Enhancing Student Support (ESS)

Personal Tutor System Evaluation: Student Focus Groups

College of Science and Engineering

School of Biological Sciences (4 students)

1. In biosciences it would seem that the first two years are generic and students don’t really choose their degree stream until year 3. They may therefore have a PT who is outside their own subject area and there was an impression that this is not helpful to any academic discussions between student & PT. They were all quite clear that an improvement to the system would be to have a PT closely matched to the subjects being studied.

2. While only one student explicitly said their PT was not approachable, the team got the impression this was generally not as good as it could be. There was not a strong feeling that students would turn to their PT automatically as a first choice whenever they needed help.

3. The students felt they should have more guidance on the role of the PT and what they could expect from their personal tutor, particularly perhaps in areas of support other than choosing courses.

4. None of the students considered that anything other than email communication with their PT was necessary.

5. Preparing notes before the meeting with a PT was not considered necessary; notes during a meeting may be taken but depends on context/subject of meeting.

6. None of the students were familiar with the concept of Group Meetings as a separate activity to 1:1 meetings; and while one student did have a group meeting with their PT it seems this was in lieu of separate 1:1 meetings. That PT had said the students could have 1:1 time with the students after the group meeting but the student did not take up this offer. The three other students had all had 1:1 meetings but never a group meeting.

7. None of the students were aware of the roles of Student Support Officer/Student Support Team and none were aware of a separate physical location for such support.

School of Chemistry (9 students)

1. This appeared to be a very contented student body in terms of their satisfaction with the Personal Tutor system within the School. It was noted that the focus group was made up of RAs and class reps who were likely to be proactive and self-motivated.

2. There appears to be an unstructured, open door policy in Chemistry and this is popular with the students. The general feeling was that structured, formalised meetings would be seen as a chore and not worthwhile, especially in later years. It was felt that first years may need a more structured system as well as more
information about the role of the PT. Students liked that they could either knock on
their PT’s door to arrange a meeting or drop them an email.

3. The students were not aware of any group meetings in the later years but it appears
that in first year the Personal Tutor holds the tutorials for their students and this was
seen as a good idea. Students would like group meetings in later years but only if
they know the aims and the direct benefits of the meetings to them e.g placement,
employment.

4. There does not appear to be a strong sense of community across the years and one
student said that there is ‘no buddy system’. This could possibly be improved by
group meetings. Students were also keen to meet with students in upper years for
peer advice.

5. The students did not have any major issues with the PT system in Chemistry and did
not really offer any suggestions on how to improve the PT system other than fewer
students per PT and to be allocated a PT with similar academic interest areas.

6. The students had no idea who the Senior Tutor or Student Support Team is. This is
potentially putting a burden on PTs in Chemistry as most students go to their PT for
help and advice.

**School of Engineering** (6 students)

1. Overall the students were satisfied with the advice provided by their PT and were
comfortable approaching them for help.

2. None of the students knew what services student support provide or knew details of
who the support staff were or what they could ask.

3. There was no desire for group meetings as the students could not see the relevance.

4. More communication from PTs as to their availability and who to contact in their
absence is needed.

5. Some students went to advice place for help with personal issues.

**School of GeoSciences** (2 students)

1. Students felt it hadn’t been so easy to arrange the meeting with their PT; there was
lots of emailing back and forth.

2. Their PTs told them to email them directly as opposed to contacting them through
MyEd.

3. Students were uncertain as to the existence and role of the Student Support Officers.

4. Students thought that more meetings (2-3 per semester) would be helpful, even if
they are just quick check-up meetings.

5. Students felt uncomfortable speaking in group meetings and thought they should be
informal in nature.
6. Students perceived meetings with PTs as something informal, i.e. that doesn’t require preparation or notes.

7. Students thought that a definitive list of all the things of all the things you should see your PT about would be very helpful.

8. Students feel supported once the initial barrier has been broken, i.e. once the initial meeting with the PT had taken place.

School of Informatics (1 student)
To Follow.

School of Mathematics (1 student)

1. Personal Tutor is the first port of call for everything. Their main role is to provide academic advice and guidance but they’re also the go-to person for pastoral advice, careers guidance etc. (or would point students to where to find help on these).

2. No direct contact with SST / Teaching Office and no perceived need for support via this route.

3. No group meetings. But could see the value in these, especially with peers from the same year group. One interesting concrete suggestion was that PT group meetings could be used by groups of students as a route for providing feedback on courses as an alternative to / in addition to end of course surveys (more on this below).

4. Students don’t like surveys. Not directly related to student support per se, but there’s a widespread perception among students that they are over-surveyed (hence the low return rate problem).

5. Students don’t like MyEd, both in terms of the meeting booking tool and more generally. In addition, the meeting booking tool is too impersonal and formal for arranging meetings with PT.

6. Having a ‘good’ PT makes a huge difference. The ability to offer solid academic advice on course choice, including some familiarity with course content, is essential, but being personable and approachable is also key. Given the choice between staying with the same PT or having a different PT each year who has specialist knowledge of that year’s curriculum, would choose the latter. This would also give students a better chance of having a good PT at some point during their studies.

7. PTs training would be helpful, to help PTs gain same level of competency and so to give students a more equitable experience.

8. The PT role does not, and should not, include monitoring academic performance or personal development.

School of Physics & Astronomy (4 students)
To Follow.
College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine

Biomedical Science (5 students)

1. Careers and Relationship between the PT role. The PT’s an important conduit and is a proactive one at that.

2. Group Meetings are seen as valuable, especially when they go across the year for the cross-fertilization of knowledge and experience.

3. MyEd is not at all popular and so is not used by the 4 interviewed. It’s viewed as inaccessible and they’re happier sticking to email where they always get a swift response from their PT.

4. Lack of any awareness of the other pastoral and practical support on offer.

5. Students view their PTs from a hierarchical perspective; they’re not keen to approach their PT on personal matters, assuming it’s over-stepping some mark and that in all likelihood the PT couldn’t do anything about their problem anyway.

6. All students saw the benefits of the ongoing electronic record of PT meetings.

MBChB (16 students)

1. Some PTs don’t reply to emails.

2. Lack of clear guidance on lines of support other than PT.

3. Perceived inconsistency of PTs within the system – becoming a PT shouldn’t be compulsory.

4. Essential to have an established rapport with PT in order to feel confident to approach them with a personal problem. Students want more meetings.

5. Very positive comments about group meetings.

6. All PTs using email to organise emails. Tutees then formalise it by putting it on EEMeC (some students unaware of this procedure).

7. Reluctance to give information to PT or SSO in fear that it may escalate with regards to issues of Fitness to Practice. Some students have concerns w.r.t. confidentiality of information passed to staff.

RDVSV (4 students)
To Follow.

Oral Health Sciences
To Follow.
College of Humanities and Social Science

Business School (3 students)

1. Students had never heard of PT group meetings, had not had a group meeting, and were not aware that they were due to have any;

2. Students were not aware that their School had a Student Support Office and were unaware of their School’s Student Support Team;

3. The three students’ experience of personal tutoring differed markedly: one student was unstinting in her praise of her PT, while another felt that her experience with her PT had been unsatisfactory and that her PT had little time for her;

4. Use of MyEd to contact PT appeared to students to be too impersonal and they would rather use email;

5. Note keeping and preparation for meetings with PT would be helpful to direct discussions and make the most of time in meeting. Direction that meetings took expected to differ depending on year of study;

6. Students appeared to be aware of services offered by University and would only use PT for academic issues or where personal issues caused problems with academic work.

School of Divinity (2 students)

1. It was very important to these students to have had continuity of PT insofar as possible; both had had this and very much valued it.

2. These students didn't have much exposure to group meetings or the IT tools, though they had some constructive comments about how these might be used. They could see why someone might use the 'request a meeting' function in MyEd but they preferred to contact their tutor in person or by email.

3. The students were very positive about their experience with the PT system in Divinity, and seemed to feel that it was an improvement over the DoS system.

4. This may be an anomaly due to a very small sample size, but the students didn't seem to even know who their student support team was, and they go straight to their PT for all issues.

5. The students felt able to discuss both academic and personal issues with their PT.

6. Meetings with PT become more focused/direct in nature as students progress through their degrees.

School of Economics (5 students)

To Follow.

Edinburgh College of Art (2 students)

To Follow.
School of Education (6 students)

1. Meetings with Personal Tutors

The students felt, generally, that the meetings were helpful and valuable; however, three of them reported having had their personal tutor changed this year, something that had not been followed by any formal contact with the new PT. While no formal preparation was required for meetings, unless the student had a particular issue they wanted to discuss, it was felt that this would be useful to make the most out of the meeting. It seemed to emerge that although the meetings had a generic focus, some students tended to be proactive in identifying questions to ask and therefore make the interaction fruitful. One student also suggested that it would have been helpful to have a “skeleton” structure of questions and points to be covered with the PTs.

As to the extent to which meetings addressed matters relating to academic progress, the responses were mixed: some students gave an affirmative response, whereas other said that meetings had a “generic” focus (i.e. the PT asked them generally how things were going).

Personal tutors were regarded as generally accessible; however, some students felt that their PTs were “busy” with their research—hence, they pointed out that for them to have a clear “agenda” to discuss in a meeting was especially important to maximise the time at their disposal.

Overall, the following were noted as positive aspects:
- Availability and accessibility of PTs;
- Trust between students and PTs and confidentiality of discussions;
- Students feeling that they were listened to;
- Ability of the PT to help students reflect on their studies as well as encouraging them to think “beyond their studies”;
- Providing support in “career matters”—students felt that they could approach their PTs to ask for advice and for reference letters.

Meetings were arranged via email and also via sign-up sheets. Students reported that at least 2 meetings a year are compulsory in the School of Education. However, it emerged that students tended to see PTs more often than that in some cases. Records of meetings seemed to be kept via EUCLID—with at least one student reporting to have been encouraged to review and agree with or comment on the PTs’ notes. Students felt able to contact their PTs at all times and expressed marked preference for email: response times were quick, usually within a day or two.

Students suggested the following as areas for improvement:
- Securing continuity in the PT/student relationship;
- When PTs are changed, ensure that the new PT sees his/her new students, even if in a group setting;
- Allocating students to PTs lecturing on the same programme or area, with whom they shared academic interests;
- Having a clearer statement of the objectives of the meeting, backed up by a “skeleton structure” for it, to encourage preparation and inform discussion.

2. Group Meetings

Students seemed generally happy about the provision of group meetings in their School. However, there were somehow different perceptions as to their content, focus and function, which are motivated at least in part by School-specific factors including the fact that students are enrolled in mainly small programmes and consequently, tend to know and interact with each other and their lecturers quite well already. The group meetings seemed to be aimed at engendering this type of interaction—the students reported that these meetings were “social” in nature and therefore did not necessarily address “academic” issues, i.e. questions related to the programmes of study and so on. Nonetheless, they were valued as an opportunity to meet other students—especially those on a different year of study—and ask them questions about courses and other similar matters.

Possible areas of improvement include:
- Making the focus of group meetings more relevant for students belonging to different years of study, so as to reflect their needs at a given stage of their study;
- Giving the meetings a clearer and better-defined structure and goals.

3. The Student Support Office

With the exception of one student, none of the participants knew that the SSO existed in the School: one student reported having known about it a few weeks ago (she is an Honours student). The student who knew about the office explained this by reference to the particular nature of her entry and of the structure of her degree. Students reported that they would normally seek advice from their PTs or from the Advice Place as well as from the third floor in the Main Library—the latter was especially popular for students wanting advice on, inter alia, study skills.

Students suggested that this situation could be improved by making the SSO more “visible” around the building (e.g. by posters) and also by asking the PTs to mention where the Office is and what it is for in individual meetings.

School of History, Classics and Archaeology (6 students)
To Follow.

School of Health in Social Science (1 student)
To Follow.
School of Law (7 students)

1. The Personal Tutor needs to be related to the student’s specific programme or at least know enough about the student’s specific programme to be able to advise the student on course selection and progression.

2. There needs to be consistency among the Personal Tutors in terms of the duration and quality of their interactions with students.

3. The students would prefer to have the same Personal Tutor throughout their academic career in order to allow for more consistency of service and to help foster a more personal relationship with their Personal Tutor.

4. The students don’t know what to expect (and what not to expect) from their Personal Tutor.

5. The students don’t have a personal enough relationship with their Personal Tutor.

6. The students don’t consult their Personal Tutor about purely personal issues.

7. All but one of the students weren’t aware of the possibility of Personal Tutor group meetings. None of them have taken part in a Personal Tutor group meeting, and all of them agree that such a thing would be beneficial (especially in their first year).

8. The students weren’t aware of the existence of a Senior Tutor and could benefit from confirmation of their Senior Tutor’s contact details and roles.

9. All but one of the students weren’t aware of their School’s Student Support Team, and they could benefit from confirmation of the Team’s contact details and roles.

10. The students have a mixed understanding and expectations of MyEd (eg booking meetings and recording notes).

School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures (5 students)
To Follow.

School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences (9 students)

1. Many students unclear about distinction between PT and SSO role. Students would like to have been introduced to SSO Team at Freshers or later weeks.

2. As PPLS had not held any group meetings, some students suggested that any future group meetings could be subject specific or year specific. A very good suggestion was that 2nd year students in particular would benefit from a presentation on difference between pre-honours and honours work/procedures etc.

3. Many students would have preferred more frequent meetings with PTs, especially after coursework returns in mid-semester.

4. As some PTs were rather unfriendly, students would have liked to discover more about PT research or personal interests in an attempt to produce a more interesting meeting.

5. Group meetings could also include talks from Careers Service, Study Abroad advice etc.
School of Social and Political Science (6 students)
To Follow.