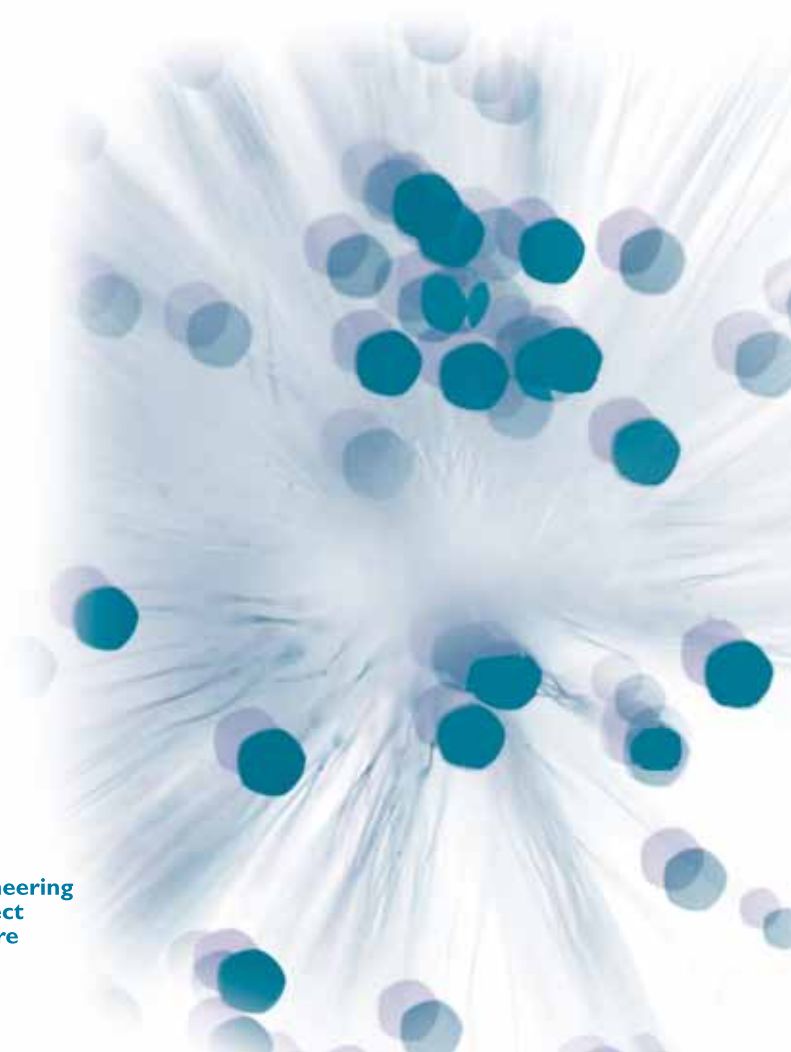


# Personal Tutoring

an **Engineering Subject Centre** guide by  
**Elaine M. Smith**

**The  
Higher  
Education  
Academy**

**Engineering  
Subject  
Centre**



## Author's biography

As a first year tutor in the School of Engineering and Computing at Glasgow Caledonian University, Elaine M. Smith has introduced an integrated and holistic approach to the student experience which has resulted in significantly improved student progression rates. She has worked for the QAA Scotland Enhancement themes reporting on Personal Tutor Systems and their Alternatives and contributes to the Engineering Subject Centre's New Lecturer workshops in a number of areas including student support and the importance of the personal tutor role.

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# Personal Tutoring

## Overview

This booklet takes a pragmatic approach and is aimed at those organising personal tutor systems and engineering academics who want more information about how to effectively fulfil a pastoral care role. A number of issues related to personal tutoring are presented. Alternative models of personal tutoring, the type of support needed and the student expectations of that support are considered along with identification of students at risk. Staff development and training are also highlighted. The booklet ends with a suggestion for evaluation and guidelines for implementing successful personal tutor systems.

Being an academic advisor or personal tutor can be a challenging experience within any academic career. It can often be an opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of individual students but occasionally it can also be difficult and time-consuming. Whilst the vast majority of students go through their university experience without any major problems, some individuals succeed or fail as a result of their relationship with academic staff who fulfil this vital support role.

### Introduction

The academic advisor or personal tutor system provides an essential support function to engineering undergraduates - as a source of information, an ideal environment for mentoring or a 'port in the storm' for students experiencing sudden or accumulating problems (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993). Although student surveys tell us that the personal tutor is often seen only as a problem solver, well-implemented tutoring systems can go further by facilitating the personal and professional development of students.

Many engineering academics would not choose to deal directly with the personal issues of their students. Whilst acknowledging that physical illness, mental health problems, bereavement, financial problems, relationship issues, de-motivation, for example, impact directly on academic performance, ideally academics might prefer to only advise on purely academic matters. This approach would be feasible only if students in difficulty could themselves separate out the cause and effect of their situation. Interestingly, in a study on the effectiveness of the provision of student support in 1995 (Easton and Van Laar, 1995) it was reported that 97% of their sample of 567 lecturers had directly dealt with a distressed student. This would suggest some difficulty in isolating academic staff from the personal problems of students with whom they have contact.

Adding to the previous observations, engineering undergraduates are an increasingly diverse population that require academic, personal and developmental support. Widening participation indicators are improving (HEFCE, 2008) and widening access agendas have brought students with a greater range of support needs through the gates of many universities (Gorard et al.,

2006). The provision of a responsive and supportive personal tutor environment can do much to enhance the student experience, identifying and overcoming some problems and helping to improve retention, progression and completion. More information about improving student progression and achievement in engineering can be found on the website of the Progress Project (University of Hull, 2008).

### **Academic advisors and personal tutors**

As previously stated, engineering academics who are subject experts in their own area of the discipline often find themselves also fulfilling the role of academic advisor and/or personal tutor as part of their employment duties. The extent to which they feel comfortable in this pastoral support role with students is variable and often dependent on their own personality and experience.

There are a number of models for the provision of student support in engineering departments and schools across the UK (Earwalker, 1992; Owen, 2002). In many institutions, the academic advisor and personal tutor is a combined role with some additional specialised centralised support available at institutional level. Some universities strictly adhere to an academic advisor only role. In some institutions, all academic staff have a group of personal tutees and the role is seen as part of the normal academic activity. In other institutions, being a personal tutor is a choice made by some academic staff who may be given a financial incentive to take on this additional role. The following case studies show different approaches.

### Personal tutor model - case studies

At Napier University's Department of Biology, the first year tutor is an academic who acts as a personal tutor for all of the first year students. The same member of academic staff then becomes the second year tutor following the same group of students through into the following academic year. In the following academic year, another member of staff becomes the first year tutor and this role alternates on a two year cycle maintaining consistency for the first two years of any cohort.

At the School of Engineering and Computing at Glasgow Caledonian University, every member of academic staff, including those in senior positions, is assigned a personal tutor group of 5 first year students. The management of first years is centrally driven by the first year tutor. Programme leaders increasingly take over the personal tutoring role as the students progress through their course.

### Problems with personal tutor systems

Good models of support may exist for students but questions that need to be considered to optimise their impact on the student experience include: how are those in greatest need identified?; how quickly can intervention take place?; and how are students made aware of what support options are available to them? (QAA, 2005). Many academic advisor or personal tutor schemes exist only in theory, written into learning and teaching policies, but are not always fully implemented. The reality is that Personal Tutor schemes may not be as effective as they could be and are difficult to evaluate in practice.

Where a gap exists between student expectations of support and their actual experience, students can feel confused and let down. A number of surveys have investigated what the student expects in terms of their support and what level of satisfaction they report in follow up studies (Gidman, 2001; Gallagher and Allen, 2000).

**Communicating clearly with students early in their experience will give them realistic and achievable expectations.** Where an academic advisor or personal tutor is made available to a student, the main requirements reported in these studies to satisfy student support needs are:

- the availability of the personal tutor;
- the level of knowledge of the personal tutor;
- the level of interest of the personal tutor.

The following case study highlights a potential conflict which should make us think carefully about our boundaries.

### Personal tutor conflict - case study

██████████ A study conducted in New Zealand (Roberts et al., 2001) discusses the culture in which academic staff take an interest in the development of the student's life as well as their academic advancement of knowledge. This study highlights the potential conflict of interest that can develop where academic staff, assuming pastoral roles, are also assessors making pass/fail decisions about students who may be disclosing very personal information to them. It emphasises the inherent power that a member of academic staff has over a student and questions the legitimacy of them encouraging or expecting disclosure from students. ██████████

### Forming personal tutor groups

Observation suggests that personal tutor groups are often formed as heterogeneous groups selected alphabetically within related subject disciplines. **Efforts to profile a student cohort at point of entry open up the possibility of creating personal tutor groups with related support issues** such as belonging to certain minority or non-standard entry groups. Students can then be grouped under the guidance of academic staff who have particular knowledge or interest, or who have previously agreed to take on a group with non-standard support requirements. The opportunity for co-mentoring or support can also be nurtured where students have common issues such as age or recently leaving the parental home. Clearly great care must be taken in grouping students using real or apparent support issues to avoid any accusation of discrimination or insensitivity.

Students who have greater support needs because they indicate more risk factors in their profile can



be put into smaller personal tutor groups or can be assigned to academic staff who have a particular empathy or more experience of dealing with the issues of student support.

### **Managing personal tutor groups**

The way in which personal tutor groups are managed is likely to effect any positive impact that may result from their formation. **It is important that students are introduced to their personal tutor in the first few weeks of arriving at university.** Further meetings must be scheduled normally one or two per semester. Where personal tutors refer students to other services, they should always ask the student to let them know how they get on, maintaining rather than ending their interest at the handover point. Confidentiality can be maintained whilst a general interest remains.

It may be interesting to challenge the idea of entirely open-ended personal tutor meetings. Where an outline agenda for each personal tutor meeting is provided, personal tutors operating with centralised guidelines on what they should discuss in each meeting with their students have expressed satisfaction in the clarity that this provides (Beggs et al., 2004). They will continue to add their own additional discussions with students depending on the individual circumstances and thus remain in control of the meetings.

### **Managing personal tutor groups - case study**

■■■■■■ In the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health at Glasgow Caledonian University, personal tutors use a library of standard messages that have been agreed to send text and email messages to their students at certain times during the semester. This includes communicating with their students when they are on placement. ■■■■■■

## **personal tutoring**

The quality of management of a personal tutor group can be improved where personal tutors have relevant and up to date information about their students. Ideally such information will include point of entry facts, such as if the student has any disability, and information about class attendance, academic engagement and achievement. It is important to find out what student management and absence monitoring systems exist within the institution in order to access relevant information. The relationship between personal tutors, lecturers and year tutors or programme leaders is also important in relation to communication with students.

### **Issues specific to engineering undergraduates**

The demographic of engineering undergraduates results in a number of unique support issues in engineering and related subject disciplines. The Engineering Council UK (2008) confirms that only 14% of engineering undergraduate places are currently occupied by female students. This produces a gender imbalance with a majority of male students (often *young* males with their own support issues) and a minority group of female students within the larger male group.

Reports from Student Counselling Services (2008) confirm that male students are less likely to seek support than female students. At Anglia Ruskin University (2008), the following facts have been published which provide a sobering insight into why large male classes present their own support challenges:

### **Male student issues - important facts**

- Depression occurs as frequently in men as in women; but women get diagnosed and treated twice as often as men.
- Suicide is the biggest killer of young men in England.
- Men are less likely than women to recognise that they are under stress or unhappy.
- Men are significantly less likely than women to go to their GP with emotional and psychological problems; if they do, they are more likely to describe physical symptoms of mental distress such as sleep problems, chest pains or headaches.
- Alcohol and substance abuse is five times more common in men than in women.
- Male students are significantly less likely to access university support services than female students, and the dropout rate is much higher among male students.

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Female students as a minority group within a class may benefit from having positive role models and the opportunity, should they wish to take it, of having female personal tutors. The use of role models and mentors for women students and graduates is advocated by the Women's Engineering Society (2008). Female students can be grouped together in personal tutor groups to facilitate peer support but it must be remembered that a range of personalities exist amongst female students not all of whom want or need to be treated differently.

### Identifying students at risk

A number of longitudinal studies have taken place over recent years to look for factors that contribute to student drop-out (Foster, 2002; Johnstone, 2001). These factors can be thought of as support indicators. Once academics get to know their students, **the observation and instincts of personal tutors can inform a proactive early warning system**. The personal tutor can be one of the first to meet the duty of care to their students. Concerns can be highlighted and dealt with, or passed to relevant people or departments. For engineering academics in their classroom or personal tutor role, once they get to know their students, the signs of developing problems may include:

- the student appearing tense or unhappy;
- the student being loud, agitated or aggressive;
- the student being withdrawn or unusually quiet;
- an obvious change in the student's personal appearance;
- changes in the attendance pattern or cessation of attendance.

## **Staff development and training**

To provide some counselling guidance to academic staff is not only beneficial to students but would also help to protect the academic staff from becoming inappropriately or over-involved, or from causing further harm by their response to a student in crisis. This is particularly true for students experiencing mental health problems.

It should be stressed that **for most personal tutors and most students it is the general day-to-day support needs rather than crisis support that will be required.** Academics often want to provide an adequate level of support to students and can lack confidence in their ability to do this. This is exacerbated when they are expected to operate without guidelines or adequate knowledge of what other information is known about the student.

## **Staff training - case study**

██████████ *A study from the University of Salford concluded that although two thirds of academic advisors also provide personal counselling, only a quarter of academic advisors are given any training (Brookes, 1989)* ██████████

## **Identifying a critical incident in relation to student support**

It seems reasonable that whichever model of personal tutoring is adopted and implemented, in any institution, the very least that should be available is a **set of clear guidelines to assist academic staff in defining their boundaries and identifying a critical incident in relation to student support.** Basic knowledge is needed to ensure that academic staff can identify and

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respond to emergencies to protect the student in crisis, other students who may be affected by that student's behaviour and themselves. A student may choose to disclose information to their personal tutor and the policy on confidential disclosure must be made clear to academics.

### Critical incident strategies - case study

*A study on developing critical incident strategies from Massey University (Graham and Shillington, 2002) emphasised that academic staff need to be aware of what to do where they believe that the situation they are faced with as an academic or personal advisor is critical both to meet the duty of care to the student and to protect the member of staff from any long term adverse reaction or feeling of guilt.*

**Academic staff do not need to become expert counsellors** nor do they have the time to assume this extra burden, but they do need to be able to deal with an immediate situation that arises and know when, how and to whom they should refer the student. This requires judgement and knowledge of key referral contacts in their institution and in external agencies.

A critical incidence or emergency may arise for a personal tutor if a student exhibits one or more of the following characteristics:

- severe depression or apparent suicidal tendencies;
- self-harming or threatening to harm others;
- appearing to be seriously physically ill;
- declaring an alcohol or substance abuse;
- behaving irrationally, being disorientated or hearing voices.

Although a large number of institutions appear not to provide training or resources for their personal tutors, some universities provide excellent support materials to academic staff in training sessions and on their Internet sites. Examples of this can be found on the websites of the Universities of Bristol (2008), Reading (2008) and Bath (2008).

### **The relationship between personal tutors and Personal Development Planning**

The introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) opportunities followed the publication of the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997). Developmental support for students can be seen as a personal development issue and may be addressed by personal tutors as part of their role. Embedding the learning and study skills element of PDP into the personal tutor role is only going to be effective if the individual academic has expertise in this area or undergoes training. It may be more efficient to use the personal tutor system to provide the framework for interfacing with specialist services such as learning support in the institution. The personal tutor could encourage students to attend workshops or presentations set up by learning support units. Follow up meetings with students may be required to assess the success of the specialist support services referral.

### **Evaluating personal tutor systems**

It will always be difficult to evaluate the impact of personal tutor systems. Much of the evidence of their success is anecdotal and sometimes confidential only to those closely involved. Perhaps the best way to start the process of enhancing any existing personal tutor

system and improving the student support is to start with its evaluation.

### Evaluation - an example

*The STAR project at the University of Ulster (2008) has already drawn up an evaluation questionnaire which it invites other institutions to use provided they give feedback on its use. The audit tool provides a range of questions with three possible answers that are scored with one, three or five points. The weaknesses will surface where aspects of practice score three or lower.*

### Summary guidelines for implementing successful personal tutor systems

- Assign students to personal tutors in the first week and have the first meeting within two weeks of the beginning of semester/term.
- Give personal tutors access to relevant and up to date information about their students.
- Communicate to students, from the start, realistic expectations and detailed information on the support that is available.
- Set up a framework of communication with students including identifying when each meeting should take place.
- Provide training and clear guidelines to assist academic staff in providing general support and identifying a critical incident in relation to student support.
- Develop a code of practice for academic personal tutors.



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