Personal and Academic Support Tutors – Guidance for academics

As a Personal and Academic Support Tutor, you play a vitally important role in helping students adjust to University life and get the best experience possible from their time at the University. Although many staff will provide elements of support to a student, from within and outside the department, each student should have a named academic from their department who provides personal and academic support. In this role, you should:

- act as key point of contact;
- provide academic guidance;
- offer personal support and act as a gateway to other services;
- help students think ‘beyond the course’;

A key point of contact for students

As a Personal and Academic Support Tutor (the name may differ across departments), you are expected to have timetabled meetings with your tutees at least once per semester, starting as close to induction week as possible.

In addition to the scheduled meetings, you should be available at other times for regular, published drop-in sessions. Both you and your tutees can also arrange for other meetings where necessary.

It is your responsibility to:

- introduce yourself to new tutees as early as possible;
- make sure the student knows how to contact you by giving out your e-mail address, extension number and details of drop-in sessions;
- stay in touch with your students: for example, email them regularly so they know that you are there to help, and understand what type of help you can offer.

Your department will inform you whether they will schedule meetings or if it is your responsibility. However, while students need an opportunity to meet face-to-face, not all
sessions need to be organised in this way. Small group tutorials offer a time-efficient way to provide tutorials as well as offering students peer support. See: ‘what to talk about’ – Guided conversations in tutorials: www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/support/tutor/conversations

Group tutorials

Some topics may be easier to address in a group tutorial as they concern all students. Some topics such as taking notes, revision, preparing for exams, writing an academic essay, exam performance and exam-based essays may lend themselves to group tutorials.

Merits of a group session

- Encourages social contact with fellow students
- Speeds up the settling-in process
- Encourages students to raise issues early on
- Sets a pattern for staff-student dialogue, as well as peer dialogue – a useful model for future group work and seminars
- Generally, an aid to retention. Students feel part of the institution more quickly, and feel listened to.

Source: A Guide for Personal and Academic Tutors, Queen Margaret University (2011, p. 6)

Building a relationship

Students can feel quite intimidated by meetings with academics. A friendly smile and making eye contact can help, as can moving from behind your desk and giving the student your undivided attention, even for a few minutes. It is important that students feel comfortable and that their problems and questions have been taken seriously and early reassurance and support can save a lot of time and trouble later on for everyone.

Building a relationship with your tutees is an important part of the role. At the start of their time here, students need help to adjust to university life and understand the new academic demands being placed on them. Beyond the excitement of Intro Week, students will need to be re-introduced to opportunities beyond the curriculum (see http://www.shef.ac.uk/lets/student ) and encouraged to become part of the learning and teaching community. As the student settles in, the role becomes more about helping the student to review and enhance their academic progress, and making them aware of the wider academic world, perhaps by encouraging them to take an interest in research by talking about your research.

When things are not working out, you will need to provide advice and sometimes a shoulder to cry on, but you will also need to know when to get more expert help (see below for more on this). It is likely that you will know the student better than anyone else, so as a student starts to think about life beyond university, you are uniquely placed to offer advice and
signposting on careers and further study. You are also likely to be the person who writes your tutee’s reference.

In short, you are a guide and mentor, ‘the friendly face of academia’.

**Record keeping and attendance monitoring**

It is recommended that you keep a note of what happened in meetings to: chart student progress, give a replacement tutor background information, provide material for writing references and give information about circumstances that contribute to poor performance. It is also worth agreeing an action plan with your tutee at the end of each meeting and both writing it down.

You should keep a note of student attendance at meetings and liaise with the department, who in turn should keep you informed of general student attendance. This should be tracked to enable an overview to be formed and to flag any potential need for additional support for the student. Your department should have processes in place and should inform you of them. It is also important to keep a record of all contact made with your tutees (e.g. saving emails) as the department may need to evidence it.

**Providing academic guidance**

The academic guidance you offer students should be of an ‘overview nature’. The type of guidance will change throughout the student life-cycle and will include:

- University expectations of students in Higher Education;
- helping students to understand the feedback and feed-forward they get from assignments and how to make the best use of it;
- helping students to reflect on their skills and experiences, both within and outside of the curriculum;
- providing advice and guidance on next steps (e.g. module choice);
- helping students to develop new skills and maximise academic opportunities;

You are not expected to give advice on module specific queries: these should be taken up by the students with the module tutor.

**More information**

- academic support – go to [www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/support/academic](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/support/academic)
- Helping students become reflective learners

**Act as a Gateway to Other Services**

You will play a key role in the welfare of your tutees. You will need to listen to your tutee’s concerns and offer encouragement and support on a range of topics that might include academic difficulty, emotional and social problems, financial problems, illness or a traumatic life event. However, you are not expected to know everything about everything or to resolve
all problems presented by students, nor are you expected to act as counsellors. You are there to act as a gateway to other sources of support where necessary and it is worth taking time to get to know what is on offer.

You should always consult your department if you feel out of your depth with a particular student’s problems. It is important to maintain a balance between assuring the welfare of the student by handing over to the correct support service and ensuring continuity of care by staying in touch. If a student has been referred to other support, you will need to follow up the outcomes at the next tutorial, to see if the support offered was effective and has solved the problem or whether further work needs to be done. This should be recorded.

For a full list of sources of support, see the LeTS Toolkit resource on personal support: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/support/personal

**Support for international students**

Although there may be a specialist international student tutor in your department, each international student will also have a Personal and Academic Support Tutor whose responsibility is to help them to integrate as much as possible into UK student life.

It is also helpful to be aware of the additional services specifically available for international students, including the Student Services Support Desk for International Students. (go to http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/international/welcome/student-support-services)

**Helping students think beyond the course**

Being a student encompasses more than the current programme of study. Encouraging your tutees to actively participate in university life is an important part of your role. There will be a range of disciplinary societies, clubs and activities to publicise as well as University-wide activities. http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/student. Again, it is worth browsing to see what is available.

As Personal and Academic Support Tutor, you should encourage your mentees to think about how the skills they are acquiring contribute to their future employability. The Sheffield Graduate (http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sheffieldgraduate) is designed to help you and your students do this and will be of benefit to them when they write their curriculum vitae.

The Sheffield Graduate Development Programme (SGDP) (http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sgdp) offers personal development planning. Your department will have selected one of four frameworks to deliver this and will inform you as to your specific responsibilities, though in all cases you will act as a facilitator to encourage tutees to reflect upon their academic studies, future planning and personal development. This information will be useful when writing the student’s reference.
Guidance on writing a reference for a student:  
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/schools/references/index.aspx

Thinking about your tutee’s future employability is likely to be part of your role. The Careers Service (http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers) offers help and support to staff and students, including a dedicated member of staff for each department. Your academic department should also be able to give you guidance on discipline-specific careers support available for students and the name of any dedicated careers tutors.

Some students will want to undertake further study. Again, where necessary, you should refer to your department about where to find discipline specific information and who to refer students to for further advice.

IN PRACTICE

Example: Induction guide for new staff – personal issues

In its induction guide (http://law-staffintranet.group.shef.ac.uk/handbook/images/1/15/INDUCTION_GUIDE_2010.pdf) for new staff, the School of Law highlights some of the personal issues which you should be aware of as a personal tutor:

- accommodation, particularly for first-year students;
- issues arising from living away from home for the first time, particularly for first-year students, and especially for international students having to adapt to a new country;
- academic implications of medical, financial and personal difficulties;
- time management issues surrounding the planning and executing of assignments;
- strategies for examination revision and exam stress;
- mental health issues.

Example: A Roadmap for Personal Tutorials

The Department of Psychology developed ‘A Roadmap for Personal Tutorials’ (see Toolkit page http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit/support/tutor/conversations#InPractice1 by linking course-related activities, Personal Development Planning (via the Sheffield Graduate Development Programme), and careers activity. It provides tutors with guidance and online resources to aid students’ personal development along with suggestions as to when in the academic year they might best be given to students.
Example: Group Personal Tutor Meetings

Group personal tutorials are a useful adjunct to individual meetings. They offer multiple perspectives and solutions to issues raised by students themselves in a supportive safe environment. Dr Jolian McHardy of the Department of Economics explains his approach in the resource “Group Personal Tutor Meetings” which can be downloaded from the Toolkit page: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk lets/toolkit/support/tutor/groups.

Example: Setting appointments with your tutees

In setting up individual meetings with his tutees, Gary Wood, School of English Language, Literature and Linguistics, uses Google calendar’s “appointment slot.” To use this tool, you block off a specific amount of time in your calendar, select “appointment slot”; and indicate the amount of time for each slot, e.g. 15 minutes. This creates a web link which you can then send with a message to tutees inviting them to select an available slot.

RESOURCES

The following guides have been written for specific universities but they provide useful hints and tips for academic staff of the University of Sheffield.

A Guide for Personal and Academic Tutors, Queen Margaret University
www.qmu.ac.uk/quality/documents/ExtendPATGuide.doc

Personal Tutoring – Staff Guide, University of Plymouth

Guide for Personal Tutors, Queen’s University Belfast
http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/CentreforEducationalDevelopment/FilestoreDONOTDELETE/Filetoupload,245702,en.pdf

www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/toolkit