

# Personal Academic Tutoring: a guide for staff

## Introduction

This guide has been developed to assist Personal Academic Tutors and other staff within academic departments who have a pastoral role. It is designed to offer individual tutors some practical advice and information which we hope will be particularly useful for colleagues new to personal tutoring at this university, to help you to:

- develop your confidence in the role of Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) and support your students more effectively;
- familiarise yourself with the University of Brighton Policy on Personal Academic Tutoring and the way the system works in your own department;
- explore some common issues that students may raise and ways of dealing with them;
- understand the range of specialist support offered by Student Services and other agencies, and when and how to refer students to other people.

The guide should be read in conjunction with the University and School Policies on Personal Academic Tutoring. Links to these and other resources and departments referred to in this document are available through the Personal Academic Tutoring website at <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/personalacademictutoring/>.

## What do Personal Academic Tutors do?

The role of the PAT is a vital one, but new lecturers can sometimes take it on without being entirely sure what is expected of them.

**The University Policy on Personal Academic Tutoring** defines it as follows:

*the provision of academic guidance which provides a central and stable point of contact, fosters a sense of belonging and sustained engagement. A personal tutor provides overarching guidance which is not related to the content of individual modules, this includes assisting students to understand the value of feedback and aiding them in developing skills to reflect on their own skills and experience. The Personal Academic Tutor works closely with the Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT) who provides support on a range of issues such as homesickness and loneliness, problems with accommodation, transition to Higher Education, stress-related issues and mitigating circumstances. A personal tutor also provides relevant information about what the university expects of the student and relevant policies and procedures.*

Details of how this is implemented vary between Schools so check your School Policy/ Guidance to staff. This should describe how the tutorial system operates locally, but you may also need to ask your colleagues about some of these issues:

- How do students know what to expect?
- Are students normally allocated a personal tutor for the duration of their degree, or do year tutors take on some aspects of this role?

- How many students are personal tutors usually responsible for?
- How is this reflected in your workload allocations?
- Who is the designated member of staff responsible for leading on PAT within the School?

**If you have any outstanding questions about what is expected of you after you have read this guide and your local policy, please discuss these with your Head of School or designated senior colleague.**

## Managing Expectations

Even within a clear policy framework, the term “personal tutoring” can be interpreted in disparate ways, and this can lead to problems if staff and students bring different expectations to the relationship.

It is also helpful to be aware of your own assumptions and whether these are appropriate to current circumstances and constraints.

- Think about your own experience as a student and the academic/pastoral support you received:*
  - *What was the most positive aspect?*
  - *What could have been improved?*
  - *What qualities did your tutor(s) bring to the role?*
- How would you like your students to perceive you as a personal tutor (e.g. friend, mentor, parent, supervisor, counsellor.....)?*
  - *Is this achievable?*
  - *What are the obstacles?*
  - *What problems might be associated with students perceiving you in this way?*

There are no definitive answers here. The important thing is to be aware of your own preferred tutoring style, and where this might conflict with other expectations or the demands of a particular situation.

## First meetings

New students will be allocated a Personal Academic Tutor at the start of their course, so plan for an introductory meeting as soon as you receive your list of new tutees. You should also receive information in advance about any students who may have special communication needs (eg hearing difficulties or vision impairment, or English as a second language).

Ideally, this first session should be programmed into induction week for all tutorial groups. Even if this is not yet a standard feature in your school, try to arrange a brief group meeting with your new students during induction week. This is a good way to introduce yourself and to set the scene for future meetings.

Students arrive at university with widely different attitudes and expectations. They may have succeeded easily at school or college, and then find it hard to adapt to the more independent atmosphere of university. Alternatively, they may have experienced academic failures in the past and struggle with low self-confidence.

A surprising number, especially in the early months, will assume that everyone else is coping well and that any difficulties they experience must mean they are on the wrong course or even unsuited to higher education as a whole. As a tutor, you have the opportunity to put these anxieties into perspective and guide your students through any initial difficulties. You can help to establish realistic expectations, encourage effective study patterns, and generally contribute to a more fulfilled student experience.

An initial group tutorial can be a useful way to help new students to explore and share any questions and anxieties. Here are some ideas:

- You could ask the students to talk in pairs for a few minutes about their expectations of the course, and list any questions about the course or starting university. Pairs can join up into small groups to compare their lists, followed by the group as a whole sharing ideas on how to resolve any common issues. This reassures them that they aren't alone in their concerns, and that their fellow students will be a source of support.
- Encourage them to recall previous experiences of transitions (such as starting secondary school or a new job) and the kinds of strategies that were most successful in helping them to settle in.
- Answer any direct questions about the course, but remember they may already be feeling overwhelmed with information at this stage, so don't overdo it.

If you are unable to schedule a group tutorial at this stage, then send a welcome note to each one of your tutees, introducing yourself and inviting them to come and see you individually. Let them know where and when they can find you, whether you offer regular 'drop-in' sessions and how they should sign up for an appointment.

The first scheduled individual tutorial meeting will usually take place later in the first semester (refer to your School guidance for more details). This is important to help establish a comfortable working relationship, and clarify the overall purposes of the tutorial system. Students should be aware that you are not just here to help with problems, but to offer support for their overall academic and personal development. It is useful for you and the student to discuss and agree any points for future action, and to note these down. If the School has a designated form for recording tutorials, use this.

## Location of tutorials

If students need to talk freely about confidential matters, they need to know whether they have five minutes or half an hour, and that they won't be overheard. If you share an office with colleagues, you may need to find somewhere else to hold tutorials. In your own room, you could use a sign on the door to deter interruptions.

Some institutions have introduced policies to restrict one-to-one meetings, to avoid accusations of harassment on either side. At Brighton this has not normally been considered necessary, but if you do have any concerns about appropriate rooms or other arrangements for tutorials, discuss them with colleagues to help you identify practical solutions. For instance you could keep the door open, use a teaching room or one with a glass panel rather than a small, enclosed office, or arrange for a colleague to be nearby.

## Written records and confidentiality

It is helpful to take a few minutes at the end of any tutorial to review what has been discussed and confirm any actions that have been agreed. For example, a student might have decided to focus on improving essay-writing skills, or to keep a diary for a week to help with time-management.

Encourage students to keep their own written notes of the summary and agreed action points. This helps them to take ownership of any decisions and to act on them, rather than perpetuating a more passive 'parent/child' relationship in which you are expected to sort out any problems for them.

Your School may already have a formal system for recording tutorials. If not, a sample tutorial record form is included at the end of this guide.

Any recording system raises the question of confidentiality - how confidential are personal tutorials expected to be? It is important that students feel they can trust you enough to talk freely, but it is equally necessary to be clear about any limitations on this. The importance of clear guidelines on information about disability is discussed in the next section. Similar principles should apply to any other personal information disclosed in tutorials. If it may affect the student's ability to fulfil the demands of their course, encourage them to let relevant staff know about it or ask if they would like you to do this on their behalf, but don't do so without explicit permission. Whatever is agreed about disclosure to staff, you should of course never discuss information from individual tutorials with other students.

You should not feel obliged to keep confidential any information where there is a genuine concern for the student's safety (for instance where they have expressed suicidal feelings) requiring notification of their GP or other specialist help. There is a section on Specialist Advice and Referrals at the end of this guide.

## Students with disabilities

It is particularly important for students with disabilities to meet their personal tutor at an early stage of the course, to explore any support needs or necessary adjustments to teaching or assessment strategies, and provide a sound basis for regular progress reviews. However, don't assume that all students with disabilities will necessarily have problems. Most will have effective strategies in place before they enter higher education, and will simply require a reasonable level of flexibility and good communication with their tutors. The Inclusive Practice Toolkit for staff offers guidance to help staff create an inclusive environment for the success of all students.

Check that you are aware of any individual students with declared disabilities, so that your initial communications can take this into account. For instance, can a student with a visual impairment easily access the system for making appointments? Will a d/Deaf student lip-read or communicate with you through a signing interpreter?

- Consider how to ensure that any students who subsequently develop a disability, such as a long-term illness or mental health difficulties, would feel comfortable about letting you know about this.
- Make a note of any particular questions you may have about working with disabled students, and discuss these with your departmental liaison tutor and other colleagues.
- If you need specific advice, talk to the Disability and Dyslexia Team in Student Services.

Under the Equality Act (2010), if a student discloses a disability to any member of staff, then the institution as a whole is considered to be aware of this and could therefore be in breach of its duties if reasonable adjustments are not made in response. The University has introduced a standard procedure to be used by Student Services, course leaders, personal tutors and some other designated staff, when a student develops or discloses a disability after their initial admission (for details see the Disability & Dyslexia web pages. As a PAT you should be aware of these procedures and what to do if a student declares a disability for the first time during a tutorial. You should also receive copies of advice from the Disability and Dyslexia Team regarding adjustments to teaching or assessment for any students on your list. Check with the course leader that this has been done, and with the student to find out whether the current arrangements are working satisfactorily.

## Arranging regular appointments

The University policy states that students are entitled to a scheduled meeting with their personal tutor to review their academic progress on a regular basis, at least three times a year.

*What would you do if a student on your list:*

- *had not been to see you for several months?*
- *had not responded to a direct invitation to see you?*
- *had given course tutors cause for concern eg by poor attendance or failing coursework?*

It may be helpful to compare your responses to these questions with your colleagues.

Although there are arguments in favour of encouraging students to take the initiative themselves, the disadvantage is that those in greatest need of support or review may fall through the net.

**Particularly in the early stages of the course, it is best to schedule meetings for all students and follow up any non- attendance.** Research into retention has shown that an early appointment for an informal discussion about how students are settling in will help them make the transition to university more effectively and identify any issues or concerns before these reach crisis point.

Another advantage of setting a fixed time for subsequent tutorials or periodic progress reviews is that both tutor and student can prepare in advance. You can look over the student's assessment results etc, and they can be encouraged to identify recent successes and areas for improvement, to help focus the discussion.

Most programmes will have key times in the year when many students are facing common issues, such as examination nerves, and it may be worth arranging an extra group tutorial rather than dealing with queries on an individual basis.

- What would be the most suitable times in the year for scheduled meetings ?
- What topics might be raised at each stage of the course?
- Are there any key points in the academic cycle where a group tutorial session could help students address common issues?
- Are there any arrangements for encouraging students' own self-help or tutorial support groups for instance through the PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) scheme?

A pre-arranged agenda can form part of regular tutorial meetings at each stage, dependent on the course structure. For instance, following on from the suggested topics for a first meeting a scheduled review towards the end of Level 4 might include discussion of coursework results, using feedback from module assignments to help the student identify areas for development. Later meetings might focus on such topics as module choices, preparation for placements, dissertation subjects and career plans.

It is good practice to use the final tutorial meeting of a degree course to agree a summary of the student's achievements and qualities and to keep this on file to help with future reference requests.

## Unscheduled meetings

Whatever the policy on scheduled meetings, students may also need to see you at other times. Some tutors put tutorial timetables on studentcentral for students to sign up to, while others run 'drop-in' sessions at specified times.

- *Find out about the usual system in your department, and the average length of time allocated for meetings.*
- *How do students know how to make an appointment?*
- *How easy is it to contact you from outside the university (especially important for those who are part-time, disabled or live some distance away)?*
- *Can students telephone your office, or do you prefer email?*
- *Could any aspect of your appointment system be improved?*

Many new tutors start by trying to be accessible at all times, but then feel overwhelmed by constant interruptions and demands, so it is useful to explore these issues in advance.

- *What do you feel about saying "Not now" when someone says they need to see you urgently without an appointment?*
- *How can you tell when it is a real emergency?*
- *Do students feel they can only come to you if they have a problem?*

There are no simple answers, but it is worth thinking carefully about the advantages and disadvantages of a completely "Open Door" policy, on the one hand, or a very rigid appointment system on the other. You should also explore how your role and that of the Student Support & Guidance Tutor (SSGT) interact. It is important that students feel cared for as individuals but this should not undermine their autonomy and sense of personal responsibility (or indeed your own entitlement to a manageable workload).

- *Discuss these questions with some of your colleagues*
- *Look again at your responses to the questions about expectations at the beginning of this booklet. How do those answers relate to the issues raised here?*

## Mitigating Circumstances Procedures

If a student is experiencing a serious physical or mental illness, bereavement or any other situation which could have a substantial impact on all or some of their work, they may need to submit a Mitigating Circumstances appeal. The procedure should not be invoked for trivial reasons, but if

something has seriously affected their performance, whether in a single examination or over a period of time, they should submit a Mitigating Circumstances form. The school's Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT) can support them with this process.

## Listening and other tutorial skills

Two of the most important skills you will need as a tutor are listening and questioning. Most tutors and counsellors recommend using open-ended questions to initiate discussion. *"How are you finding the different aspects of the course?"* is usually more productive than *"Is everything OK?"* to which the student may feel obliged to answer "yes" and no more. Unless the student is obviously distressed, it is also useful to spend a few minutes together setting an informal agenda for the meeting – ask them what the key points are that they would like to cover, or use a standard format (e.g. progress since the last meeting, recent highlights, issues and queries, agreed action points).

It's equally important to allow students enough time to explore for themselves the issues that are raised, whether academic or personal, and to develop their own ideas about what to do. A common difficulty for personal tutors is the temptation to see oneself primarily as a source of information and advice. If so, you may jump in too soon and just tell the student what you think they should do. Instead try to avoid being too directive, attend closely to words and body language, and hold back your own comments or questions until they have had time to say what is on their mind.

After the student has finished speaking, you should repeat back the main points, to reassure them that you have been listening attentively and to enable them to correct any misunderstandings. Asking one or two questions can then open up the discussion and help them clarify the underlying issues. For instance:

- *How do you feel about what is happening?*
- *What are the options for you?*
- *Tell me more about....*
- *What would need to happen to make you feel better about....?*
- *What would you like to change?*

(These prompts are adapted from Wheeler and Birtle, *A Handbook for Personal Tutors* Chapter 3 'Counselling and Listening Skills'. The chapter as a whole is full of practical examples and discussion of case studies and dilemmas.)

Towards the end of the discussion, it is helpful to agree jointly some realistic action points and, if appropriate, a time for a further meeting to follow up on progress.

Try to allow a few minutes immediately after each tutorial to make a note for yourself about how the session went and any ideas on how this could have been improved. It may even be possible - with advance permission - to record some tutorials. Both you and your students can benefit from this reminder of your discussions, and it will also help develop your awareness of tutorial dynamics.

You will probably have observed a wide range of teaching styles in lectures and seminars, but tutorial role models are usually more limited. It may be possible (with student permission), to sit in on a colleague's scheduled tutorial, or ask them to observe one of yours. This can broaden your experience and help you identify the kinds of tutorial contributions which seem most effective.

Another good way to explore different approaches to tutoring is for a group of colleagues to discuss anonymous case studies - which can bring out surprisingly different attitudes - to enable you to benefit from other people's experience. Some case studies and other resources are available through the Personal Academic Tutoring website.

## Common Concerns

In addition to improving your tutorial 'technique', it is helpful to think about the kinds of concerns that students are most likely to present so you can have relevant suggestions and contact details ready. These fall into a number of basic categories:

### Problems with academic work

- *Worries about course choice.* It is very common for new students to wonder if they are on the right course. This may be related to other anxieties and will be overcome as they gradually settle down generally; you can help students best by enabling them to deal with the kinds of concerns outlined below. However, in some cases, it may be necessary for them to review their course choice. Careers Service staff can be very helpful here in offering unbiased advice and a chance to talk through the issues. Contact details can be found on the Student Services website.
- *Difficulties with particular modules.* Encourage the student to discuss this with the module leader first. However, if they are reluctant to do so for any reason, you can talk through any general issues with them, but be careful not to invite criticism of professional colleagues. Instead, help them to identify the underlying problem (e.g. inappropriate module choice, specific academic difficulty, personality clash with staff or students...) and to explore possible solutions for themselves, as this will help them to cope better in future.
- *Difficulties with general academic skills, such as writing essays or coping with examinations.* Online advice and resources to support most aspects of university study are available for all students. Details can be found at the Study Skills section of the PAT website. These generic resources are intended to complement rather than replace course-specific guidance on academic study which is often integrated into first year modules or the written advice in course handbooks. You should also find out whether a PASS scheme (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) operates in your programme.
- *Time management* is another common problem, particularly during the first year. Students who have been used to reminders from parents or teachers at every stage of A-level coursework can find it hard to manage multiple deadlines on their own. Help them to draw up a sensible work-plan at the beginning of every term, but avoid taking on a 'parental' role or nagging them about this - they need to learn how to take responsibility for themselves. Resources on time management and organisation can also be found on the PAT website.
- *Problems with other students* may arise from group projects, which can easily spark personality conflicts. Avoid taking sides, but help them to work towards a compromise. As with other transferable skills, the ability to work well in groups requires practice and some support.
- *Dyslexia or other specific learning difficulty.* If you suspect this is the cause of academic difficulties, do encourage the student to contact the Disability & Dyslexia Team for an expert assessment, as they may be entitled to additional support and specialist tuition.

In general:

- Think ahead about common study difficulties and plan appropriate responses.
- Check what course-specific support is available and take a look at the Study Skills section of the PAT website so you can advise students where to find relevant information and resources.
- Keep a note of any recurrent concerns, and consider building some subject-related ‘study skills’ development into first year modules, or running free-standing sessions with other tutors.

## Financial difficulties

These are increasingly common and can have a cumulative effect on students’ work, with stress and anxiety often combining with too many hours of part-time employment to cause academic under-achievement or failure. As their PAT, you can encourage students in difficulties to access specialist advice on student finance, benefits and debt counselling available from Student Finance Advice.

Students may need help at first to reduce some kinds of spending rather than working excessive hours to fund their lifestyle. Many first-year students really do find it hard to get a balance between study, work and fun at first, and may need a gentle reminder to focus priorities. The University recommends a **maximum** of 15 hours paid work during term time, but 10 is more realistic; students should consider switching to a part-time registration unless they can find time for 35 hours of study each week.

## Personal problems

If you have built up a good relationship, it is quite natural that students will see you as their first port of call if they have any personal problems. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the professional support offered by Student Services and other specialist agencies and the role of Student Support and Guidance Tutors in signposting this. Although you should expect to give advice on academic matters, do NOT attempt to take on the role of a personal counsellor.

When a student comes to you with a serious medical, financial or other personal problem, listen sensitively to what they are telling you, but **avoid the temptation to offer well intentioned but amateur advice**. Instead use open questions to help the student clarify the issues in their own mind, and encourage them to make contact with the SSGT and/or Student Services, who will refer them to an appropriate specialist if necessary. Keep the relevant contact details guide easily available for reference.

## Specialist Advice and Referrals

The School Student Support and Guidance Tutor is likely to be the main point of contact with Student Services, but if they are unavailable you can contact the relevant service at any time for advice on referring a student for specialist support, even if you are unsure about whether they can help. They can usually point you in the right direction, and all calls are treated in confidence. You should familiarise yourself with the specialist services (details on the PAT website and discuss with the Student Support and Guidance Tutor and other colleagues the boundaries between your own role and theirs.

You may also contact the Counselling service to explore a general issue that may be affecting one of your students, though you should not discuss individual cases without the student’s explicit

permission. They can also help you to talk through difficult tutorial events and help you look at strategies for possible future situations..

The following advice is based on Counselling Services guidelines for dealing with particularly difficult or disruptive situations:

- If someone is very upset or angry, try to stay calm yourself. Let them finish what they are saying so you can understand what it is they want. Ask them calmly to explain the bits you don't understand. Keep judgments to yourself.
- Acknowledge their emotion directly e.g. *'I can see how upset/angry you are and I would like to try and help you'*.
- Do not get angry yourself – their anger is not personal to you but will be an accumulation of events and pressures.
- If the student is very upset, offering them a cup of tea or coffee will also give you some extra time to decide the best way forward. Tell them about the services that you feel might help them and offer your telephone for them to make an appointment.
- Ask them to let you know later whether they got the help they needed – show your interest in helping them resolve their difficulties.
- If you don't have time to deal with the situation then it is better to say so - e.g. *'I understand what you want but I'm due in a meeting shortly and I want to make sure I give you the time you need – what time can you come back this afternoon?'*
- Ask the student if there is anything else they want from you.
- If you don't know how to help, be honest about that e.g. *'I understand what you want but I'm not sure who can provide that for you. Can you give me some time to make some calls to establish where you can get the help you need? I will keep your personal details confidential'*

Consider how to introduce the suggestion that the student might speak to someone other than yourself. It is important that they don't feel you are just trying to offload them and their problems, but that you are genuinely concerned to ensure that they get the most appropriate support. Listen carefully before suggesting that a particular issue may be outside your own area of expertise and then do whatever you can to help them to make an appointment with the relevant specialists .

It is usually best not to make this initial contact on the student's behalf, and certainly not without their permission. Counselling services suggest that in 80% of cases where someone else has made the appointment, the student will fail to attend. However, if you are worried that they may avoid seeking the necessary professional help, and the matter seems urgent, encourage them to make an initial contact during your meeting. If that is not possible then give them the relevant information, in writing, to enable them to do so later.

**Do not expect to receive any feedback about the outcome of a referral.** Other professionals are bound by confidentiality rules just as you are. However, check that the student is aware of this, in case they are anxious about privacy. Equally, they may prefer you to know what is happening and automatically assume that you will be kept up to date by other people.

This is not the case, so ask the student to let you know how they get on and to come back to you if there are any problems or delays. This will reassure them that you are not trying to ignore their difficulties, but are genuinely concerned to make sure they get the appropriate support from a qualified professional.

**Appendix 1**  
**Sample Tutorial Record Form**

**PART A:** (Students should complete this before the tutorial)

**STUDENT'S NAME:**.....**LEVEL 4/ 5 / 6**

**PERSONAL TUTOR'S NAME:**.....**DATE OF MEETING**.....

**ISSUES FROM LAST MEETING:**

(include progress on actions agreed at last meeting and any issues still outstanding)

**PROGRESS SINCE LAST MEETING:**

(give details of any particular successes or difficulties for each element of the course)

**OTHER ISSUES:**

(indicate any other issues you would like to discuss with your tutor)

**PART B:    **AGREED OUTCOMES AND ACTIONS****

(This should be filled in by the student at the tutorial, and agreed and signed by both tutor and student)

**STUDENT'S SIGNATURE**.....

**PERSONAL TUTOR'S SIGNATURE**.....