



Leadership for the First Year Experience: The evolving role of personal tutors

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ABSTRACT

This vignette examines how Personal Tutors (PTs) can act as ‘champions’ for supporting the first-year experience, while enhancing student engagement and retention within a large undergraduate Business Management programme. With increasing marketisation and diverse student cohorts, proactive support is essential. Many first year and direct-entry students face barriers to assessment submission including uncertainty about processes and limited awareness of support available. To address this, a streamlined system was introduced using Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) data to identify low engagement and trigger timely outreach. Complimentary measures, such as a centralised MS Teams channel, improved communication between Programme Leader, PTs and Module Leaders.

These changes aimed to make the PT role more meaningful, reduce non-submissions and foster a supportive culture. Early adoption by other programmes suggests wider applicability. Future evaluation will explore the long-term impact and stakeholder perceptions to refine practices and strengthen institutional strategies for student success.

Keywords: First year experience, personal tutoring, early engagement

Introduction

Drucker (2007, p.15), argues ‘there is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer’. This perspective has influenced debates on whether students should be viewed as customers within universities. For example, Naylor et al. (2021, p.1027) highlights the ‘increased marketisation’ from institutions but rather than ‘customers’, suggests that viewing students as key stakeholders or ‘active agent’s’ fosters better relationships and shared responsibility for learning. Similarly, Planas et al. (2013), note that limited social interactions between students and the University can lead to disengagement and exclusion. Naylor et al. (2021, p.1037), proposes that support from ‘champions’ can address these issues. This vignette considers how Personal Tutors (PTs) can act as such ‘champions’ by implementing simple collaborative strategies to support students. Although there are two authors, the vignette is written in the ‘voice’ of the lead author, a Programme Leader (PL).

I lead the BA (Hons) Business Management, one of the largest Undergraduate offerings at our university with around 700 students. The programme aims to prepare students for the international workplace and to enable them to create sustainable value for business and society. As a modern university, many of our students enter through non-traditional pathways. HESA (2025) figures show that a significant proportion are direct-entry students (DE’s) from colleges, and 40% of students are from the poorest areas (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation levels 1 and 2), with many being first generation Higher Education (HE) entrants.

The PT offers a link between students and the institution, supporting academic development and helping students navigate the new HE environment. While models vary, research suggests that strong PT-student relationships positively impact outcomes (Yale, 2019). However, PTs face significant challenges: faculty members are often time poor, balancing the role of PT along with delivering research, securing grants and providing high quality teaching (Carpenter & Bishop, 2025; Wakelin, 2023). A range of factors have changed the nature of PT-student interactions, including rising awareness of neurodiversity, increased social anxiety driven by Covid and its impacts, and widening participation imperatives (HESA, 2025; Saladino et al., 2020). PTs increasingly need to act as an 'empathetic listener' (Pasetti, 2020, p.1) requiring new skills and training.

My experience indicates staff may have a limited understanding of the PT role and insufficient training, which may lead to staff deprioritising this responsibility. Grey and Osbourne (2020) highlight the lack of formal evaluation of PT systems, further complicating accountability. Given that 52% of university income comes from tuition fees, and many HEIs face financial challenges (HESA, 2025), implementing a streamlined, proactive support system could help improve student retention and success. This enhanced approach not only positively impacts student experience but also strengthens institutional stability, with users of the system suggesting that more students were progressing due to timely interventions.

Effective communication as a student support mechanism

In my first formal experiences as PT, interventions tended to be reactive and I felt that an opportunity was missed to provide more ongoing, proactive and timely intervention which could enhance personal tutoring as a key element of student support (Grey & Osbourne, 2020; Gabi et al., 2024; Carpenter & Bishop, 2025). As a result, I developed a more proactive process to manage students' engagement levels.

My initial focus was on barriers to student engagement. Many students struggled to access support due to uncertainty about who to contact or what steps to take. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) reports were used to monitor engagement, and a process was introduced where they were generated by our learning technologists seven to ten days before submission deadlines. This allowed the team to identify students with low engagement and send check-in emails offering support and crucially, guidance on next steps if submission was unlikely. The email, initially sent out by the Programme Lead (PL) was designed to encourage responses and start a wider conversation, while also including the PT to ensure that students knew who to contact for support, especially if there had been no prior communication with their PT.

Students expressed appreciation for these timely interventions, which addressed common barriers to submission: uncertainty about starting, the submission process itself or knowing who to contact if there were issues. Unexpectedly, many students disclosed additional issues after the initial outreach, which helped to build trust and strengthen relationships – factors that contributed to higher retention levels (Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006). Staff suggested that this collaborative approach not only benefited students, but enhanced the practice and confidence of personal tutors, and 'contributed to a stronger, more supportive learning community across the programme.'

The process proved effective in identifying struggling students, especially students who were experiencing HE for the first time. Continued implementation improved understanding of student challenges and highlighted barriers to learning. The new process fostered collaboration between the PL, PTs and Module Leaders (MLs), helping to challenge assumptions of the role of PT and how students could be supported in a more proactive way (Dobele et al., 2013). Gabi et al. (2024) argues that a synergised PT approach enhances

the programme team's ability to meet student needs. As part of the rollout, some MLs were shown how the VLE data could inform resource design and engagement strategies. Including PTs in email responses encouraged active involvement and shared responsibility, contributing to reduced non-submissions.

Each PT on my programme supports around 60 students, however the time allocated to PTs for carrying out this important role rarely matches students' needs (Race, 2007; Wakelin, 2023). This can often represent less than one hour per student per year, which leads to a variation in the engagement with the role. Therefore, to roll out an effective, integrated support system, processes had to be simple and time efficient (Kassem & Mitsakis, 2025).

The systems and processes I put in place grew from being mindful of trying to reduce time spent on individual cases whilst enhancing the timeliness of support to students. To facilitate communication amongst the programme team I created an MS Teams channel with relevant information including student details for each Level/PT as well as modules level information. In addition, other information such as Fit to Sit details (our process where students can declare themselves 'not Fit to Sit' and preserve their attempt), standard email replies, PT roles and responsibilities and emergency procedures were added. The PTs themselves could add information on student engagement and resources (without details for confidentiality). The Teams channel serves as a value-adding shared knowledge repository for the programme team.

The Teams channel and other innovations I implemented made the process of supporting students less confusing and more efficient as core information was in the same space. It also meant that if a student was unable to connect with their PT, another PT could see if there had been an issue. As we use red-amber-green coding, a picture was created to see where support had been (or could be) provided. This reduced student waiting times, which could be vital to any intervention made. More generally the changes facilitated a supportive culture amongst the programme team making them better able to support our students (Duffy, 2023). One PT commented that 'The revised approach has enabled me to support students more quickly and effectively, without a tiresome administrative burden and encourages me to focus on meaningful academic and pastoral engagement.'

A way forward for Personal Tutors

Although actions taken were comparatively simple in their approach, the process provides a starting point to align the needs of the customer (or student) with the current practice offered at the university. These enhancements are particularly valuable to students new to the University but also have a wider application to the programme /PT ecosystem more generally. The revised processes have been adopted by other programme teams and module leaders, allowing them to monitor and provide early interventions to support students within their own programmes. My aim is that the enhancements will develop the PT role to be more meaningful and effective, as well as providing a positive impact on student wellbeing and engagement given the diverse needs of students and the limited PT time available to undertake the role. If students do not feel meaningful support is offered, they are unlikely to engage. While the new processes are still relatively early in implementation, their early adoption by other departments illustrates the need for a similar system on a larger scale. The main challenge was the initial set up, due to constantly changing information and reluctance to change. However, once I had overcome this (with substantial help from our programme coordinators and PT team) the rewards in both time and student experience were clear. Further

analysis will be essential to assess the effectiveness of the new processes over time and explore both PT and student perceptions of their value and implementation.

Biographies

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