

# The influence of the personal tutor in supporting students with specific reference to attrition

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## Background

The purpose of this study was to assess the current learning and teaching role of the personal tutor in enhancing the learning experience of students registered on the BSc Radiography degree. The main objectives were:

- to determine how personal tutors can identify students at risk of early withdrawal, due either to academic failure or personal factors, with a view to reducing attrition
- to investigate the level of support that students anticipate from a personal tutor when they join the programme.

## Approach/methodology

The study consisted of two elements:

1. A longitudinal study aimed to determine whether it is possible to identify Radiography students at risk of failing by looking at their demographic characteristics. The following demographic data was therefore collated on all Radiography students registered on the BSc programme: age, gender, level of qualification on entry, distance from home to university and clinical placement, number of dependants and academic attainment throughout the placement. This data collection is on-going and will be analysed on an annual basis, when end of year assessment marks are known.
2. A qualitative study to look at support provided by the personal tutor. Current Radiography students were invited to become part of the research team. Four students accepted the offer and were guided through the research process. They were introduced to the following methodologies: focus groups, questionnaire design, and semi-structured interviewing. A questionnaire was devised by the student researchers which they piloted on students within the institution using a focus group. The questionnaire consisted of open questions and asked students about their understanding and experiences of the personal tutor role, and whether their expectations had been met. The questionnaire was distributed to all Radiography students by members of the research team.

The student researchers then subjected the questionnaire data to thematic analysis, and used their findings to create a semi-structured interview to explore the views of Radiography lecturers on the role of the personal tutor. Questions included: the levels of support they believed they provided to personal tutees, how they identify failing students and what actions they then take, what they think students expect from a personal tutor and whether students' expectations are realistic. The data gathered was used to develop a model for the personal tutor role.

## Outcomes

From the questionnaire it was identified that personal tutors were seen as someone who would be readily available to provide support and guidance for students throughout the course.

*Someone to support me through my university experience by offering help and advice, knowing where to direct me for any problems or matters (Year 2 student).*

However, an important finding was that a few students were confused regarding the roles of the link and personal tutor and were unaware that the tutor who visited them on placement (the link tutor) was also their personal tutor. This confusion appears to have arisen because the link visits were used for 'personal tutoring' and a lack of distinction had been made between the roles. This was further compounded by the fact that students tended to have group discussions with the link tutor unless they specifically requested an individual meeting, and these discussions tended to centre on clinical issues. Consequently, these students did not feel they could approach the link tutor with academic or other issues because they did not think it was part of their role.

From the staff interviews it was apparent that staff and students' perceptions of the personal tutor role were fairly well aligned, although there was some surprise that students were confused by the link and personal tutor role. The following terms were used to describe the role: multi-dimensional, guiding, responsible, there to help students reach full potential, all concepts which appeared in the students' responses to the questionnaire. There was, however, also acknowledgement of the need to recognise one's own limits, and that as personal tutors they are not necessarily qualified to deal with all the issues facing students.

Using students to conduct the research was key because as 'service users' their understanding of the student body ensured that the student voice was heard. Findings from the research were fed into the recent revalidation of the programme and has directly influenced the way in which the Radiography team implement the personal tutor role.

The students who undertook the research gained a greater understanding of the research process and reported that they enjoyed the experience, indeed one of the students has since applied to do a PhD. For the students who participated and completed the questionnaire some have since reported that it raised their awareness of the role of their personal tutor, and has meant that they are now making more use of them.

Since this research has been completed the role of the personal tutor in the Interprofessional Learning Programme and hence Radiography has been linked with personal development modules. The link and personal tutor role has been separated and students are briefed regarding the role of the different staff supporting them during their course. This has been a positive outcome for both students and staff.

## Enhancing RIT

The project engaged the students in the process of research, and enhanced their written and verbal communication skills through the construction of a questionnaire, undertaking a focus group and interviews. The students who completed the questionnaire now have a practical example to review and reflect on when critiquing published research and staff members are able to refer to the questionnaire as an example of research during taught sessions.

## Advice for others

Involving students as part of the research team does create more work initially, but it adds a valuable extra dimension to the research.

## Reflection and any future plans

Guiding students through the research process in this way was hugely rewarding and demonstrated that actually undertaking a piece of research does support understanding through experiential learning. Since we have now changed the personal tutor role it would be valuable to conduct a similar piece of work to assess whether the changes have made any difference to the ways in which students feel about how they are supported in their learning. Future work would look to involve students as part of the research team.

*I have enjoyed being a part of this research project. Being able to take part in this has allowed me to gain a huge insight into the research process and the different aspects that make it up. I feel that it has also boosted my confidence hugely when I have carried out the interviews with lecturers, and after the initial nerves wore off I enjoyed it. I would definitely say that this has been worthwhile, as if I were to go on and do some of my own, I now have ideas and some background information into how it could be done (Member of the student research team)*

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