

Tutoring During Transition: Students' Experiences and Preferences Towards Personal Tutoring in UK Higher Education.

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Abstract

In highlighting the difficulties and challenges associated with the transition into higher education (HE), the current study looked to explore students lived experiences and perceptions of personal tutoring during their first year of university. The personal tutor may play an important role in supporting students to successfully integrate and adapt to university. In addition, the study looked to understand students' preferences and experiences of online or face-to-face personal tutoring as tutors and tutees were required to move online during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Utilising a mixed methods approach, quantitative (e.g., questionnaire; $n = 203$) and qualitative (e.g., semi-structured interviews; $n = 6$) data were gathered from undergraduate students at a post-92 UK university. Once both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed, three meta-inferences were developed, guided by the aims of the research. First, students highlighted the multifaceted role of the personal tutor, expecting tutors to provide a range of different types of support (e.g., pastoral, academic, professional), whilst being flexible with their provision to meet the specific needs of the student. Second, students perceived the personal tutor to be a crucial source of support during the transition period but also sought consistent support throughout the duration of their degree. Finally, while students recognised the challenges with the rapid shift to online learning, students preferred face-to-face tutoring as it was perceived to facilitate a better tutor-tutee

relationship compared to online interactions. Overall, the current paper offers insights into the provision of personal tutoring and whether effective relationships and communities can be developed virtually to facilitate the transition into HE. The implications for HEI's and the provision of personal tutoring are also discussed.

Key words: personal tutor; higher education; university transition

Introduction

Early adulthood is marked by a series of major life events, otherwise known as transitions (Greene, Wheatley, and Aldava, 1992). A transition can be described as "a process or period in which something (or someone) undergoes a change and passes from one state, stage, form or activity to another" (Perry and Allard, 2003, p. 75). Common, yet significant life transitions can include, leaving the parental household, gaining employment, forming new relationships, and starting a family (Switek and Easterlin, 2016). One considerable transition for young people in the United Kingdom (UK) occurs when compulsory education ends and progression into higher education (HE), further training, or employment occurs (O'Donnell, Kean, and Stevens, 2016). Research has highlighted the transition into HE as a challenging period for many young adults (Briggs, Clark, and Hall, 2012), particularly those in their first year of university who are more likely to withdraw from their course if they feel they are unable to cope with the demands associated with HE studies (Masserini and Bini, 2021).

The transition from school or college to university can be difficult and adjusting to a new environment has been recognised as a challenge for new students (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Throughout the transition process, students must make sense of their own identity and how they fit into and adapt to university life (Tett, Cree, and Christie, 2017). The transition into higher education comes with a number of psychological demands (e.g., forming new identities) which can potentially have a significant impact on

students' overall mental health and wellbeing (Barkham et al., 2019). Krieg (2013) found that students transitioning into their first year of university experience higher levels of stress, which was due to the fact that students' experiences of higher education did not match their expectations. Moreover, students' who experience difficulties in adjusting to the first year in HE have reported issues such as a lack of connectedness (Perry and Allard, 2003), loss of personal identity (Christie et al., 2008), lack of peer support (Yorke, 2000), feeling unhappy, lonely, or alienated (Pargetter, 2000), and dissatisfaction with the institutional provision (Yorke, 2000). Overall, the transition into university is a major concern globally, with students' first year experiences directly impacting attrition rates (Brinkworth et al., 2009).

Previous research has suggested that a personal tutor can play an important role in supporting students to successfully make the transition into university, adjust to university life and to create a sense of belonging amongst students (Watts, 2011; Yale, 2019) which may be created by developing a community amongst students. Social learning theorists argue that membership to social groups and communities may enhance students feeling of connectedness through satisfaction with interpersonal relationships (Rovai, 2002; Li et al., 2009). Specifically, a community of practice has been defined as:

a persistent, sustained social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise (Barab, MaKinster, and Scheckler, 2003, p.238).

A community of practice is a social process that facilitates learning through building connections (Barab et al., 1999) by providing individuals with a safe environment to observe and interact with others (Li et al., 2009). Community of practice memberships can help create "a sense of identity and belonging, affirmation, commitment to the group, strong bonds, and the development of both common purposes and collective responsibility" (Westheimer, 1998, p. 12). Specifically, The Community of Practice model suggests that students

who work collaboratively with others, who have shared goals are best supported in their needs and learning trajectory (Barab, MaKinster, and Scheckler, 2003).

Informed by social learning theory, Orsmond, Merry, and Callaghan (2013) found that undergraduate students formed a community of practice within the university which contributed to students overall learning and identity development. As described by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002):

A community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts (p. 34).

It is possible the personal tutor can play a crucial role in developing a community of practice and develop students' sense of professional belonging and inclusion which is essential for engagement (Li et al., 2009).

The role of a personal tutor can be multifaceted and a crucial source of support for students especially during the first year of university (Yale, 2019). The responsibilities of the personal tutor might include but is not limited to providing students information about HE processes, pastoral support, developing a sense of belonging and integration amongst students, supporting students transition into university, and referral on to additional information or student support (Thomas, 2006). More often than not, a personal tutor is an academic member of staff, who may or may not have taught their tutees, but are assigned the responsibility of supporting students' academic and personal development (Walker, 2020). The role of a personal tutor can encompass various roles and responsibilities as summarised by Wheeler and Birtle (1993):

The personal tutor is needed by all students, including those who enjoy a relatively straightforward passage through university. The existence of this system in itself may reduce student anxiety. Personal tutors also provide assistance for students in need, an important aspect of this work is attention to academic work when difficulties are experienced. There is also a welfare component and students may seek advice on a wide range of matters including housing, finance, emotional and relationship problems (p. 3).

Whilst clearly an important source of support for the university student, one of the challenges of personal tutoring is that its delivery can vary across and within institutions (Owen, 2002). For example, within some universities, personal tutors may offer academic support only, whereas other institutions may offer both academic and pastoral support (Marr and Aynsley-Smith, 2006). Despite there being a number of UK regulatory bodies that provide a framework of personal tutoring in HE (e.g., The UK Professional Standards Framework, The UKAT Professional Framework for Advising and Tutoring), it is argued that there is a gap between this guidance and its operationalisation (Walker, 2020). However, if personal tutoring is implemented successfully, it can be a strategic tool used to increase student retention, progression, and transition outcomes (Ghenghesh, 2018). Despite some of the apparent benefits of personal tutoring, researchers have highlighted a lack of research clarifying personal tutoring roles and effective practice in HE, with a majority of studies being conducted in the nursing sector (Walker, 2020). This gap in knowledge may mean that there is no consistent approach to personal tutoring (Owen, 2002), and students may have vastly different expectations and experiences depending on their institution of study.

As previously mentioned, the transition to university is a potentially stressful situation for new students which can lead to withdrawal from university and poorer mental health (Collings, Swanson, and Watkins, 2016). As the current study will look to explore, it is possible the provision of a personal tutor may act as a buffer to the various psychological demands experienced by first year

university students and subsequently lead to a more successful transition outcome. There is therefore a need to add to the existing research on personal tutoring, specifically looking to explore students' experiences and perceptions of personal tutoring during their first year of university.

In addition, the current study will look to explore students' preferences towards online or face-to-face personal tutoring. It is not yet known what impact the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shift to online learning has had on students' experiences of personal tutoring. After the rapid shift from face-to-face to online learning students were faced with a number of challenges including personal adjustment to daily life, financial burden, and lack of social interaction due to isolation. Sahu (2020) explored the impact of the closure of universities and highlighted that the high level of uncertainty has resulted in increasing levels of stress and anxiety amongst students. As a result, students may need to be encouraged to seek emotional support, potentially through a professional service or a personal tutor.

Overall, the current paper looks to offer insights into the provision of personal tutoring and whether effective relationships and communities of practice can be developed virtually to facilitate perceived connectedness as students transition into HE. Specifically, the aim of the current study is two-fold. First, the study looks to add to existing literature and explore students lived experiences and perceptions of personal tutoring during their first year of university. Second, the study will look to understand students' preferences and experiences of online or face-to-face personal tutoring. Employing a mixed-method approach, the current study looks to explore the following three questions:

RQ1: What are students' perceptions and expectations of the role of the personal tutor?

RQ2: What are students' perceptions and expectations of the role of the personal tutoring in facilitating their transition into HE?

RQ3: What are students' experiences and preferences of personal tutoring during the shift from face-to-face to online tutoring?

Method

Researcher Positionality

A pragmatic research philosophy was adopted throughout the current study. Pragmatism focuses on developing practical solutions to applied research questions which as a result will aim to drive positive change (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). A pragmatist theory of inquiry suggests that knowledge is based on experience and the primary purpose of this inquiry is to create knowledge in order to bring about positive change and provide practical solutions for application in the context of HE (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019; Talisse and Aikin, 2008).

The focus on tangible and practical solutions is one justification for the philosophical stance within the current study. For example, the current study focuses on developing new knowledge on students transition into university during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically looking to understand their perceptions of personal tutoring and whether this relationship may be perceived to be useful in facilitating the transition. This data can then be used to potentially drive positive change including better transition outcomes, clarity of personal tutoring roles and the development of personal tutoring curriculum.

The pragmatic approach assumes that each individual has their own reality, and the purpose of the research is to understand participants 'true' reality (Creswell, 2003). The pragmatic paradigm places the focus on the research question and may utilise any methodological approach which works best for the particular research problem that is being investigated (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

Design

The current study used a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (Creswell and Plano Clarke, 2017), whereby both quantitative (e.g., questionnaires) and qualitative (e.g., interviews) methods were utilised. The rationale for using a sequential exploratory design was to use quantitative methods to capture empirical data, followed by the use of qualitative methods to expand upon and enrich these initial findings (Creswell and Plano Clarke, 2017). The current study looks to provide an in-depth understanding of personal tutoring in a UK university and the specific role of the tutor in facilitating students’ transition into HE. This integration of mixed methods research may also provide the audience with more confidence in the conclusions drawn from the study compared to the use of one single method of data collection (O’Cathain, Murphy, and Nicholl, 2010).

Participants and Procedure

Snowball sampling was used to recruit undergraduate students at a post-92 UK university. Once ethical approval was granted, the survey link was sent to personal tutors across the university who were asked to share the link with their tutees. The total number of participants in the quantitative phase of the study was 203 (see table 1 for a breakdown of participants demographics).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information from the Quantitative Phase

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	127	62.6
Male	75	36.9
Prefer not to say	1	.5
Age Group		
18-25 years old	160	78.8
26-30 years old	18	8.9
31-35 years old	8	3.9
36 or older	17	8.4
Year of Study		
Level 5 – 2 nd year undergraduate	203	100
Course		
Education Studies	21	10.3
Engineering	1	.5

Esports	9	4.4
Film and Media Production	2	1.0
Football Coaching and Performance	5	2.5
Forensic Psychology	9	4.4
Forensic Science	2	1.0
Game Design and Programming	5	2.5
Health and Social Care	4	2.0
Journalism	3	1.5
Journalism and Digital Media	2	1.0
Nursing	9	4.4
Paramedic Science	3	1.5
PE and Youth Sport Coaching	8	3.9
Policing	7	3.4
Policing and Criminal Investigation	40	19.7
Psychology	12	5.9
Psychology and Child Development	9	4.4
Psychology and Counselling	21	10.3
Psychology and Criminology	5	2.5
Sport and Exercise Science	12	5.9
Sports Coaching	7	3.4
Sports Therapy	2	1.0
Not identified	5	2.5
Do you have a personal tutor?		
Yes	201	99.0
No	2	1.0
Did your personal tutoring switch from on-campus to online due to COVID-19?		
Yes	190	94.1
No	3	1.5
I don't know	9	4.5

Following completion of the questionnaire, students were asked to provide their contact information should they be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview. In total, 11 participants volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview and were subsequently invited to attend. This resulted in a total of 6 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.83$; $SD = 5.60$; range 20 -34) agreeing to be interviewed with 3 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.67$; $SD = 4.62$) and 3 male participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 27$; $SD = 6.56$) being interviewed in-person ($n = 2$) and via Microsoft Teams ($n = 4$), all of whom had just moved into the second year of their degree.

Prior to the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study. All interviews were audio recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the author, which was also used to initiate immersion and familiarity with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Data Collection

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed using two questionnaires utilised in previous educational research (see Paechter and Maier, 2010; Grey and Osborne, 2020) to capture students' perceptions of personal tutoring and preferences towards online or face-to-face teaching. The questionnaire used is made up of four parts (a) demographic information (b) perceptions of personal tutoring, (c) evaluation of personal tutoring experiences and (d) preferences for online or for face-to-face components of personal tutoring.

In part a, students' demographic information was captured including age, gender, year of study, programme of study, whether they had a personal tutor and if this was impacted by the shift to online teaching. In part b, students' perceptions of personal tutoring were assessed with a focus on developing an understanding of the key principles and characteristics of effective personal tutoring. This section of the questionnaire was based on the measure developed by Grey and Osborne (2020) which was adapted to measure students' perceptions of personal tutoring only, whereas the initial questionnaire explored tutors' expectations as well. As a result, part b of the current questionnaire contains 11-items exploring perceptions of personal tutoring (e.g., All students in their first year of university must have a personal tutor) on six-point scale (ranging from 1 "*I disagree completely*" to 6 "*I agree completely*"). The following section of the questionnaire was focused on students' evaluation of personal tutoring experiences, with questions being drawn from Paechter and Maier's research (2010). Part c includes five

questions (e.g., my personal tutor supports and counsels me with regard to my learning processes) with students evaluating their personal tutoring experiences during their first year of university on six-point scale (ranging from 1 "I disagree completely" to 6 "I agree completely"). The final section, part d, involves 4-items where students were asked to evaluate their preferences for online or face-to-face teaching. Specifically, participants were asked to compare various elements of tutoring (e.g., easy, and fast accessibility to the personal tutor) and whether this can be better achieved through online or for face-to-face learning. Responses were provided on a seven-point scale (ranging from 1 "much better in face-to-face learning sessions" to 7 "much better in online learning sessions").

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for the current study as it allows for an extensive evaluation of participants' perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings towards the research area (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), in this case, their perceptions of personal tutoring in HE. When attempting to understand individuals' experiences of a unique topic, such as their personal learning experiences, participants should not be constrained by specific questions, especially when each participant may have vastly different experiences (Ritchie and Tate, 2003). The interview guide was designed deductively, in that it was guided by the questionnaire used. Whilst the interview guide sought to develop knowledge concerning students' perceptions of personal tutoring, their transition into university, and their interaction with their personal tutor (both face-to-face and online), the interview approach remained flexible, allowing the researcher to ask impromptu, probing questions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author and lasted between 31 and 77 minutes ($M_{min} = 49\text{min}$; $SD = 17.57$).

Data analysis

Quantitative phase

Data was collected using the online platform Qualtrics. Once the scheduled timeframe for survey responses had been reached, the online survey was closed, and participants responses were retrieved. Data were stored and analysed on IBM SPSS Statistics for Mac (version 28.0), with descriptive statistics being used to highlight students survey item responses. The quantitative data gained from the study were primarily used to provide descriptive information and to corroborate the findings from the qualitative data.

Qualitative phase

For the qualitative analysis, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was adopted as the method of choice as it can be used to describe data collected in rich detail through the identification, analysis, interpretation, and subsequent reporting of themes within the data set (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis was deemed an appropriate method of analysis for the current study due to its flexibility in allowing for both an inductive (e.g., focused on students' individual experiences) and deductive (e.g., guided by quantitative data) analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

In order to gain a full understanding of student's experiences and perceptions of personal tutoring during the transition into higher education, a deductive to inductive thematic analysis of the data was performed. First, consistent with the deductively designed interview questions, the first phase of analysis involved deductively exploring participants responses by comparing and building upon the findings from the quantitative data. Following this, participants transcripts were inductively analysed to explore and identify any new and novel themes which may not have been captured by the quantitative questionnaire but reflects students' lived experiences and perceptions of personal tutoring in HE. Reflexive thematic analysis involved the six-phase approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), including (a) familiarisation

with the data, (b) coding, (c) generating initial themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing up.

Legitimation

The current study drew upon Onwuegbuzie and Johnson's (2006) typology of legitimation for mixed method research to measure the overall quality of the research. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) outlined nine different types of legitimation (e.g., sample integration, paradigmatic mixing, commensurability), however, the current study incorporated legitimation through weakness minimization, inside-outside, and multiple validities.

First, weakness minimization refers to the extent to which the weakness from one approach (i.e., qualitative or quantitative) is compensated by the strengths from the other (i.e., quantitative or qualitative; Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006). For example, one weakness associated with taking a quantitative approach (e.g., lack of consideration of contextual factors) may be offset by the incorporation of qualitative approaches, and vice versa. Similarly, statistically significant results that are found during the quantitative phase of analysis may be able to be explained at a deeper or broader level through the use of qualitative methods (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, and Collins, 2011). Therefore, the current study used two complimentary methods, whereby the quantitative data was used to identify patterns in student responses, and the qualitative data was used to understand and broaden knowledge of students' interpretations and perceptions of their tutoring experiences.

Inside-outside legitimation refers to the extent to which the researcher incorporates both insiders' views and observer's views to enhance understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, and Collins, 2011). Inside-outside legitimation was enhanced by the researcher's familiarity with the study context and previous experience of being a personal tutor as well as receiving personal tutoring. In addition, the qualitative data gathered were read and reread numerous times in an attempt

to encourage the researcher to look beyond the written words and develop a greater awareness of participants' perceptions. Moreover, participants' quotes are presented in-text in order to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions and interpretations of the data. Inside-outside legitimization was also established by using peers (i.e., academic colleagues) to review different components of the data. Finally, as equal status is given to both the qualitative and quantitative components of current research, it is important both perspectives are systematically presented in the reporting of the results (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, and Collins, 2011).

Multiple validities legitimization refers to the incorporation of mixed validity approaches, that is, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed legitimization types to enhance the quality of inferences (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006). In the current study, the questionnaire used was adapted from a previously used instrument designed to measure students' perceptions of personal tutoring (see Grey and Osborne, 2020; Paechter and Maier, 2010). In addition, content validity was enhanced through the administration of a pilot study with two colleagues and one student, with feedback being used to refine the survey where necessary.

Qualitatively, the following criteria were used for enhancing methodological rigour; transparency (e.g., the clear outline of procedures used to collect and analyse the data; Smith and Caddick, 2012), reflexivity (i.e., how has the interpretation of the data been challenged and developed; Smith and McGannon, 2018), and resonance (i.e., has the research meaningfully reverberated and affected the audience; Smith and McGannon, 2018). In an attempt to enhance reflexivity, a critical friend (e.g., colleagues, researchers) were sought throughout various stages of integration (e.g., mixed data analyses, meta-inferences; Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, and Collins, 2011), which can be a useful tool to seek multiple perspectives and enhance researcher reflexivity (McGannon and Smith, 2015). In regard to resonance, thick descriptions and a detailed interpretation of the research findings have been provided and supported with supplementary material.

Meta-Inferences

Once both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed, findings were integrated and three meta-inferences were identified, guided by the aims of the research: (1) The multifaceted role of the personal tutor, (2) facilitating the university transition, and (3) preferences towards online or face-to-face.

The multifaceted role of the personal tutor

The first meta-inference represents 'the multifaceted role of the personal tutor' and provides support for previous literature that emphasises the complex nature of the personal tutor role (e.g., Ghenghesh, 2018).

Participants in the current study described the various roles and responsibilities of the personal tutor with one student summarising, "different students will want different things from their tutor. Academic support and career development advice is important to me but so is having that personal connection... I want that personal support too sometimes." These comments reflected students' perceptions that the personal tutor needed to be able to offer various types of support (e.g., academic, pastoral, professional) whilst also being flexible to the specific needs of the student. Moreover, these findings were further supported with the quantitative data (see table 2) which revealed that 99% of students perceived that personal tutors should support students' personal and professional development (slightly agree = 7%; agree = 44%; strongly agree = 48%; $M = 4.40$; $SD = .65$) and set goal and monitor students achievements (slightly agree = 22%; agree = 45%; strongly agree = 32%; $M = 4.07$; $SD = .77$). In addition, 97% of students perceived that personal tutors should support students' academic development (slightly agree = 11%; agree = 46%; strongly agree = 40%; $M = 4.23$; $SD = .76$).

Participants discussed some of the practical elements of personal tutoring in terms of its delivery and emphasised the need for one-to-one meetings with their personal tutor. During the interviews, one student

Table 2

Survey Questions and Summary Responses

Perceptions Personal Tutoring*	I disagree completely	disagree	slightly disagree	slightly agree	agree	I agree completely	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. All students in their first year of university must have a personal tutor	.5%	2%	.5%	10%	30%	57%	203	4.39	.87
2. Students should keep the same personal tutor throughout their degree programme.		6%	7%	17%	31%	39%	203	3.90	1.18
3. The first year of the degree programme should have greater focus for personal tutoring.		1%	6%	21%	43%	29%	203	3.93	.91
4. Personal tutoring should involve one-to-one meetings with a personal tutor.		.5%	1%	9%	39%	50%	203	4.38	.74
5. Personal tutoring should involve group meetings with a personal tutor.	1%	3%	8%	31%	42%	15%	203	3.56	1.02
6. Personal tutoring/advising should support student academic development.			3%	11%	46%	40%	203	4.23	.76
7. Personal tutoring/advising should support student personal and professional development.			.5%	7%	44%	48%	203	4.40	.65
8. Personal tutoring/advising should involve (collaborative) goal/target setting and monitoring of achievements against targets.			1%	22%	45%	32%	203	4.07	.77
9. Personal tutoring/advising should help students to learn how to learn and engage in effective study practices.	1%	6%	4%	18%	42%	29%	203	3.81	1.14
10. Personal tutoring/advising should help students understand and adjust to the		.5%	.5%	13%	41%	45%	203	4.30	.74

differences between studying in Higher Education and studying at school/FE college.

11. Personal tutors should help students interpret assessment results and feedback, to help them improve their academic performance. 2% 9% 1% 11% 35% **42%** 203 3.94 1.31

Evaluation of Personal Tutoring Experiences*	I disagree completely	disagree	slightly disagree	slightly agree	agree	I agree completely	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. When I need advice from my personal tutor, I can easily get in contact with her/him via e-mail, chat, forum etc.		1%	4%	15%	42%	38%	201	4.13	.86
2. My personal tutor gives fast feedback via e-mail, chat, newsgroups and/or other communication facilities.		2%	5%	20%	42%	31%	199	3.94	.96
3. My personal tutor supports and counsels me with regard to my learning processes.		1%	4%	21%	44%	30%	200	3.96	.89
4. I miss the personal contact with my personal tutor during the shift to online teaching.	7%	19%	10%	21%	27%	16%	200	2.91	1.54
5. Due to the online communication in the module personal relations are neglected with my personal tutor.	12%	30%	13%	20%	18%	7%	197	2.20	1.51

Preferences for online or for face-to-face components of personal tutoring**	Much better in face-to-face learning sessions	Better in face-to-face learning sessions	Slightly better in face-to-face learning sessions	Neutral (Neither better nor worse)	Slightly better in online learning sessions	Better in online learning sessions	Much better in online learning sessions	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>

1. Fast feedback from the personal tutor.	26%	21%	13%	22%	6%	5%	7%	202	2.04	1.81
2. Counselling and support of learning by the personal tutor.	35%	25%	12%	19%	3%	3%	3%	202	1.50	1.56
3. Possibility to establish personal contact with the personal tutor.	37%	26%	9%	18%	4%	4%	3%	202	1.48	1.61
4. Easy and fast accessibility to the personal tutor.	18%	11%	13%	30%	7%	11%	10%	202	2.69	1.87

Note: * Scale ranging from 1 (*Disagree Completely*) to 6 (*Agree Completely*); **Scale ranging from 1 (*Much better in face-to-face learning sessions*) to 7 (*Much better in online learning sessions*).

reflected on the personal tutoring they had received in the first year at university and criticised the lack of personal contact and connection with their tutor:

...without sounding rude, I didn't really get much out of the personal tutoring in the first year because I didn't have a one-to-one with [personal tutor], everything was done as a group and everything was done on Teams so... it's meant to be *personal* tutoring, but there wasn't anything personal about it.

Again, this was supported by the questionnaire responses as 98% of respondents reported that personal tutoring should involve one-to-one meetings between the student and tutor (slightly agree = 9%; agree = 39%; strongly agree = 50%; $M = 4.38$; $SD = .74$).

Finally, another key finding which was apparent across both the quantitative and qualitative data reflected students' perceptions of having one personal tutor throughout the duration of their course. Interestingly, a number of students felt they had developed a positive and effective relationship with their personal tutor during the first year of their degree and were left feeling frustrated after being allocated a different tutor the following year, one student reflected:

Personally, I would have liked the same tutor in second year... and speaking to my course mates we felt quite strongly about that... we've talked about that. We were happy with our tutor and now it's changed. It's the fact that we... the uni didn't even ask us... we had already got to know our tutor, we had that trust and now we have a new tutor... that was frustrating.

Furthermore, 87% of participants believed that students should keep the same personal tutor throughout the duration of their degree (slightly agree = 17%; agree = 31%; strongly agree = 39%; $M = 3.90$; $SD = 1.18$).

Facilitating the university transition

The second meta-inference of 'facilitating the university transition' refers to the perceived role of the personal tutoring in facilitating students' transition into higher education. Students in the current study emphasised the importance of the personal tutor, particularly their role in helping students adapt to their first year of university and the challenges that are associated with the transition (e.g., adjusting to a new environment, developing a new support network). Students believed that the personal tutor would be a useful source of informational (e.g., expected behaviours) and emotional (e.g., managing personal challenges) support as well as drawing on their own experiences of transitioning into HE:

Students are adapting to a lot when they come to uni and if you are 19 and coming from college it can be quite a lot to cope with. So it might be that they need to speak to the personal tutor about how to cope with that jump up to uni. This was further corroborated by the questionnaire responses with 99% of students believing that personal tutors should help students make the transition into HE (slightly agree = 13%; agree = 41%; strongly agree = 45%; $M = 4.30$; $SD = .74$) and 93% of students suggesting the first year of the degree should have a greater focus on personal tutoring (slightly agree = 21%; agree = 43%; strongly agree = 29%; $M = 3.93$; $SD = .91$).

Preferences towards online or face-to-face personal tutoring

The final meta-inference refers to students 'preferences towards online or face-to-face personal tutoring', with the current study looking to gain further insight into the impact of the shift from face-to-face to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in the current study appreciated the challenges tutors were faced with during the shift online, 'I think [personal tutor] did they best they could really, but it's hard online'. Generally, students were able to recognise the potential benefits of online (e.g., convenience) and face-to-face (e.g., social connection) delivery, but overall had a preference towards face-to-face personal tutoring as it allowed for the development of a

more effective relationship, one student reflected "it's different, isn't it? online and face to face, it's so different. I think when you speak in-person it's got that personal touch and when you are online you are missing that connection". Similarly, during the interviews, students discussed that online tutoring didn't allow for informal, 'corridor conversations', with a majority of students having their cameras off and not engaging online. The results from the questionnaire demonstrated that 72% of students felt that counselling and learning support from the personal tutor was better face-to-face compared to online (much better in face-to-face learning sessions = 35%; better in face-to-face learning sessions = 25%; slightly better in face-to-face learning sessions = 12%; $M = 3.96$; $SD = .89$). Moreover, 64% of students missed the personal contact with their tutor during the shift to online teaching (slightly agree = 21%; agree = 27%; strongly agree = 16%; $M = 2.91$; $SD = 1.54$) and 45% of students felt that personal relations were neglected with their tutor when online (slightly agree = 20%; agree = 18%; strongly agree = 7%; $M = 2.20$; $SD = 1.51$).

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore students' perceptions and experiences of personal tutoring during their transition into higher education. It also sought to understand students' perceptions of the role of the personal tutor and whether the quality of tutoring was impacted by the shift from online to face-to-face teaching.

The research highlighted the multifaceted role of the personal tutor, with students expressing the need for tutors to be able offer a wide range of support including, but not limited to pastoral, academic and professional support. As a result, it is necessary for the personal tutor to be able to provide flexible provision and tailor their support to student's individual needs. The student population is growing in diversity (Gidman Humphreys, and Andrews, 2000; Baker, 2020) and therefore a one size fits all model of personal tutoring may not be appropriate nor most effective (Barker and

Mamiseishvili, 2014). Instead, students in the current study value tutors who are able to offer flexible support, have a good knowledge of HE processes, and view each student as unique. These findings offer support for previous research which has highlighted the importance of holistic support from the personal tutor with students highlighting a number of important tutor traits including demonstrating empathy, being reliable, caring, approachable, non-judgmental, and showing a genuine interest in the tutee (Stephen, O'Connell, and Hall, 2008). Students who have positive experiences of personal tutoring have highlighted the importance of having a good relationship with their tutor as well as receiving both personal and academic support (Hixenbaugh, Pearson, and Williams, 2006). In contrast, students in the current study expressed actively avoiding contact with their personal tutor if they felt they did not care about them and their development. This was supported by Bates and Kaye (2014) who suggested this could have a detrimental impact on student experience, foster negative emotions (e.g., frustration), causing students to reconsider the value of the degree, which in turn is likely to impact student retention and institutional evaluation (e.g., the National Student Survey). Therefore, the information from the current study can be used to inform and guide tutor roles and responsibilities in order to ensure that students expectations are met. For example, it may be not all academic staff are best suited to become personal tutors, instead HE institutions should identify staff who value the role of the personal tutor and are confident and competent to deliver the role effectively (Ghenghesh, 2018). This may mean staff with important qualities (e.g., empathic understanding) become personal tutors and are able to develop a foundation for the tutor-tutee relationship, which then has the potential to support students through the transition into higher education (Brinkworth et al. 2009), facilitate social integration and foster a sense of belonging (Barefoot 2000; Thomas 2006).

Findings from the current study also outline that a majority of students (87%) would prefer to retain the same personal tutor throughout the duration of their degree, which has also been suggested in some previous research (i.e.,

Owen 2002; Thomas 2012). A number of participants in the current study described developing a strong relationship and connection with their personal tutor during the first year of university and were left feeling frustrated and angry when assigned a new tutor the following academic year. Research argues that developing a positive relationship with an academic member of staff can foster belonging within the student population, which is particularly crucial for students in their first year of university as it helps them to feel more connected to their course and institution (McFarlane, 2016). Student success and retention has consistently been linked to social integration and belonging in HE (Beard, Clegg, and Smith, 2007; Thomas et al., 2017). Therefore, personal tutors can play an important role in creating a sense of belonging amongst their tutees and helping students feel connected to the institution and academic community (McCary et al., 2011).

As described by Drake (2011, p.10) the personal tutor provides 'perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in their institution who cares about them'. Therefore, it may be useful for HEI's to assess whether it is feasible for students to retain the same personal tutor throughout their degree in order to allow students to develop a consistent relationship with an academic member of staff.

A majority of participants (98%) agreed that they believed personal tutoring should involve one-to-one meetings between the student and tutor, which can be an effective method for developing the tutor-tutee relationship, connection, and trust (Yale, 2019). In addition to this, 71% of students believe that personal tutoring should involve group tutorials. This concurs with Thomas' (2012) findings on the value of small groups in building peer relationships, promoting belonging, supporting transition and student success. Therefore, a combination of group and one-to-one tutorials appears to reflect best practice and student's expectations of personal tutoring. Specifically, group tutorials can be a useful tool to facilitate social integration amongst student peers (Cook and Rushton 2008). As highlighted earlier the student population has become a more diverse representation (e.g., mature students,

part-time students), as a result institutions must consider these target groups and strategies to facilitate social integration and a sense of belonging. These strategies may be best delivered by the personal tutor and may include activities such as peer mentoring, organised social events, and collaborative learning and teaching (Thomas, 2012).

An overwhelming majority of respondents in the current study (99%) believed that personal tutors should help students make the transition into HE. Moreover, respondents (93%) also agreed that the first year of their degree should have a greater focus on personal tutoring, which was further emphasised during the follow-up interviews. This provides further support for the recommendation of Thomas (2012) who outlined in the 'What Works study' that personal tutoring should be given greater focus during the first year of the degree than subsequent years in order to support students through the challenging transition into higher education.

Students in the current study were also asked to consider the impact of online learning, specifically whether the shift from face-to-face to online learning impacted the quality of the tutoring provision they received. Whilst students were cognisant of the challenges faced by tutors when delivering online, overall respondents felt that personal tutoring was more effective face-to-face. Nichani and Hung (2002) suggest that developing a community of practice online can be particularly challenging, with many social nuances (e.g., facial expressions, tones, gestures) that cannot be adequately expressed virtually. The authors argued that online interactions are often brief and intermittent, limiting the opportunity to develop relationships and build trust, which is needed when developing a strong community of practice (Wenger, 1996; Wenger and Snyder, 2000). It has been debated as to whether a community of practice can be developed virtually which is associated with a number of challenges which are not necessarily barriers when developing a face-to-face community (Wenger et al., 2002). For example, it has been questioned whether tacit knowledge can be shared online and whether relationships and trust can be developed in a virtual

environment (Davenport and Hall, 2001; Eraut, 2002). However, a review of the literature suggests that the use of both synchronous and asynchronous online interactions such as virtual meetings and discussion board activities facilitate connection with the learning community and engagement more broadly (Watts, 2016). However, students in the current study described a loss of personal connection with their tutor when online and preferred face-to-face personal tutoring, which is consistent with research exploring teaching during the pandemic (e.g., Besser, Flett, and Zeigler-Hill, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). White et al., (2005, p.83) argue that the role of a tutor when delivering face-to-face compared to online is different, 'in terms of the roles they assume and the ways they interact with students, and the attributes and expertise required of them'. It is therefore possible that personal tutors were not appropriately trained or equipped to deliver tutoring online as they were quickly required to do so due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it is also likely that the shift to online tutoring impacted social interaction and integration amongst student peers. Recent research exploring students first year experiences of personal tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic have also indicated that students were lonelier and more stressed due to a loss of social interaction (Hodgson, and Hagan, 2020). Despite this, research has suggested online platforms can be a useful tool to facilitate connectedness and belonging amongst groups (e.g., Tice et al., 2021; Thacker et al., 2022), it is possible that many HE institutions were not equipped, and staff members were not best prepared for the rapid shift from face-to-face to online learning, impacting students overall tutor experiences (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020). Moreover, it is possible that not all students were equipped to deal with the new teaching systems as a result of COVID-19, with many students being affected due to limited or no access to technological resources such as the internet to facilitate the tutoring process (Dube, 2020; Omodan, 2020; Omodan and Ige, 2021).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

It is recognised that the current study is limited by focusing on students' perceptions from only one HEI as well as collecting data from students at only one specific point in their academic journey (e.g., following completion of their first year). Despite the current study focusing on student's transition into university and the first year of their degree, it could be useful for future research to explore students' experiences longitudinally and assess any changes in students' perceptions and expectations of personal tutoring as they progress throughout their degree. For example, it is possible that students require greater personal tutoring support in the first year of their degree with the need for personal tutoring support diminishing as they progress through their degree and become more independent learners. Second, and beyond the scope of this paper, future research could look to implement cross-institutional research in order to offer a comparison of personal tutoring practice across HEI's. This information can not only be used to understand potential variations of personal tutoring across UK HEI's but may also inform the development of a structured framework of personal tutoring to provide consistency across and within institutions.

Another limitation of the current study relates to the questionnaire used which was adapted from previous research. The questionnaire developed specifically for this research and has not been validated, however it is hoped, the results are still of interest and value to institutions and individuals looking to improve the provision of personal tutoring.

Conclusion

The need for effective student support within HEI's has never been more salient considering the recent global pandemic and subsequent adverse mental health outcomes in young adults (Stroud and Gutman, 2021). The insights gained from this study regarding students' perceptions and expectations of personal tutoring in higher education have led to a number of practical considerations for institutions to contemplate. Despite the current study focusing on one HEI, it is possible the findings can be used to inform

and contribute to a model of best practice amongst HEI's across the UK in order to develop and deliver a more consistent model of personal tutoring. The current research highlights that first-year students desire meaningful contact with their personal tutor through the provision of one-to-one support sessions. In addition, students require a personal tutor who can provide holistic support and is able to offer flexible provision depending on the individual needs of the student. It is crucial HEI's consider how to best support students transition into higher education, especially during this challenging time (Pownall, Harris, and Blundell-Birtill, 2022). Specifically, HEI's can help the delivery of effective personal tutoring by providing clear guidelines regarding roles and expectations during the early phase of the students' educational transition.

Author's Disclosure Statement

All materials included in the article represent the author's own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no conflicts of interest that would influence the findings and dissemination of this paper.

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