7STEPS WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

7 Steps to:
Effective Personal Tutoring

Overview

Personal tutoring is a challenging yet rewarding role (Stephen et al, 2008). It serves a vital function in personalising the higher education experience of our students (Owen, 2002). Personal tutors have an important responsibility throughout a student's time at university, but this is never more vital than in the first few weeks, easing the transition to university and helping the student engage quickly with learning at HE level (Wilcox et al, 2005).

Effective personal tutors will promote the academic achievement and personal development of all their tutees by monitoring their progress, taking an interest in their academic, career and personal development and encouraging students to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them during their time at university (e.g. Barfield et al, 2006; CRA, n.d.).

Students will vary in their need for personal support (Thomas, 2006). Sometimes a student will face personal, legal or financial issues that have an impact on their ability to study effectively and will hinder their learning. For students experiencing difficulties the personal tutor provides support by listening, supporting their reflection on options for resolution, and signposting the relevant available services (Neville, 2007).

1. Understand the Role

At Plymouth University personal tutors are designated as a sustained and first point of reference for individual students. The role is a pro-active, developmental one and includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Being a consistent point of contact for the student.
- Ensuring that tutees know how to contact them.
- Providing general feedback on overall academic performance and offering appropriate guidance.
- Signposting services that students might access to support their further development or to obtain appropriate professional guidance on academic or pastoral matters and providing appropriate assistance where required to support students in accessing such services.
- Encouraging students to engage with all the opportunities that time at University has to offer.
- Fostering the development of students' reflective and independent learning strategies.
- Encouraging students to engage in Personal Development Planning and to give timely consideration to their future aspirations where appropriate.
- Ensuring that tutorial meetings are arranged at appropriate intervals.
- Respecting confidentiality and protection of information shared with them by their personal tutees.

Full detail on the Personal Tutoring policy and support at Plymouth University are available at **www1.plymouth.ac.uk/ouruniversity/teachlearn/guidanceresources/Pages/personaltutoring.aspx**

2. Support Personal Development

Effective tutors are good at motivating their students to engage in learning. By taking an interest, asking questions and setting expectations in relation to personal development, tutors can help students to make good use of their time at university, whether in relation to their academic, career or personal development. For many tutors, this aspect of their role will be formalised in their department tutorial system and will link to the departmental strategy on Personal Development Planning (PDP) (Laycock, 2009).

In addition to the PDP support provided for your students within their programme, the University offers an e-portfolio called 'PebblePad' (available on the intranet through the MyEdesk dropdown, under e-portolio). PebblePad helps students to manage their personal development by providing a range of tools that will help them to record, reflect and plan.

3. Manage Student Expectations

It is helpful from the outset to be clear with your tutees about what they can expect from you (CRA, n.d.); this should be congruent with Plymouth University policy and the guidelines for your School's tutorial system as explained in the Programme Handbook. You need to be approachable and accessible, and clear about your availability and expertise. Tutors can be expected to listen, offer academic advice and refer tutees to support services, but it is not their role to try to solve a tutee's problems (Grant, 2007).

References

Barfield, S., Hixenbaugh, P. & Thomas, L. (eds.) (2006). Critical reflections and positive interventions: An electronic casebook on good practice in personal tutoring. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resource_database/personal_tutoring_ecasebook_2006. Accessed 7th March 2011.

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Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie Gauld, M. (2005) 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. Studies in Higher Education, 30(6), 707-722.

Whilst most of the problems presented by tutees are easily handled, in cases where this is more difficult you may want to consult a senior colleague or the appropriate support service (e.g. Counselling, Disability Assist Services etc).

4. Monitor Students' Well-being

There may be times when you need to speak with someone as a matter of urgency because you are concerned about your own or someone else's immediate well-being or safety. Plymouth University Counselling service provides two helpful resources on support available in a time of crisis: 'Guidelines for Action – Risk of Serious Harm to Self or Others' and 'Guidelines for Action – Staff with Concerns about a Student's Well-being'. These flow charts help you quickly and easily decide what action may need to be taken. This website also provides contact numbers of emergency and out of hours services. It is available at: **http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling/Pages/crisis.aspx**

5. Refer to other Support Services

When a student has concerns or experiences difficulties, they may come and talk to you. However, it is important to remember that your role is not one of counsellor (Grant, 2007). You need to listen to your student in order to identify what their issues are and then, if their problems are beyond your remit, you need to refer the student on to the appropriate source of specialist support (Wheeler & Birtle, 1993).

The quickest route to information about what is available can be found from the university home page by clicking on 'Student Services', then 'All Student Services' (**http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/studentgateway**).

6. Interact: your interpersonal skills

Students experiencing difficulties will seek your support when they are feeling low and vulnerable. Be approachable and give the student your full attention: minimise external distractions (e.g. find a private space, turn off computer screen etc), sit informally (preferably not behind your desk), make comfortable eye contact and use your body-language to demonstrate your attention. Do not offer judgements or interrupt, and try not to tell the student what you would do in their place. Instead, listen to what the student has to say. Use paraphrasing to show you are listening, e.g. "what I am hearing is …". Use questioning to clarify points e.g. "what do you mean when you say ...". Periodically summarize what is being said. This further helps to check your understanding, will help the student focus on the main issues for them, and will help you both in deciding what needs to be done next (CRA, n.d.; Wheeler & Birtle, 1993).

7. Respect Confidentiality

Under the terms of the Data Protection Act, students have the right to request access to most information held about them. Tutees should be able to trust that tutors will respect their wishes with regard to confidentiality, unless there is a requirement to disclose.

Sometimes a tutor will need to disclose details to another person or agency that is better placed to help. This is normally because a tutor has concerns about the well-being of the student (or others), the student has a disclosed condition, or the tutor suspects a criminal offence. It is preferable to come to an agreement with the tutee about to whom the information may be passed. Where such agreement has been difficult to reach, it is a wise to confirm this in writing. Ultimately, tutors need to balance the right to confidentiality against other obligations and should not hesitate to consult others if in doubt.