

# Enhancing Quality in the M.Pharm Degree Programme: Optimisation of the Personal Tutor System

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Personal tutoring (PT) systems operating in Higher education (HE) generally aim to offer support, information and advice to students concerning many areas in their university life, both the pedagogical and the personal. This article considers the methodologies and perceptions of a PT system for 4-year Master of Pharmacy (M.Pharm) undergraduate students within the School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences at the University of Brighton.

The 2000/2001 Level 1 and Level 2 M.Pharm cohorts were surveyed with respect to their perceptions of the personal tutor system. These perceptions are reported in this work. The majority of students made zero or one visits to their assigned personal tutor each academic year. Overall positive student perceptions concerning the effectiveness of the PT system is reported, with most students reporting that they found their allocated personal tutor helpful. Most students stated that they felt able to request a change of personal tutor under any circumstances without fear of any negative consequence, a key attribute of the system.

Students described the PT system as a means of listening to personal problems, to review status of academic progress and to act as an initial point of contact between the students and the University. Yet the students did not acknowledge some of its key functions. The PT was not described as a means to discuss learning and assessment strategies, deploy information on course and exam regulations and help in choosing modules (as well as assistance in gaining access to support services).

The results of this study provide us with a framework by which the current system may be improved. Results suggest that its focus now must be on enhancing staff dedication to the provision of a quality service, training support to staff in the skills of PT, instituting a minimum number of PT sessions-per-academic year and broadening student knowledge of the multi-dimensional role of the personal tutor. It is also concluded that

the one-size-fits-all model does *not* fit all and that a flexible model for tutoring is more likely to satisfy the requirements of the student body as a whole.

*Keywords:* Personal tutor; Student support; Counselling; Student welfare; Pharmacy undergraduates

## BACKGROUND

This study extends some of the issues originally explored in our previous work that investigated the use of student focus groups to probe student beliefs concerning the Personal Tutoring (PT) system and parity of the students' learning experience (Sosabowski *et al.*, 2001).

The School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences at the University of Brighton has been offering a PT service in its current style for several years, whereby undergraduate Pharmacy students are allocated an individual personal tutor. The personal tutor usually occupies a full-time, and occasionally part-time, post in the academic staff. The student normally retains the same tutor from the start of their four year course of studies but it is made clear at the outset that students may change their tutor for any reason.

The personal tutor fulfils a role to act not only as the student's information, advice and guidance resource but also as a valuable first point of access to a diverse range of University specialist support

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services. Ideally, the personal tutor should be an approachable, understanding listener, readily available to deal with any problems and administer advice on academic and personal matters. The role of the personal tutor is believed to be transparent and clear within this model (University of Brighton, 2000). The University believes that each student should have regular opportunities to review their personal, academic and career development on a planned and regular basis through PT.

A 20-item questionnaire dealing with the quality of needs-support at the University was administered to the 2000/2001 Level 1 and 2 student cohorts (L1 and L2). One-third of these questions concerned students undertaking extracurriculars to enhance income, another third on general support and perceived disadvantage of minority groups within each cohort and the final set of items on the personal tutor system. The personal tutor-based questions were a combination of qualitative and quantitative evaluations concerning the number of contacts with personal tutors, the perceptions of the tutor role and the effectiveness of the PT service.

Much of the previous work evaluating PT systems has been carried out in the fields of medicine (Cottrell *et al.*, 1994), dentistry (Rhodes and Swedlow, 1983) and nursing (Charnock, 1993; Phillips, 1994; Newton and Smith, 1998; Gidman *et al.*, 2000). Pharmacy, as a professional degree, is educationally and personally as demanding as other degrees in the healthcare professions; it should be expected that adequate student support is available to pharmacy students throughout their training.

Charnock (1993) observed that the level of satisfaction among medical students for their PT system was significantly linked with the regularity of tutorial contact. This report finds that a small proportion of students would not share personal problems with their tutors, which may highlight the need for links to other student services.

Under the current policy for the implementation of the PT system within the University of Brighton, criteria are specified for both staff and student entitlements. Personal tutors should learn their clear specifications and undergo training to develop their role.

The Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education (PADSHE) project is a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded venture to improve PT, which involves the participation of seven institutions: the universities of Nottingham, Birmingham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Reading, City University London and Liverpool John Moores (PADSHE, 2002). This project attempts to streamline, enhance and optimise student support and guidance via the PT system. This system has implemented personal and academic records (PARS), documents that students

carry with them throughout their academic career. These documents act as a dossier of the department's academic and personal support to each individual. This appears to be a rational approach to strengthening the line of communication between the student and personal tutor. It also allows students to keep, reflect upon and add to their PAR's throughout their course with duplicate copies held within the department.

PADSHE working criteria emphasise the strengthening of the academic link. Assigning only personal tutors to students with whom they will have contact in the lecture environment (during at least one teaching module-per-academic year) is one means of doing so; the personal tutor thus has a deeper knowledge of an individual student's abilities, accomplishments or potential difficulties. This also facilitates the staff member's personal familiarity of the students and removes barriers of communication.

In order to facilitate dispersion of information concerning the precise nature of the student facilities, the criteria also states that a code of practice should be disseminated to all students entering the course. This document should clearly differentiate and clarify the role and responsibilities of senior and personal tutors and also outline the tutees' own responsibilities in the system. Students should be made aware of the need to respond promptly to requests by their personal tutors to see them, along with the need to respect the times that academic staff members offer for tutoring sessions. All efforts should be made to improve student-to-staff interactions.

Qualitative statements have highlighted that students feel that personal tutors should be friendly, approachable, empathetic, available to spend time listening and interested in them as individuals. These attributes have also been pinpointed as favourable to students in other studies (Charnock, 1993).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following results refer to the relevant sections of a twenty-item questionnaire administered to the L1 and L2 cohorts of the 2000/2001 intakes to the M.Pharm degree at the University of Brighton. The relevant questions are summarised in Table I. Results for each cohort are discussed separately and, where relevant, combined.

The ages of both cohorts are comparable (Tables II and III) with the L1 cohort having a slightly higher number in the lowest age range, as expected. It might be expected that the younger students will have a greater need for personal tutor support, especially at L1, in which students are likely to be undergoing

TABLE I Questionnaire summary

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- (1) To which age bracket do you belong?  
(a) 18–21 (b) 22–25 (c) 26–30 (d) 31–35 (e) 36 +
- (2) Do you find your personal tutor helpful? ANSWER: YES/NO  
Please explain your answer:
- (3) The following are broadly defined as being the role of the personal tutor—please tick those that you are ALREADY aware of:
- help choosing modules
  - information on course and examination regulations
  - to listen to personal problems
  - to provide access to support services
  - to bring personal difficulties to the attention of examination boards
  - to arrange regular contact meetings with tutee
  - to discuss learning and assessment strategies
  - to review progress
  - to act as a point of contact and communication with the university
- (4) What ideas do you have for improving the personal tutor system?
- (5) Would you feel able to ask to change your personal tutor? If not why not? ANSWER: YES/NO. REASONS IF NO:
- (6) How many times have you seen your personal tutor this academic year?  
ANSWER: times
- (7) Do you have any other comments about the personal tutor system?
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their first experience in HE. When asked how many times they had seen their personal tutor during the academic year, 34% of L1 respondents said they had seen their tutor twice, 41% said once and 12% said not at all (Fig. 1). The stated minimum at the University of Brighton is for students to see their tutors once per-term; however, the questionnaire to which this study relates was carried out in the spring term of the relevant year and some students would have not yet made their termly visit to their personal tutor. Of the L2 students, 45% had seen their tutor once, 26% twice and 19% had not seen them at all (compared with 12% of L1 students).

Both cohorts were surveyed regarding their awareness of their tutors' roles and showed similar results; choosing modules and discussing learning and assessment strategies were the two roles of which the students were least aware (Fig. 2). However, the "helpfulness" of the tutor was considered to be an important attribute of the system, inspiring confidence in the student who requires assistance but who may be too shy or anxious to solicit it. The majority of both cohorts (L1 66%, L2 67% based on those respondents who indicated either "yes" or "no") confirmed that their tutor was helpful.

TABLE II Level 1 respondents' age distribution

Age	18–21	22–25	26–30	31–35	36+	Total
Number	71	16	5	7	0	99
%	72	16	5	7	0	100

TABLE III Level 2 respondents' age distribution

Age	18–21	22–25	26–30	31–35	36+	Total
Number	52	25	7	3	3	90
%	58	28	8	3	3	100

Tables IV and V show a representative expansion of both "yes" and "no" responses. Negative responses mainly corresponded to the perceived lack of meetings, which the complainants attribute to their tutor not being sufficiently proactive. This could and should be recognised as a dual responsibility, but the organisational policy is such that, in the absence of an approach by the student, the tutor should pursue the appointment. In Student Focus Group discussions it has emerged that some students find tutors who make the approach as intrusive. Indeed, many students, particularly mature students, preferred to keep a more remote relationship with the tutor, meeting only if they have an immediate requirement for assistance. (In truth, this line of reasoning works well until it is actually executed, since a tutor and student must have a working relationship over and above that attributed to the normal student–lecturer liaison to engage in any meaningful dialogue.) Some respondents felt that their tutors were encouraging meetings for bureaucratic reasons rather than a genuinely-held belief in them or the system.

According to the respondents, the tutors' positive attributes included a visible interest in the student's well-being, finding solutions to a wide range of concerns (e.g. accommodation, assistance with financial matters, etc.), availability, approachability, flexibility and a convenient point of reference.

One of the categorically stated attributes of Brighton's personal tutor system is the ability to change tutors without fear of any negative consequences or repercussions. Just under two-thirds of L1 of L2 respondents (64 and 63%, respectively) felt that they would be able to ask to change their personal tutor. Table VI shows representative responses of students who might feel unable to change their personal tutor (32% for L1 and 30% for L2; the remainder made no response). Most answers were based on a wish not to offend or upset their tutor. For some this led to concern over possible adverse consequences.

Table VII shows selected student ideas for improving the system; most of them allude to a greater frequency of meetings. In discussions with focus groups and teaching staff, it is clear that this should be a partnership. Many students often ignore requests by staff to visit them; whilst it is both clear and intuitive that the tutor must take a greater initiative than the tutee, the tutee must also be a partner in what amounts to be a joint endeavour.

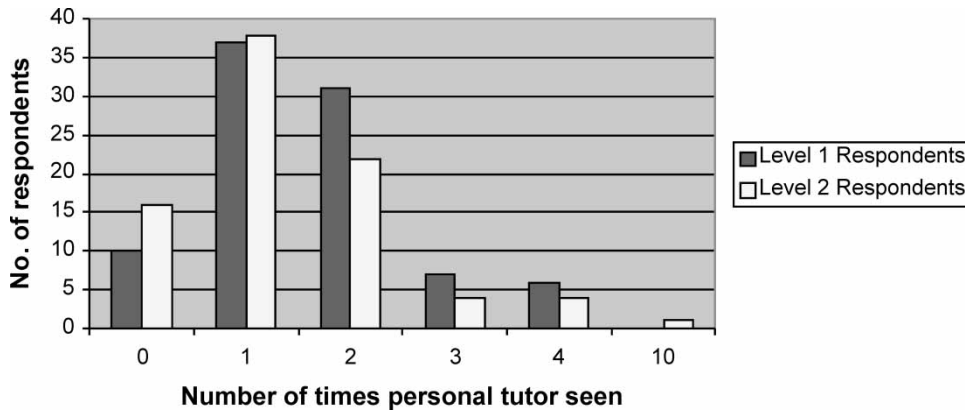


FIGURE 1 Number of occasions L1 and L2 respondents visited their personal tutor during the academic year.

This study found that the “one-size-fits all” model does not really fit all. Students come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and doubtlessly have differing needs. The level of support and attention one student finds reassuring and comforting may be seen as intrusive, claustrophobic and cloying by another. A variable and flexible approach to the requirements of the individual student may be a solution to this constraint, perhaps involving the frequency and duration of routine meetings being determined by agreement with the student.

Another feature of PT is the unavoidably variable ability of the tutor to perform in an excellent (rather than a merely competent) manner. By their collective nature, the staff have different strengths and weaknesses. Certain weaknesses can, of course, turn a potentially good tutor into a merely satisfactory (or even below satisfactory) one. Training is one answer. Another solution could be to allocate more tutees to the excellent tutors and fewer tutees to not-so-good ones; this,

however, can merely serve to reinforce negative behaviour. Yet another option could allocate students to choose their own tutors. This appears laudable upon first inspection. But the new L1 students who do not know the teaching staff at all would be at an obvious disadvantage. A final option: encouraging (rather than, as is the case under the current system, merely allowing) a reshuffle at the end of Year 1 would allow them to make an informed choice. Yet once more, this would lead to an uneven tutor/tutee distribution.

In the end, a potential solution lies with the Student Focus Groups. By allowing them to have limited input with regard to student requirements, rather than the teaching staff requirements, personal student needs could become a more primary directive in programme reform.

The other context to this issue is that of staff dynamics. Unwanted or unattended tutor-tutee meetings are demotivating and many of the perceived negative attributes remarked upon by

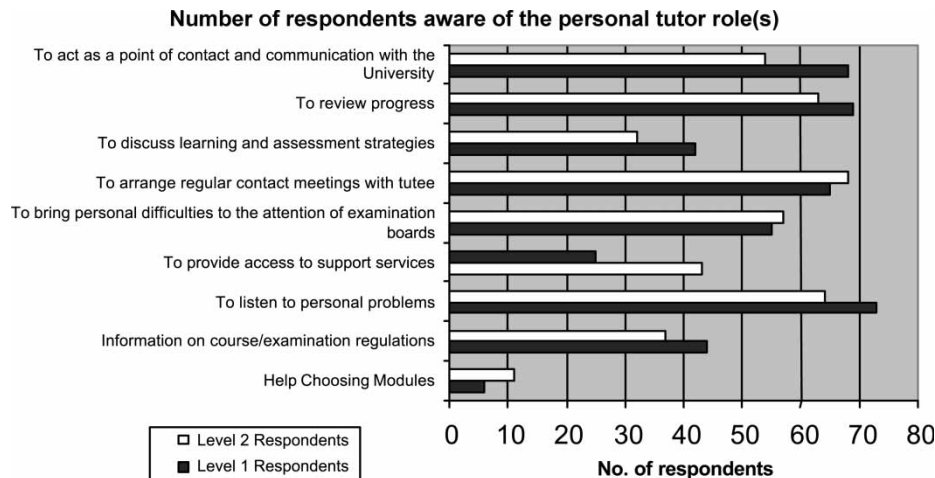


FIGURE 2 L1 and L2 respondents’ awareness of the role(s) of the personal tutor.

TABLE IV Level 1 respondents' perceived helpfulness of personal tutor

Question: Do you find your personal tutor helpful? YES	NO	No response	Total
57 (57%) (66% of those who indicated either "yes" or "no")	30 (30%) (34% of those who indicated either "yes" or "no")	12 (12%)	99

Please explain your answer:

Ten selected positive explanations:

- Keeps track of my progress notes any difficulties, thinks of alternatives
- Provides good advice on study skills and time management and makes one feel more positive
- Approachable, helpful, relaxed, understanding, friendly, "normal" and on my wavelength
- I was helped to overcome a couple of issues raised on the first semester
- It is easy to arrange a meeting to sort out any problems as and when they arise
- I find that if I had any problems I could approach him very easily and feel comfortable with telling him any problems I was having
- The tutor is helpful in receiving my situations regarding every aspect of university life
- I could go to my tutor at any time and get help in any subject that I am studying. If he is not there I can still arrange an appointment to see him, at the latest within 2 days
- He has helped me immeasurably since I came to Brighton with both academic and health problems I have had
- Have been to see him about a serious accommodation problem and he pointed me in the right direction. Giving me more than one option and offering to intervene if I feel this is necessary. He also followed up my progress

Ten selected negative explanations:

- If I tell him something, as I did, a personal thing, he sounds more judging than helping
- Never been asked to see him
- I have only seen my tutor twice and even though I know I could go to my tutor when I felt the need I think it is necessary to spend more time with my tutor to build up a relationship
- Doesn't seem to be much communication between us
- I have not seen him since fresher's week (partly my fault)
- He is not in his room when I need him and he never writes to his tutee and never asks to see us if we have problems
- All I do is drop in the evaluation sheets he gives me. He is never in when I do this so I have not seen him since September
- No, because I have not met since we started the university
- Have only met my tutor once, in a group, I don't feel that he has made any difference to my time here
- Can't seem to do much for me

TABLE V Level 2 respondents' perceived helpfulness of personal tutor

Question: Do you find your personal tutor helpful? YES	NO	No response	Total
55 (61%) (67% of those who indicated either "yes" or "no")	27 (30%) (33% of those who indicated either "yes" or "no")	8 (9%)	90

Please explain your answer:

Ten selected positive explanations:

- I find him helpful because every time I need to see him and discuss something with him, he is always there to hear me and help me
- The system lends itself to bridging the student-establishment gap
- Can talk to personal tutor confidentially since he/she is a member of staff, if there are any problems they can be aired easily
- He's very helpful + I feel I can go to him for help with work + personal life. He always organises meetings with his tutees each term which is very good
- Whenever I have approached my tutor with any problems he has been very helpful
- Yes, it is nice to know there is someone specifically allocated to me when in need of help
- Yes, useful knowing there is a friendly point of reference
- Yes, is interested in all aspects of college life-health, social, etc.
- I have experienced a number of personal difficulties recently which have affected my study my tutor has been extremely helpful
- Yes, nice bloke, very helpful and chatty!

Ten Selected negative explanations:

- They are never there. They are too busy and do not really have time to know you. Sometimes they don't even recognise you
- On the one occasion I needed assistance my tutor was extremely unhelpful. It is obvious my tutor has no real interest in the welfare of his tutees+simply needs to fill in the correct forms to look like a good tutor
- Never seen him
- No, its very academic and personally ineffective
- Yes and No, If I have a serious problem then my tutor is very helpful, but I feel like I'm troubling them if I go to see them
- Not available to help
- Only have met twice
- Only seen him once in the 1st year
- They are too busy and often have no sense of empathy whatsoever
- No he has never had a meeting, never found out how I'm doing. I doubt if he knows me by name



TABLE VI Ten selected stated reasons why L1 and L2 respondents felt unable to change their personal tutor should they feel the need

Question: Would you feel able to ask to change your personal tutor (YES/NO) If not, why not? (Please Explain)

Because would not want to offend/upset the tutor  
 Wouldn't want to offend my tutor—would feel a bit embarrassed  
 Maybe he will misunderstand  
 Embarrassment  
 If the teacher is also a lecturer you will feel guilty or bad  
 In case it causes problems in the future  
 They may act biased towards you  
 Person might take it personally (sic) I am not sure how this will affect our relationship as student/lecturer wouldn't want to offend—they might know my writing  
 The possibility of animosity with an ex-tutor in future.  
 Rejection is a HUMAN attribute  
 I feel that they could hold it against me in assessment, etc.  
 Would make the present tutor feel incompetent  
 Upset the tutor  
 Tutor may take personal offence  
 Tutor may be offended

TABLE VII Selected L1 and L2 respondents' stated ideas for improving the personal tutor system

Question: What ideas do you have for improving the personal tutor system?

- Sometimes tutors aren't very well informed for matters that aren't relevant with the modules they are teaching e.g. a chemist is not well informed for things having to do with other modules, pharmacology for example
- Not all of them have individual offices; therefore, it can be difficult to discuss emotional problems of a delicate nature
- Make them more available i.e. more specialized to the student
- Have tutors that understand their role + are willing to help student
- There should be a set date timetabled for meetings as many tutors are not available much of the time
- More contact/Meet more often/More meetings i.e. 2 in a semester/More time to have a chat with them. More regular meetings/Meeting more often/Regular meetings between tutor and tutee
- It's not personal enough. Each session involves the brief and routine filling out of a form. The questions don't seem sincere this way, and the answers are very similar
- Tutor must have more power. Break the ice between tutor and student. Complaints, etc. from students must be taken under serious consideration. More help for practical problems e.g. accommodation
- Maybe allowed to choose own tutor
- Not all of them have their own offices and it is off-putting to go and see them about a problem
- Become more available, easier to get hold of. Perhaps have a timetable on their doors to show when they are available
- Tutor may encourage more meetings
- More contact with the tutors i.e. more than once per year
- More meetings with tutor
- There should be regular meetings each semester
- Probably to have meetings between just the tutor and tutee as the meeting which I have been to have always been as a group. Also it would probably be a good idea to meet up after each semester
- Tutor maybe having less tutees so that they can have more time for them

students can be corrected by establishing "agreements" with individual tutees that place more responsibility on the student. Clearly, there has to be a balance between the tutee and tutor in what is offered. Otherwise, there is a potential for other staff activities to be negatively affected.

In the end, it is proposed that the short and medium term solutions lie in managing expectation of students by attempting to under-promise and then over-deliver rather than over-promise and then under-deliver. This would require focus group input to determine optimum styles and approaches to PT.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the results of this study, it is concluded that no "one-size-fits-all" approach to PT will ever satisfy all students all of the time. Managing student expectation and engaging in dialogue with the appropriate staff and student forums allow all stakeholders to meaningfully develop a comprehensive, PT policy. This will allow schools to incorporate constructive suggestions into a continually improving PT and tutor training programme.

## Acknowledgement

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