Pastoral Support Roundtable (13 March) - Meeting Notes

Presentations

What is Personal Tutoring?

David Grey – UKAT

- UKAT defines tutoring as a sustained, proactive relationship that takes a holistic view of a student's experience, playing a crucial role in their progression and achievement. It involves structured, ongoing interactions that personalise learning, foster a sense of belonging, and help students navigate HE. It also supports the development of graduate attributes. The focus of personal tutoring should not be about a specific delivery method but rather these underlying principles.
- David introduced different frameworks for conceptualising personal tutoring, including the Personal Tutoring Spectrum, the Continuum, and various delivery models (see slides for details). He highlighted sector trends such as group tutoring, curriculum integration, and leveraging technology to enhance support.
- David emphasised three key considerations for institutions: defining desired student outcomes, developing a curriculum of structured interactions with students, and determining a means of delivering this approach.
- Students have expressed a desire for personal tutoring that is caring, individualised, and proactive. They value advisers who are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and approachable. They prefer clear expectations, structured and valuable meetings, and proactive contact - ideally through scheduled sessions. Face-to-face interaction remains their preference.

Student Success Coaches

Andrew Turner – Coventry University

- Coventry University introduced success coaches in 2021, comprising coaches, lead practitioners, and a head of service. Team members came from diverse backgrounds although they were encouraged to pursue coaching qualifications.
- The coaching model emerged to address inconsistencies in traditional personal tutoring. Each student is assigned a success coach who stays with them throughout their journey. Data and analytics are used to prioritise support. Coaches

collaborate with the student engagement centre, which proactively contacts students (e.g., when there is low academic engagement).

- While students valued coaching, data was underutilised, and at-risk students often did not seek support. There was also misalignment between the student engagement centre, coaches, and the wider institution. This led to a refined approach: weekly cross-departmental meetings (academics, coaches, engagement team, registry, and finance) to review data and prioritise students for follow-up. Improved data sharing enhanced coordination and impact.
- Results within 12 months included higher first-attempt module pass rates, £2.5m in savings from increased retention and progression, and reduced staff workloads.
- Key takeaways: actionable data is essential to manage workloads and prioritise interventions; success coaches should be integrated in the broader support system; and quality conversations with students drive long-term success.

Departmental Pastoral Mentors

Nicola King – University of Exeter

- In 2023, the University of Exeter identified significant inconsistencies in student support. Students' issues were becoming increasingly complex, requiring a more structured approach to support.
- The new model of Pastoral Mentors aims to connect students to support whilst aligning with the existing support provided by academic and professional service colleagues. Pastoral mentors serve as the first point of contact, triaging and identifying students early before they become unwell, miss deadlines, or develop attendance issues.
- Pastoral mentors are dedicated full-time staff who don't teach. This removes barriers to disclosing personal issues to academic colleagues. They complement, rather than replace, academic tutoring and wellbeing services. Students can self-refer, or staff can refer students as needed. The role is 80% standardised and 20% adaptable to meet departmental needs.
- A key impact has been to reduce the risk of international students breaching visa conditions due to non-attendance, as well as improved student retention which helps to offset the cost of the model.
- Key takeaways include: early identification of students is crucial; clear responsibilities and escalation processes between colleagues and teams are needed; and students benefit from a named, approachable mentor.

Student Support Triangle

Esther Kent – Sheffield Hallam University

- Introduced in 2018/19, Sheffield Hallam University's Student Support Triangle consists of a named academic adviser, student support adviser, and an employability adviser for each student. This model simplifies and targets student support, ensuring timely, personalised support.
- The academic adviser role varies by course to meet the different needs of academic disciplines. Employability advisers drive the University's strategy of embedding work experience at all study levels. Student support advisers provide pastoral care and serve as the first line of support for student concerns, using data to inform their interventions.
- Key impact and reflections include: positive student satisfaction feedback; academics appreciate its simplicity and are thus more likely to engage and collaborate on student support; and strengthened the ability to deliver employability initiatives at-scale.
- However, challenges remain in the consistency of academic advising and managing resource demands. Future focus may shift towards student self-help, with the model evolving to meet changing student and institutional needs.

Coaching Project

Jane McNeil and David Woolley – Nottingham Trent University

- The Coaching Project at Nottingham Trent University was established following recognition that the traditional personal tutoring model did not, and perhaps could not, provide coaching for all students on their personal development. Symptoms included unevenness in the extent and efficacy of provision, variable student engagement, and staff reporting dissatisfaction with the model.
- Recognising an unmet support need, the University launched a project to trial scalable, cost-effective coaching models, assessing both their efficacy and operational feasibility.
- Four models were tested: targeted 1-to-1 professional coaching for students with partial academic engagement; group coaching within the curriculum for all students; use of coaching techniques in existing teaching and support activities; and coaching professional development for academics on courses with a decline in continuation.

- Student engagement was a challenge across all models, especially for non-timetabled coaching. Students who did engage reported significant benefits, and this was the case for all models. 1-to-1 coaching enabled high personalisation but had low participation and high costs. In-curriculum group coaching was more affordable, widely attended, as effective as other models, with additional benefits for peer connections and support networks.
- The project led to the identification of key design principles: coaching must be comprehensive , and therefore compulsory and likely credit-bearing; both students and staff must understand its purpose and benefits; coaching must meet professional standards, with ongoing staff development; and leadership commitment is essential for success. Finally, coaching for personal development flourishes in a wider coaching environment, which means *coaching-informed* techniques must be embedded into a wider range of teaching and guidance.

Key Themes from the Broader Discussion

Affordability and caseload model

- It is possible to sustain a high caseload if institutions:
    - Possess accurate and actionable data that enables tutors/coaches to identify and prioritise students most in need of support, for example where they have low academic engagement, or where they are missing credit.
    - Recognise that whilst all students may have access to a tutor/coach, not all will need ongoing or intense support, and some will just require a friendly and supportive conversation.
    - Improve enquiry support for students, to reduce the need for tutors/coaches to respond to low-level queries that could be resolved earlier or elsewhere.
    - Embed tutors/coaches into a coherent student support ecosystem where they can rely on clear and effective pathways to refer students to specialist support when required.
- Whilst the delivery of a comprehensive coaching/tutoring model will incur higher costs, savings generated for the institution in terms of improved student retention may offset these costs and make the model affordable. These savings should be considered when developing a business case for a new approach.

Delivery of support

- A centralised model may be more able to respond consistently and proactively to institutional priorities (e.g., targeting specific groups of students) and make use of

institutional data. Whereas a more devolved model may enable local adaptation of design and delivery to better meet the specific needs of academic disciplines, to deliver developmental course-adjacent support, as well as to facilitate closer collaboration with course teams to improve academics' confidence and engagement. The challenge lies in developing a model which can straddle both these positions, or rather, recognising that there will be a need to possess different models that together form a coherent and comprehensive support system.

- Embedding tutoring/coaching into the curriculum will likely require a more fundamental rethink of teaching and learning, with a reorganisation of course teams, course content and structure. Whilst this will be necessary, it is likely to become increasingly challenging as more demands are placed on the curriculum to include additional activities and initiatives that institutions deem to be important.

Engaging students and staff in these models

- Engaging students, especially those with persistent low participation, ongoing challenges, or high support needs, can be resource-intensive. However, early, supportive conversations—ideally within the classroom—can help break this cycle and reduce the need for long-term intervention.
- Engaging colleagues in a new model of tutoring/coaching can be challenging. Local interpretation and adaptation of a model may result in inconsistent application. There is a need to develop mechanisms to ensure devolved delivery is maintaining prescribed quality and consistency, and that there is appropriate oversight and evaluation.
- It will also be necessary to ensure that tutoring/coaching is given appropriate professional esteem, and that colleagues see it as a legitimate activity with links to career development and progression.

Support for disabled students

- Recent advice from the Equality and Human Rights Commission is placing greater emphasis on the support provided to disabled students. Any model of tutoring/coaching will need to consider this. There are two key issues.
  - o Firstly, how are tutors/coaches (and all non-specialist staff) being trained to recognise and respond to disabled students and/or students in distress.
  - o Secondly, how is data being collected, reported and shared across the institution to give visibility to students' disabilities or other support needs.

- The latter point raises additional questions around the clarity and rigour with which institutions expect colleagues to use data to inform their interactions and interventions with students.