“How can I be an effective personal tutor and what is out there to help me do this?”

A qualitative study into staff perceptions of their personal tutor role and the influence of key resources
Webinar presenters

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Host

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Today’s webinar

The webinar aims to help you:

• assess the value of tailored personal tutoring resources (both student-facing and for staff development in the role) produced as part of a national research project;
• understand the background, rationale, key issues, and methodology behind our Lincoln-based research on personal tutoring;
• identify and discuss the findings and evaluation of this research;
• consider the implications of this research on personal tutoring both in terms of tutoring/advising practice and areas for potential future work.

It will include ‘thinking points’ for participants along with time for questions at the end.
Context

Policy & context developments

• more students = greater diversity, increased competition
• concern about league tables (influenced by retention),
• differential outcomes for under-represented groups,
• 2012 increase in fees / ‘value for money’ debate
• HE Research Act (2017) = regulatory framework (OfS & TEF)

(Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006: 5-6; Thomas, 2017b; Walker, 2018)

Key research headlines

• importance of the ‘human side of education’ and a sense of ‘belonging’ to student retention and success
• the academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing this

(Thomas 2012; 2017)

• engagement is a critical factor in differential outcomes
• not all students have the social or cultural capital needed to engage readily or ask for support

(Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015)
In terms of personal tutoring...

How have these sector developments manifested themselves at your institution?

Discussion

- A change and re-evaluation of the relationship between HEIs and students
- A personalised learning experience
  Universities emphasising it
  Students expecting (demanding?) it
- Universities reviewing tutorial arrangements
What are the practical dilemmas and challenges (in terms of personal tutoring) resulting from this?

Discussion

- Pressurised situation caused by metrics-based situation
- Chronic under-resourcing...
- Purpose, models & structures of PTing not well articulated (Lochtie et al, 2018: 6)
- In terms of staffing
- In terms of support & development for tutors

“training opportunities for tutors can be superficial, lacking in sufficient depth and lacking in purpose” (Lochtie et al, 2018: 6)
The contradiction?

Increasing importance of the personal tutor role and yet....

What creates the need for a personalised learning experience makes it impossible to deliver with any effectiveness?

It remains an under-developed and under-researched area

“The field of personal tutoring in higher education is something of an academic research desert” (Thomas in Lochtie at al, 2018: x)
The literature

Of the literature which does exist in the field....

• views of tutors have been gathered through institutional research (Owen, 2002; Ridley, 2006; Stephen, 2008; McFarlane, 2016)

• These elicit
  ➢ issues with perceived confidence and competence (and factors affecting this)
  ➢ the challenges in the delivery of the role
  ➢ gaps in training and ongoing support

• Few research studies into personal tutoring, fewer still which demonstrate impact on student outcomes (Webb et al, 2017) and, I would argue, staff
This study

Is about practical resources & support

Operating within personal tutoring at the University of Lincoln which can be thought of as:

➢ The curriculum model (Earwaker, 1992; Lochtie et al, 2018: 22)
➢ The integrated model (McIntosh, 2018) of personal tutoring with a ‘senior tutor’ role

Previous studies (Owen, 2002; Ridley, 2006; Stephen, 2008; McFarlane, 2016) established

➢ The value of tutoring
➢ But associated concerns

This study responds by

➢ Providing an intervention to address such concerns
➢ Assessing the efficacy/impact of this intervention

Responds to gaps identified in the literature
Critical Thinking Activity 3

What does resourcing / support / development of personal tutoring look like at your institution?

Discussion

• May depend which of the 3 aspects above is being talked about
• Often department specific?
• Informational v Developmental (more of which later)
The intervention

• Tailored development materials for tutoring (created as part of the Intervention for Success Project)
  • student-facing (for use in individual and group tutorials)
  • staff-facing (to enhance professional development in the role)
  • universally available (creative commons licensed)

• Professional Development Programme for Personal Tutors – Tutoring the Tutors (not assessed as part of the study)

http://lncn.eu/ptmaster
Research questions

How effective do personal tutors perceive their support of level one students to be when working with students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

Prior to the provision of tailored personal tutor resources for level one students and staff, what resources and support do personal tutors draw on to address challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

After engagement with tailored personal tutor resources for students and staff, what are personal tutors’ perceptions of the support and resources available to address the challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?
Methodology

Type

- Cyclical
- Insider research
- Semi-structured 1 to 1 interviews
- Pre and post intervention (12 weeks apart)
- Research population

Data analysis

- A perceptions study
- Detailed exploration of the individual and lived experiences and the meanings that these hold for the participants (Smith and Eatough, 2016: 50)
- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Lyons and Cole, 2007)
- Thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008; Saldana, 2016)
Findings

How effective do personal tutors perceive their support of level one students to be when working with students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

Commonly held perceptions of personal tutoring
- Attributes and skills
- Scope and function

Perceived effect / influence / impact
- Levels of effect - interlinked
- Importance of tutoring ethos and approach
- Early identification
- Though referral to professional services

Factors affecting perceived effectiveness / influence
- Difficulty of measuring
- Workload / structural issue
- Causal factors / underlying issues (students)

Factors affecting perceived confidence / competence
- Pastoral or academic
- Level of experience
- Background / previous employment

Factors affecting understanding & performance
- Lack of clarity & consistency
- Boundary issues
- Level of peer/team support
- Gaps in support/development
- Level of experience
Findings

How effective do personal tutors perceive their support of level one students to be when working with students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

- You just have a mixed bag out there ... I think we should be more unified, in terms of how we approach personal tutoring. At the moment, I think it is fairly ad-hoc (Interviewee 3)
- If you use the right strategies, and engage in collaborative conversation, rather than rescuing or rejecting, then you could have a massive impact (Interviewee 8)
- That is very difficult; particularly if you have an upset student; to keep that boundary....the line we are given is that you don’t deal with those personal issues; which I don’t think is a reflection of what really happens in personal tutoring sessions (Interviewee 2)
Prior to the provision of tailored personal tutor resources for level one students and staff, what resources and support do personal tutors draw on to address challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

**Types of general support are aware of & use; views on the usefulness of**
- Importance of peer support, trusted colleagues and team
- Knowledge of support mechanisms
- Lack of awareness, knowledge

**Types of resources and materials are aware of & use; views on the usefulness of**
- Department and team specific resources
- University wide resources (for referral only)
- Individual resources

**Gaps in support and resources identified**
- Need for clear induction on the role
- Lack of generic university wide resources for tutors
- More training on the pastoral side needed
- Looking after yourself
Findings

Prior to the provision of tailored personal tutor resources for level one students and staff, what resources and support do personal tutors draw on to address challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

- [the] tutor website for the uni I know about but, must admit, not used (Interviewee 2)
- I really don’t know (Interviewee 3)
- I don’t know the answer to that happens quite a lot (Interviewee 5)
- Am not entirely clear what I’m meant to be doing (Interviewee 3)
- In the face of increasing demand [more] support in mental health issues, for example training on how to deal with depressed students [is needed] (Interviewee 4)
Findings

After engagement with tailored personal tutor resources for students and staff, what are personal tutors’ perceptions of the support and resources available to address the challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

Ways in which these resources helped

(The resource ‘one to one conversations and coaching’ was used the most by participants)

Confidence
- Structure
- Clarification
- Approaches to tutoring interactions and language use
- Overcoming barriers to progress
- Enabling independence
- Connecting and supporting colleagues
- Filling the gap(s)
- Developmental not informational
Findings

After engagement with tailored personal tutor resources for students and staff, what are personal tutors’ perceptions of the support and resources available to address the challenges in supporting level one students at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal?

I really like the theory base behind it of encouraging the student to talk; and you listen to that student. I don’t think those skills necessarily come easily … I thought the materials were really rich on that … that could be a whole seven months of development to actually incorporate them (Interviewee 6)

This certainly helped fill some gaps never any before for staff [personal tutoring development] only student based (Interviewee 3). These were the only ones I was aware of for staff support. We had no kind of induction; we were just given students, and that was it, really (Interviewee 2)

get the students to talk, and not ask them closed questions; … get them to open up in that non-judgemental atmosphere. … What do they need? I really liked that aspect of the materials … problems sometimes go round and round, and the tutor becomes part of the circle. That was really helpful; and the whole issue of letting go – when do we let go; referrals

[We] get a PT handbook as part of the school - more about process than resources (Interviewee 5)

Not much support before; this is something that can teach staff (Interviewee 2)
Critical Thinking Activity 4

To what extent do these findings resonate with your experience?

What are the implications?
Discussion / Implications / Recommendations

New insights
Tailored developmental resources positively influenced personal tutoring practice
- developmental (rather than informational)
- providing clarity
- address gaps in resources, support and development identified in the existing literature

Implications
Individual practitioner
- greater use of non-directive and coaching approaches
Institutions
- provision of developmental not just informational, transactional resources and support
Sector
- highlights the need for sector wide transferable principles of effective tutoring akin to those principles which exist for teaching, for example the UKPSF standards
- UKAT’s forthcoming Professional Competency Framework for Advising and Tutoring

Impact?
- Evidence of impact in the areas identified by previous research
- ‘any measurement of impact needs to be a measurement of change, and a comparative element over time is needed.’ (Lochtie et al, 2018: 176).
- determining impact from experiences and perceptions subjective in nature is complex (Lochtie et al, 2018: 181)

Limitations
- Small sample size & limited research period
- Intervention – not the only changed variable
- Context based ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schon, 1983)

Areas for future work
Development of the study could happen in a number of ways including:
- Involvement of students' perspectives & outcomes (Alison)
- Use of quantitative data
- Longitudinal approach


QUESTIONS
Thank you