Supporting Personal Tutoring in 2020-21

Introduction
The new academic year will be one of unprecedented challenges for Heriot-Watt University. For personal tutoring, as with so many areas of our activity, business as usual will not be an option. We already have indications of the challenges from student responses to the recent survey on the effects of Covid-19 on their learning experience.

- Running through the responses to the recent were many comments indicating a desire for a better connection with personal tutors.
- Only 32% of respondents found their personal tutor helpful throughout the rapid shift to online learning.
- Most students were understanding of the fact that personal tutors’ lives had also been put on hold and turned upside down, but felt that even a bi-weekly communication – at least a blanket email to all tutees – would have been a helpful support opportunity.
- Students seeking help and advice reported that some personal tutors were unresponsive to their emails.
- Some students indicated that they still do not know/had not met their personal tutor.
- On a more positive note, those who had built a good relationship with their PT prior to the pandemic felt supported by the system.

The Coronavirus crisis and the University’s adoption of Responsive Blended Learning mean we have to re-engineer personal tutoring. We need to find ways of delivering support to our students effectively, smartly and without adding new pressures to academic colleagues or others who are already working hard to adapt to the new learning and teaching environment. RBL emphasises the wellbeing of students and staff. Personal tutors have a key role in promoting student wellbeing through the advice, guidance and referral that they provide, and the University should consider how personal tutors can be supported.

How Can We Support Personal Tutoring in 2020-21?
The six proposals in this paper are designed to support personal tutors to meet the challenges of the coming academic year.

1. **Guidance on Personal Tutoring in the Context of COVID-19 and RBL**
Guidance for personal tutors in supporting students remotely will be developed and updated by the Student Experience Manager in consultation with the Quality Enhancement Officer and Schools through the Induction and Support Group convened by the Deputy Registrar. This will incorporate existing guidance from the Learning and Teaching Academy and the updating of existing support resources for personal tutors such as the Quick Referral Guide for each campus. This will be relevant for the personal tutoring of both new and continuing students. In addition, The Student Experience Manager will work with colleagues in Student Wellbeing to hold a number of wellbeing related events for personal tutors and other interested colleagues. These online meetings will outline the support available to students, discuss how to refer students online and answer questions.
2. **Standardised use of Microsoft Teams**

Guidance on developing a Virtual Environment for Personal Tutoring in Microsoft Teams to be developed by the Academic Quality Team. This will be a powerful tool for informal tutor-tutee and tutee-tutee contact, and University & Department information dissemination.

MS Teams is a potentially very powerful tool for personal tutors to use to:

- Enhance personal tutor/tutee engagement in both group and one to one settings.
- Develop the potential for the tutee group to become a mutually supporting social network.
- Develop an inter-year peer mentoring network among tutees.

Personal tutors can therefore facilitate students to become co-creators of the learning environment.

**Guidance is currently under development and will be shared with Personal Tutors in Block 3. Draft of the guidance can be found here.**

3. **Additional Contact Points**

Heriot-Watt has already developed a framework contact points for personal tutors and their tutees which forms a minimum for Schools. We propose a revised framework based on the discussions of previous meetings summarised in the table below. This includes contact points in both semesters for all students in Consolidation Week. This fits with the ethos of Consolidation Week as a time for reflection on progress already made, challenges faced and the tasks to be addressed in the rest of the semester. In addition, the early allocation of personal tutors will mean that an additional contact point can be arranged for new students during Welcome Week and also for continuing students at the start of semester 1. The week 7/8 pre-assessment contact point for new students in semester 1 will now move to week 10 and a new contact point for both new and continuing students will be established in week 10 of semester 2.

**Summary of Personal Tutor Contact Points for 2020-21 for New and Continuing Students.**

**Semester 1**
- Start of semester – Welcome Week (new and continuing students) or Teaching Week 1 (continuing students)
- Consolidation Week 6
- Teaching Week 10

**Semester 2**
- Start of semester (for all students but for new students, the initial meeting at the start of the semester is particularly important).
- Consolidation Week 6
- Teaching week 10

4. **Online Personal Tutor Training**

Exploring Personal Tutoring now exists as an online course on the WorkRite platform. WorkRite will grant access to the training for staff on request from Heriot-Watt. We propose to launch online training for the start of August so current personal tutors who have not been trained can do so in time for the new semester. As the uptake of training will be dependent on support from the Schools, we propose that Schools inform staff of the online training and explain why it is necessary. Text will be supplied by the Student Experience Manager. It is important that training is seen as a means of supporting the development of personal tutors, not as an additional task to already hard-pressed academic colleagues. Note: the online course is ready for use now but any revisions will delay its availability until after the start of the semester. Further online resources on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Unconscious Bias requested by Student Representative Bodies to also be developed.
5. **Pulse Survey - Agreed by COVID 19 L&T Group 27th July 2020**
The new situation requires new means of gathering student opinion which we can demonstrate responsiveness to. We propose to run two pulse surveys at the start and end of the academic year in a similar format to that organised in semester 2. The surveys should gauge the student experience, they will not be personal tutor focussed, but relevant to the work of personal tutors.

6. **Personal Tutoring Award - Agreed by COVID 19 L&T Group 27th July 2020**
Personal tutoring is not always recognised or prioritised in institutional thinking throughout the sector, therefore HWU should take the lead in recognising good personal tutoring practice and seek the agreement of each campus student union/council/association to create a student nominated award for outstanding personal tutoring. A small focus group will be set up to discuss how these awards work over the next few weeks.