



OfLA Project
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09 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies

NTU: Staff Reflective Diaries Study

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APPLIED SCIENCES

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Output 9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies

These reports will map the process of data-informed advice in the second year of the study.

A1. We will confirm with the new study subjects how we will work alongside them. This time however, we will have selected a new group of courses or degree programs to work with, or will be testing a new approach to using institutional data/ learning analytics in the advising and supporting process. This may include group tutorials, different types of alert or early warning, or advising using a particular pedagogical methodology.

A2. We will monitor and project manage the operation of the learning analytics resources.

A3. We will map how data (on each course and/or centralized) is used to firstly spot students at risk, how students are communicated to and how they are supported. Importantly, this year the reports will also include a summary of how we communicated with staff to set up the new round of interventions and challenges associated with the new cycle of interventions. The reports will also include recommendations for conducting the final cycle or research in 2020-2021.

A4. We will publish the resources to the website. AHS will take the overall responsibility for editing together the reports.

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1. Executive Summary

Throughout the 2019-2020 academic year, a small number of personal tutors at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) regularly completed a reflective diary detailing their experience, thoughts, feelings, and self-evaluation of their tutoring practice throughout a term. A reflective diary was constructed in collaboration with participants, and aimed to capture not only what the staff member did to support students, but the reasons behind this approach, how the staff member themselves coped with any difficulties in the process, and for personal tutors to make suggestions on how to improve the process as a whole.

7 participants completed diaries throughout the first term, and 15 participants from multiple schools completed diaries throughout the second term. Focus groups were conducted before and after the study, to understand issues and approaches, and to give participants the opportunity to not only reflect on their experience, but to offer their views and advice on improving the process of completing a reflective diary itself. As a result of this research, 8 distinct recommendations are made; this ranges from advice and guidance for personal tutoring staff, resources that may be useful in supporting these staff members, to wider policy and investment recommendations for NTU as a whole.

Feedback gathered both via the reflective diaries and in focus groups highlighted several key themes. The complex nature of the personal tutoring role can lead to staff considering a personal tutor to have multiple roles for the student, for example academically and pastorally. Clearly establishing these roles at the earliest opportunity is felt to be crucial. In order to establish a coaching or mentoring role, staff shared several techniques in building rapport, which ranged from role modelling to sharing some personal experiences. In building a relationship with the students, staff were often vulnerable to the negative emotional effects of supporting students with a problem. Staff not only empathised with their students, but felt this burden themselves, and suggestions were made to help support the staff with the emotional weight.

Personal tutors discussed their own skills and training throughout the process and gave examples of how this impacted their own approach to support. Again, suggestions were made as to what could be considered 'essential' training, with a particular consideration for the types of issues they face in their role. In supporting students, participants not only relied on their own skills and training, but often were required to signpost the student to other services. This in itself creates its own challenges, and recommendations were made in order to streamline this process and where further investment may be needed. Finally, participants throughout the study described the administrative burden associated with supporting students. A key factor in successful interventions is not only the actions taken during a meeting, but a good level of organisation in order to hold an intervention in a suitable location, and follow-up with the student.

2. Introduction and Methodology

2.1 Background Information

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU), each student has an assigned member of staff to support them academically throughout their time at University. Students may meet their tutors individually or in small groups depending on their course. In addition, all teaching staff are expected to provide office hours where students can speak to this staff member about problems with their studies. Where students face more complex challenges, they are referred onwards to specialist help, usually Student Support Services or the Library (who provide academic advice and study support).

Guiding these members of staff, there is a personal tutoring policy¹ at NTU however this is adapted between schools and faculties for two reasons: firstly, responsibility is delegated to the schools², and secondly the courses within each faculty often differ significantly. The personal tutor role is therefore filled by a personal tutor, year tutor or, on small courses, the course leader. In the majority of cases, a tutor is a member of academic teaching staff, although in some disciplines, students may have a designated academic tutor (sometimes also called a mentor) that has not also got a teaching role within the school. The University policy is predominantly academic in nature, however there is some expectation of pastoral support. These staff members are referred to as simply 'personal tutors' going forward.

During February and March each year, we conduct the Student Transition Survey (STS). Sent to first year students only, this survey focuses on forming a picture of current student experience; including engagement and confidence of coping with studies, experience of personal tutors, and reasons as to why some students may withdraw from their studies. Via this survey, 95% of respondents had interacted with their personal tutor, and therefore had already had some experience of personal tutoring. The confidence of students in interacting with their personal tutor is mixed. From the responses, 83% of students felt confident in approaching their personal tutor with an academic problem, whereas 53% felt confident approaching them with a personal problem.

The STS also suggests that the student body has a wide range of expectations of their personal tutor. For example, 84% of respondents expected their tutor to be able to coach them to solve an academic problem themselves, roughly half expected the tutor to consider this when marking their work, and just over a quarter expected the personal tutor to be able to solve the academic problem for them. A breakdown of these views can be found in Appendix A.

As well as a range of expectations, student experience of support from personal tutors can also vary significantly between the individual. Most students have a very positive experience of support and interventions from their personal tutors, as illustrated in the following quote.

"My tutor has been amazing this year, they have helped and guided me through many situations." – STS 2020

¹ The personal tutoring policy can be found on page 5 of the Quality Handbook, accessible here: <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/myhub/policies-and-guidance/a/academic-quality-handbook/sections/quality-handbook-section-14-learning-and-teaching>

² At NTU, faculties are referred to as 'schools'. NTU is comprised of 9 distinct academic schools.

For some students however, this experience can be less positive. Again, an example of this is shown in the following quote.

"Sometimes long waits on receiving help." – STS 2020

Tutoring is clearly a challenging part of teaching. Part of the OfLA project is to better understand the experience of the tutoring process, from both the student and the personal tutor perspective.

2.2 Introduction and Aims

This study investigates how personal tutors approach supporting students in group situations, scheduled support sessions, and proactive interventions conducted when the personal tutor has been alerted to the student being potentially at risk of failure or withdrawal. We are interested in the strategy and approach of the personal tutor, how they perceive the process from a personal and professional point of view, and what can be changed or improved in order to help facilitate better student support.

We understand that there is a disparity of student experience in tutoring, as highlighted by the STS. We have also found from staff interviews and focus groups (discussed in the [OfLA NTU O6 report](#)) that staff often take a wide range of approaches to support, as well as several issues and considerations experienced by a large proportion of personal tutors. These cover all three stages of the OfLA project support model: from alert, to communication, to intervention.

In the first year of the project, personal tutors were asked to reflect retroactively on their tutoring practices³. This study develops the approach. In 2019-20, personal tutors were asked to capture their experiences of tutoring contemporaneously in reflective diaries.

We aim to investigate the staff approach to, and experience of, the supportive (or intervention) process specifically. We aim to collate feedback throughout the year from staff, in order to reveal a more immediate and accurate picture of the tutoring experience. We also aim to have staff continually reflect on their practice, in order to measure whether this ongoing reflection can have a positive impact on the tutoring itself⁴. This formal reflective practice will be a new approach to using tutor-generated information in the advising and supporting process.

The goals of this study therefore are as follows:

- To understand the impact of formal reflective practice on personal tutors and tutoring
- To investigate the ongoing issues experienced by staff supporting students
- To identify strategic approaches to supportive practice
- To find what resources and/or policies can be created or amended in order to support the tutoring process

³ More can be found on this in our [OfLA NTU O6 report](#)

⁴ This links to Recommendation 5 found in the [OfLA NTU O6 report](#)

2.3 Overview of Methodology

In this study, 22 personal tutors shared their experiences. These staff members were a mixture of personal tutors and student mentors, who all have a responsibility for a group of students in providing academic and pastoral support.

This study used a methodology of a reflective diary, with staff detailing their experience of tutoring and supporting students throughout a term. The diary itself was modelled on the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988). The diary format and delivery was co-created with staff during the initial introductory session, and completed using the '[Online Surveys](#)' platform.

Prior to the start of the reflective diary period, focus groups were conducted with participants. These were held with the aim of gain insight into how participants view their current supportive practice and allowing them to feed into the design and delivery of the reflective diaries themselves. Although there were key talking points (these can be found in Appendix D), the conversation was more informal, and the structure was loose. The focus group was scheduled to last approximately half an hour and were recorded. Due to constraints on participant time and availability, in some cases these became interviews rather than focus groups, however the objectives remained the same.

A short reflective phonecall/ interviews were conducted mid-term. These were informal and acted as a 'check in' for staff. These were not recorded, and were used simply to ensure that the process was running smoothly

After the reflection period, a follow up focus groups were conducted in order to understand and review the process of completing the diaries, as well as subsequently reviewing how the participants feel about their own approach to supporting students. Again, key talking points were used (these can be found in Appendix E), however the conversation remained informal and the structure somewhat loose. The diaries themselves were analysed by the OfLA researchers, with themes discussed during the subsequent end of term focus groups.

The steps to this study are described below:

- Term 1
 - Focus group one/ design workshop (Sept 2020)
 - Fortnightly reflections (Throughout term one 2019-20)
 - Short reflective phonecall/ interview (Mid-Term One 2019-20)
 - Focus group two (December 2020):
- Term 2
 - Focus group one/ design workshop (January 2020)
 - Weekly reflections (Throughout term two 2019-20)
 - Short reflective phonecall/ interview (Mid-Term Two 2019-20)
 - Focus group two (April 2020):
- Term 3
 - Optional design workshop with a wider pool of NTU staff and students – (this was postponed due to Covid-19).

Throughout the report, quotes are taken from the diaries to illustrate various themes. These are labelled with the participant number (e.g. P1) and the diary number (e.g. D1), to ensure anonymity.

3. Findings

3.1 Term 1

3.1.1 Overview of term methodology

Term 1 of this study took place between the 23rd September 2019 and 20th December 2019. Two introductory sessions were held with participants on the 16th and 17th September, which introduced the project, allowed participants to reflect on and share their personal tutoring experience, and give their input in how the diaries should be recorded. Follow up interviews and focus groups were held on the 16th, 18th and 20th December, although these were informal in nature.

In term 1, 9 Participants were initially recruited, however only 7 participants ultimately submitted diaries throughout the term.

During the introductory meeting, it was felt that recording a reflective diary on a fortnightly basis, with a view to reflecting on the previous two weeks personal tutoring experience, would be sufficiently frequent to capture the experience.

The regularity of recording feedback varied between staff, with some participants recording less frequently than others. An overview of the time periods that staff described reflecting on in each diary illustrated is reflected in a Gantt chart style table, in Appendix F.

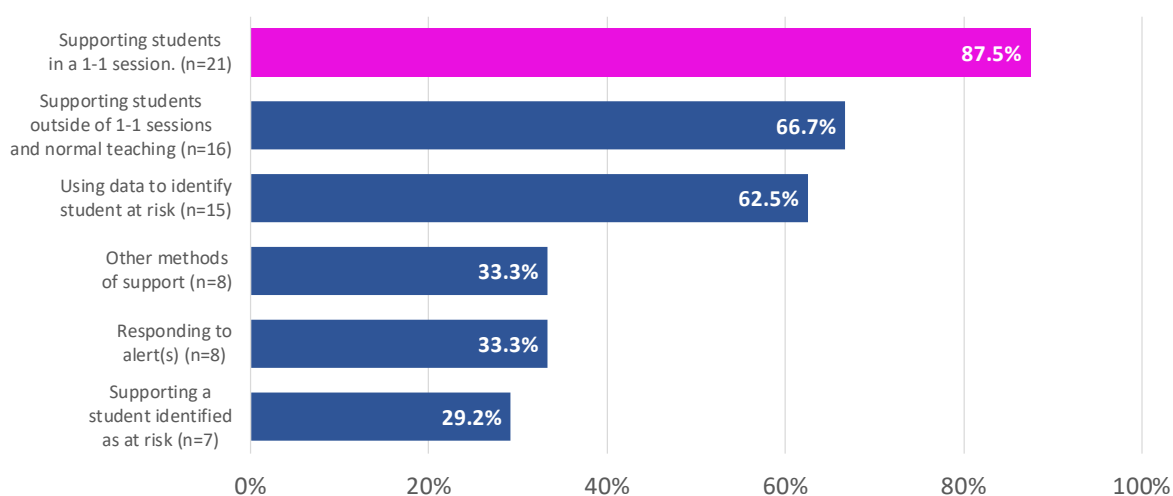
3.1.2 Overview of findings

A total of 26 diaries were completed throughout the term, with staff providing differing numbers of diaries between them. These provide detailed feedback regarding what support that staff member has been involved in, and responses to questions that prompted reflection. Through the Online Surveys platform, all diaries totalled 69 pages of feedback collated into a PDF document. A copy of this diary structure can be found in the Appendices.

In term 1 of this study, a quantitative (closed) question was added at the start of each reflective journal. The aim of this question was to investigate how much time personal tutors spend conducting various types of supportive activities, from using data to identify students (which reflects the 'alert' stage in our three stage model), to responding to alerts (reflecting the 'communication' stage in our three stage model), and several methods of 'supporting students' (reflecting the 'intervention' stage in our three stage model). Personal tutors were able to select multiple answers, as they may have conducted several different activities within a single reflective period.

The responses gathered produced a percentage of the overall diary entries, and this is represented in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Percentage of responses to “Over the past two weeks, or since your last diary entry, please select the support that you have been involved in”, for term 1:



Due to the low numbers, and issues with this data (which will be highlighted), no statistical analysis was carried out on the results illustrated in the figure above. Responses to this question suggest that 1-1 sessions take up the majority of personal tutoring time, whereas supporting a student specifically identified as at risk is a much less frequently occurring process.

At the end of term, participants were asked to attend focus groups or interviews in order to reflect on their experience. These took place throughout the week commencing 16th December 2019. During these sessions, staff views with the study itself were recorded.

Firstly, it was felt that the quantitative (closed) question illustrated in figure 1 (above) was not useful or representative of the actual work. Some of the answers had been subject to different interpretations by different participants and did not accurately reflect the time spent on these tasks. For this reason, the answers have not been discussed further in this report.

Secondly, although more frequent reflections may appear to be more resource and time intensive, having reflections that were less frequent actually caused problems with recollection, having to gather relevant notes, and meant that a lack of routine reflection caused the participant to often forget to complete the diary entirely. It was proposed therefore that more frequent reflections would be more appropriate when the study is repeated in term 2.

"I would rather have a smaller thing that I can use to reflect more frequently... ..by the time I come to do it I think "oh there was something, but was that this week or last week..." – OFLA term 1 follow up FG 18.12.2019

Finally, staff consistently felt that completing the reflective diaries was positive for them. This was in part due to them having the space and time to consider their actions, but more importantly to process their experience on an emotional level. The emotional aspect of the personal tutoring process from the staff perspective is something that will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3 of this report.

"The thing that I found really good about it was being made to reflect. To actually make myself take that time. What usually happens is I run from one thing to the next and I don't have time." – OFLA term 1 follow up FG 18.12.2019

3.2 Term 2

3.2.1 Overview of term methodology

Term 2 of this study took place between 13th January 2020 and 3rd April 2020. Five introductory sessions were held with participants on the 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th, and 25th January 2020, which introduced the project, allowed participants to reflect on and share their personal tutoring experience, and give their input in how the diaries should be recorded. Follow up focus groups were held with participants via Microsoft Teams on the 30th and 31st March, and 1st and 3rd April 2020

In term 2, 28 Participants were initially recruited, however 15 participants ultimately submitted diaries throughout the term.

During the introductory meeting, it was felt that recording a reflective diary on a weekly basis, based on the experience of staff in term one, would be appropriate. This was to be taken with a view to reflecting on the personal tutoring experience of that week. The diary was also amended to remove the closed quantitative question, and the question "Please could you provide any other information or details regarding the support you have given to students that you think is relevant" was also removed as term 1 participants felt this to be redundant. A full copy of the term two diary structure can be found in the Appendices.

Again, the regularity of recording feedback varied between staff, with some participants recording less frequently than others. An overview of the time periods that staff described reflecting on in each diary illustrated is reflected in a Gantt chart style table, in Appendix G.

3.2.2 Overview of findings

A total of 77 diaries were completed throughout the term, providing detailed feedback regarding what support that staff member has been involved in, and responses to questions that prompted reflection. Through the Online Surveys platform, all diaries totalled 139 pages of feedback collated into a PDF document.

In comparison to term 1, the term 2 diaries were slightly shorter and more focused in nature; this was an intentional effect of discussions with staff, so that they felt they were less onerous and more focused in their content. Despite the slightly shorter and more focused reflections, participants in term 2 still expressed their belief that completing this diary was beneficial to them, particularly in emotionally processing the experience.

*"We're kind of putting them first in those situations and you know signposting or listening trying to help them find solutions but by me writing those things down I think it helped me work some things out" –
OFLA term 2 follow up FG 01.04.2019*

In adapting to the working practices of some staff members in term 2, participants were given multiple options for how to submit their reflective diary. In term 1, this was completed only through the 'Online Surveys' platform. In term 2, participants could email their diaries as a word document directly to the researcher, with the same headings and structure followed. Although the freedom to choose the medium of submission was requested by staff members, this did cause some confusion for others, who felt that multiple options for submitting the diaries caused the process to feel less clear. In future iterations of this study, it is recommended that submission of the diary remains limited to one medium and a singular set of instructions.

One drawback of the methodology that streamlining the process and having more regular reflections did not solve, was a perceived lack of clarity on what should be included in the diary or considered 'support'. Some personal tutors described having informal conversations with students, some of which may have touched upon support or could be considered partly an 'intervention', however were not considered formal in the eyes of the personal tutor. This issue touches upon the complexities of the role of the personal tutor, and how this can blur the boundaries between personal, professional, academic, and pastoral. This is discussed further in section 4.1 of this report.

*"mean I think I was unclear because I might speak to several students in a week I wasn't clear if I should just do it like do one for each student or one for like the overall experience" – OFLA term 2 follow up
FG 01.04.2019*

A final consideration raised for this methodology was that staff highlighted the importance of being able to review and reflect on their previous diary entries. In completing a diary entry, some participants suggested that it would have been more useful to build on their previous entry rather than complete a new one entirely, as this would have further helped the reflective practice as well as acted as a prompt for their own recollection. This ability was limited through the Online Surveys platform, and therefore future studies using this methodology may wish to consider an application that has the ability to address this issue.

4. Discussion and recommendations

4.1 Theme 1: Expectations and establishing the personal tutor role

The role of the personal tutor is to coach their student(s) in finding a solution to any problems raised, rather than to have a responsibility in directly solving the problem themselves. Considering this in the context of the Clutterbuck (2014) model, this would mean that support is predominantly directive rather than non-directional, and based primarily on the intellectual or challenging, rather than emotional or nurturing need. It is key for students to not only be able to overcome problems, but to develop their own tools and skills to overcome problems in the future.

The way in which the personal tutor approaches this role is not prescriptive in the NTU personal tutoring policy, and therefore open to that staff members personal approach. This allows the personal tutor to bring their own training, experience, personality, and strengths to supporting students. Because this is open to some interpretation however, personal tutors often need to consider their own role in this process, which was reflected in this study.

Taking a coaching role as opposed to a problem-solving approach can create a conflict within these staff members, who often actively wish to help their students. This conflict is not only a practical problem for the personal tutor to navigate but has an emotional impact on the personal tutor themselves.

"[I feel] worried about whether I am offering sufficient support however from my experience I think that they will both be a lot happier if they complete some decent artwork and although I am trying to encourage that, the students have to manage that situation." – P9, D3 (term 2)

As stated in the introduction, we also know from our Student Transition Survey (2020) results that our students have an expectation that personal tutors take their personal issues into account when considering their academic performance. There is no formal process to do this, and therefore there is a mismatch of expectation between staff and student in this case.

For some of our personal tutors, their own role can also change dependent on the problem presented to them. One particular personal tutor described how for their tutees, they may be both an academic mentor when presented with a studying problem, however may also have a pastoral role to play when the student discloses a personal problem. For these personal tutors, finding a balance between the roles can be a challenge, and often require different skills to support the student effectively.

"It's being adaptable because being a pastoral tutor versus being someone that they come to with their draft for something they've written is clearly gonna be a different conversation..." – OfLA term 2 follow up FG 01.04.2020

This problem is one identified more widely in academic literature, with some solutions suggesting the need for a separation of the role of academic tutor and pastoral tutor (Bell, 1996). This is not the approach taken at NTU, as it is understood that there is an overwhelming need for 'front-line' staff to be able to guide the student with a pastoral issue, when often the student themselves are not clear as to the nature of their own issue or when it should be raised.

"...a lot of the time they come to me as a tutor so they have a problem and they don't really know how to deal with that and what they're looking for is me to say to them this is how you try to approach this problem..." – OfLA term 2 follow up FG 31.03.2020

There is therefore an expectation from both staff and students that personal tutors are required to support student pastorally as well as academically. With staff addressing personal and pastoral issues, as well as academic, the role of a personal tutor can move from the 'intellectual/challenging' to the 'emotional/nurturing' side of the Clutterbuck model. We can see that for some staff members this is reflected in a self-reported shift in role from a coach to a mentor. Several staff members described how their role is to be an emotionally supportive and a helpful figure to the student. One personal tutor described their unofficial role as "University Mum"; a role that they described with pride and highlighting the positive relationships they have built.

Again, from the pastoral angle of support, there are differences in expectations. During the introduction (section 2.1), we described student expectations of this role as being primarily that of a coach, however a quarter of students have an expectation that the tutor engages in problem solving with them. Staff also reported that students often have an expectation that staff can help to advise them of how to address a pastoral problem when one is disclosed, however as previously described, staff often reflected that their role was not to advise, but to coach the student to find the solution themselves. In finding the balance between advising, mentoring, and coaching, as well as managing student expectations, there are clearly reported differences in approach between the staff members within this study.

"I have been advised by a senior colleague recently not to get involved with student concerns (i.e. this is not my job so don't do it), and leave it to student support to sort out - this is not possible if the student is clearly distressed and I am there with them. I am not going to just walk away. Clearer guidelines as to what we are expected to do and what not to do would be very helpful." – P9, D7 (term 2)

With differing expectations between staff and students, in addition to differing approaches between staff, a clear definition of the role of personal tutors and tutorials need to be established. A consideration for the differing skills needed to address academic and pastoral problems is also required, to ensure tutoring staff are fully equipped to deliver different types of support.

RECOMMENDATION 1: More explicit clarification of tutoring role in the NTU Quality Handbook, established clearly with the student during induction.

4.2 Theme 2: Building rapport and establishing relationships

In cultivating and maintaining successful relationships, Clutterbuck (2005) suggests that 'Rapport-building' is a key initial stage of this supportive process. During this phase, finding common ground, balanced with a dissimilarity to provide opportunities for learning, helps to establish the relationship between personal tutor and student. Clutterbuck highlights the importance of building a relationship, in addition to establishing expectations of behaviours and role, discussed in our previous section. Our personal tutors also shared this view.

"Having the relationship with the students and knowing who they are as individuals was crucial" – P14, D2 (term 2)

During many reflective diaries, interviews, and focus groups, staff discussed how their role required at least some form of a personal relationship and built rapport, in order to

support their students. Establishing this relationship however led to staff describing some differing approaches. For example, one staff felt it was important to reveal personal thoughts and feelings, in order to establish a common ground.

"I will try to do a sort of 'mutual disclosure' so I will tell them some stuff about me... ...if I am expecting them to share information about themselves, then I need to at least meet them half way, and make a recognition that I am not Dr [surname], but that I am [first name]. And I'd rather be [first name]." – OfLA term 2 initial FG 24.1.2020

The idea of having at least some personal disclosure was shared by many staff who were part of this study, however the levels to which this disclosure is personal or revealing, differs greatly between personal tutors. For example, one staff member described sharing very limited information about what they did in the summer holidays, as a way of giving a personal touch to an introduction with their student(s).

"...personally, I have a couple of anecdotes I share with all of my tutees... ...I'll make sure I have a couple of lines, they're a bit jokey and informal, that will set them at ease, but do not reveal anything about me." – OfLA term 2 initial FG 23.1.2020

For other staff, using deeper more personal examples of issues, mistakes, or learning points from their personal life helped in building rapport. In some cases, these can be much more revealing about their lived experience and them personally, than many other staff may feel is comfortable or appropriate in sharing.

"I regularly disclose to students that [when I was a University student] I had an awful second year, barely scraped through with a third, and it's because I drank too much. That's what happened, that's the truth. And it was actually a tutor meeting that sorted me out, that got me on track in my third year." – OfLA term 2 initial FG 24.1.2020

The NTU Quality Handbook⁵ also acknowledges that "build[ing] effective relationships with students" is not only important to personal tutoring but is one of the Universities attributes for high quality teachers. The handbook describes how high quality teaching also involves "model[ling] personal and professional integrity and wisdom". Both of these 'indicators' of high quality teaching however, can be open to interpretation. With some staff interpreting these qualities very differently, there can even be disagreements between staff on what could be deemed appropriate or not, based on shared guidance.

"A couple of them [colleagues] were very unhappy with me. It shows that there can be discrepancies among colleagues in what we believe we should talk to students about." – P16, D2 (term 2)

With some staff interpreting this fundamental stage of the tutoring process so differently, it could be argued that further consideration is needed on how staff can and should effectively build rapport and develop relationships with students. This is not due to any perception that staff are not broadly successful in this stage, but rather to address the inconsistent experience for students, who may have understood the relationship they have built between themselves as the staff member to be vastly different due to the staff member themselves, rather than the staff role.

⁵ The personal tutoring policy can be found on page 5 of the Quality Handbook, accessible here: <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/myhub/policies-and-guidance/a/academic-quality-handbook/sections/quality-handbook-section-14-learning-and-teaching>

RECOMMENDATION 2: Further investigation/study in rapport building, in order to establish clear guidance for staff.

4.3 Theme 3: Emotional needs and emotional support

The NTU Quality handbook guides staff on supporting students, in part through defining the key attributes for high-quality teachers. One of the indicators of high-quality teaching is being a tutor that “knows, and empathises with their students, understanding and responding to their needs”. Personal tutors in this study often described the critical importance of empathy in order to be able to effectively support them.

Throughout the reflective diaries, staff described how building relationships with students, and empathising with them during difficult times, often creates an emotional burden for that personal tutor.

“one of the things that is problematic about the work we do is that we do not have any personal or emotional support.” – OFLA term 1 follow up FG 18.12.2019

Participants throughout their reflective diaries described ‘worry’ and ‘concern’ over the students. Several referenced how supporting students in a pastoral sense can subsequently impact them outside of office hours.

“I am so tired. The emotional labour in this is exhausting. I do not have the time that they need.” – P7, D3 (term 1)

Personal tutors explained how they are not only feeling sadness due to their relationship with the student, but also due to a sense of responsibility in their role in supporting them. This is particularly challenging for staff when considering the distinction between the personal relationship and professional role.

“I have been upset and concerned about my final year student. It is a serious issue and I am having to force myself to not overstep the line from my role as academic tutor...” – P2, D4 (term 1)

While there is institutional support in place for students, both in the form of the personal tutoring system and in student services that they can be referred to, there appears to be less in place for staff. One of several personal tutors reported this issue through the reflective diaries below.

“...there is no support for mentors in dealing with such heavy stuff – when I spoke to my line manager about the weight of what we carry I was told that it is not my job to carry it, but to refer the student on to relevant service.” – P17, D2 (term 2)

Staff did not necessarily suggest that they themselves need to be signposted for help, but some staff did discuss the need for a more formal support network for staff, so these issues can be discussed and the emotional burden shared.

“there is nowhere apart from colleagues to actually voice what happened. Often you take it home and it is a worry. Some additional support for us to share and voice concerns or worries as to what we have heard would be beneficial” – P20, D2 (term 2)

Other participants suggested a form of debrief after a set of tutorials, that staff could use to ‘wind down’ after some difficult conversations. Again these could be less formal, but would help to emotionally support staff. An example of this was used in April and May

2020, during a 'call campaign' for students at Nottingham Trent University during the Covid-19 pandemic⁶. Staff involved in making phone calls were able to 'debrief' at the end of the day, which staff at that time reported to be emotionally useful.

"A line 'manager' instead of a line administrator who we could talk to and 'debrief' these situations on a weekly or monthly basis." – P9, D4 (term 2)

A final factor of note in this case is that a large proportion of staff who were affected by problems, had also had to help support students with mental health issues. There is a separate need here to consider training, which is discussed further in the next section.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Establishing a network/forum/debrief session for staff to be able to discuss issues raised during personal tutoring.

4.4 Theme 4: Skills and training

In order to support students who may be identified as at-risk of failure, the personal tutor must first identify the problem that is causing low engagement with study or preventing the student from achieving their academic goals. As discussed in previous sections, a large amount of issues raised are not academic but pastoral in nature, the effects of which are disruptive to the student both personally and academically.

Although personal tutors have a role in providing pastoral advice and signposting the student to further support where needed, issues raised by students are often multifaceted without one clear cause or solution. Students often present complex personal issues or describe their issues under broad categories such as 'poor mental health'. The issue of poor mental health as a significant issue for students who have been identified as 'at-risk' of withdrawal, was also describe in research conducted in the first year of the OfLA project⁷. Many tutors reflected particularly on the latter issue in their reflective diaries as being a key issue in higher education, with one example illustrated below.

"Most concerns at the moment are about mental health and settling into uni (I only see first years) and I have had two that have had funerals already" – P8, D2 (term 1)

With such serious issues presented to them, personal tutors have a challenge in correctly identifying the problem and providing the correct advice. The consequences of getting this wrong does not only impact on the student, but on the emotional state of the personal tutor themselves.

"Very worried and anxious about this student. Very concerned I had given her incorrect advice. Tried not to cry about this." – P9, D3 (term 2)

In several diary entries, staff felt concerned that they had provided incorrect advice, or did not know enough in order to fully support the student with their problem. As this is a

⁶ During this call campaign, staff primarily from the CenSCE department called all students with 'low'/'very low' engagement as measured through the NTU Student Dashboard. Calls were informal to 'check in' on the student and encourage re-engagement with studies. Personal issues were often raised, leading to the need for a 'debrief' for staff who may have dealt with emotionally charged issues.

⁷ More can be found on this in our [OfLA NTU O6 report](#) particularly linking to recommendation 6.

recognized part of role, personal tutors predominantly felt that rather than wishing for this responsibility to be taken away from them, more training and support for them would help address this problem.

"I cannot think of another job where adults support adult in this way without any allocated time, training or support to do so. This needs to be addressed." – P9, D3 (term 2)

When considering what training had been useful, or could be useful, several personal tutors made similar suggestions around training to address and support students with mental health problems. With this issue being not only increasingly commonly raised, and often having serious and potentially distressing consequences if not addressed properly, it is unsurprising that this is suggested as being potentially useful for personal tutors.

"I am glad that I have booked to be involved in mental health first aid training later this year as it will hopefully help me to develop more or better ways to support students who are experiencing difficulties." – P21, D6 (term 2)

At Nottingham Trent University, some personal tutors have already received "Mental Health First Aid" (MHFA) training and believe it to have been crucial in supporting students. This is not only in being able to ensure the personal tutor can give appropriate advice, but in helping to understand the severity of the issue in the first place. One tutor described how the training gave them confidence to understand a student's problem fully, and strongly recommended that all personal tutors at the university should receive this training as they believed it is critical to the role.

"...including me having to ask her in a tutorial, 'Are you considering suicide?'. I wouldn't have asked that question if I hadn't been encouraged through mental health first aider training to say, you need to ask that question. Because you asking that question is not going to make someone kill themselves or not, but at least you then know what you're dealing with." – OfLA term 2 initial FG 24.1.2020

This evidence suggests that personal tutors as a whole would benefit from MHFA training. This is due to the need for further training and support, not only to help the student but to help the staff, and the significant number of cases that personal tutors are reportedly seeing that link to mental health problems. In order for this to be achieved in a cost-effective manner, establishing a MHFA champion in each department would provide some support for staff members. It is also suggested that this could be planned with a longer-term goal of ensuring all staff receive some form of mental health awareness training.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Mental Health First Aid training to be accessible for all personal tutors.

4.5 Theme 5: Signposting and support services

Although we have discussed the role of the personal tutor in coaching students when faced with a problem, many issues raised by students during tutorials are more effectively dealt with through a different service. This is reflected in our diaries, with many personal tutors describing 'signposting' or 'referrals' or 'advising further contact' as part of their tutoring experience, or as a next step for action. This is an expected part of the personal tutoring process.

Although signposting may seem like a simple process, the NTU Academic Quality Handbook describes personal tutors having to “effectively signpost students to support” as a skilled activity. Not only do personal tutors need to have the ability to correctly diagnose a problem, but they need to have the knowledge of available services both internally and externally from the institution, and in which situation they may be most appropriate. For our tutors, this is knowledge built through experience over time.

“I feel I have sufficient knowledge now after 3 years in post to signpost and support appropriately” – P2, D3 (term 1)

The range of issues that personal tutors need to be able to identify and provide signposting advice for can be large. Even experienced tutors have expressed an anxiety about whether they have advised their students to contact the most appropriate service in order to help them. For example, the staff member who confidently states they have developed signposting knowledge in the quote above, still showed some concern about signposting a student in the quote below, as this is far from a simple task.

“[I’ve dealt with] some personal issues – some health, some mental health and some issues with friends and accommodation. I hope that I reassured and signposted correctly.” – P2, D3 (term 1)

In order to simplify the complex nature of diagnosing a problem, and correctly referring or signposting a student when appropriate, some staff have created tools to help them. One such tool was discussed particularly during multiple focus groups during this study; a ‘flowchart of concern’. This is a simple flowchart, detailing the type of issues raised, and subsequently pointing to the most appropriate support service that may be able to help address the problem. The resource was created by a member of staff based within a support service, in order to help themselves and colleagues. It has subsequently been shared with some personal tutors, in order to help guide staff in advising the most appropriate advice service.

[the flowchart of concern] “We had that up on our office wall, because as a group we thought that this would be useful. So that when you get the email from the student you don’t have to go and find it, you can just walk over to the wall and so get them printed and put them in every office.” – OfLA term 2 initial FG 24.1.2020

Personal tutors described how a simple flow chart had been helpful to them and their team to address problems that students have raised, but discussed how this simple resource can be a solution to the wider problem, that it takes time to develop the skills and knowledge needed to effectively signpost a student.

“I’ve got my flow diagram, so I know what to do in certain situations... [a staff member] produced that for people who are not just tutoring full time, but for maybe a brand new member of staff. Lecturers arrive here, particularly from a research background and they have not had tutor groups, so it is a safety net for them if in their first few weeks if they have a difficult problem, they know where to go.” – OfLA term 2 initial FG 20.1.2020

This resource is currently an informal document, created by staff, and therefore can become outdated quickly. A centralised document that was held electronically and regularly updated would provide a more effected solution to addressing some of the issues highlighted here.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Creation and maintenance of a centralised ‘flowchart for support’ document.

There is another aspect of signposting students to support services, that personal tutors have raised as an issue throughout this study; the availability of these services themselves. Several personal tutors at various points described their frustration with waiting times and the lack of resource in student services both internally and externally.

"Had been to the doctors who had to helped. Had self-referred to NTU support services but currently over 2 weeks wait to see someone. Spent 20 mins with the student. Advised her to go to NHS walk in centre, Referred her again myself on the NTU online referral system." – P9, D3 (term 2)

Again, as with the other issues raised in this study, the impact is not limited to the student, but can have an impact directly on the personal tutor. This impact on the staff members can be both an emotional and professional burden.

"...often the student has to wait for three weeks before they get any support, so in meantime they come to me, so it becomes MY weight." – P17, D2 (term 2)

Personal tutors frequently described the need for more investment in various student support services. Investment in this area would provide a direct time and resource benefit to the personal tutor, which is we will discuss in the next section, is already limited.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Further investment in Student Support Services.

4.6 Theme 6: Administrative challenges and environment

Delivering effective interventions with students is a challenging task, and there is often more to consider than identifying a problem and working with the student in order to solve it. In the reflective diaries, staff were asked about what their 'next steps' were in supporting the students that they had met during that time period. The majority of the feedback in this area actually related to activity outside of the tutorial session, rather than further conversations or interventions directly with the student.

"Time allocated for Personal Tutoring and admin of it (making notes on dashboard etc) not sufficient" – P22, D1 (term 2)

In the NTU Academic Quality Handbook, tutorials are described as 'primarily a student-centred form of teaching and, as such, tutorial sessions require advance planning and consideration of outcomes'. A significant part of the personal tutors role involves time and effort in preparing for tutorial sessions (such as administration, planning, contacting students, finding suitable physical space, reviewing notes/information about the student), which can impact the time and resources available for the tutorial itself.

"Difficulty of finding time to meet regularly with all students to check in. Spent lots of time on admin tasks to set up PT slots" – P22, D2 (term 2)

There are also a number of actions that a personal tutor may need to take after the tutorial (such as organising subsequent meetings, compiling and recording notes, communicating with other staff, follow up actions, monitoring and or tracking that student) which again can be impactful on the amount of time a personal tutor has to complete all their work in a normal working week. In the quote below, a personal tutor describes how attempting to support a student following a tutorial ended up impacting the personal tutor in their own role.

"Very frustrated. I lost a day to this when I have other work (marking, preparing lectures) that I am now behind with. And now still working at 6.20pm on a Friday!" – P9, D5 (term 2)

Some work has already been done to address the administrative burden on staff, for example the call campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic was designed to help identify where students needed further support, however this was an isolated campaign rather than a repeated process. More administrative support for personal tutors, as well as further allocated time resource for staff that considers the added burden on staff would subsequently ensure the personal tutoring system can run smoothly and effectively.

"Additional admin support would have helped me to organise times/rooms etc. I honestly don't think those higher up realise the impact in terms of time, that these things take" – P1, D2 (term 1)

RECOMMENDATION 7: A developed call campaign, aimed at low engaged students, with the aim of encouraging re-engagement with study.

Meeting students is not only administratively time consuming, but often difficult to organise. A common frustration expressed in the diaries was that a lack of time and physical space available to personal tutors for one to one tutorial meetings meant that these are often organised in locations that perhaps do not facilitate open discussion.

"The environment where we meet them is entirely inappropriate. It is noisy, very public, and uncomfortable both physically and emotionally. It is not a safe space to discuss difficult and/or emotional issues." – P7, D4 (term 1)

When supporting students, the need for a personal tutor to organise an 'intervention' with a student can be urgent or unexpected. In arranging sudden or unanticipated meetings, staff are required to meet with students outside of their classroom, or in a location neutral to both the staff and the student. At NTU, a pilot study that supplied staff with iPads in order to meet students more flexibly has been conducted, with some positive results⁸.

Using technology can help staff in gathering information and recording the session, thereby addressing the administrative burden, however meetings in public spaces still bring their own challenges in providing a private and appropriate environment.

"...He had requested we meet somewhere private as he was concerned he would break down. I met him in the communal 'Link Lounge' initially with a view to taking him somewhere more private. There was nowhere. I ended up finding a 'booth' seat level 1 Newton in a communal area. He was very emotional and cried a lot. There was little privacy, no tissues, no peace." – P17, D2 (term 2)

When conducting personal tutorial meetings, the physical space in which the meeting is held, can influence the outcome of that intervention. A consideration is therefore needed for how the personal tutor can achieve this on a busy campus with limited reservable room space for a private conversation to take place.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Investment in quiet spaces dedicated to student support.

⁸ More can be found on this in our ABLE O8 Case study 'Staff Survey'

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