

# Personal Tutoring Toolkit Guide

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A Toolkit of Resources to Support Skills Development in  
Personal Tutoring Sessions

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# Personal tutoring as a means to support student transition

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Personal tutoring acts as a ‘conduit between the student and the institution’ (Wootton, 2006, p. 118); the tutor is a clear point of contact for students within an academic department. The role involves helping students to understand the University expectations and academic requirements of the programme and to review their academic progress (Thomas, 2006). Ultimately the main role of the personal tutor is support (Rhodes and Jinks, 2005). This could include pastoral support, advising on academic matters, or academics skills support.

Personal tutoring is embedded throughout Brunel University London with all students assigned a personal tutor as part of our Tutoring@Brunel initiative. It is important for students to have a strong sense of belonging in higher education (HE) to support successful transition, which can be nurtured by engaging with activities with an “overt academic purpose” (Thomas, 2012, p. 12). Following feedback from academic staff on personal tutoring, we developed a toolkit to provide some guidance on using skills development as a means to engage students in personal tutoring.

The toolkit aims to:

- Provide academic staff with a flexible set of resources to use in their personal tutoring sessions
- Support students’ study skills development to successfully transition into higher education (HE)
- Create some continuity in students’ experiences of personal tutoring

This guide has been designed to provide some context into why these resources were developed, how they can be used in your institution, and how we envisage the toolkit growing in the future. Our good practice guides on supporting practitioners and students to improve transition provide further insight into the other work we have completed as part of the HEA Strategic Excellence Initiative. The tutoring toolkit of resources is available in a separate document.

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to Monica Fernandes and Melanie Crisfield for their work developing the resources for this toolkit. Thank you also to the project’s Advisory Board, Steering Group and staff from across the University for their feedback and guidance in creating this practical resource to support personal tutoring. Finally, thank you to the HEA Strategic Excellence Initiative without which we would not have been able to develop this toolkit. We are delighted to be able to share our work on these resources with the sector.

## Supporting academic skills development through personal tutoring

Tutoring@Brunel is a relatively new concept focussed on cohort development at the University. As part of this introduction, staff felt that they would benefit from having a toolkit of resources that they could use to help them structure sessions for the benefit of the development and integration of students.

Our toolkit is a growing resource. The initial focus has been on essential academic skills because these have featured heavily in discussions with our academics and has been a prominent feature in our workshops with one of our local FE colleges.<sup>1</sup> Whilst BTEC students have gained some of the skills intrinsic to success in HE, they can struggle with other essential skills such as academic writing (Fisher, 2010) and time management (Clark, 2011). In our own study, exams were also a key area for concern, which is perhaps unsurprising due to having no exams in the current BTEC. Identifying these as priority areas for additional support, we developed a set of resources in the toolkit to include these topics.

Upon entering HE, students may have to be deconstructed from the dependence learnt at school (Keane, 2011). By supporting skills development in personal tutoring, we can use a small group format that students may be more familiar with from school/college to scaffold transition to becoming independent learners.

Many of our programmes have a study skills module in the first year. Whilst we agree that international best practice is clear that embedding 'study skills' into academic programmes in a discipline-specific fashion is preferable to generic 'disembodied skill programs' (Clerehan 2002, p. 77), personal tutoring provides an opportunity to elaborate on these existing modules. Small group discussion facilitated by a practitioner who can provide advice and guidance allows for a tailored approach to academic skills development. The resources have been designed to complement existing provision.

### The toolkit content

The content has been designed to be used by personal tutors in their sessions with first year students, but they could be used for any undergraduate level tutorial if the tutor recognises a need to cover any of these topics with their students. The topics are as follows:

- Time management
- Independent learning
- Critical thinking and reading

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<sup>1</sup> We have run a number of workshops in collaboration with Uxbridge College – from which we accept a number of BTEC students onto our programmes – to identify the skills that students need for success in HE and how these can be developed. More information can be found in our Good Practice Guide: Support for Practitioners, which was published as part of our HEA Strategic Excellence Initiative funding work.

- Breaking down assignment questions
- Preparing for exams

Within each topic is an example session plan, as well as a collection of activities that can be used to create a bespoke session. These two strands to the toolkit allows for staff to use the resources flexibly to build on their existing tutoring practices. For early career academics, the toolkit provides a useful starting point, and for others it can be a source of activities to build on their existing practices.

The toolkit allows for us to create some consistency in the personal tutoring experiences that students have, but not at the expense of hindering practitioners' creativity and autonomy in this area.

## Using the toolkit in your institution

The toolkit has been designed as a flexible resource to support practitioners introducing skills development into their personal tutoring. It is intended for online use – with links between activities, external resources and session plans – which unfortunately will not be reflected in the PDF versions of these documents. At Brunel, the resources are available to our staff on Blackboard Learn in folders arranged by topic for easy navigation. Example session plans and activities are in separate documents to enable practitioners to adapt their own sessions. We would recommend a similar approach if you are interested in using these resources in this way.

## Developing the toolkit

The toolkit has received feedback from a variety of staff in a range of academic and non-academic departments. It will be officially piloted in 2016/17 during which time we are inviting staff to submit their tutorial resources to continue to grow this set of resources and expand the topics it covers. The toolkit format allows for the easy addition of resources over time. We will be looking at integrating a personal development programme element into the personal tutoring system. We envisage that this would enable tutors to take a more holistic view of their students by developing an awareness of their achievements, personal objectives and priorities (Stevenson, 2006). We will be tracking the use of the toolkit throughout 2016/17 and collecting feedback from staff on how it has been used in their personal tutoring.

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