OfLA Project
2018-1-UK01-KA203-048090

O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies

Mode of communication

pilot study

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1.   Executive Summary

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU), an embedded learning analytics platform uses a number of proxies for engagement, to provide each student with a daily engagement rating. These ratings, along with measures of performance and attendance, contribute to staff understanding of each student's performance and acts as a method of alerting staff to students who may potentially be at risk of failure or withdrawal. Once it is deemed necessary for an intervention to take place, personal tutors or academic mentors (responsible for supporting the student) establish communication with the students, with the aim of 're-engaging' the student.

This study aims to understand the impact of varying the mode of this communication in order to understand which method is more effective in successfully establishing a dialogue, and subsequently re-engaging the student. It used the following two measures of success: firstly, whether communication resulted in subsequent contact with the student's academic mentor or with other members of staff within the university; and secondly, whether following this subsequent contact there was an increase in student engagement as recorded on the Dashboard.

A single 'school' was the focus of this study, and a 'mid-term review' conducted within the first term identified 865 students that would benefit from a communication from their academic mentor. These students were randomly allocated to one of two groups; one group were contacted via email, and the other contacted via letter to their term time address.

The results of this study suggested that there is some evidence to suggest that receiving a letter is more likely to result in a subsequent face-to-face meeting between the student and a member of staff, and that students that receive a letter are less likely to be in the lowest engaged student group at the end of term 2. Findings also suggest that having any form of contact with the academic mentor may have been a key factor in raising student engagement.

Recommendations are made relating to the training given to staff, improving the process of mapping personal tutors to students, how students are communicated to and how they are supported, and investigating the use of phone calls and online platforms as a method of communication.

As this was a new and ambitious pilot, involving many staff in a large school, an important part of this pilot also involved consideration of the *process* of such a trial. It therefore also makes recommendations about how processes can be improved in order to evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions.

2. Introduction and Methodology

2.1 Background Information

This pilot was conducted with undergraduate students in a large academic school within Nottingham Trent University that aims to provide a personalised student experience in order to develop each student's potential[1]. This school has used the NTU Student Dashboard since its early stages of development in order to support student retention, belonging, and attainment. The OfLA researchers worked closely with two senior staff members within the school to develop this pilot through regular meetings and email communications.

The model of personal tutoring differs across the university. Within this school, each undergraduate student is assigned an academic mentor with whom they are scheduled to meet three times in their first year and also in their second year, and twice in their final year. The role of this mentor is to provide the student with individual support for their studies, and to signpost them to central support where appropriate. Each student also has a course leader who typically teaches on the course but is also responsible for the academic management of the course. Students within this school can also contact a student support advisor who provides pastoral support.

Although the model of personal tutoring differs across the university, there are principles on which the personal tutoring model is based, including "providing personalised academic, pastoral and professional advice and guidance and serving as a gateway to further specialist support" and supporting students' social and academic transition throughout the student lifecycle (Nottingham Trent University Quality Handbook Section 14: Learning and Teaching). Within the UK this type of role is commonly referred to as a 'personal tutor'; within continental Europe it may be referred to as 'study advisers', and within the US, 'academic advisers' (Foster et al, 2020).

The NTU Student Dashboard generates 'engagement' data for each student based on their interaction with the University using the already available electronic measures of: attendance, Library loans, Log-in to NOW (the University's Virtual Learning Environment), Accessing NOW Learning Rooms, Card swipes to NTU buildings, use of E-Resources, and coursework submissions (through the NOW dropbox). Using these measures, the Dashboard algorithm provides an engagement rating for each student for each day of the year based on their activity levels: the more a student engages with the resources the higher their engagement rating. The engagement rating can be one of five ratings: High (H), Good (G), Partial (P), Low (L), or Very Low (V). Previous research has found that engagement data generated by the dashboard has a relationship with student progression and attainment at NTU, with high average engagement being a strong predictor of academic success (Foster, 2018), therefore engagement data can be used to identify potentially at-risk students (Foster and Siddle, 2020). For further details about the Dashboard see the NTU Student Dashboard Staff User Guide, the STELA Project Case Study Zero, and the NTU Student Dashboard – a brief explainer.

The Nottingham Trent University Quality Handbook highlights that the Dashboard is a "resource designed to support tutorials", in that it can provide important information as well as being used to keep a record of notes and agreed actions between staff and students (Nottingham Trent University Quality Handbook Section 14: Learning and Teaching). When meeting with an individual student, staff can add notes to the Dashboard to record any discussions or agreed actions with the student. These are seen by both staff and student, and both can add comments to these notes. The Dashboard

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[1] NTU has nine academic schools that may typically be called faculties in other Higher Education Institutions.

also allows staff to record the communication method and these are displayed as a dropdown list containing the following options:

- Attempted phone call/Voicemail
- Email
- Face to face
- Letter
- Missed appointment
- Phone Call
- Online Meeting
- N/A

For further information about the Dashboard notes please see Appendix 1: Dashboard notes.

NTU primarily teaches in three terms, and this study focuses on communications sent as a result of mid-term interventions that take place in the first term within this school. The mid-term interventions (referred to by staff within the university as 'mid-term reviews') typically take place in the eighth week of the first eleven week term and draw upon data from the first four to five weeks of term. In this mid-term review process course teams meet to review individual student's progress, combining data provided by the Dashboard with their existing knowledge about the student to decide whether they would benefit from a communication from the school that reminds the student about the importance of engagement and that signposts them to further support if needed. This mid-term review process differs slightly between each school, and data provided for the review is tailored to the needs of each school. Further details about this review process can be found in the OfLA (2020) O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: NTU Mid-term reviews.

2.2 Introduction and Aims

Previous research has found that in order to improve academic success, the generation of data needs to lead to actions that will improve performance (OfLA Output 4: Literature Review). Seeking support as an effective strategy for improving academic success has been highlighted by Wong and Chiu (2019) who also found that non-traditional students may find this particularly difficult because of pride, fear of approaching tutors, and a lack of experience of asking for support (Wong and Chiu, 2019). This study explored what would be the best *mode* of communication to use to re-engage these students with the university and to encourage these students to seek any support that they may need in order to do this[2].

Re-engagement in this case is measured in two ways. Firstly, by whether the communication resulted in subsequent contact with the student's academic mentor or with other members of staff within the university. Secondly, whether following this subsequent contact there was an increase in student engagement as recorded on the Dashboard. This contributes to the OfLA project aims of testing interventions within a three stage model: prompts, communication, and actions, in that it explores effective modes of communication that may lead to action once a student has been identified, and in turn whether this action leads to an increase in student engagement.

The evaluation approach chosen was based upon a current need identified within higher education within England. Higher education in England is regulated by the Office for Students (OfS) who are calling for higher education providers to better understand what interventions work to support students' success, and as such have developed a standards framework of intervention for providers to use in order to do this (OfS, 2019).

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[2] Communications are also explored in the OfLA 09 report (2020) 09 – Interventions at Arteveldehogeschool: Case Study 1 and 2 – Improving academic/social integration and class attendance.

It has been identified that within the sector there is less evidence about what works using causal evidence in which a control or comparator group is used to test the intervention (TASO, 2020) and therefore this study also aimed to contribute here. It was decided that ethically it would be preferable to offer all students an intervention (rather than having a control group with no communication) so the pilot was set up as a randomised field experiment (Fox, 2017) in which each of the two randomly selected student groups would receive a different communication (a letter or an email).

The use of learning analytics for research, in particular to evaluate interventions in this way, is a relatively new area so it was hoped that this pilot would also provide insights about how learning analytics can be used to test interventions within our three-stage model in a rigorous way. This report therefore also includes how we communicated with staff to set up this intervention, associated challenges, and lessons learnt along the way.

2.3 Overview of Methodology
Mid-term review process: identifying students to receive a communication
In this pilot, in order to identify those students with low engagement, students were firstly classified into quartiles based on their daily engagement ratings over this timeframe. These quartiles were calculated based on peers in the same year group because engagement tends to differ between years (the quartiles identified were therefore the lowest 25% engaged first years, the lowest 25% engaged second years and so on)[3]. This calculation was tested prior to this pilot by calculating the subsequent progression of students by engagement quartile using 2018/19 data for first year undergraduate students within this school and it was found that dividing this data in this way would allow us to identify those students that were least likely to progress to the next year (see Appendix 2: Quartile Calculation).

Within this school, 1,153 undergraduate students were identified as being within the lowest quartile during this period in 2020. The course teams then met in the mid-term review meetings to discuss each of these students individually alongside feedback gained from personal tutors and the course teams' knowledge of the student and which students would benefit from a communication, and if so what type of communication would be beneficial for that individual student (see OfLA (2020) O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: NTU Mid-term reviews.   Following the mid-term reviews within this school, it was identified that 865 undergraduate students would benefit from a communication[4]. These students were then randomly assigned one of two groups by the administration staff within the school; those that would receive a letter to their term time address and those that would receive an email, both addressed from their course leader. In order to minimise the effect of potential bias due to differences between the academic mentors, each academic mentor had students assigned within each of these two groups.

The content of the communication
The content of the communication was the same in both groups, and varied slightly according to the year of the student:
- First and second year students were advised that they will be contacted by their academic mentor to arrange a meeting in order to discuss any factors that the student may feel are affecting their engagement and that the meeting will be recorded on the Dashboard; and

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[3] It could be argued that this could be done on a course basis, but this would be administratively too time consuming given the timeframe of the trial.
[4] Postgraduate students were also identified as part of this process within the school but were not included in this trial.

- Final year students were advised that if there are any issues preventing their full engagement with their studies to contact their course leader or a member of their course team.

Each of the communications also included a named student support adviser within the school that the student can contact if they prefer, and how to find out further details about central support also available to the student (see Appendix 3: Email/letter communication content for a copy of the communication sent to students). The communication was signed by the course leader and sent by a member of the administration team.

Receiving feedback from the mentors
In order to evaluate whether the communication had resulted in subsequent contact the academic mentors were asked by the senior members of staff to provide in spreadsheet form:
- A list of their students who were sent a communication.
- Which of these students they had arranged a one to one meeting with.
- Whether they had subsequently met the student face-to-face, or had another form of contact, or whether no response was received from the student.

Learning from the *process* of this intervention
As this was a new and ambitious pilot, involving many staff in a large school, an important part of the analysis also involved consideration of the *process* of such a trial, in particular how communications with staff, and how to set up such a pilot for evaluation, could be improved in future. The findings and lessons learnt from the pilot were therefore discussed at a meeting with the OfLA researchers and the senior staff within the school and the result of these discussions are also included in the recommendations below.

3. Findings

3.1. Which communication (letter or email) was more likely to result in subsequent contact with the students' academic mentor, or with other members of staff within the university?
3.1.1 Feedback from Academic mentors
The mentors returned their feedback using slightly different formats (such as in a spreadsheet or within the body of an email). This feedback was given during a busy term, where there are multiple pressures and time demands on the academic mentors. At the time of this first review, of the 865 students involved in this pilot, 54 students weren't mapped to their tutor. This occurs when students are not mapped to their tutors within timetabling, and this is then reflected in the Dashboard (with students unable to see who their tutor is) because the Dashboard draws data from timetabling[5]. Academic mentors for 226 of the 865 students involved in this pilot (26%) gave feedback on whether they had any contact with the student as a result of the communication (either an email or a letter).

Table 1 (below) illustrates the resulting contact between academic mentors and students as a result of the mid-term review letter or email as reported by the academic mentors. The data illustrates the 226 students that the academic mentors provided feedback to senior staff about their subsequent contact. As can be seen in this table, the proportion of students who did not have any contact with the academic mentors following the

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[5] This has been helpful to prompt further conversations with staff about what to do if their students haven't been mapped to a tutor, and prompt further discussions about the time and resources required to support students in this way.

communication (either letter or email) were the same (58%) for both the letter and the email.

	Count of students			Percentage of students		
Resulting contact	Email	Letter	Total	Email	Letter	Total
Email or phone	12	19	31	10%	17%	14%
Face-to-face	36	28	64	31%	25%	28%
No response	67	64	131	58%	58%	58%
Grand total	**115**	**111**	**226**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 1: Resulting contact between students and academic mentors following the letter or email (as reported by the academic mentors)

3.1.2 Subsequent contact as recorded in the Dashboard.
This analysis focused on a count of notes for each student and information about whether or not notes about students provide evidence of one-to-one meetings. The notes data contains any notes made by any staff member about students contacted in the NBS mid-term review. Evidence of a face to face meeting was measured based upon whether 'face-to-face' was recorded in the "Communication method" input into the Dashboard. The data for tables 2 and 3 is therefore taken from the Dashboard rather than self-reported data from the academic mentors.

Table 2 (below) indicates the number of notes that were on the Dashboard for the 64 face-to-face meetings reported by academic mentors in their feedback in the timeframe between the first and second term mid-term reviews. It illustrates that there were 38 notes recorded in the Dashboard for these 64 meetings. Although the analysis of these notes indicate only that a student has had a face-to-face meeting with a member of university staff (this could have been, for example, with a member of library staff rather than with the student's academic mentor) it is useful in that it tells us that a student has had contact with university staff. This Dashboard data seen in Table 2 (that is, there were 38 notes recorded in the Dashboard for those 64 of the 226 students that the academic mentors provided feedback for) suggests that there is not yet consistent use of the Dashboard notes by the academic mentors to record meetings.

	Count of students			Percentage of students		
Communication sent in mid-term review	No dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Total	No dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Total
Email	17	19	36	47%	53%	100%
Letter	9	19	28	32%	68%	100%
Grand Total	**26**	**38**	**64**	**41%**	**59%**	**100%**

Table 2: Number of notes on the Dashboard for the 64 face-to-face meetings reported by academic mentors .

Table 3 (below) illustrates those students that had one or more notes input into the Dashboard that were contacted following the mid-term review (421 of 865 students). It shows that there is evidence from the Dashboard notes that 27% (238 of the 865 students identified) of students had contact with a member of university staff following the mid-term reviews which is a greater proportion than the self-reported evidence from the academic mentors which indicated that 7% (64 of the 865 students contacted) had

contact with an academic mentor. This is due to the limited feedback from the academic mentors on their subsequent contact with students.

Communication sent in mid-term review	Count of students			Percentage of students		
	No dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Total	No dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Dashboard evidence of face-to-face meeting	Total
Email	99	109	208	48%	52%	100%
Letter	84	129	213	39%	61%	100%
Grand Total	**183**	**238**	**421**	**43%**	**57%**	**100%**

Table 3: Students that had one or more notes input into the Dashboard that were contacted following the mid-term review

A higher proportion of students who received letters (61%) had evidence of a subsequent face-to-face meeting, than students who received emails (52%). As discussed above, these face-to-face meetings may have occurred with any member of staff (e.g. a member of library staff) not just the student's academic mentor The data from the Dashboard notes therefore suggests that sending a letter may be more likely to result in students having contact with a member of the university (such as library/school/academic mentor) and that this is worthy of further exploration[6].

3.2 Did subsequent contact affect student engagement and was there any difference between those students that had email/phone contact or face-to-face contact?

3.2.1 Feedback from academic mentors: Engagement data analysis

Table 4 below provides engagement data for the 95 students (out of the 226 students that the academic mentors provided feedback for) that had subsequent contact as a result of the communication (email, phone or face to face). This engagement data was measured at the end of term 2. The number of students is relatively low (n=95) but shows that a higher proportion of students who received an email (58%) were in the bottom quartile (Q1) for the last two weeks of term than those who received a letter (40%). Students within this group that had received a letter were therefore less likely to be the lowest engaged students at the end of term 2 than those that had received an email.

Engagement quartile (last 2 weeks of T1)	Count of students			Percentage of students		
	Email	Letter	Total	Email	Letter	Total
Q1	28	19	47	58%	40%	49%
Q2	15	19	34	31%	40%	36%
Q3	4	8	12	8%	17%	13%
Q4	1	1	2	2%	2%	2%
Grand Total	**48**	**47**	**95**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 4: Engagement data in the last two weeks of term 1 for those students that had subsequent contact with their academic mentor.

Table 5 below provides engagement data at the end of term 2 for students who had no contact with their tutor following the communications (either email or letter), that is, 131

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[6] There is the potential to conduct further analysis on staff IDs for the Dashboard notes to ensure only face-to-face meetings with NBS staff members are counted, but this requires extra data processing that was beyond the scope of this evaluation.

out of the 226 students that the academic mentors provided feedback for. It illustrates that there were slightly more students in the lower engagement quartile (Q1) that had received an email than a letter (64% and 59% respectively). Of particular interest is that when compared with Table 4, it also illustrates that there was a greater proportion of students (62%) in the lowest engagement quartile (Q1) that had no contact with their academic mentor, than those students who had subsequent communication with their academic mentor (49%).

	Count of students			Percentage of students		
Engagement quartile (last 2 weeks of T1)	Email	Letter	Total	Email	Letter	Total
No longer enrolled		1	1	0%	2%	1%
Q1	43	38	**81**	64%	59%	62%
Q2	13	19	**32**	19%	30%	24%
Q3	9	5	**14**	13%	8%	11%
Q4	2	1	**3**	3%	2%	2%
Grand Total	67	64	**131**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 5: Engagement data in the last two weeks of term 1 for those students that had no subsequent contact with their Academic mentor.

3.2.2 All students that were sent a communication: Engagement data analysis

Table 6 below provides engagement data for all 865 students within the school that were sent an email or letter, regardless of any subsequent contact. It illustrates that there were slightly more students in the lower engagement quartile (Q1) that had received an email than a letter (60% and 53% respectively).

	Count of students			Percentage of students		
Engagement quartile (last 2 weeks of T1)	Email	Letter	Total	Email	Letter	Total
No longer enrolled	2	4	6	0%	1%	1%
Q1	267	223	490	60%	53%	57%
Q2	113	126	239	25%	30%	28%
Q3	46	50	96	10%	12%	11%
Q4	16	18	34	4%	4%	4%
Grand Total	444	421	865	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 6: Engagement data in the last two weeks of term 1 for all students that were sent either a letter or an email.

Table 7 below provides engagement data for all 865 students within the school that were sent an email or letter and illustrates the type of subsequent contact that the student had with their academic mentors (as recorded by the academic mentors). However this data is limited because it may be, as seen above, that not all of the academic mentors recorded subsequent contact with the students.

	Count of Students				Percentage of Students			
Quartile in last 2 weeks of T1	Email or phone	Face-to-face	No response	Unknown	Email or phone	Face-to-face	No response	Unknown
No longer enrolled			1	5	0%	0%	1%	1%
Q1	15	32	81	362	48%	50%	62%	57%
Q2	11	23	32	173	35%	36%	24%	27%
Q3	5	7	14	70	16%	11%	11%	11%
Q4		2	3	29	0%	3%	2%	5%
Grand Total	**31**	**64**	**131**	**639**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Table 7: Engagement data in the last two weeks of term 1 for all students that were sent either a letter or an email and their subsequent contact with the Academic mentors.

It illustrates that there was a similar proportion of students in the lowest quartile that had received email/phone contact or face-to-face contact (48% and 50% respectively), and this was also the case with those students in quartile 2 (35% and 36% respectively).

It also indicates that there was a much higher proportion of students in this lowest quartile (Q1) that had had no contact with their academic mentor (62%) than in the quartiles 2-3 (24% and 11% respectively). It suggests then that it is having subsequent contact with the academic mentor that appears key here, rather than type of contact that may be making a difference to the students' engagement. However, it must be remembered that it may be that those students that are least engaged are least likely to seek contact with their academic mentor in the first place, so this study cannot attribute causal factors between attending a meeting with a mentor and subsequent higher engagement.

4.   Discussion and recommendations

4.1 How students are communicated to and how they are supported.

This study has explored what would be the best *mode* of communication to use to re-engage these students with the university, using following measures: firstly, whether communication resulted in subsequent contact with the student's academic mentor or with other members of staff within the University; and secondly, whether following this subsequent contact there was an increase in student engagement as recorded on the Dashboard.

Did the communication result in subsequent contact with the student's academic mentor or with other members of staff within the University?
The smaller sample size of those students that were recorded by the academic mentors provided no conclusive evidence of whether a letter or email would be more likely to encourage subsequent contact with an academic mentor. However, when looking at students' subsequent contact with a member of university staff as recorded on the Dashboard notes there is some indication that sending a letter is more likely to result in a subsequent face-to-face meeting. This suggests that this is an area worthy of further exploration, and it is recommended that further research in this area also considers any other impact on the student (such as their wellbeing and their perception of the course) as well as the resource implications of sending a letter as opposed to an email.

Following the subsequent contact with the student was there was an increase in student engagement as recorded on the Dashboard?

Within both the sample of students that were recorded by the academic mentors and the sample of 865 students within the school that were sent an email or letter students that had received a letter were less likely to be in the lowest engaged students group at the end of term 2 than those that had received an email. It may be then that sending a letter is more likely to result in a subsequent increase in student engagement, and this is worthy of further investigation on a larger scale. As this is a relatively new area of research and use of the dashboard, the following recommendation is made:

- **RECOMMENDATION 1: Further research conducts repeat trials using the same measures of success using larger sample sizes to allow for statistical analysis as well as the processes recommended in section 4.2 below to ensure rigour.**

When exploring the type of follow on contact that the students had with their academic mentor (such as email or phone, and face to face contact) it appears that having some form of contact with the academic mentor (rather than the contact type) may be a key factor in raising student engagement. Limitations to this data means that there could still be a positive correlation between students being more likely to contact their mentor, and students who are more highly engaged. What this data does illustrate however, is that students identified with low engagement should be encouraged to have contact with their personal tutor, and this area in particular is worthy of further exploration on a larger scale.

- **RECOMMENDATION 2: Students identified with low engagement should be encouraged to have contact with their tutor (or a member of university staff where appropriate)**

- **RECOMMENDATION 3: Further research on a larger scale focusing on student contact with a tutor or member of staff, to explore *why* contact with a tutor may be effective in raising student engagement, and *how* to establish and maintain communication between the student and tutor effectively.**

4.2 How we can improve future use of the Dashboard to systematically evaluate interventions

This pilot has also highlighted how processes can be improved in order to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions. As discussed earlier, this is a relatively new use of learning analytics, and as such it is still being developed, including the ethics[7] associated with this. Nottingham Trent University has an already existing policy, Use of learning analytics to support student success, about how learning analytics data is used to support student success (NTU Quality Handbook Section 14). Whilst the existence of a note and communication method has been analysed for this research, the content of the notes by individual tutor was not. In order to better understand what works, and to continue to conduct trials such as this, it is recommended that the recording of interventions is *in addition* to the recording of notes on the Dashboard in order to provide the detail necessary for effective evaluation to take place. This pilot study has been useful to identify improvements to the *process* of setting up such trials for evaluation, including a better understanding of the time and resources needed to

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[7] Suggestions for further reading on ethics and learning analytics can be found in OfLA Project 04: Literature review: tutoring/study advising. Recommendations about ethics and learning analytics in English Higher Education institutions is also considered in the From Bricks to Clicks - The Potential of Data and Analytics in Higher Education report.

conduct such an evaluation. The mentors returned their feedback using slightly different formats in their spreadsheets; some for example included copies of the Dashboard notes, some included dates of each meeting and some Mentors returned their feedback within the body of an email. In future studies, in order to support the evaluation process, it is recommended that:

- **RECOMMENDATION 4: Ethical use of data generated by a learning analytics platform is considered, and where appropriate additional reporting is used in order to evaluate interventions.**

- **RECOMMENDATION 5: There is a consistent and agreed reporting process for recording of interventions** (for an example of this see Appendix 4 for an example of recording for evaluation purposes).

- **RECOMMENDATION 6: An audit of time and resources needed to evaluate interventions in a rigorous and systematic way[8].**

4.3 How we communicate with staff and how they are supported.

This pilot study has also identified where to focus further communication and training with staff. In the upcoming year, staff will be reminded earlier in the term about the importance of mapping students to tutors within timetabling and offered advice and guidance on how to do this, to ensure that students can see their tutor within the Dashboard. It is recommended that:

- **RECOMMENDATION 7: Ensure every student is mapped to a personal tutor or study advisor, who can be responsible for individual support.**

The pilot also identified that not all the academic mentors were consistently reporting information about contact with students in the Dashboard notes. The Dashboard already allows for the consistent tracking of contact with students, but it appears that more could be done to train and support staff with this, including conveying the importance of doing so. If a learning analytics system is used that requires colleagues to record notes following contact with students, it is recommended that:

- **RECOMMENDATION 8: Training is given to staff about how to use the notes, and clear guidance about how and when it is expected that notes are completed.**

4.4 Recommendations for future cycle of research

It is of particular interest in this study that some academic mentors and students chose to have phone contact rather than email or face-to face contact. This study was completed just as the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning, and since then the phone as a method of communication with students has become increasingly important. This is a method of communication that was also suggested by some students in the OfLA 09-Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: Prompts, communications and action – NTU student research report. It is therefore recommended that:

- **RECOMMENDATION 9: Further research explores a phone call and online platforms as an additional approach to contacting students.**

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[8] For further discussions about the experience of the time and resources needed to support students by tutors please see the Nottingham Trent University OfLA report O6 – Evaluation of First Year Studies

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