008) are now better than the results for UoW as a whole. The system is currently being developed to increase the range of PDP materials available to students to provide opportunities for communication with personal tutors on wider aspects of learning and development.

Conclusions

This paper evaluates the experience of embedding personal tutoring in the curriculum, considering its effectiveness in enhancing the student experience. It discusses the development and implementation of a system which is designed to help students make the transition to learning in HE. A pilot study was designed in the context of the widening participation agenda and the development of a new personal tutoring policy at UoW. Tutors from across the undergraduate courses in SABE were consulted, with the aim of creating a system for tourism students that could be adapted and developed across a range of different courses. The decision was taken to develop an approach which built in a commitment to engage with tutoring by integrating it into mainstream teaching and learning activities associated with skills development and PDP. It had the advantage that it provided a model that was replicable across the SABE and did not require intensive championing to ensure its survival.

This study suggests that where personal tutoring is clearly structured and embedded into the curriculum it is possible to actively and effectively engage both students and staff. The advantage of the curriculum model is that it provides academic staff with a clear structure on which to base the development of their pastoral role as personal tutors. Tutor involvement in PDP provides a way of enabling tutors to take a broader view and to provide more proactive support to their students. Frequent group tutorials in the first semester provide a formal socialisation process, developing common experiences to enhance interactions between student and tutor and between students in the group. This underpins the development of supportive networks within the peer group and enables students to make connections between the different elements of the learning experience.

The widening participation agenda presents a challenge for tutors in understanding a diverse cohort of students with wide-ranging experiences. It requires opportunities for students to ask questions about learning in HE and to bring in their wider experiences. This paper argues that group tutorials within the curriculum give legitimacy to, and a set of ground rules for, interaction between tutors and students. Discussion in small groups around tasks which reflect upon individual experience, needs and aspirations, sets the stage and allows more informal interactions to emerge. Group tutorials can provide a mechanism to facilitate and

improve communication between tutors and students and for them to explore issues together, which improves reflective practice on both sides.

References

- Dunne, A. (2005, May). *Structured personal tutorials for personal development planning*. Paper presented at the Conference on Perspectives on Personal Tutoring in Mass Higher Education: Supporting Diverse Students, University of Westminster, England.
- Earwaker, J. (1993). *Helping and supporting students*. Buckingham, England: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- HEFCE (2007). National Student Survey. Retrieved January 20, 2009, from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/data/2007>
- HEFCE (2008). National Student Survey. Retrieved January 20, 2009, from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/data/2008>
- Hixenbaugh, P., Porter, A., & Williams, D. (2008, June). *Factors Leading to Student Success in a UK First Year University Cohort*. Paper presented at The International Conference on Educational Sciences, Cyprus.
- Luck, C. (2005). *BATS: Reaching all students: Example of a tutorial programme for bio-sciences students*. Paper presented at Perspectives on Personal Tutoring in Mass Higher Education: Supporting Diverse Students Conference, University of Westminster, England.
- McPherson, G. (2005). *Introduction to career development planning HEA Academy*. Retrieved March 9, 2005, from www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/cases/case24html
- National Audit Office (NAO) (2002). *Improving student achievement in English higher education*. House of Commons Session 2001-2002, 18 January 2002.
- Nixon, S., & Vickerman, P. (2005). *Finding and following the dream: Introducing students to personal learning and development*. Retrieved March 9, 2005, from www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/cases/case24html
- Owen, M. (2002). Sometimes you feel you're in niche time: The personal tutor system, a case study. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3, 7-27. doi:10.1177/1469787402003001002
- Palmer, S. (2006). Personal tutoring in the faculty of Humanities, Management, Social and Applied Sciences at Edge Hill College of Higher Education. In S. Barfield & P. Hixenbaugh (Eds.), *HEA casebook: Critical reflections and positive interventions*. Retrieved March 9, 2005, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/tla/personal_tutoring_ecasebook_2006
- Solomonides, I., & Swannell, M. (2006). Encouraging Students Making the Passive Active at Nottingham Trent University. In G. Whisker & S. Brown (Eds.), *Enabling student learning: Systems and strategies*. London: Routledge.
- Stevenson, N. (2006). Integrating personal tutoring with personal development planning. In S. Barfield & P. Hixenbaugh (Eds.), *HEA casebook: Critical reflections and positive interventions*. Retrieved January 12, 2009, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/tla/personal_tutoring_ecasebook_2006
- Strivens, J. (2006). Transforming personal tutors into personal development tutors at the University of Liverpool. In S. Barfield & P. Hixenbaugh (Eds.), *HEA casebook: Critical reflections and positive interventions*. Retrieved January 12, 2009, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/tla/personal_tutoring_ecasebook_2006
- University of Westminster (2005). *Personal Tutoring Policy 2005*. Internal document.
- Wickens, E., Forbes, A., & Tribe, J. (2006). Listening, Understanding and Responding to Leisure and Tourism Undergraduates. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 5(2), 5-13. doi:10.3794/johlste.52.100

Submitted 2 November 2008. Final Version 20 January 2009. Accepted 5 March 2009.