

## **Making the invisible visible: Value and reward for personal tutors**

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### **Abstract**

Academic advising is a core part of the teaching and learning experience in higher education, but it receives little recognition in workload allocations or institutional prestige. We argue that it is high time that personal tutoring and academic advising be valued and esteemed as much as other core parts of the modern academy.

### **Keywords:**

Personal tutoring; CPD; invisible work; academic advising

### **Personal tutoring; Invisible work?**

As long-term, experienced personal tutors, we increasingly feel that personal tutoring can be viewed as being “*invisible work*” (Kaplan Daniels, 1987, p.403). Invisible work is labour that is unrecognised, peripheral or hidden, less valued and overlooked (Hatton, 2017). Framed within these terms, it can be viewed as work that is of less value or worth than ‘proper’ academic work, such as teaching and research. This view is one shared by the University of Oregon Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group (2017), which suggests that, along with teaching and research, an academic role also includes administration, service (to committees, for example) and advising (personal tutoring). However, the group contends that these roles are “*not valued or rewarded equally*” (*op.cit.*, p.230) when compared to higher-status academic endeavours like teaching and research.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research and grant capture are seen as having greater importance and as constituting a more certain route to promotion than the invisible “*care work*” of personal tutoring and student mentoring (*ibid.*, p.213). Such is the apparent lack of parity between the different roles an academic is required to perform that Bird, Litt and Wang (2004) have suggested that engaging with lower-status advising care-work activity – such as personal tutoring – and prioritising it over research and teaching can limit realistic chances of academic promotion. This same view persists fifteen years on, with Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel (2019) and Walker (2020) contending that pastoral care work is still not part of the metrics used to measure academics’ performance. Instead, research output and top-graded teaching evaluations are what are prized and pursued by those seeking promotion and academic career enhancement.

The challenges of the context in which personal tutors must operate are arguably exacerbated by an increasingly casualised workforce with precarious contracts – meaning greater turnover (Williams, 2021) – and larger student intakes, together with competing interests, demands and pressures, all resulting in such staff-student ratios (Grey and Osbourne, 2020) as do little to support personal tutors in performing their roles effectively. However, over time, changing attitudes have become evident within the higher education (HE) sector. The big question here is: Why, when student experience is top of many institutional strategies, are personal tutoring and advising often operating in the shadows?

It is within this context that this opinion piece seeks to shine a light on this frankly iniquitous situation, by recognising the institutional value of personal tutors and their vital role in supporting student progression, achievement and wellbeing (Stuart, Willcocks and Browning, 2021). We suggest ways by which personal tutors might be developed and rewarded, as part of a process of recognition for what they do: a visible, legitimate and high-status academic endeavour which, we aver, should enjoy parity of esteem with teaching and research.

### **Personal tutoring and the pandemic – legitimate academic work in the spotlight**

Despite those who position personal tutoring as ‘nice to have, but not really that important’ – a sideshow encouraging academic do-gooders to dish out “*tea and sympathy*” (McIntosh and Grey, 2017) – we would argue that, far from being peripheral, personal tutoring has never been so important. In 2006, the Global Community for Academic Advising asserted that “*academic advising is integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education*” (cited in White, 2015). In all universities, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how integral personal tutoring and advising really are and also clearly demonstrated that more time and resources are needed to provide pastoral and wellbeing support for students (Office for Students, 2020).

The pandemic has revealed the complexity of the personal tutoring role and also what forms of knowledge are required to carry it out effectively: from discipline-specific and institutional knowledge to signposting to university services (such as student finance, academic support skills and student wellbeing, to name a few). Though these may be, declaratively and procedurally, essential forms of knowledge, something less tangible and less institutionally valued, but still very significant, is knowledge concerning the personal relationship between tutor and tutee. Until we consider aspects of emotional intelligence (Mayer and Salovey, 1997) – such as empathy, active listening and personability – as distinct skills and bodies of knowledge in their own right (ones which require development and training), personal tutoring will never be as fully valued as it should be. If we take seriously (as we should) the assertion that the values of personal tutoring espoused by Lochtie *et al.*, (2018) – for example, being approachable, non-judgmental and authentic, developing rapport and listening – are key **skills** as well as values, then this hitherto hidden element of personal tutoring practice needs equal development and recognition.

### **Voices from the frontline**

What we have particularly learned from our own tutees during the pandemic is how much they value our interest in them as individuals and our concern for their wellbeing (Stephen, O'Connell and Hall, 2008; Starcher, 2011). This means: being there, being present and being visible. We argue that those who view the personal tutor-tutee relationship as little more than 'a chat' have pathologised it; they fail to recognise how, with a supportive and emotionally intelligent personal tutor, these 'chats' can be transformational for a tutee. For many students, these tutor-tutee interactions are vital and can have a profound impact (Light, 2001); they can be the difference between dropping out or staying; between suffering a crisis or achieving full academic and/or professional potential.

The simple fact of the matter is, at a time when university leaders extol the virtues of personalised learning (Walker, 2020), against a backdrop of an acute interest in student mental health and wellbeing, personal tutoring remains the poor country cousin when compared to other forms of work within the academy. The simultaneously hidden and open value of personal tutoring lies in linking the many realms of student experience: academic skills, employability, wellbeing and personal development. To do this properly requires proper investment in training and workload support. However, it also requires that the esteem in which personal tutoring is held be very much higher indeed than it is at the present time.

### **Development and reward**

We argue that part of raising esteem and the status of the role can be afforded through formal training and development. Given the importance of the role, it is perplexing and frustrating that personal tutors are usually left to learn the ropes with little or often no formal training or guidance (Stuart, Willcocks and Browning, 2021). This is in contrast to other academic roles: there is usually mandatory training for those engaging in teaching (via a PGCertHE or Advance HE fellowship recognition), in conducting research or in providing doctoral supervision. Personal tutoring development could be facilitated in house via continuing personal development (CPD) or, externally, through United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) professional recognition awards (UKAT, 2019). Further measures could include the development of promotion pathways for academics specialising in personal tutoring, with UKAT awards as official markers of esteem/qualification for promotion applications.

We also suggest paying greater attention in the first place to the process of selecting academics to act as personal tutors. Not everyone has the skillset and mindset to be a personal tutor. Arguably, those in the role should demonstrate the necessary skills as well as living the intrinsic values that the role demands. Indeed, evidence suggests that poorly equipped and inadequately trained personal tutors can have a negative impact on students (Wootton, 2006).

Finally, the role of the personal tutor could be further supported by exploring the judicious use of learning analytics. Jisc research reported that using a data dashboard can support personalisation, student retention and enhancement of learning (Sclater *et al.*, 2016). However, we contend that any use of a data dashboard should not be at the expense of the fundamental, highly relational and dialogic personal tutor-tutee dynamic. Systems need to be developed by

institutions in conversation with tutors and tutees, so that they encompass the needs and outcomes of personal tutoring, which is still rarely the case (Francis *et al.*, 2020). Personal tutoring is all about people and about building and developing relationships, something that a purely data-driven model could never successfully replicate.

### Conclusion

At a time when students really want and need to “*feel that they matter*” (Hudson 2006, p.45) and we want to live the values of the university, we urge leaders to make the invisible visible; to recognise the value and worth of personal tutoring to tutees and to the wider institution by supporting personal tutors and giving personal tutoring the academic respect it deserves.

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