

Summary of key insights from Principles and Practices of Personal Tutoring literature review

The INKC has conducted an initial literature review investigating the principles and practices of personal tutoring in higher education, to inform our practices based on up-to-date evidence from the literature. We are sharing some of the key insights from the literature below:

- “Good personal tutor support is described as the ‘anchor on which the support system of the university rests’ (Wheeler and Birtle 1993, 3) and is credited with **improved student experience** (McFarlane 2016), **student success** (Battin 2014; Pellagrino et al. 2015), **learning, progression, and overall student experience** (Braine and Parnell 2011).”
- “Responsible and supportive personal tutors can enhance the student experience and in turn help **improve retention** (Webb, Wyness, and Cotton 2017), progression, and ultimately completion (Smith 2008), by enabling students to connect different elements of learning (Stevenson 2009) and **facilitating academic integration** (Leach and Wang 2015).”
- “**Despite the evidence of their value, personal tutoring systems have come under increasing strain in recent years and have even been described as being ‘in crisis’** (Evans 2009) as a result of poor staff–student ratios arising from increased student numbers, academic staff prioritising research, a wider diversity of students, competing demands on resources, and changing student expectations (including value for money and staff contact time).” These barriers for personal tutors were highlighted by MacFarlane’s study, finding that these barriers directly impact tutors’ perceptions of their confidence and competence in personal tutoring.
- A survey of students’ perspectives on personal tutoring (Dixon) found that students expected one-to-one personal contact with a tutor, and of the first year students surveyed “almost all envisioned the tutor as offering a **pastoral** role, with an emphasis on **help, feedback, support and guidance** as they settled in to their new life as undergraduate students.” Students reported personal tutors providing academic support as being “secondary” to supporting students to navigate transition and access other support services.
- “**Almost half of the respondents asserted that they would find personal tutoring more effective, firstly, if contact was increased and, secondly if this was done by being incorporated into the timetables.**” (Dixon) There are trends across the literature that students would prefer more contact with their tutors and the curriculum-based model (structured tutorial sessions, generally in groups and included in student timetables) is particularly popular with first year students.
- Personal tutoring is important for all students but can be particularly valuable for nontraditional students with limited expectations and experience of higher education. Kreig found that “those students with previous academic experience and a **family background in higher education have more realistic expectations**, which contribute towards their successful adjustment and

integration into university life". This suggests that personal tutors can support students in managing expectations and provide guidance to students who are more likely to struggle in the transition e.g. first-in-family students.

- The **first meeting between tutors and tutees is crucial**. Yale notes that "if students perceive [first encounters] as successful, then they are more likely to contact their PT for future support and develop a positive relationship". Students particularly value tutors from their own subject who teach them, as they "prefer to know their tutor before using them for support". The literature also supports the allocation of personal tutors as early as possible, with initial contact in induction being important to establish relationships.
- The importance of effective personal tutoring is made clear by Yale: "**Poor personal tutoring is worse than not providing a PT at all**, as this can lead to students experiencing strong negative emotions of anger, internalised attributions and a move towards re-evaluating their decision to go to university". Multiple authors note the potential for students to feel like their tutor doesn't care about them and express their frustration and upset in negative responses on NSS and other surveys, which may have implications for the institution through these measures of student satisfaction.
- Students **highly value** tutors who have key attributes of **caring**, being **authentic**, **listening** and making the effort to treat the student with **respect**. Students notice when tutors appear to be too busy to talk, or who don't follow up on their conversations in a timely manner. Stephen et al highlights that "**most students agreed that they would like their personal tutors to adopt a more proactive role in monitoring their academic progress**", but most students were aware that their tutors were balancing a lot of responsibilities (e.g. teaching, administration, research, alongside personal tutoring) and were unsure about what they could realistically expect.
- Students in Stephen et al's study had the most positive experiences of personal tutoring when tutors provided a mixture of personal and academic support. The students noted that "**a lot of your personal things do actually affect the way you perform academically**" and were against models which separate academic and pastoral support entirely, as these interact and cannot be dealt with in isolation.
- Stephen et al summarises the trends from across the literature about what students want and need from personal tutoring.
 - "Students highlighted the need for: **greater frequency of personal tutorials; clarity about the personal tutor's role; timetabling of tutorial support; being more proactive in establishing contact; providing a balance between academic and pastoral support and encouragement; regular monitoring of progress; being a trusting advocate; being reliable and accessible, and; making them feel cared for**. In summary, students wanted trusting, empowering relationships with proactive, empathic personal tutors (cf. Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson 2005) to promote personal and academic well-being and development (cf. Yorke 2001), and to have tutors who can facilitate access to wider specialist services (Owen 2002) when required."