

## **The role of the personal tutor in a curricular approach to Personal Development Planning**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper describes some outcomes from the introduction of a curricular approach to Personal Development Planning (PDP) within an Interprofessional Learning Programme, in particular within the Adult Nursing pathway. This approach provided some substantial changes to the way academics had previously functioned in the role of personal tutor and sought to address concerns that had been raised about the perceived constraints in facilitating holistic student development posed by the existing curriculum.

The context for change is outlined, including results of a local survey of personal tutors. The curricular changes, the new role for the personal tutor and the design of the necessary staff development programme are explained. Having begun to implement the new role, personal tutors' views are explored through interview data. A key theme to emerge is the significance of relationship building in this new curriculum structure and, following identification of the challenges, the paper concludes with recommendations in light of this experience.

**Key words:** personal tutor; curricular approach; personal development planning.

### ***Introduction***

Whilst academic and personal support strategies are frequently assigned to different sections of a university, at an operational level the personal tutor may be the first person a student comes to for help of any nature. The key characteristics of people in the helping

professions of health and social care are often rooted in a desire to care, to provide both practical and emotional support to others. Given these circumstances it is not surprising that personal tutors in these disciplines can spend a lot of time providing personal support, often at the expense of academic guidance.

Canterbury Christ Church University decided to implement Personal Development Planning (PDP) via the personal tutor system. That is, the personal tutor is the person with responsibility for enabling the student to engage in the process of PDP. Clegg and Bradley (2006) suggest that there are three models of PDP – academic, employment and professional. Clearly in the education of health and social care professionals it is the final category of professional PDP that is relevant. The study described here aims to provide evidence to support the facilitation of PDP firmly within the role of the personal tutor.

## **Context**

Personal tutoring originated from the need to provide support to young people living away from home for the first time when they started university (Grant, 2006). Within nursing programmes, the role of the personal tutor incorporated a substantial monitoring function in terms of the completion of practice hours, attendance at lectures and the achievement of competencies – requirements all set by the professional body (NMC, 2004). At least two meetings each year with personal tutors were required where documents would be checked and forms signed. Above this, if a student had a problem in practice, with academic work or personal difficulties, it was likely that he/she would turn to the personal tutor for support in the first instance who might then refer them on to central services when appropriate. This wide range of responsibilities for personal tutors in nursing education, without formal requirements, has led to role ambiguity in some cases and there have been recommendations for clearer boundaries of support given by personal tutors (Por and Barriball, 2008).

The Government agenda to increase participation in Higher Education (HE) (Dearing, 1997) has resulted in a student body that is no longer a homogenous group but is one with wide and varied life situations and educational backgrounds. In particular, in nursing there are a large number of mature students, predominantly female, who have raised their families to a point of relative independence. At selection interview they often say it is now

their turn to pursue a career. To address such increases in student diversity, there is a demand to provide effective personal tutoring systems to meet the needs of individual students (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006).

In the past, the role of the personal tutor in the adult nursing pathway at Canterbury Christ Church University had evolved into one that necessitated a wide variety of skills, almost none of which were to do with academic or professional development but were more likely to include giving financial guidance, personal counselling, health advice or ensuring documents had been signed. To explore the staff perspective of the personal tutor role in the department at that time, a questionnaire was administered to twenty four personal tutors revealing four key areas of concern and dissatisfaction with the role. Firstly they felt unable to carry out the role effectively because there was no allocated time for it and, subsumed within this, was the dissatisfaction of not being engaged with the academic side of a student's development. Due to time constraints, many felt that their limited efforts were focussed on the students with problems at the expense of those who were apparently managing their learning effectively. Secondly, there was concern that existing structures did not provide the personal tutor with enough information to facilitate a meaningful relationship within which they could enable a student to address concerns and become successful in all aspects of the programme. Thirdly, the system allowed students to not engage with their personal tutor beyond the signing off of necessary documentation and, whilst this was acceptable from the perspective of adult learning, it meant that vulnerable students who may be struggling might not be benefiting from the support of their personal tutor. The fourth and final category of concern was that the widening participation agenda led to a greater number of students who seemed to require a higher level of support for many complex difficulties relating to both their personal situations and their learning contexts. A curriculum review and revalidation provided the opportunity to consider these issues and make changes for the future.

### ***Curriculum development***

A professional development theme was introduced to the Interprofessional Learning programme to address the concerns raised, as well as provide a strong vehicle to support the PDP of students. The Interprofessional Learning programme is undertaken by students from eight different professions in discrete profession-specific groups and a Professional

Development module has been created for each year of the programme. The Professional Development modules seek to address some of the key factors which will influence a student's success, in particular the transition into HE and progression year on year; the development of graduate skills; and the process of PDP. It comprises two weeks (18 hours academic direction each week) at the beginning of years 1 and 2 with five workshops, each comprising four hours of academic direction distributed throughout the year as fits with each pathway's programme. In the third year the initial period of learning is reduced to one week and there are ten workshops throughout the year. This will support the writing of the extended piece of work to complete the degree.

Yorke and Longden (2008) identified that the first year of a programme is key in determining student success. Supporting students during this time is an important factor in retaining them and is particularly crucial for the student who is under-prepared. Therefore it is important that the programme facilitates regular contact with a member of academic staff, who will provide continuity of support. During curriculum review, it was decided that the personal tutor would be the obvious choice to provide this support and by delivering the Professional Development modules the personal tutor would also have dedicated hours for it..

Research has shown that timetabling personal tutoring through a curriculum module for students can help to generate better relationships between staff and students, as well as between students and their peers (Owen, 2002). Continuity of contact with a member of academic staff should provide a safe environment in which the students can reflect on their progress, identify areas for improvement and plan how to address these. Being involved in the delivery of these modules will provide the personal tutor with the opportunity to monitor the students' development and recommend early intervention of appropriate support as required. By meeting regularly with a personal tutor, students may also feel more comfortable in approaching tutors for help and guidance (Stevenson, 2006).

Earwaker (1992) describes three models of student support – pastoral; professional and curriculum. The pastoral model places responsibility on a designated member of staff to provide pastoral care and guidance to students throughout their course, whilst in the professional model, students are directed to specialist members of staff within HEIs for support, for example, counselling or student services. The curriculum model integrates student support within programmes/modules where:

Helping and supporting students then appears not as some extra-curricular activity for which time has to be found, but as a normal part of the course. (Earwaker, 1992, p.115)

Combining student support with the teaching of subject knowledge and academic skills in the curriculum has been considered more valuable for students than separating pastoral and academic support (Elander, 2003; Laycock, 2009; Warren, 2002).

Whilst providing students with specialist knowledge and skills, the programme seeks also to facilitate the development of the university's graduate skills. In particular through the Professional Development modules, the students will be enabled to develop their skills in an integrated way whilst engaging with other components of the programme. This context is of particular importance in an interprofessional learning programme where the same modules will be delivered within eight different professional pathways. Central to the philosophy of the Professional Development modules is the provision of a learning environment for a student to engage in PDP:

A structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. (QAA, 2001, p.1)

The graduate skills provide a framework for reviewing development and in accordance with university policy, interaction with a personal tutor will be the vehicle by which this review will be undertaken. Involving personal tutors in the delivery of PDP can have many advantages, including the opportunity for student and tutor to review progress and learning, and enabling the design of standardised PDP monitoring and recording systems where appropriate (Strivens, 2006). However, engaging academic staff in the delivery of PDP is not always easy, particularly when some structures are not assessed or credit-bearing, such as mandatory PDP group tutorials (Dunne, 2005), or when staff are not confident that they have the skills to fulfil the personal tutor role (Strivens, 2006).

This paper will proceed to look at the successes and challenges of implementing a curricular approach to PDP at Canterbury Christ Church University delivered by personal

tutors. The personal tutor perspective of this approach will be examined and areas for improvement suggested.

## ***Methodology***

Nurse lecturers teach to their strengths and areas of speciality, for example, acute nursing, rehabilitation or clinical science. Those lecturers with a particular interest in learning and teaching may also teach study skills and those with an expertise in research might also teach research awareness or methodology. The delivery of the Professional Development modules required all adult nurse lecturers to facilitate students in learning development and academic skills such as information searching and the critiquing of evidence sources. Some staff welcomed being involved in supporting learning in these areas, whilst others were more reluctant to take on teaching these topics. As part of the new validated programme it became a requirement rather than an option that the personal tutor took on this teaching, therefore staff development was necessary.

Two groups of personal tutors were involved initially. One group was involved in delivering the PD1 module to first year students, helping them to orientate into HE, the requirements of the programme and begin their learning development; whilst the other group of tutors delivered the PD2 module, working with students that they had already known through their first year as they made the transition into year two of the new curriculum. To evaluate the new personal tutor role and curricular approach to PDP, seventeen telephone interviews were conducted with adult nursing lecturers at Canterbury Christ Church University a few weeks into the new term and following the delivery of the initial two weeks of PD1 and PD2. This method of data collection was chosen as the most practical way to access the staff because it could be organised around their teaching commitments. Participation was voluntary and an information sheet was given in advance.

The sample consisted of five male and twelve female lecturers, all of whom were personal tutors and therefore delivering the Professional Development modules. Some had a first year personal tutor group, others had second years, and certain tutors had more than one tutor group. Some lecturers had previous experience as a personal tutor, whilst others were new to the role. The majority were senior lecturers in adult nursing and some also

had additional responsibilities such as year leader, or involvement with recruitment or practice placements.

## ***Findings***

### **Relationship building**

One of the key themes to emerge from the interviews was the impact that the extended contact time had on relationship development between the personal tutor and their students. The personal tutors described a greater investment in the relationship and an increased closeness. Whilst this may lead some to become more involved in the students' lives, other personal tutors believed that time spent on supporting individual students has decreased as students are more likely to raise concerns during the timetabled activities instead.

The two weeks of timetabled delivery at the start of PD1 allowed personal tutors to get to know their students earlier in comparison to the previous structure where they may have only met once or twice a year. Leading the students in classroom activities enabled the personal tutors to gauge their students' academic ability, detect their strengths and weaknesses, whilst also getting to know them as individuals:

I think for me it's been good because I've been able to pick out... quite early the students that I know are going to struggle and the students I know are going to be ok, so I suppose it gives you that overview of that as well which is going to possibly help throughout the year and the transition to year two. (Lecturer no.13)

By forming a relationship with their students, the personal tutors found that they were in a better position to tailor academic support to individual students' needs, including quick identification of students requiring support for dyslexia. Interestingly, personal tutors involved in the delivery of the PD2 module highlighted that they got to know their students better in the first two weeks of the second year than they had in the whole of the students' first year of the previous curriculum. Another commented that they were seeing their students grow more quickly than they had in the past.

As well as noticing advantages in relation to learning development, the personal tutors anticipated that the time spent getting to know their students would also enable them to bring forward pastoral needs. Whilst most did not favour a 'mothering' role, the personal

tutors took an element of responsibility in supporting and guiding students with personal issues:

I don't believe that everybody should be spoon-fed but I think sometimes if you don't help them through some of their pastoral and their health related issues, you're setting them up to fail. (Lecturer no.10)

Some personal tutors noticed that students seemed to build trust in the relationship quickly and seemed to find it easy to approach their tutors. Knowing all of their students' names was regarded as a positive outcome of the Professional Development modules which made students feel valued.

In addition to enhancing the relationship, the Professional Development modules seemed to have a positive impact on peer support and student bonding, enabling students to form a group identity earlier in their nursing programme than had been noticed in previous years:

I think the group identity formed very quickly because they spent so much time together. Really by the end of the first week they were all getting to know each other, understand each other, be aware of the different personalities within the group and they've actually commented on it whereas in the outgoing curriculum...they only actually spent one module in the first semester together. (Lecturer no.15)

They've put themselves into a network called Ning.com...I had this feeling the second week that this group is just going beyond me. They had an identity that wasn't dependent on me...What's my role? In many ways it's like you create something and it floats off without you and I feel you've got to make sure it floats in the right direction. (Lecturer no.1)

Whilst seeing themselves as distinct from the group identity, personal tutors viewed the group relationship as an important support network for the students and also recognised its role in enhancing engagement with PDP through social learning. One tutor highlighted that students need to feel safe and secure in their class and within their social group to be



able to explore ideas and concepts relating to their nursing practice and academic development.

### **Perceptions of the personal tutor role**

Personal tutors described their role as offering support and guidance to students and signposting them or referring them to other services where necessary. They aimed to facilitate at a distance and help students to problem-solve rather than provide the answers, therefore, encouraging independence. They had also embraced the changes to the personal tutor role in terms of facilitating academic development and saw it as their role to help give students the confidence to develop their previous learning and skills and increase students' self-efficacy. Some considered themselves to be the 'lynchpin' or 'life line' for their students but recognised it was important to work in partnership with them:

I want to be able to share a walk with somebody in which they're transformed and I think that's what HE can do, but its up to the student how much time they want to stay in the chrysalis and if they want to emerge. (Lecturer no.4)

So the personal tutor and student relationship was seen as a two way process. Staff were willing to support the development of their students through the Professional Development modules but required the students to take responsibility for their progress as well. The majority appreciated the value of moving away from a purely pastoral and surveillance role as personal tutor to engaging with their students academically, and the influence of the personal tutor role was valued by most:

I think it is a really privileged position...such a powerful support for somebody in a period when they're actually doing something that's quite life changing. (Lecturer no.17)

The new personal tutor role had an impact on job satisfaction among staff as they no longer felt they were processing numbers. Instead they knew the students and their abilities individually. However, whilst those interviewed were enthusiastic about being personal tutors, it was made clear that the personal tutor role may not be favoured by others who opt to do the minimum requirement. To a certain extent, engagement in the role was down to the individual.

Although the initial two weeks of the modules were considered intensive and tiring for both the staff and students involved, the benefits appeared to counterbalance this. The personal tutors liked the opportunity that the continuity brought for seeing students develop and the emphasis on supporting the transition between the years was considered valuable:

I think it's a very good idea because you're starting them off thinking academically and it's a continual theme isn't it, a thread right through year one, two and three and I should be with them all the way through...I think it's consistency for them and for me. (Lecturer no.12)

The module gives personal tutors the opportunity to convey academic expectations to students at each transition stage in year one, two and three and it was felt that the modules would have a positive impact on supporting the development of students' graduate skills. One personal tutor felt that the continuity of their role with students would not only enable them to support those who were struggling but help to identify and nurture individuals who were excelling, looking at where they can go next and how they can improve on their skills. This begins to address one of the concerns from the original personal tutor survey regarding time constraints, where personal tutors had focussed their attention on students with problems at the expense of those who were managing their learning effectively.

With regard to their identity as a personal tutor, some perceived that they were seen as 'the soft guys' by students in comparison to other lecturers. This image may have arisen from the previous association of personal tutors with pastoral support. It will be interesting to note whether this perception will change as a result of delivering the Professional Development modules, particularly in marking the students' summative work.

The involvement of the personal tutors in student assessment is a change that also brings new relationship boundaries. The individual investment of time is much greater and may therefore expose feelings of vulnerability as a student's assessment performance may be seen as a measure of the tutor's success (or failure). Although personal tutors will promote the student's own responsibility for their learning, many may feel exposed by this apparently transparent measure of their abilities as a teacher. Those who recognised this

very quickly may have compromised their normal boundaries in order to ensure their students' success e.g. by reading complete drafts of essays instead of outlines, or by reading more than one draft. It is of interest, although not for discussion in this paper, that these individuals do not appear to feel the same sense of vulnerability with regard to their students' achievement in other learning relationships.

Whilst support from a personal tutor was in theory considered valuable, some felt that students should have the option of being given a different personal tutor if the relationship was not effective. Introducing an opt out clause was one suggestion for resolving situations where students do not engage with their assigned personal tutor due to differences in personality or teaching style:

Unfortunately for the students, if they don't like you, they've got you a lot haven't they, and for you, actually, if you've got a student you don't engage with very well, you're spending a lot of time with them. So I'm not sure whether there should be some opt out clauses there along the way for the student and for the personal tutor, just sometimes, because we've all got different personalities...I think we should make it ok to at least express that the relationship is not working for you. (Lecturer no.2)

In contrast, others believed that the university experience, including receiving critical feedback, should help develop students' resilience for working in the NHS where they will have to engage in professional relationships with colleagues and patients. On the wards there may not be the opportunity to opt out of working with a particular patient.

### **Staff professional development needs**

For the personal tutors, the change in curriculum design entailed developing new teaching material and a responsibility shift. These personal tutors needed to understand the reasons for the changes and the underpinning philosophy. They also wanted to know what needed to be learned by the students and there was an expectation amongst them that lesson plans and materials would be provided for them to deliver. However, whilst session topics and delivery methods were explained, prescriptive material was not provided. Instead the lecturers were actively encouraged to share ideas, materials and lesson plans and a virtual learning environment was provided as a place to do this.

The reason for this is based in the philosophy of interprofessional learning and the evaluation of the way the previous curriculum was designed and delivered.

Interprofessional learning is of paramount importance in today's health and social care environment. Inquiries into tragedies such as the deaths of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) and Baby P (Healthcare Commission, 2009) showed that a better understanding of professional roles will facilitate improved communication which will in turn enhance the delivery of services to the public. However, it is true that there are skills and knowledge required by all health and social care professionals, such as the ability to critique evidence for practice and to write reflectively and critically. Whilst the topic may be shared, contextualising it to enable the student to assimilate it with existing knowledge is essential. Evaluation of the previous curriculum had identified that the delivery of generic material did not support the individual student's learning, so the material for the Professional Development modules needed to be contextualised for delivery by each of the health and social care pathways.

Within the two groups of personal tutors there were those who had previously taught these topics in the outgoing curriculum and were therefore equipped with knowledge and skills to share. The knock-on effect of this was that a defined group of tutors evolved where one had not previously existed; one where collaboration and shared support appeared and was encouraged through referring colleagues to each other when challenges arose. Most personal tutors felt that the changes made to their role provided them with more ownership of helping their students to learn, and they enjoyed the freedom involved in delivering the module. For others, however, the changes generated feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. Not all personal tutors were experienced in teaching academic graduate skills to students and lacked confidence in delivering certain aspects of the Professional Development modules:

PD2 was more terrifying because I hadn't generally taught on a module like that in the past...PD1 was fine because I'd done stuff on educational studies before so I was quite relaxed about that one. (Lecturer no.16)

I'm sure for the experienced lecturers, they're going to have a pretty good idea what their personal students are going to know, but for me I felt I wasn't sure. Am I meant

to be teaching them about reflective skills, writing, referencing, you know, or what?  
(Lecturer no.13)

Such insecurities led to fear that they may be disadvantaging students and concerns that different student groups may feel they are getting 'less of a deal' if other tutors can teach subjects more appropriately. In some respects a defensive mechanism was adopted by staff, resulting in a comparison of experience and teaching ability. Inexperience, for example, was a factor used to defend some tutors' unsettled feelings towards delivering graduate skills sessions, highlighting the impact of the module on staff self-esteem.

A significant challenge for many tutors was the necessity to use a wiki. Students are required to use a wiki as a pseudo-portfolio for recording their development and personal tutors are required to use the same wiki to give feedback on this process. The Faculty's Learning Technologist provided both taught sessions and printed guidance for the personal tutors. Some tutors were already confident with wikis; some had no prior knowledge but were able to acquire the fundamental skills relatively easily. There were those who doubted their own skills but were comfortable to be guided by the students within their group who knew how to do it. A few tutors struggled to learn but were determined to stay one step ahead of the students. There was also a minority who were likely to have chosen not to participate if there had been an option.

A positive outcome of the development of this theme which was not anticipated is that it has brought together personal tutors as a group which would not normally occur. There were initial meetings which introduced the theme and modules, and these meetings have continued throughout the year. This time together is considered a productive opportunity for the collaborative development or sharing of resources for their teaching.

Regardless of apprehension, the personal tutors interviewed held a positive view of the professional development theme and were willing to engage in further staff development to increase their confidence in the new role. With the personal tutor role now at the centre of the curriculum it was acknowledged that time needed to be invested in developing the required skills:

I think people underestimate the value of the personal tutor role and I think it's something we're all expected to do but it's almost assumed that you know how to

do it and I think sometimes we forget that we'll probably all get rusty in that and that personal tutoring moves on as well. So I suppose that's about staff development isn't it and highlighting what research is coming about that helps students in the personal tutor role. (Lecturer no.11)

One personal tutor in particular valued the time set aside for their interview for this study as it provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their role and educational practice.

### **Student evaluation**

Although this paper has taken the personal tutor perspective of a curricular approach as its key theme, module evaluations from students at the end of the year echoed the positive view of the relationship that they had developed with their personal tutor and with each other. The first year students expressed that it had set them off on the right path for the development of their learning skills and understanding what is required for a university course. The second year students reinforced the value of getting to know each other and their tutor much better than they had during their first year. Whilst some students had difficulty understanding the importance of considering their development from an holistic perspective ('I'm training to be a nurse, why do I have to write a summary of everything I've done this year?'), others appreciated the value of 'taking stock' and looking forward with an action plan for how to develop. This particularly applied to the second year students who undertook activities during the first two weeks which required them to review their performance in year one and identify their learning development needs for the coming year.

### **Conclusion**

Amidst the challenges it is important to acknowledge the enthusiasm with which some lecturers have embraced change. It is recognised by staff that the professional development theme attempts to address those areas of concern identified in the original personal tutor survey. Time is now provided for the personal tutor role through the delivery of these modules, as is engagement with academic aspects of the students' development. The modules now facilitate the development of both those who find it more difficult as well as those who benefit from being challenged and stretched. This engagement also provides

the personal tutor with much more information regarding the students' development and it is virtually impossible for the students not to engage with their personal tutor. For all these reasons there is more opportunity within the learning activities to provide the support needed, particularly by those students who enter HE as a result of the widening participation agenda.

As with most new initiatives, the curriculum change faced practical issues during implementation that will need to be considered for the future. For example, there is a timetabling issue with the personal tutor being required to facilitate eighteen hours of learning (3 x 6 hour days) in each of the first two weeks of years one and two. It is very likely that these weeks may overlap and it is also likely that at least one personal tutor will have a group in both years.

In future, more structure will be provided to develop key aims and some learning materials for sharing which individual tutors can contextualise within subject specific learning activities. Tutors will be encouraged to engage in reflective discussions as part of their professional development which may help to identify possible areas for improvement, create new ideas and enhance the role. In turn these will help to refine the personal tutor role as the professional development theme rolls out in the future.

This project set out to examine the role of the personal tutor in facilitating the development of students through a curricular model. After one year, feedback from staff and students is generally very positive. It is hoped that continued review and development will provide a model of PDP delivery which is an example for other programmes.

## ***Acknowledgement***

This paper is an outcome of the National Action Research Network on researching and evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio practice project (2007-2010). The project was led by the University of Bolton in association with the University of Worcester and Centre for Recording Achievement, and in national collaboration with the University of Bedfordshire, Bournemouth University and University of Bradford. The project was funded by the Higher Education Academy, National Teaching Fellowship Project

strand. More details about the project can be found at:

<http://www.recordingachievement.org/research/narn-tree.html>.

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