

University of Bolton Personal Tutoring Strategy

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Institutional Context

A stated goal of the University of Bolton Strategic Plan (2006-2012) is:

“To help every career-motivated student to achieve their career aspirations by offering personal and academic support to every student from the time they first make contact with us through to their successful transition into their career of choice. This means keeping in close contact with individual students throughout their time with us.”

The above implies provision of *personal tutoring* (PT) at the university, which can be defined as ‘Staff (academic, support and guidance tutors), who act as a key contact point between the university and the student. They offer academic and personal support at a more individual level than is sometimes possible within a formal teaching context, especially on large courses’ (based on guidelines from the University of Brighton, Centre for Learning and Teaching. Guide for Personal Tutors, 2008-9).

Personal tutoring has a long history at the University of Bolton adopting, primarily, a pastoral and, more recently, a hybrid pastoral / professional model (see Part 1). Despite the introduction of initiatives to improve the quality of the student experience, (such as the introduction in 2006 of Student Liaison Officers in each of the five academic Schools), the outcomes of the last Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) institutional audit of the university in 2005 indicated that there may be issues regarding the robustness of current personal tutoring provision that must be addressed and the recommendation that the university:

“Review the extent to which departmental implementation of its policies and procedures is consistent, in particular those relating to personal tutoring”.

As it is now known that the next institutional audit is to take place in the autumn term of 2010, evaluation of current personal tutoring provision across the university and exploration of new, effective, *curriculum-based* models of personal tutoring, possibly ones that aim to integrate PDP activities, was given high priority status. Consequently, in the University’s ‘Student Retention Plan’ (v5 - July 2007) the following issues related to the ‘First Year Student Experience’ were identified:

1. Need to develop curriculum model of personal tutoring rather than pastoral or professional
2. Necessity to identify minimum entitlement to meetings and ensure that the focus of meetings is aligned with key activities in academic year.

The plan emphasises that this is especially important for full-time undergraduates and those who enter university for the first time The University responded with the appointment of a Learning & Teaching Fellow to investigate and inform this process.

This document details the progress made to address these issues and culminates with a strategy for delivery of personal tutoring at the University of Bolton.

The first section (Part I) contains an overview of findings from UK higher education institutions (HEIs) on the most effective strategies to employ in personal tutoring and the financial implications of implementing a personal tutoring scheme.

Part II reports the results of a comprehensive review of current personal tutoring at the University of Bolton.

Part III describes a pilot study on the effectiveness of a proactive, integrated-curriculum model of personal tutoring that was conducted in Psychology during Semester I (2008-9).

Finally, and based the local and national research evidence presented, the final section (Part IV) details the proposed strategy for personal tutoring at the University of Bolton, one which recognises and serves to meet the aims of the current university Personal Tutoring Policy.

Part I

Evidence from UK Higher Educational Institutions and Agencies on Effective Personal Tutoring

It was considered crucial that any recommendations for a personal tutoring strategy were informed by research findings from both the University of Bolton and other UK higher education institutions and agencies, thus a literature review on recent research and development of personal tutoring in UK universities was conducted.

Background

Widening participation and growth in international recruitment have led to an expansion in the number of students pursuing higher education in the UK. As the greater number of those seeking higher education has not been met with an appropriate increase in per capita funding (UUK, 2001) this has led to higher staff-student ratios (SSRs) and resulted in many universities placing greater reliance on teaching via large lectures and less on seminars and tutorials, necessarily affecting the amount of *personal contact* that a student has with their lecturers. Over the past few years, the educational (and retention) consequences of this have been recognised; research has repeatedly demonstrated that personal contact with university staff is important to *all* students and low contact is reported to affect student satisfaction.¹

The reduction in scheduled personal contact has been shown to be particularly problematic for the large number of non-traditional students now attending UK universities as a result of the widening-participation initiatives, i.e., first generation entrants, students from a wide-range of ethnicities, and more from working-class backgrounds. All of these demographic groups present an “increased complexity of student needs”, have more external pressures that compete with independent study time, (e.g. financial pressures to work), and little cultural capital to ease their transition into university life (Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006) . Studies have indicated that this group are less likely to *actively seek assistance* when faced with academic and personal problems, (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Thomas, 2005), possibly due to low levels of self-confidence It has been postulated that this may be a major contributing factor to withdrawal decisions in these cohorts (Quinn, 2005).

Collectively, these factors have led many institutions to conclude that development of *time and cost-effective systems of personal tutoring*, (i.e., schemes that go some way to compensating for the lack of academic seminars and tutorials by increasing the amount of contact with at least *one* member of teaching staff), is high priority.

The perceived importance of personal tutoring in 21st century higher education is evidenced by the emergence of the first national conference on Personal Tutoring at the University of Westminster in 2005 which, amongst other things, revealed the extent of

¹ For example, in a survey conducted in 2001 at the University of Leicester, over half of the respondents rated contact via personal tutoring as “above average importance” in their student experience and there was a positive correlation between finalists’ agreement with the statement “The academic staff have cared about my well-being” and responses to “I am proud to have been a student at this university” (Grant, 2005).

activity and change in provision that is currently taking place across the UK higher education sector;²

The most conspicuous agendas to emerge at the conference and in recent literature on the topic are:

1. The role of a personal tutor (and benefits for students);
2. Alternative models and the appropriateness of each for particular student populations;
3. The financial implications of personal tutoring.

As each of these factors are fundamental to the successful development and sustainability of any personal tutoring strategy at the University of Bolton, each will be briefly examined in the context of research carried out by UK researchers.

What is the role of a PT?

Various attempts to define the role of a personal tutor have been made. Watts (1999) presenting his analysis of the role of a personal advisor in all post-compulsory education suggested the following benchmarks against which effectiveness of provision might be judged:

1. Providing ongoing support based on an established relationship
2. Providing holistic guidance encompassing academic and personal information, advice and guidance
3. Referral to other specialist agencies
4. Advocacy via references and representation (Watts, 1999).

The first role implies *continuity of contact* between tutor and tutee and the development of a *stable relationship* that leads to trust and confidence and enables a student to talk comfortably and freely about academic and personal issues. Research conducted at the University of Leicester indicated that when this is established students report that, when facing issues, they are almost as likely to consult their personal tutor as they are friends and family and more likely to turn to their PT than to specialist services that the university may offer (Grant, 2002). Wheeler & Birtle (1993) refer to provision of a personal tutor, (an established member of the academic community, with whom a student has regular and continued contact), as “*anchoring*” the student within the institution and leading to a “*sense of belonging*”.

Frequent engagement with a student regarding both academic and personal matters (‘holistic guidance’) also makes the fourth role of advocacy easier to carry out; the tutor is better placed to supply accurate and comprehensive references on the student (incorporating academic and personal information) for potential employers.

Grant (2005), quite reasonably, points out that in order for ‘referral to specialist agencies’ (central support services) to be achievable, accurate knowledge of the full range of services available is required and quite often not the case. She recommends more *effective dissemination of information on student support services* within an institution

² 86% of pre-1992 establishments and 43% of post-1992 and 91% of colleges of HE were reported as utilising a compulsory personal tutor system (Grant, 2005).

and strongly advocates closer working relationships between departmental personal tutors and professional support units, proposing that this is also the key to reducing burden on staff and making better, fuller use of institutional resources. In her own institution, the University of East Anglia, this was facilitated by student services staff creating a short booklet, '*Helping Students with Difficulties*'.

In her paper, Grant also emphasises the necessity for *consistency* of personal tutoring practice *within departments* and across the university as a whole. She advises that in order to achieve this, two factors are critical. The university must:

1. Ensure that students are fully informed of the personal tutoring system and have *realistic and accurate expectations* of personal tutoring (i.e., avoid the perils of 'consumer disappointment');
2. Acknowledge that academics do not always naturally possess the most appropriate skills for and commitment to personal tutoring (i.e., appoint with care and / or educate sufficiently to safeguard *parity of provision*).

Liz Thomas, Senior Advisor on Widening Participation for the Higher Education Academy has also compiled a set of similar benchmarks for personal tutoring. Offering evidence to support the inclusion of each, she suggests that personal tutoring comprises the following roles:

1. Providing a stable point of contact within the university;³
2. Providing information about higher education processes, procedures and expectations;⁴
3. Providing academic feedback and development to alleviate new students' anxiety regarding what is expected of them academically;⁵
4. Personal welfare support;
5. Referral for further information;
6. Institutional relationship / sense of belonging (Thomas, 2005).

Alternative Models of Personal Tutoring

There is a wide-range of approaches to personal tutoring, based on distinctly differing philosophies and beliefs. For example:

1. It can be provided for all students or just those identified as in need of personal assistance with their studies;

³ This has noted benefits in terms of student social identity and confidence (Wheeler and Birtles, 1993).

⁴ Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that students from non-traditional backgrounds had little prior knowledge of what student life involved and how to manage study and assessment independently. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), and Read *et al* (2003), showed that mature, first generation attendees and ethnic minority entrants felt that they were "expected to be too independent too early" and "shocked by lack of supervision or guidance"; A UCAS (2002), study revealed that many young people felt underprepared for the transition to HE from the more 'cosseted' learning style of school or college.

⁵ For example, how to study (Quinn *et al*, 2005) and how to structure academic writing and examination standards (Murphy & Fleming, 2000).

2. It can be proactive (tutor scheduled) or reactive (responsive to student needs or requests for assistance / guidance);
3. Students can have limited access or there can be an 'open-door' policy;
4. It can be integrated into the curriculum or offered as additional support;
5. There can be structured tutor involvement (following a 'syllabus') or unstructured.

Earwaker (1992) organises the above into three basic models:

1. The (traditional) *pastoral* model
2. The *professional* model
3. The *integrated* / '*curriculum*' model

Each of these differ in terms of the underlying principles and, it has been proposed, each vary in their appropriateness for use according to the demographics and needs of a student population (Thomas, 2005).

The Pastoral Model

With this approach, a specific member of staff is allocated to each student and provides both pastoral support and academic guidance. When pastoral models are adopted, it is usual for *all* students to be allocated a single personal tutor.

Pastoral tutoring is largely unstructured and reactive; students approach tutors for assistance 'as and when needed'. This has been noted to carry some weaknesses. As Thomas (2005) points out, some students "fall through the net" due to a lack of confidence to approach or the tutor being unavailable at times when needed. This latter issue is seen as especially problematic for non-traditional students who are unlikely to be living on campus or nearby and may have significant work commitments. Furthermore, it relies on parity in quality of provision and not all tutors are as suited to this role as might be desired.

Owen (2002) argued for a revision of the pastoral model, recommending a more proactive and structured approach in which students are required to meet with their assigned tutor at scheduled times throughout the academic calendar whether they are experiencing difficulties or not. Yorke and Thomas (2003) suggested that in addition to this, indicative content might be incorporated into the schedule based on an agenda prepared in advance by the student.

The Professional Model

This approach is very much predicated on provision of student support via professionally trained staff employed full time in centralised academic and welfare services. An advantage of this is that professional, structured support is always available when required but a noted shortcoming is that it is unlikely that the student will receive assistance from the same member of staff each time thus, limiting the development of staff / student relations and anchoring of the student within the institution. Furthermore, once again, this model relies on the students seeking support. Thomas (2005) reports that staff in student services are very much aware that many students who might benefit from assistance do not approach.

In response, hybrid pastoral / professional models are emerging. These incorporate the use of 'one-stop shops', (such as the Student Centre at the University of Bolton), and placement of academic and personal advisors in departments (the Student Liaison Officers employed by the University). While the 'one-stop shop' provides a convenient and unambiguous point of contact for students needing assistance they can, according to Thomas (2005), be perceived by some students as too "*distant from identity and sphere of influence*". Although 'local', departmental advisors help to overcome this particular problem, issues can arise around the ability to form (beneficially) close relationships with the large number of students they may be required to see.

The Integrated Curriculum Model

In this, a small cohort of students takes a 'module' of learning (incorporating study skills and information about their university and studying at HE level) with their assigned personal tutor. Earwaker (1992) lists six objectives for integrated curriculum approaches to personal tutoring:

1. To familiarise students with the institution;
2. To introduce them to what is expected of them;
3. To nurture institutional and subject-related expectations and engagement;
4. To help them understand their own learning and learning development;
5. To encourage and cultivate mutual peer support;
6. To enable students to seek professional help when needed.

When the integrated curriculum approach is used, personal tutoring is timetabled and attendance is compulsory; in some institutions it is also accredited. This proactive approach ensures that all students benefit from guidance that they may not even be aware of or anticipate they need. An additional advantage is that the scheduled, regular contact enables working relationships to develop between students and their PT.

The importance of relationships to students was demonstrated in research by Paula Hixenbaugh (University of Westminster) who focused on the research question "What do students want from personal tutoring?" Having surveyed 3,000 first year students she found that *relationships are fundamental to students' positive experience* at university and personal tutors can play a central role in facilitating good relations with academic staff *and peers*. The outcomes of her research suggested that this is best achieved by means of:

1. A proactive, structured and 'integrated into curriculum' approach to personal tutoring that should;
2. Bring together academic and professional support and;
3. Must reach all students, not just high-adopters of support (Hixenbaugh, 2005).

Another advocate of the integrated curriculum approach is Liz Thomas. Based on data from exit interviews with 67 first-generation attendees of working class background⁶ who

⁶ A common demographic of University of Bolton students.

withdrew from a post-1992 university she concluded that an integrated-curriculum personal tutoring system might have benefitted these and similar students and prevented withdrawal. The major contributing factors cited by these students were that they felt ill-informed and prepared for university life and deprived of organised, personal contact with a tutor which they were reluctant to initiate themselves. To quote Thomas:

“The research with working class and first generation entrants suggests that these students are particularly likely to benefit from a proactive, integrated and structured approach that prioritises relationships rather than the onus being on students to access student services when they need them, from staff they do not know”

The challenge, according to Thomas, is to develop proactive, integrated PT systems that are time and cost-effective.

Financial Implications of Personal Tutoring

The relative cost - benefits of implementing proactive personal tutoring was highlighted in a study conducted by Ormond Simpson of the Open University (OU) in 2004. Prompted by changes in the structure of entry level courses, in 1996 the OU began to abandon its traditional (pastoral approach) personal tutoring system in favour of guidance on a reactive basis from teams of three or four academic tutors at each of the thirteen regional centres. The tutors contacted by students for assistance were not necessarily involved in delivery of the course a student might be enrolled on. The teaching staff received assistance in student support from full-time clerical staff also based regionally and a Customer Relations Management (CRM) system. Although student retention and re-registration figures were noted to have dropped, no formal evaluation of the change was conducted; Simpson, (2005), likens this to a version of the “Titanic Effect”, (Watt, 1974) – once senior management have backed a project, “no-one looks out for icebergs”.

In 2004 Simpson, (and a number of other junior staff), on examining the retention figures, felt driven to devise small-scale studies to assess the impact of the abolition of traditional personal tutoring. Simpson’s work set out to provide a compelling *financial* case for personal tutoring in the hope of persuading OU budget-holders to reinstate the traditional system. His project investigated the effects of *early* personal contact on retention rate. 3000 new entrants, identified via their entry profiles as ‘vulnerable’, were divided into two groups; half were proactively phoned by a ‘study advisor’ *before their course started*. The member of staff chatted with them for about 10 minutes in an attempt to establish a relationship with them and the institution and raise their motivation to pursue and succeed on their course. The other 1500 were not contacted. This experiment was repeated for three successive years.

Simpson found that, on average, the ‘contacted’ groups had around 5% higher retention than the control group. Analysing the financial consequences of this personal contact (i.e., communicating a welcome message prior to entry) he estimated an average cost of around £200 (in staff time) but the 5% increase in retention represented a saving of £1300 per student retained – in all, a 550% return on the university’s staffing investment. From this he concluded that investing in personal tutoring is *“a sound financial decision”* especially in the context of increased student fees and demand for ‘value for money’.

Implications of the Above Findings

Collectively, the above findings suggest that the best models of personal tutoring, (ones which enhance the first year experience and improve student performance, thereby maximising chances of retention), incorporate the following features:

1. **Academic focus at a departmental level with close collaborative relationships with central and departmental student support services** to assist with pastoral issues and basic study skills (thus drawing on all the resources that the university has provided to distribute workload fairly, appropriately and to the students' benefit).
2. **They have the goal of forging 'personal' relationships between tutors and students**, (and between students) with the belief that these relationships 'anchor' a new student into the community, instil a sense of security and promote trust and belief in the university's commitment to assisting them to progress successfully. They aim to initiate this relationship from very early in the student's academic career (**even prior to induction**).
3. They are **proactive**, thus reaching all students, yet are **responsive** to individual needs, using small group plus individual meetings.
4. They **attempt to integrate or ally personal tutoring provision with the curriculum** in order to provide a clear focus for meetings and motivate students to attend. It appears that by increasing the curriculum relevance, (hence highlighting the educational benefits of attendance), regular contact with tutors and peers is maintained and becomes the cultural norm.
5. They aim to cultivate **realistic expectations** of what to expect (and not expect) from a personal tutoring service.

Part II

Review of Current Personal Tutoring Provision at the University

Online Staff Survey

In order to gain a comprehensive and accurate overview of *current* personal tutoring provision within the university, (identify strengths and weaknesses and highlight any diversity in approaches across the five Schools), a nineteen-item online survey⁷ was developed and distributed to 55 members of academic staff established as responsible for administration of personal tutoring in their various programmes. A copy of the questions contained in the survey can be found in Appendix I. Thirty-nine members of staff completed the survey. (Data can be observed in Appendix II).

Results of Staff Survey

The results indicated that some commonalities exist across Schools:

1. A large number of pathways indicated that they utilise *Programme, Year or Module Leaders* as the personal tutor for a cohort of students (68%)
2. Most (76%) reported that students on their courses were introduced to their personal tutor in *induction week* and, generally, *this person remains their personal tutor* for a student's entire time at the university (71%)
3. Delivery of personal tutoring is, largely, on a *one-to-one* (66%) and an '*as and when needed*' basis across all three years.
4. It appears that the majority of personal tutoring (79%) is *both proactive* (tutor organised) and *reactive* (student initiated)
5. Almost all staff surveyed considered that their personal tutoring comprises both *academic support and pastoral care* (92%)
6. 85% of respondents expressed that students received *support and advice outside the personal tutor meetings* by means of email advice, SLO assistance, website or WebCT support, etc.
7. 74% felt that they had not (or didn't know if they had) received some form of training to carry out their role as a personal tutor.

There appear, however, to be a couple of clear differences in the structure and operation of personal tutoring in the various Schools. For example:

1. Only 53% reported a *structured 'programme'* of personal tutoring meetings in *Year 1*
2. The amount of time allocated for personal tutoring on *staff contact hours differed widely* from "less than 7 hours per semester" (44%) to "fifteen hours plus per semester" (22%).

⁷ The survey incorporated items on a wide range of personal tutor-related issues such as administration, staffing, structure and content, communication, frequency of contact across levels of a programme, staff training and support and, crucially, the perceived nature and function of personal tutoring within a programme.

Summary of Themes in Qualitative Data from Staff Survey (See Appendix III)

1. There are a number of different times in the academic calendar when students are allocated a personal tutor (from “before enrolment” to “as soon as possible in the first semester”) and significant variation in how students are informed of their personal tutor.
2. Diverse practice exists between Schools (and even between courses within a School) in who takes on the personal tutor roles (Programme Leaders, Module Leaders, Year Leaders, Practice Trainers, assigned teaching staff, etc), and how large their cohorts of tutees are.
3. When Year or Module Leaders act as personal tutors, it is not unusual for students to have many different members of staff assigned as their personal tutor during their time at the university.
4. Although the modal method of delivery was one-to-one in an office setting, quite a lot of personal tutoring is conducted in classrooms.
5. In addition to the formal meetings arranged by staff, a large number of informal, ad hoc meetings at the request of the students occur. The manner in which these are arranged is diverse but quite commonly involves the student visiting the staff member’s office.
6. Staff acknowledge that personal tutoring comprises both academic assistance and pastoral support but perceive their role to be biased towards matters academic, preferring to direct students to relevant central services for help with ‘personal’ issues.
7. The number of formal, ‘scheduled’ personal tutor meetings offered to students varies quite radically from 1 x 10 minute slot once per semester to 10 x 1 hour slots in Semester 1 / Year 1. Ad hoc requests for meetings by students are commonplace and seem to be welcomed.
8. Although the quantitative data indicated that few staff felt they had received any training for the role, some describe having received guidance documentation or verbal advice from colleagues or mentors.

Staff Focus Groups

Two staff focus group sessions held early in Semester II of 2008/09 proved greatly informative, supporting and elaborating the findings of the online survey especially regarding the perceived role of a personal tutor, the function of personal tutoring and staffing issues. The most salient themes to emerge related to:

1. The need, for the benefit of both students and staff, to *define the role* of a personal tutor and delineate it from the roles met by central support services and Student Liaison Officers.
2. Uneasiness about *potential role conflict*, e.g., when a member of staff is acting as a student’s personal tutor and also their Module or Programme Leader
3. The *necessity for staff guidance and or training and coordination of provision* across Schools.

4. Concerns regarding staffing and *workload* and lack of sufficient formal contact hours for the role.
5. The perception of personal tutoring as an (unrecognised / un-credited) *adjunct to teaching and administration* workload.
6. The possibility that *not all staff are suited* to the role of personal tutor; it was suggested that students gravitate to the staff they prefer regardless of who they have been allocated.
7. The *usefulness of personal tutoring*; some proposed it provided a mutually beneficial connection with students whereas others claimed excellent student satisfaction (evidenced by the National Student Survey) without any definitive departmental policy on personal tutoring.
8. The *aims and function of personal tutoring*; remarks were made that it *should* serve to assist individual student development but the content of personal tutor meetings is often influenced or dictated by administration or assessment needs.

Online Student Survey

It was essential to gain information on students' perception of their personal tutoring experience, (and preferences / aspirations for it). Hence, with the cooperation of Student Data Management, an online survey similar to that distributed to staff⁸ was circulated to 9,500 students in mid-March 2009. As of 04/04/09, 277 replies had been gained, 254 of which were from undergraduate students. (See Appendix IV for questions contained in student survey and Appendix V for data).

Results and Conclusions of Student Survey

1. Students say that they are most commonly *allocated a personal tutor in induction week* (38%) and introduced to them or *informed of their name* at that time also (47%).
2. Most (61%) stated that their allocated personal tutor was an *assigned member of academic staff* rather than Programme, Year or Module Leader although this varied radically across Schools.
3. 51% of respondents reported that the *same member of staff* would act as their personal tutor for their entire time at the university.
4. 47% described their experience of personal tutoring as being '*one-to-one*' (or a mixture of one-to-one and group sessions – 35%). The majority (53%) also stated that frequency of meeting with their personal tutor was either on an '*as and when needed*' basis or during or after a class; i.e., regular scheduled meetings were not the norm for many.
5. Meetings are generally *initiated by both the personal tutor or student* (42%) and contact with a personal tutor (to arrange a meeting) is most commonly made *by email* communication (65%).

⁸ For the student survey, additional questions were added on whether they would like a structured programme of meetings across all years of their course and the preferred frequency of such.

6. 57% of students stated that they felt that the focus or purpose of personal tutoring was *both academic guidance and pastoral support* (41% claimed that the focus was purely academic support).
7. Less than half of the students surveyed (46%) expressed that they considered that they received academic and pastoral support from sources other than their personal tutor.
8. 73% indicated that they *had not received any 'scheduled and structured' personal tutoring provision* (or were not aware of any) in Year 1, this figure rises to 91% for Year 2 and 93% for Year.
9. Perhaps because of this, when asked whether they would like to be offered a structured programme of personal tutoring meetings, the majority (41%) answered "Yes, in all three years". It should be noted that a further 33%, (quite reasonably given the lack of detail on the proposed programme), chose the response, "Not sure; depends on content", suggesting a willingness to consider the benefits if provided with information.
10. The results indicated that 49% would like these meetings to be *at least once a month* with a further 22% expressing that they would like scheduled meetings a minimum of twice a semester.

Student Survey: Summary of Themes in Qualitative Data (See Appendix VI)

1. Qualitative responses to a number of items on the questionnaire revealed *extensive lack of awareness of personal tutoring provision* within their department. A significant number reported that they had either not been allocated a personal tutor or, perhaps more accurately, they were not aware who their personal tutor was, suggesting a *failure in effective communication*.
2. Most students recognise that their personal tutor is a source of both academic guidance and pastoral support but there is still considerable *confusion regarding their primary role*, again possibly the product of poor communication. There also appears to be some reluctance to consult personal tutors regarding pastoral issues. For example:

"What is the role of personal tutor? Are they there for academic support or pastoral support? It is not clear. If I have a problem regarding academic work I would approach module tutor. If I have other difficulties I would approach personal tutor."
"I'm sure that most lecturers would be happy to provide personal support and advice, but obviously their main role is to help students academically"

In complete contrast, another student wrote:

"I am not aware that a personal tutor can be used for academic assistance. My interpretation is: If I experience difficulties with subject content then speak to relevant module tutor. If experiencing other problems e.g. personal then I speak to personal tutor"

Students' statements also exposed some *tutor misconceptions* on the role of a personal tutor:

"I was told that as a mature student, I wouldn't need to meet with my personal tutor (by him) as I wouldn't have problems with for example Halls"

3. Student responses confirmed *variation in continuity of provision*. In some pathways, students have the same personal tutor for the duration of their course, whereas, when Module or Programme Leaders adopt the role, students commented that their personal tutor generally changes with module or level of study. It should be noted, however, that no strong value judgement was attached to this.
4. A lot of students appear to prefer or want meetings to be organised by their personal tutor, (i.e., *proactive organisation*), rather than a student-led, reactive model. Comments of the type, “*I don’t like to bother them; they’re so busy*”, etc, were offered. The following reply is fairly representative of a number of students’ responses:

“Tutoring in our department seems to be on a purely ad hoc basis and generally to do with admin or personal matters. Staff are usually available when we need to see them but I don’t think that my tutor, although he knows me, would remember that he is my tutor. I can’t remember having any information on what the role of the tutor/student relationship is at Bolton. It would be really helpful to have some proactive tutoring in relation to the academic content and its interface with personal aspects of study”.

5. Marked *diversity appears to exist in the frequency of contact* with personal tutors and number of formal sessions. This may reflect:
 - a. The fact that the various Schools and courses prioritise personal tutoring differentially in their curriculum and / or;
 - b. They administer it in distinctly different ways. For example, some courses amalgamate personal tutoring into academic and study skills modules whereas others invest staff time into tailored personal tutor programmes.
 - c. Alternatively, the broad range of comments relating to this topic may be a product of student confusion over what constitutes ‘personal tutoring’.

Additionally, it appears that any ‘organised’ or ‘scheduled’ personal tutor meetings are perceived to diminish in number as the student progresses through Years 2 and 3.

6. The final questions on the survey attempted to gauge level of satisfaction with current provision and opinion on implementation of a formally scheduled, integrated-curriculum ‘Personal Tutoring Programme’. Responses exposed a broad spectrum of opinion on their experience of personal tutoring thus far.
7. A number of students voiced concern about the *lack of parity* in personal tutoring across the university and the seemingly “ad hoc” nature of schemes and, again, problems associated with awareness of personal tutoring and its function were apparent.
8. Obvious *dissatisfaction* with current schemes could be found in some comments:

“I don’t think that they are a useful resource as they don’t support you if you have a real problem. They are not around enough to get to know you enough to support you properly unlike my supervisor who would go out of their way for you. The PT would be better every couple of weeks to discuss any problems with you and your course....”

“I don’t feel that they are entirely necessary. I don’t think that they are a useful source of advice and support, when you email them they take far too long to reply so by the time that you get a reply it doesn’t really help or that you have already handed your work in.

The group needs to feel that the PT meetings are more helpful so that there is more point in going. Because I didn't feel that they helped me much"

"More focus needs to be applied to small group sessions for help, or individual cases. In my first few weeks we were advised that we should only approach a tutor for help at a very last resort - hardly makes you want to ask for help!"

9. Many others, however, provided evidence of *good practice* and stated satisfaction with current provision.

"X has been incredibly supportive - support has been offered whenever requested by me and could have exceeded once a semester if required - guidance has been practical and helpful - couldn't have asked for more. Email information/communication was weekly after our once a week scheduled sessions"

"I can honestly say that our personal tutor groups have been a god send especially for me returning back into education as a mature student. It helps a lot with areas of my studies that i am weakest at. Its provided help on all sorts of areas as to what is expected in our essay formats, referencing, assignments, etc. Anything I or the group were unsure about our tutor was able to explain in detail and go through areas of concern".

10. A few left comments indicating that they would find an *organised programme of personal tutoring (perhaps one that follows an integrated-curriculum model)* useful, especially for the first year of study. For example:

"For year 1 it is good to meet regularly to get information off the personal tutor and also to help you settle into university life. After the first semester of year 1 however, it is not very necessary for such regular meetings."

"I think in year 1, more support with study skills would be good, in structured meetings".

"I think it would be really helpful to have a few allocated sessions each year just for your tutor to discuss module options, career options, general problems etc. It would provide reassurance and guidance without feeling that you are bothering the tutor by asking for meetings yourself".

One or two students highlighted what is widely considered to be the greatest benefit of any personal tutoring programme, i.e., that it provides an opportunity to build working relationships with tutors such that they feel comfortable and 'authorised' to approach for tutor assistance or advice in the future:

"Not everyone wants or needs personal tutoring, but a structured program of sessions in the first year would definitely help to address the high dropout rate by ensuring students know they have access to this kind of one-to-one support"

Although quantitative data suggested general support for the notion of a scheduled, integrated-curriculum personal tutoring programme, a small number of student comments indicated that they thought it unnecessary or would find it difficult to participate:

"I don't think it is needed, as a student it is your responsibility to organise meetings if and when needed. The tutors are always available to talk with".

"I am happy that I can get all the support I need whenever I ask for it".

Comparison of Staff and Student Personal Tutoring Survey Responses

If we compare the responses of staff and students to questions common to the two surveys, interesting similarities (and discrepancies) in experience, understanding or perception of personal tutoring at the university emerge.

Topic on Questionnaire	Majority Staff Response	Majority Student Response
When are PTs allocated?	Induction week (68%)	Induction week (38%)
Who acts as a PT?	Programme / Year / Module Leaders (68%)	Assigned staff member (61%)
Introduced to PT?	Induction week (76%)	Induction week (47%)
Same PT for duration of course?	Yes (71%)	Yes (51%)
How are PTs contacted?	By email (59%)	By email (65%)
Mode of delivery of personal tutoring?	One-to-one (66%)	One-to-one (47%)
Frequency of meeting? (Year 1)	As and when necessary (36%)	As and when necessary (27%)
Proactively/ tutor-organised, reactive or both?	Both (79%)	Both (42%)
Focus of personal tutoring: Academic guidance and / or personal support?	Both (92%)	Both (57%)
Additional support outside PT?	Yes (85%)	Yes (46%)
Is there a structured programme of meetings in Year 1?	Yes (53%)	No / Don't know (73%)
Is there a structured programme of meetings in Year 2?	No (61%)	No / Don't know (91%)
Is there a structured programme of meetings in Year 3?	No / Don't know (58%)	No / Don't know (93%)

Although there is some variation in degree of agreement across survey items (percentages for the most popular staff / student response varies on a number of issues), the greatest difference in staff and student responses occurs regarding:

1. Whether a structured programme of personal tutor meetings occurs in Year 1 and;
2. Who acts as students' personal tutors.

Most *student* respondents seem to have the impression that no structured programme of personal tutor meetings exists or existed in Year 1 of their course and that their personal tutor is an assigned member of academic staff.

In contrast, the majority of *staff* reported that a structured Year 1 schedule of meetings is provided and that Programme or Module Leaders are more commonly employed to act as personal tutor for a year / module cohort.

These differences might be attributable to lack of student awareness on what constitutes personal tutoring and that their personal tutor is also a Module or Programme Leader.

SWOT Analysis of Staff and Student Survey Data

Based on the *most common* responses⁹ to items on the questionnaire and data from the staff focus groups, the strengths and weaknesses of current personal tutoring provision at the University of Bolton are summarised below. Factors identified as 'Threats', (those perceived as having the potential to jeopardise the success of a proactive, integrated-curriculum scheme), are also listed. In addition, 'Opportunities', (factors which may predispose positive change in the way we operate personal tutoring at the university) are included too. Where appropriate, the possible consequences of each are detailed in parentheses.

<p>Strengths</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early introduction to PT 2. Continuity of tutoring across some courses of study (facilitating closer relationships) 3. Partially proactive and fully reactive model (responsive to individual needs) 4. Both academic assistance & pastoral care (clearly identified first source of assistance for most matters) 5. Additional support and advice available 6. Use of Module Tutors (classroom-based personal tutoring possible; frequent contact) 7. Willingness to work with central services 8. Evidence of staff good practice and enthusiasm 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not all staff suited to role (opportunity for redistribution of workloads to release enthusiastic contributors) 2. Receptiveness of students to proposed revised model (proactive, integrated-curriculum)
<p>Weaknesses</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of Programme Leaders, Year Leaders and Module Leaders as PTs in some Schools (large cohorts; role confusion / conflict) 2. Use of Year Leaders and Module Tutors / Leaders as PTs (lack of continuity) 3. Poor role definition 4. Limited student awareness (on what it is, who their PT is and entitlement) 5. Lack of staff training or guidance 6. Variability in provision (frequency, focus and staffing) of a structured programme of personal tutoring - or sufficient meetings - especially in Year 1 7. Reliance on a reactive model (student reluctance to approach) 	<p>Threats</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Failure to sufficiently formally acknowledge contribution to personal tutoring in staff PDPs 2. Staffing workloads (perceived negative cost-benefit) 3. Staff perception of a proactive, integrated-curriculum approach being unnecessary and / or without merit

⁹ It should be noted that the factors listed here do not necessarily reflect personal tutoring provision in *all* Schools and Course but were majority responses or conspicuous themes to questions on the survey.

Part III

Development and Assessment of a Proactive, Integrated-Curriculum Personal Tutoring Programme in Psychology (School of Health & Social Sciences)

In order to explore the feasibility of adopting a proactive, integrated-curriculum model of personal tutoring, (rather than the pastoral or professional approaches that are, seemingly, commonly employed at the University), and evaluate whether or not this approach increases engagement and contributes to supporting first year students in the transition to higher education, a pilot programme was developed in the Psychology Subject Group and implemented in Semester 1 of this academic year (2008-9).

Background: Historical Approaches to PT in Psychology at the University

It has long been recognised in the department that personal tutoring of new undergraduates is of substantial value in assisting student retention. For some 15 years, a personal tutoring scheme, designed to support and socialise entrants to a university community and orient them to their chosen subject, has been utilised within the department. The scheme consisted of each member of academic staff being allocated, on average, 15 new students whom they met during induction week for a one hour orientation and information meeting followed by compulsory 30 minute group sessions for the following five weeks. Traditionally, it was suggested that these sessions be used to discuss any generic academic or 'personal' issues or syllabus-based psychology topics. In practice, although tutors enthusiastically and consistently attended the scheduled sessions, it was found that, (almost without exception), students failed to attend after the first couple of weeks and any further contact was prompted by a student's request for assistance, i.e., personal tutoring became almost exclusively reactive and largely pastoral in nature or a means to access administration mechanisms / gain information about university policies or procedures.

In response, during the summer of 2008 the Psychology Teaching Team decided to re-model Year 1 personal tutoring within the department to incorporate more 'university orientation' and curriculum content in the sessions. It was proposed that this might foster a greater appreciation of the Personal Tutoring Programme's worth and increase attendance and engagement with the course as a whole. To summarise the revised programme:

1. The sessions included university and department orientation, academic (and study skills) support and PDP activities;
2. It was planned that the scheme would run for the first 10 weeks of Semester I;
3. As previously within Psychology, members of academic staff were assigned a small cohort of Year 1 students, (approximately 15), and they negotiated with them a mutually convenient time to meet for 30 minutes to one hour each week;
4. The content of the sessions was documented in handouts designed to build, over the weeks, into a 'Personal Tutoring Programme Handbook' and included the generic module handbook cover;
5. In this way, the programme was essentially presented to students as a non-credit bearing, compulsory attendance module.

The syllabus and copies of session handouts can be found in Appendix VII.

Results and Conclusions on Attendance

Attendance at the sessions ranged from 78% to 93% which was considered highly encouraging given that previously the majority of students tended to withdraw from personal tutoring sessions after weeks 2 or 3. It was postulated that this result might be attributed to a number of factors including:

1. Incorporation into the programme of a number of assessment and PDP exercises required for a credit-bearing module¹⁰ and;
2. Presentation of the Personal Tutoring Programme as a fourth, 'non-credit bearing module' to be attended.

A further positive consequence of the programme was that there was a marked increase in the number of students who contacted their personal tutor if they be unable to attend a session; i.e., communication between tutors and students and recognition that mitigated absences should be reported had improved.

No records of attendance at Semester 1 personal tutoring sessions in previous years can be located but in order to assess whether the above attendance data represented a significant positive shift in student engagement during the early parts of their academic career, data on attendance levels in *all* Year 1 psychology modules this semester was analysed. The results indicated better attendance for personal tutoring meetings than for all but two of the credit-bearing, compulsory Year 1 modules (See Appendix VIII).

Results: Student Feedback (N=58)

1. Most students (n = 33) agreed that they enjoyed the sessions
2. 37 students strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that there were too many sessions
3. 47 strongly disagreed, disagreed or selected neutral to the statement that the sessions were too long
4. Most (n = 31) indicated that they liked the content of the sessions
5. Only a small number (n=5) felt that we should do different things in the sessions
6. A large majority (n=51) indicated that they found the sessions useful
7. 35 expressed that the sessions had made them feel 'bonded' with other members of their PT group with only a small number (n=8) dissenting from this opinion
8. Encouragingly, 41 students reported that they felt they had developed a close or good relationship with their PT
9. 46 / 58 agreed that they felt the PT Programme had helped them settle into university life and feel part of the department
10. Finally, 37 of the 58 respondents said they would like to see a PT Programme in Semester 2.

(See Appendix IX)

¹⁰ 'IT & Study Skills for Psychologists'

Kruskal-Wallis analysis of the feedback questionnaire data was conducted to establish if there were differences in the responses across personal tutor groups; it revealed no significant differences ($p>0.05$) to all but one questionnaire item indicating a similar experience of the scheme across groups (See Appendix XI)

Psychology Staff Plenary Session

A staff plenary session was held at the end of Semester I. Nine members of Psychology teaching staff attended. Reflection on the efficacy of the pilot programme led to an overall conclusion that the meetings had served to successfully integrate the students into the department and university and supported them in their transition into higher education. Staff also indicated that they too felt that they had forged closer relationships with their personal tutees as a consequence of the scheme and, importantly, it was agreed that it probably doesn't matter *what* you do in the Year 1 / Semester I personal tutoring sessions long as the meetings are perceived by students as compulsory and *useful and interesting*, thus encouraging them to attend each week and form beneficial relationships with their tutors and peers.

Part IV

University of Bolton Personal Tutoring Strategy

Based on data collected (and SWOT analysis), the outcomes of the pilot scheme in Psychology and evidence from other HEIs on what constitutes good, effective personal tutoring, it is recommended that the strategy for personal tutoring aims *to 're-brand' and reposition personal tutoring* in School teaching, learning and retention agendas and should include the following strategic aims:

Strategic Aim 1	Clear definition of the role of a Personal Tutor
Rationale	Qualitative evidence from both staff and student surveys and staff focus groups revealed confusion over the role of a PT, that is: what constitutes 'personal tutoring'?; what the university requires from them in their role as a PT; the need for delineation from the role of a Student Liaison Officer.
Potential Barriers	None.
Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Distribution of handbook that defines the role of a PT by including role benchmarks (and boundaries), a template for a personal tutoring programme¹¹ and example tutoring session materials and activities. This should be available by Semester I (2009-10).2. Creation of a series of Professional Development Sessions on personal tutoring (covering 'what, why, and how') to be offered Semester I (2009-10). <p>Both strategic tools to be developed by Learning & Teaching Fellow for First Year Experience¹² (for and during 2009-10).</p>

¹¹ The template should be appropriately sensitive to departmental resources / subject-specific requirements and yet uphold the central aims of the scheme.

¹² To be produced in consultation with members of the 'First Year Experience' Sub-Committee.

Strategic Aim 2	Introduction of a 'small group' approach to personal tutoring
Rationale	Prior to induction, all newly enrolled undergraduates (including joint honours students and, where applicable, postgraduate and CPD students) to be assigned by Course PT Co-ordinators (see 'Strategic Aim 3) to the personal tutor group of a member of academic staff ¹³ . The recommended maximum size of any PT group should not exceed 15 students.
Potential Barriers	<p>Student comments on the online university survey, staff and student feedback on pilot PT programme in Psychology and evidence from other universities suggests that provision of small group forums for interaction and informal discussion leads to the creation of good working relationships between students and academic staff (established members of that academic community); it has been shown to increase likelihood of students approaching for assistance in a reactive manner. It has also been demonstrated that small group meetings enable better social relations between students, minimizing social isolation. Both of these factors have been shown to be vitally important to new university entrants and influence their perception of the student experience, satisfaction with their course and withdrawal decisions.</p> <p>Furthermore, monitoring individual progress (and resolving issues) of a small group is more manageable.</p>
Potential Barriers	Staff focus groups exposed that some pathways may have difficulties staffing this type of scheme; i.e., they wouldn't have enough staff to support it and some staff may not be suited to the role. Increased workload of staff was also an issue.
Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Timetabled contact hours to be allocated to staff involved in provision of a PT programme. The minimum entitlement outlined in Strategic Aim 4 indicates that no less than 13 and a half hours per year should be timetabled for those tutors with cohorts spanning all three years of an undergraduate degree. 2. Possible redistribution of responsibilities and workload within a teaching team to release enthusiastic contributors. 3. Encourage use of technology to assist in delivering PT, e.g., emailing material and activities to students, online discussion forums, email 'conference calls', screen-casts

¹³ Exceptions for courses where alternative PT provision is made, e.g., Health Practice Trainers

Strategic Aim 3	Assure parity of personal tutoring provision across courses by appointing local and School Personal Tutoring Co-ordinators
Rationale	<p>The last QAA report contained the recommendation that the university: <i>“Review the extent to which departmental implementation of its policies and procedures is consistent, in particular those relating to personal tutoring”</i>.</p> <p>Qualitative data from the University of Bolton Student Survey on personal tutoring confirmed that inequity in personal tutoring provision is, for some, an issue. Student comments demonstrated awareness of disparity in provision across the Schools. Comments indicated that this was, for them, a source of dissatisfaction (inequities in support and ‘value for money’ were cited).</p>
Potential Barriers	Staffing
Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Such that there is clearly identified responsibility for administration of the PT programme for each course (and mechanisms for assuring parity of provision across Schools are set in place) a member of academic staff from each course or related group of courses to be appointed ‘Personal Tutoring Co-ordinator’ for those courses. These staff members to be co-opted to their School Learning & Teaching Committee¹⁴. The Chairs of each of these Committees (the Principal Lecturers for Learning, Teaching & Retention) to then report on Personal Tutoring to the Learner Experience and Professional Practice Committee. (LEPP) 2. Staff appointed as Course PT Co-ordinators to have the appropriate number of contact hours included in their timetable. For example, one hour per week for 14 weeks each Semester. 3. To ensure that all students have been allocated a personal tutor, the names of their assigned PT to be listed on SITS.

¹⁴ Membership of these sub-committees should also include the School SLO.

<p>Strategic Aim 4</p>	<p>Implementation of a compulsory programme of PT meetings based on an integrated-curriculum model.</p> <p>Frequency</p> <p>Year 1 Semester I: A programme consisting of series of 30-45 minute weekly meetings to commence during induction week and continue for a minimum of 6 weeks throughout the student's first semester or term at university.</p> <p>Year 1 Semester II: Contact should consist of a minimum of two meetings at the beginning of the semester, one mid-semester and one (review) session at the end. As in Semester I, the duration of each should be between 30-45 minutes.</p> <p>Year 2: Frequency of contact and length of each meeting should match (at least) that of Year 1 / Semester II.</p> <p>Year 3: Frequency of contact and length of each meeting should match (at least) that of Year 1 / Semester II.</p> <p>Content (Guidelines)</p> <p>Year 1 Semester 1: Focus of meetings should be 'socialisation', i.e., aim to orient new students to the university, their department and School, their subject and studying at HE level.</p> <p>Year 2: Emphasis might be on developing learning skills and / or enhancing understanding and appreciation of academic subject.</p> <p>Year 3: Preparation for careers and employability. 'Soft skills'.¹⁵</p> <p>At all years, PT programmes should accommodate key activities in the academic calendar, e.g., module selection, exam preparation and counselling for re-submissions and re-sits.</p> <p>Staff are encouraged to customise the system for their course or courses, creating a version which is relevant to their subject and student body and which picks up on their existing good practice.</p>
<p>Rationale</p>	<p>Previous findings from other HEIs and the feedback from Psychology staff and students to the pilot integrated-curriculum programme introduced this year suggests that having clear and documented focus and function for meetings (e.g., how they are related to academic development or socialization to university) motivates students to attend and that this improves social identity as a student and facilitates positive staff-student relations.</p>
<p>Potential Barriers</p>	<p>Shortage of readily available materials to use in sessions.</p>

¹⁵ The focus of Year 2 and 3 might be switched as appropriate for the course.

Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Development of a central, electronic depository (on the university Virtual Learning Environment) of PDP, careers and study skills materials, exercises and activities that might be used for PT sessions.2. Circulation to staff of sample integrated-curriculum programme. <p>Learning & Teaching Fellow to provide example materials in personal tutoring VLE depository by 2009-10. Additional resources to be added to a VLE depository by the Teaching & Learning Fellow, PT Co-ordinators and Personal Tutors throughout 2009-10.</p>
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Strategic Aim 5	Raise the awareness and understanding of personal tutoring in all new undergraduate, postgraduate and Continuing Professional Development students
Rationale	<p>Data collected from students at the University of Bolton indicated poor awareness of personal tutoring schemes at the university. This might be attributed to failures in effective communication at university or departmental levels. The research also suggested that, in those students aware of personal tutoring systems at the university, there was high variability in expectations / perceptions of its function and operation.</p> <p>As research conducted at other HEIs has found that inaccurate or unrealistic expectations (or experience that doesn't match expectations) can lower student satisfaction with their course, it is perceived as vital that details of the University of Bolton 'model for personal tutoring' is documented in a handbook to be distributed to all students as early in their careers as possible..</p>
Potential Barriers	None.
Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A generic booklet 'Personal Tutoring at the University of Bolton: Guidelines for Students' to be given to new students at enrolment: What is a PT? (and boundaries); Minimum entitlement; Typical frequency of meetings; Function of meetings; Methods of contact, etc. ¹⁶ 2. 'Welcome' email to be sent to assigned tutees <i>prior</i> to induction. This should include PT details and contact methods and time and place of first meeting. <p>Booklet to be provided by L&T Fellow for First Year Experience (for 2009-10).</p>

¹⁶ To be created in consultation with members of the 'First Year Experience' Sub-Committee.

Strategic Aim 6	To clarify the role of central student support services and establish clearer links (and greater collaboration) between these and local and School Personal Tutors
Rationale	<p>There is currently some confusion (in both staff and students) on the relative roles of personal tutors and departmental / central services in student support. Comments made by students in the online survey suggest that they often seek assistance from members of academic staff, (who are often ill-equipped to supply advice on the most appropriate source of help), simply because they are not aware of the range of services offered by, e.g. The Student Centre and Library.</p> <p>There is a need to maximise use of these University resources, thus re-distributing workload more equitably and to the students' advantage. It is hoped that clearly identified links between the two might encourage students to seek professional support independently (avoiding the need students to seek pastoral / welfare assistance from sources other than the tutors involved in teaching them).</p>
Potential Barriers	None
Operational Mechanisms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Production of succinct, easily accessible informational resource (booklet or information card) on student support services. This should be distributed to all new students at enrolment or induction. <p>Booklet or card to be produced by Learning & Teaching Fellow for First Year Experience in collaboration with The Student Centre and Students' Union.</p>

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