



Exploring student's perceptions and experience of personal tutors

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SUMMARY

There are a variety of arrangements to support pre-registration nursing students whilst they engage with the theoretical and practical elements of their course; these includes academic supervisor and a personal tutor. The personal tutor system is recognized as an effective method of ensuring that each student has access to a wide range of support services and that the individual's academic progress and personal development are monitored by a skilled member of academic staff (Harrison, 1990).

However, there is a dearth of studies relating to the role of the personal tutor in nurse education from the students' perspective. This study set out to explore the pre-registration students nurse's experience of personal tutoring at one School of Nursing and Midwifery in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK. Focus groups and a semi-structured questionnaire were used to collect data from pre-registration nursing participants. Data analysed revealed both positive and negative experiences; most rated their advice and support good with many positive aspects to their personal tutoring expressed however many felt the need for more contact time, more support academically and whilst on clinical placements, and more structured support with their personal development planning.

This paper also describes how the study was conducted, the importance that students place on the role, and the need for further research and areas for improvement.

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Introduction

The learning and support experienced by student nurses are pivotal to ensuring that nursing students are fit for practice and can deliver high quality nursing care. However, it is well documented that undergraduates encounter many challenges during their studies, and for some this may mean contemplating leaving their programmes (Cooke et al., 2004; Fowler and Norrie, 2009). Whilst there may be no panacea to the challenges that students face, providing effective high quality student support is undoubtedly critical, and the role of the personal tutor is central to the support systems that higher educational institutes offer. There are a variety of provisions to support pre-registration nursing students whilst they engage with the theoretical and practical elements of their course. The allocation of students to a named personal tutor has been identified as one method of addressing these needs (Gidman et al., 2000). In the UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) employ a personal tutoring system for pre-registration students as stipulated by the *Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2004)*, in which students are allocated a registrant i.e. nurses tutor (from the same part of the register) to support their learning in both academic and practice environments throughout

their course; however, this model of support may not be used in HEIs outside the UK. Widening access to students from backgrounds not traditionally associated with higher education has necessitated a review of the personal tutor system, as potential students may not be equipped with the academic skills to meet the demands of higher education. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the findings of a study that set out to explore student nurses' experiences of personal tutoring in one UK HEI.

Background and literature review

As HEIs in the UK, Australia and the USA address major policy drivers of widening and increased participation set out by current government policies (*Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009; Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2009)*), and at a time of increasing focus on attrition rates, the need for student support could not be greater. Moreover, with attrition rates running as high as 28% in the UK (*Nursing Standard, 2010*), this has the potential to limit the scope and effectiveness of future healthcare (O'Donnell 2009). The personal tutoring role is increasingly valued in this complicated multi-layered environment and growing literature on the subject reflects the increasing need to develop and optimise student support in order to maximise achievement and minimise attrition. Although a range of factors contribute to attrition, it is widely accepted that student nurses have a particular need for support and

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guidance (Glossop, 2002; Bowden, 2008; Urwin et al., 2010). In addition to HEIs addressing the need for diversity and inclusivity they also need to address how this might affect the support needs and requirements of nursing students. This unquestionably presents many challenges for tutors teaching and supporting learning in higher education. Por and Barriball (2008) concluded that the personal tutor's role is multifaceted and difficult to fulfil with increasing student numbers and the competing demands on lecturers' time.

Although the concept of the personal tutor is not new, and is one that has evolved over time, within healthcare literature the role is not only poorly defined but it is relatively scant. The literature identifies various components of the role. Phillips (1994) attributes the role to three main areas; teaching, counselling and supporting, whilst Gidman (2001) asserts that the personal tutor in healthcare has three main aspects to the role; clinical, pastoral and academic. Richardson (1998) whilst exploring concepts of the role observed personal tutors acting as 'gatekeepers' and 'supporters'. Additional roles were revealed by Por and Barriball (2008) these include; being a friend, counsellor, critic, career advisor and a monitor of student progress. Neary (2000) also includes; encouraging reflective practice to aid the relationship between theory and practice, and participating in the preparation of placement mentors. According to Thomas (2006) the role can be seen to fulfil a number of roles for students: information about higher education processes, procedures and expectations; academic feedback and development; personal welfare support; referral to further information and support; a relationship with the institution and a sense of belonging. Thus personal tutoring can be ascribed to two main roles; academic and pastoral see Table 1. However, Warne and McAndrew (2008) provide another perspective arguing that it offers opportunities for students to explore the often unspoken in a way that allows for emotions to be authentically expressed safely, and allows tutors to act as catalyst and role model for personal growth and therapeutic endeavour.

Current literature also reveals a dearth of studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of the personal tutor role from the students' perspective. Dobinson-Harrington's (2006) phenomenological study found that students often felt isolated in their learning, and saw their personal tutors as a 'safety net', and the key to a satisfactory personal tutor was their personal tutoring interest in them and the development of a supportive relationship. In Stephen et al.'s (2008) study exploring applied social science students' experiences of personal tutoring both students and staff desired more meaningful contact with each other, and students wanted to feel cared for. Whilst exploring reasons for attrition amongst nursing students Bowden (2008) identified that a significant factor in enabling students to stay was their personal tutor support. It is clear that personal tutoring as part of student support, has a crucial and integral part to play in learning and experience, and involves a number of skills. However, the effectiveness of the personal tutor role cannot be presumed and must be carefully monitored and evaluated. Given the dearth of research on

students' expectations of personal tutoring, and as part of a much larger agenda embedding evidence based nurse education into the curriculum within a UK School of Nursing and Midwifery (Warne, Holland, McAndrew, 2010, Nurse Education in Practice, in press), this study set out to explore the students' experience and expectations of personal tutoring. Students in the UK are required to provide a portfolio, comprising of a transcript recording student achievement and a means by which the students can build, monitor, and reflect on their personal development (Dearing, 1997). Although a variety of terms exist to describe this process, in the school in which this study took place personal development planning (PDP) is used to describe one activity that students undertake to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning and plan for their development. The key to this opportunity for students to explore and demonstrate their abilities and competence is their personal tutor.

Methods

Research design

The purpose of this study was twofold. Firstly, to explore the concept of the personal tutor's role from the pre-registration students' perspective, and secondly to contribute to the evidence base for supporting student nurses, contributing ideas for good practice guidelines which would seek to improve student progression and retention. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods and was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of a pilot involving focus groups to establish the issues to be addressed in a large-scale questionnaire survey and the piloting of the survey. The focus group was based on a series of semi-structured questions, guided by an interview schedule related to their perception and experience of personal tutoring; see Fig. 1.

The second phase involved a survey questionnaire derived from the focus group themes, as there appeared to be no available instrument to use in this study. The semi-structured, self-reported questionnaire consisted of open and closed format questions primarily in three sections: demographics, student experiences and suggested areas for improvement. This method was used primarily as it enabled the targeting of a large number of students.

Ethics

Ethical clearance to proceed with the project was obtained through the University's Research Governance and Ethics committee. The participants were assured that involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw without penalty. All participants who volunteered were informed about the study's

Table 1
Summary of the personal tutor role.

Summary of the key aspects of the personal tutor role	
Academic	Pastoral
Monitoring progress	Listening and providing help and advice related to personal issues/problems
Help with study skills	Being there – a critical friend
Help with writing essays and exam techniques	Provide access/referral to support agencies
Support with issues related to learning needs	Help with identifying solutions to problems
Providing information	Facilitating and nurturing personal growth
Support with personal development planning (PDP)	
Facilitating reflective skills	

Interview Schedule
Introductions – the purpose of the study, obtain consent, assure anonymity and confidentiality
Questions
What are your expectations of the personal Tutor Role?
Can you tell me about your experience of your personal tutor?
How has your personal tutor supported you on this programme of study?
Can you describe what you think the personal tutor role is?
What would you like to see from the personal tutor?
Is there anything you would like the personal tutor to do differently?
Have you any suggestions regarding the role of the personal tutor?
Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Fig. 1. Interview schedule.

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