Enhancing the role of Personal Tutor in professional undergraduate education

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Abstract

The personal tutor role can be multifaceted, capable of serving a variety of functions such as providing pastoral care and professional/clinical support, well beyond the more conventional support around academic issues. This paper will analyse the role of the personal tutor in serving all of these functions and explore the link between the personal tutor, the student, the university and professional practice. It will look at the use of personal development planning (PDP) as a mechanism to provide the link between these three areas. The students' expectations and needs of personal tutoring, alongside considerations regarding those of personal tutors, will also be explored. The paper will conclude by considering how this understanding can be translated into practice.

Key words: *pastoral support; professional support; academic tutor; personal development plan (PDP); student services*.

Introduction

I work as an Associate Lecturer on a professional clinical training programme that provides NHS staff with the knowledge and competencies to treat patients with anxiety and depression. Since 2008 the programme has been delivered as a Post Graduate Certificate but, following adaptations to academic level, it has now been combined with a portfolio of undergraduate psychology modules to create the country's first BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) programme. This programme combines the academic study of psychology with the development of clinical competencies and enables students to graduate with a professional qualification alongside their academic qualification, enhancing employability. Undertaking the postgraduate certificate myself and working in the NHS as a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) has enabled me to have direct experience of the clinical skills I am teaching and appreciate the academic work involved. A new role I will be required to undertake on the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) will be to act as a personal tutor to a small group of students. Given the combined academic and professional basis to this programme, however, the role will require me to not only provide academic support to the students, but to also provide a pastoral and professional role during their time at university.

Given that I have not previously undertaken the role of personal tutor, and furthermore that the role will require me to provide more support beyond the usual academic remit, I wanted to research relevant literature to develop my understanding of what the role entails and how I can best support my students through this process.

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What is Personal Tutoring?

There are many descriptions and uses of the term 'personal tutor', and the role and responsibilities of a personal tutor have changed over time (Grant, 2006). Despite the many changes, however, there seems to be an agreement that the role includes support for students beyond that of a usual academic tutor; the University of Exeter also makes the distinction in the Personal Tutor Code of Good Practice (2011).

In 2007 the Vice Chancellor's Executive Group at Exeter University approved a role description for personal tutors as follows (Personal Tutor Manual 2012):

'The Personal tutor will have primary responsibility for:
- Developing and maintaining a safe and confidential relationship with their tutees
- Providing advice and support to tutees in matters related to academic work and students' personal development
- Working with tutees to find appropriate pathways to resolve difficulties
- Representing the university to the tutee and the tutee to the university
- Maintaining effective communication with other support services on behalf of tutees.'

This description highlights a pastoral element of the personal tutor role, supporting personal development beyond that merely concerned with supporting students academically. Consequently this new role description requires tutors to recognise that personal/external factors influencing the student have a direct impact on their studies and thereby the academic function of the role requires students to be supported in a pastoral capacity also (Rhodes and Jinks 2005). Personal tutoring therefore becomes the 'conduit between the student and the institution' (Wootton 2006, p118)

My role as a personal tutor, however, is required to extend beyond being merely a conduit between the academic and pastoral aspect of the students' time at university (Wootton 2006). It also requires me to provide a further link between students, the university, and the professional aspects on their course and final year work based placement (see Figure 1). Helping to provide a link between all of these separate functions in the use of Personal Development Planning (PDP) serves to support the students' development and provide them a mechanism with which to monitor their progress.
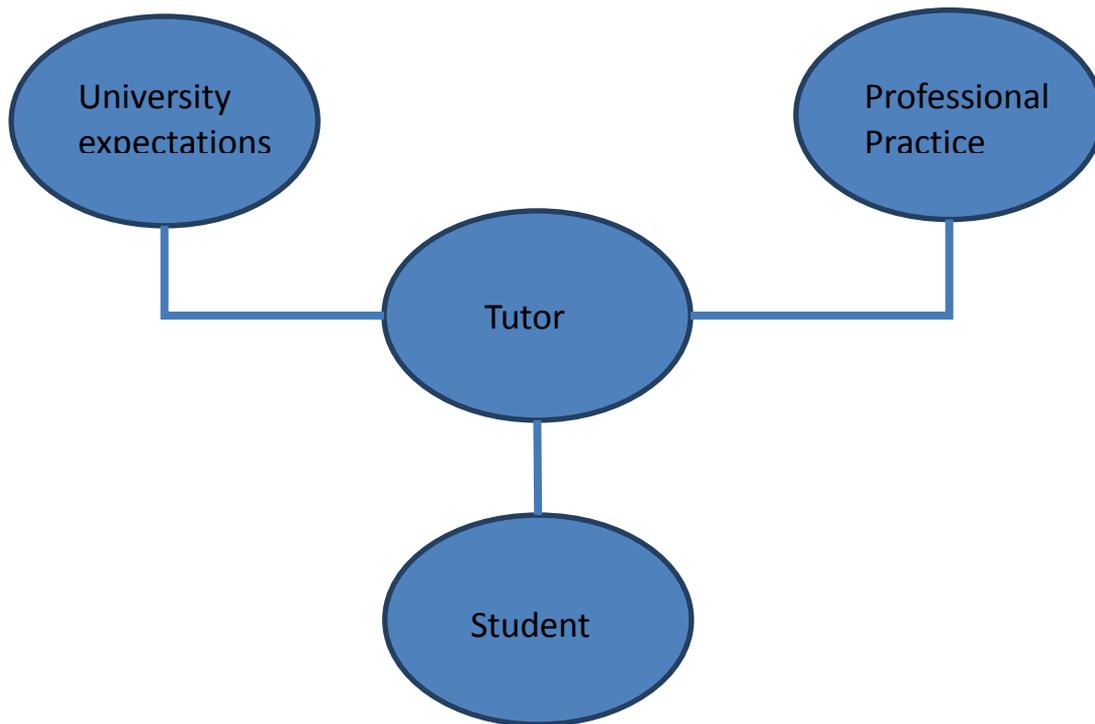
Figure 1. The enhanced role of personal tutor as a conduit between the student, the institution and aspects of professional practice.

University expectations

A key area for students' success at university is their ability to integrate and embed themselves into the institution of the university (Stephen, D. E, O'Connell, P., and M. Hall 2008). In the student's first year at university one of the roles of the tutor is, therefore, to support and acclimatise them to university life. This is especially important given that the first year is critical for students' adjustment period to the new environment (Hixenbaugh, Pearson and Williams 2006). The personal tutor role therefore extends beyond acclimatising students merely into aspects of academic practice such as writing assignments and highlighting the difference in support at university compared to college/school. The role also requires the tutor to support students through their transition into university life, which may require helping them to adjust to demands associated with living away from home for the first time, financial independence and navigating a new social environment (Lee and Robinson 2006). It can be a challenging time for students. However it is well worth the personal tutor investing time in providing support during this transition. Not only will it help students adjust and thereby reducing the likelihood of emotional difficulties, however it may also reduce the likelihood of withdrawal from university (Wilcox, P., Winn, S., and M. Fyvie-Gauld 2005).

This transition can be particularly difficult for non-traditional students or students who are the first in their family to attend university as these students lack easy access to others' experiences (Thomas 2006). These students may therefore require even more support from the personal tutor as they acclimatise to student life. However, despite non-traditional students finding the transition more difficult, it is these students who are more hesitant to ask for support from their tutor and as a result

may withdraw from higher education (Thomas 2006). A consequence of the widening participation agenda may therefore require the personal tutor, and indeed the university, to pay even more attention to this aspect of the role.

From a university perspective, student support services have a key role to play in meeting the more specialised needs of students during their time at university (Grant 2006). Such specialised support often includes the provision of financial advice, mental health teams, disability support and careers advice among other services. Such services are accessed in addition to personal tutors as they include staff with greater training in these specialist areas. The importance of personal tutors linking into these services is paramount, especially as personal tutors have reported feeling overwhelmed by some of the difficulties that students bring to them (Earwaker 1992). As the personal tutor may be the first person students turn to for advice and support, they need to be fully aware of the support services available in order to refer the students to the correct place to access the most appropriate support (Grant 2006). Effective referral and knowledge of services is key and the personal tutor needs to be sensitive when referring students on to other services so as not to appear to the students as 'passing the buck' (Grant 2006, p17). A lack of referral to third parties could hinder the student's development as this would be preventing them from receiving the best support and advice available (Wootton 2006). For tutors to try to manage these difficulties themselves is needless when there are services with specialist expertise to deal with these issues (Earwaker 1992). Indeed, there has been suggestion that given the range of skills and expertise within such services that these may be enough for students and that the personal tutor may no longer be needed. However Grant (2006) makes the point that students may be less likely to approach staff with whom they are less familiar; the relationship between the student and tutor is a key element in accessing support (Earwaker 1992).

Another potential role for the personal tutor in helping the student to understand the expectations placed upon them is to provide support in understanding the academic requirements of their programme and to review their academic progress (Thomas 2006). Students would like the personal tutor to monitor their progress closely and give proactive feedback on their academic work (Braine and Parnell 2011; Stephen, O'Connell and Hall 2008). This function of the role has been cited by students as a vital resource (Braine and Parnell 2011). Surprisingly, however, there is a lack of reference in the literature to the review of academic skills as an individual task of personal tutoring. This raises the possibility that although often seen as central to the personal tutor role it is also an assumed activity. The combining of the roles of academic and pastoral support for students has been considered of more value (Elander 2003).

Professional practice

Being linked to the fundamental aims of the programme, a much less commonly discussed area of personal tutoring is concerned with providing and supporting professional knowledge and practice. Given this extra function of personal tutors on professional healthcare programmes the personal tutor role here has been identified as having a clinical, as well as pastoral and academic function (Gidman 2001).

The development of clinical skills and professional practices is crucial when delivering a programme such as the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) which has a strong vocational element. The role of Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) is a relatively new role within the NHS and, with the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) being the first of its kind in the country, the role of the clinical function of the personal tutor role may be significantly enhanced. There is little research specific to the personal tutor role on mental health degree programmes and as a result I refer to literature in similar applied degree programmes, such as nursing and teaching, to support the importance of the professional element in personal tutoring.

Personal tutoring is seen as a 'core around which academic and industrial tutoring can fall into place' (Powell 1997, p92). In a degree with a vocational training element, part of the tutor's role is therefore to make the link between the professional role and academic learning. The translation of theory into practice is a key element of our degree programme as it helps to develop practitioners' skills and awareness of their areas for development (Bennett-Levy 2006; Farrand, Perry and Linsley 2010). Reflective practice is often used to support this link.

An additional clinical role played by the personal tutor on professional programmes is to serve as a role model for students by helping them to prepare for work experience (Ottewill 2001). This function is certainly transferrable to the role of personal tutor on the BSc Applied Psychology (clinical) programme where a work placement is a crucial element of the third year of study; at this stage, the course is predominantly geared around developing the competencies and skills necessary for the professional role. Role modelling professional attributes and behaviours may also help students to develop the skills needed for their entry into employment at the end of their course, thus serving a role in enhancing employability.

Students can therefore begin working towards creating their own professional identity throughout their course. Demonstrating behaviour as a professional role model is different to the usual example set by personal tutors as an academic role model and involves replicating cultural norms and ethical considerations relevant to that particular work environment. Having worked within the role of PWP, I am particularly well placed to model these attributes and expectations for students on the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) (Harvey, Moon and Geall 1997, cited in Ottewill 2001).

Additionally, the personal tutor may also serve to provide a role model by emulating the skills and values of the profession. A good example of this in practice would be demonstrating to the students that we as tutors also continually reflect on our own practice. This demonstrates the importance, within the profession of PWP and within pedagogy, of continually developing and being aware of your skills regardless of your levels of experience, and adds weight to the idea of life-long learning. The potential for role modelling may be further enhanced through the demonstration of advanced communication skills employed within the personal tutor role. Commonalities between the role of the personal tutor and the professional role associated with the degree programme may therefore be identified by students. Indeed, tutors working on a nursing education programme have noted how similar the role of healthcare practitioner is to that of personal tutor (Rhodes and Jinks 2005). As a consequence, exposure to the core skills associated with the role of the personal tutor may help students to develop these skills themselves (Ottewill 2001).

Personal Development Planning (PDP)

Thus far the role of the personal tutor within professional training programmes has been shown to extend well beyond providing simply academic or pastoral support. However, merely having these separate functions does not necessarily mean that the personal tutor will be able to effectively integrate these separate roles (Braine and Parnell 2011). Personal Development Planning (PDP) provides one way to enable the personal tutor to integrate all these separate roles. PDPs were introduced into Higher Education as a way of monitoring students' development, both academically and personally, by recording students' achievements over the duration of their course. They were introduced sector-wide following recommendations from the Dearing Report (1997). Within this report, PDPs were identified as having two main elements:

- a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies;
- a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development.

The aim of PDP is to provide a mechanism through which students can reflect on their learning, academic performance and achievements and create a career or personal development plan. It adopts an approach whereby learning and development are considered not only from an academic perspective but from a holistic viewpoint which integrates academic, personal and professional issues. This structured and supported process therefore enables students to increasingly take responsibility for their own learning and articulate this learning for themselves, their tutors and their potential employers. It supports the notion that learning is a life-long activity rather than something that only occurs whilst at university (QAA 2001).

Three specific types of PDP have been identified: professional, employment and academic
(Clegg and Bradley 2006). Interestingly, the overlap between these types of PDP with the pastoral, academic and professional functions associated with personal tutoring immediately highlights the potential utility in combining these two separate areas. The *Professional* PDP model focuses student competencies through supporting applications for employment and/or placements within a particular professional field. The PDP is the start of a model of lifelong learning and continued professional development and is often orientated around reflective practice. Academics that work with this model are often closely affiliated with the professional field and professional bodies themselves and therefore value the reflective model and the core professional beliefs and cultures that accompany the elements of the PDP. The *Employment* PDP model is focused upon employability and transferable skills, and the competencies it contains are generated to acknowledge the skills a student is developing alongside their academic knowledge and competence. The *Academic* PDP model is focussed upon the skills and attributes of a particular discipline and the metacognitive skills that the learner will develop. The focus here is therefore upon academic development and discipline needs rather than the pastoral or professional needs of the student.

The different types of PDP therefore highlight the considerable flexibility that exists within PDPs to capture different areas of the student experience. It also highlights the potential benefits that may arise when PDPs are developed to capture the specific needs of students at a programme level, rather than developing in a more generic fashion (Clegg and Bradley 2006). Indeed, it has been noted that academic staff tend to make sense of their own practise of PDP by developing models

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that fit with their own disciplinary and professional orientations and from their assessment of the external environments in which they find themselves (Clegg and Bradley 2006). The different approaches to PDP can be highlighted by considering those developed at Exeter for the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) and those for the BSc Psychology. Although covering some of the elements of the academic and employment styles of PDP, the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) is also heavily rooted within a professional style, in particular to prepare the students for the clinical practice placement in their third year. Additionally there is a much greater focus upon the development of reflective practice than would be commonly anticipated with the more theoretically rooted BSc Psychology. It would therefore be unsurprising to see very different PDPs being developed for these two programmes, which on some levels may seem to be similar.

All the same, an important consideration across both programmes when developing a PDP is to place emphasis upon features associated with the employment PDP model. Whilst increasing employability has become a major focus across all degree programmes it has particular resonance in psychology given concerns that have been highlighted regarding the employment of psychology graduates (Trapp et al. 2011). In particular, psychology students have been identified as having difficulties recognising the many transferrable and employability skills to which they are exposed during their degree programme (Maltby, Day, Giles, Gowers and Gill 2008) and furthermore being able to relay knowledge of these skills to potential employers (Trapp et al. 2011). The style of PDP that we choose to use with our students will help them to recognise and relay these skills. Two of the key things that enable a PDP to be most effective are that the purpose is meaningful to students and staff and that learners can see the benefit to participating (Jackson 2001a). By helping the students to recognise their transferable skills, and by engaging with the PDP process, tutors can take a more holistic view of the student and be proactive in helping them to recognise and communicate their own achievements (Stevenson 2006).

What do students want from Personal Tutoring?

After reviewing the literature concerned with the role of the personal tutor and PDP it seems important to consider what students have reported themselves as wanting from personal tutoring. One of the key themes to emerge is that students place considerable importance upon the quality of the relationship with their personal tutor and that they want to feel supported (Braine and Parnell 2011). Consequently students express a desire to see their personal tutors more often and/or spend more time with them (Braine and Parnell 2011; Grant 2006; Hixenbaugh et al. 2006; Stephen et al. 2008). However, not only is the desire to spend more time with their personal tutor a reflection of the desire to develop a better relationship with them but also a reflection of students' desire for specific areas of support. Braine and Parnell (2011) note that students would like more support around their clinical placements and also more structured support around their use of PDPs. They would like structured and consistent support as they often have difficulty compiling a PDP and students often opt out of the PDP system after year one (Stevenson 2006). The PDP itself can also help to develop a relationship between a student and tutor as it gives the tutor a holistic view of the student and their difficulties; rather than just looking at academic aspects the tutor is able to see the full picture of the student's progress. It also gives the student and tutor the opportunity to build a

relationship when the student is not experiencing problems, which may mean the student is then more likely to approach the tutor when they are (Stevenson 2006).

Of significance however is that whilst students feel most comfortable approaching personal tutors for support surrounding academic issues, they feel far more reluctant to approach them concerning pastoral issues (Hixenbaugh et al. 2006). Such reluctance is particularly marked if the tutor is also the person responsible for assessing their work (Thomas 2006), which in fact may often be the case (Code of Good Practice 2011; Earwaker 1992). This is of particular significance for students on professional courses such as the BSc Applied Psychology (Clinical) where the personal tutor may also have a role in assessing the students' fitness to practice (Grant 2006). Consequently students may often approach their peers on the course and friends for non-academic advice (Lee and Robinson, 2006). Whilst the relationship with their tutor is therefore something that students feel is important, their relationship with friends is where they tend to gain most support (Wilcox et al. 2005).

An important role of the personal tutor, especially in the first year of a student's programme, may therefore be to support them in forming friendship groups and relationships with peers in order to enhance their personal friendship networks (Lee and Robinson 2006). This is reflected in the work of Braine and Parnell (2011), who identified that students would like to spend more time working in groups with their personal tutor and other tutees. The key time to form these relationships, friendships and a sense of group identity is in the first week of university (Hartwell and Farbrother 2006).

What do I need to consider as a Personal Tutor?

Ironically, whilst students would like to see personal tutors more often, tutors report often feeling overwhelmed by the demands of students, not only with the amount of time needed for the role but also by the types of difficulties with which they are presented (Braine and Parnell 2011; Stephen et al. 2008; Earwaker 1992). Boundaries of the role and the times that a tutor is available therefore need to be clearly marked out (Earwaker 1992). Tutors also find it difficult to have the dual role of supporter on the one hand whilst also being involved in the assessment of students' work on the other (Rhodes and Jinks 2005; Earwaker 1992). With conflicts of time and demand alongside the increased number of students attending higher education (Thomas 2006), this is a difficult role for a new tutor. Such difficulties are increased as the role is often given to the least experienced members of staff (Earwaker 1992) and with little, if any, training provided.

There has been some discussion of the kind of support a new tutor may need to help them with this complex role. Training may be especially important given that new tutors have not had the opportunity to learn from their own experience, or, given that they would be unlikely to have had an opportunity to observe a colleague tutoring, to learn from the experience of peers. New tutors may often find it difficult to strike the right balance between being accessible to students in times of needs versus being too available and ending up feeling overwhelmed with the role (Ridley 2006). Ridley (2006) continues, suggesting that new tutors need reassurance from peers that they are doing a good enough job, but that it would also benefit them to have either a senior colleague or a mentor to turn to for advice and reassurance and that this would help to give them confidence in the role.

Conclusion

Initially I considered the role of personal tutor as the link between the student, the university and professional practice. On reviewing the literature and the wants and needs of both students and staff I can now see that rather than being the link between the university and professional practice, the role of personal tutor is to support the student to make these links and access these resources for themselves (see Figure 2).

There are some practical applications to be aware of: students would like more structured, focussed time with tutors and support around both the personal and academic transitions into university life. The PDP can be used as a tool to build this more holistic view for the student and possibly flag the areas in which further support may be needed. For a tutor on a professional training programme there needs to be a recognition of the role involving a modelling not only of good academic practice but also of the norms, expectations and cultures of professional practice. A consideration of resources available in terms of training for personal tutors and mentoring support, in addition to maintaining clear time boundaries, could potentially reduce the burden of the role. The main consideration, however, is the knowledge that personal tutoring involves more than just supporting the student with their course and academic support; it is also about the students' pastoral care and access to support systems. Ultimately the main role of the personal tutor is support, in whatever facet that may take (Rhodes and Jinks 2005).
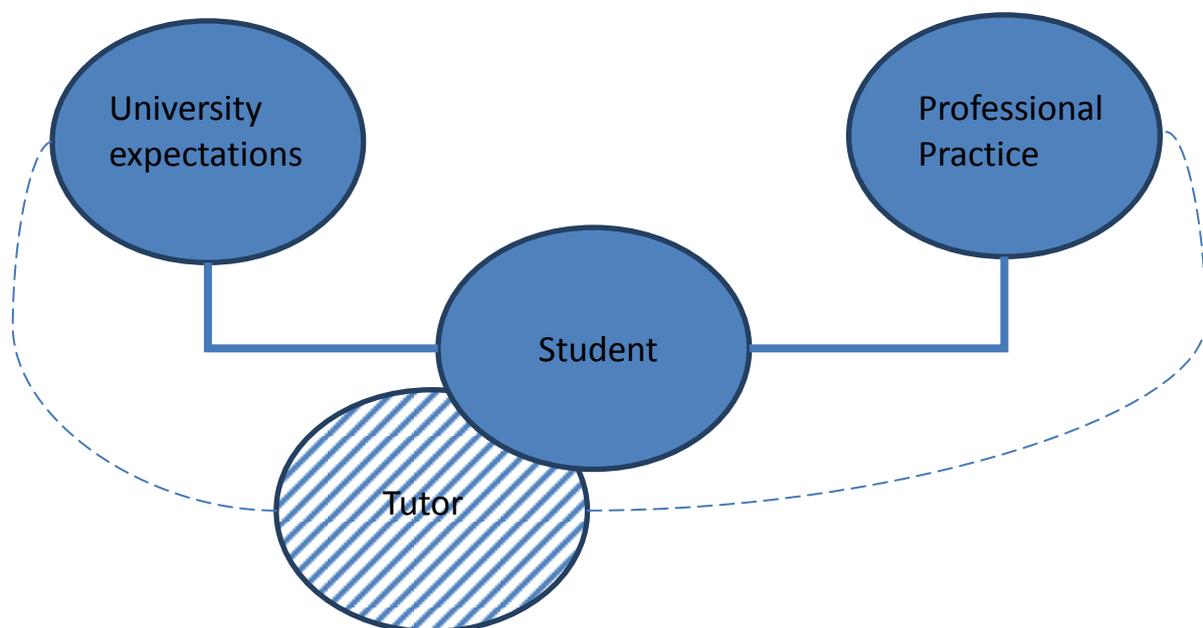

Figure 2. The role of personal tutor revised as a link/support for the student.

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