

Partners for progression: engaging the learning community in supporting student success (PfP)

The Role of the Personal Academic Tutor Report of findings from initial staff survey

[Draft]

The University of Northampton
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1.0 Context

In a higher education context, personal tutors are usually academic staff who, in addition to their normal working duties, provide an extra layer of academic guidance and pastoral support to an assigned number of students (Wheeler & Birtle, 1995). At the University of Northampton, personal tutors work within a Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) scheme, which supports PATs through training and guidance. The PAT scheme is a specific strategy for supporting the student experience, promoting student progression and helping students achieve their academic goals.

The Partners for Progression project aims to engage the entire learning community in supporting student success. As part of this project, several current initiatives are being reviewed to determine whether these are effective and/or if further support or resource is required. This report presents the findings of an initial staff survey that was carried out in March-April 2014 to understand the PAT scheme from the PAT's perspective. Findings from this survey will contribute to the Institution's understanding of the support, delivery and impact of the PAT scheme. Data are presented in the next section, followed by a set of possible recommendations.

2.0 Results

2.1 Participants

The survey included both quantitative and open-ended questions. It was distributed (by email) to academic staff in all six Schools: NBS, Arts, Health, Education, Social Sciences, Science and Technology. Completed surveys were received from 72 participants. It is difficult to represent this as a response rate since it is unclear how many staff were included in email distribution lists. However, it is plausible to suggest that this is a relatively low rate of response. Figures 1 and 2 show the frequency distribution of participants by role and by School/Area.

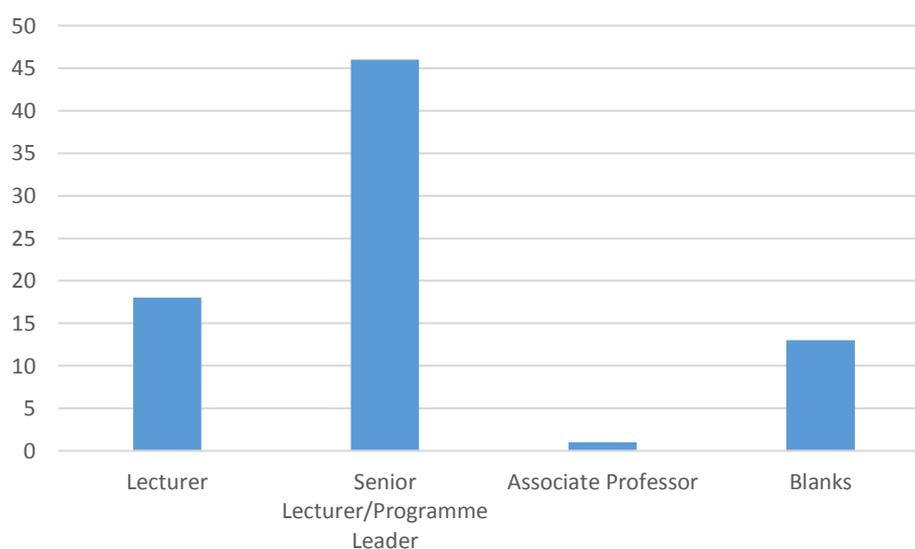


Fig 1. Number of participants by role ($n=72$)

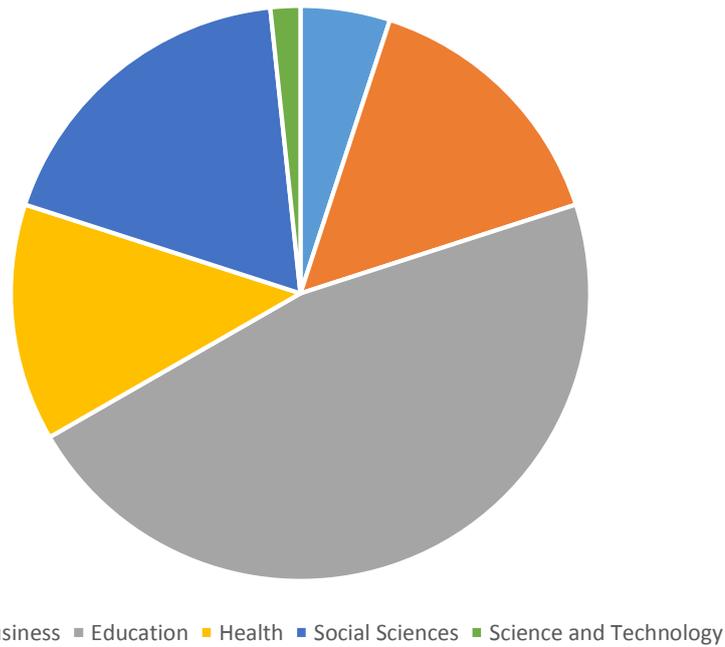


Fig 2. Number of participants by School/Area ($n=72$)

The School of Education offered nearly half of the data for this survey. Senior Lecturers and Programme Leaders were the largest categories of participants.

2.2 Perceptions of training, support and ability

Staff were asked to report their response to a series of statements. Several of these statements dealt with their perceptions of training and guidance related their role as a PAT and two of these statements addressed their confidence level in performing the role.

Statement 1: “I feel that I have been appropriately trained to work as a Personal Academic Tutor.” (Figure 3)

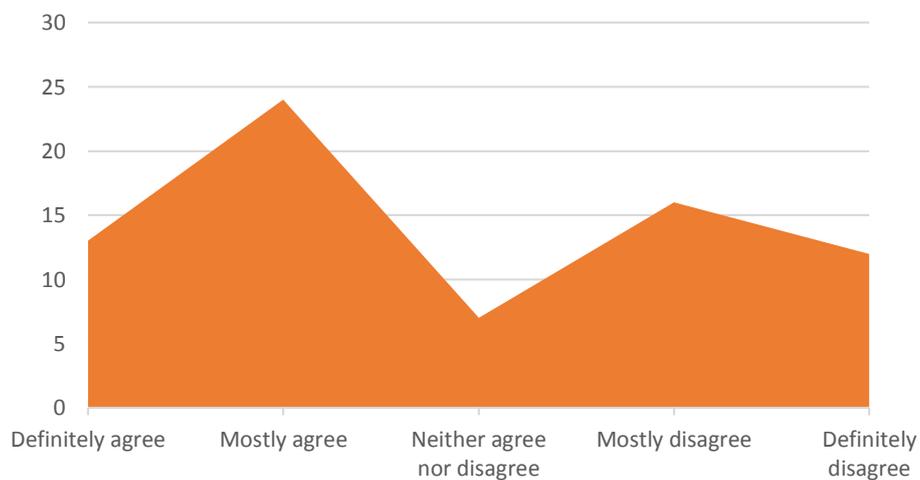


Fig. 3

Statement 2: “I am equipped with resources (such as the PAT Handbook) to support me in my role as a Personal Academic Tutor.” (Figure 4)

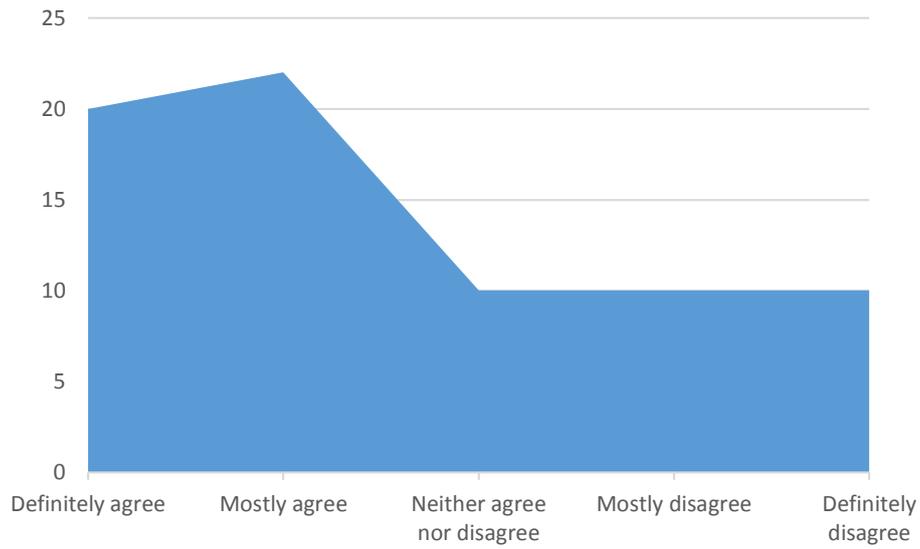


Fig. 4

Statement 3: “I am familiar with the PAT Handbook and I refer to it in my role as a Personal Academic Tutor.” (Figure 5)

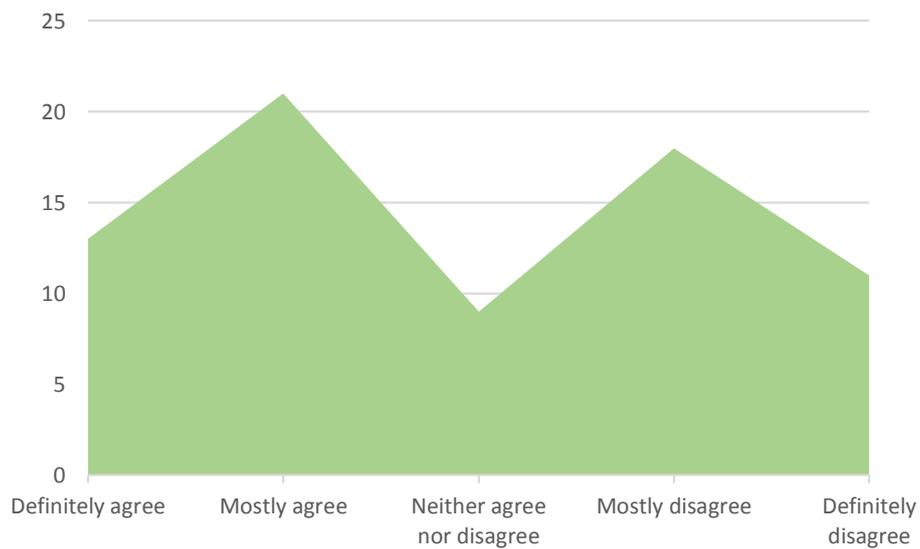


Fig. 5

Statement 4: “I feel that I have enough time to carry out administrative functions (scheduling meetings, monitoring, referrals, reference letters) related to my role as a Personal Academic Tutor.” (Figure 6)

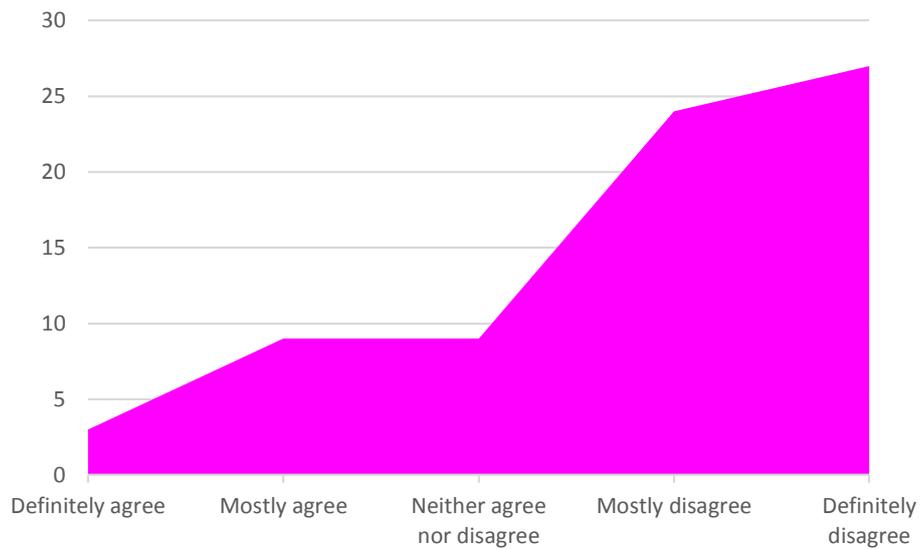


Fig. 6

Statement 5: “I feel confident in the pastoral support aspect of the Personal Academic Tutor role.” (Figure 7)

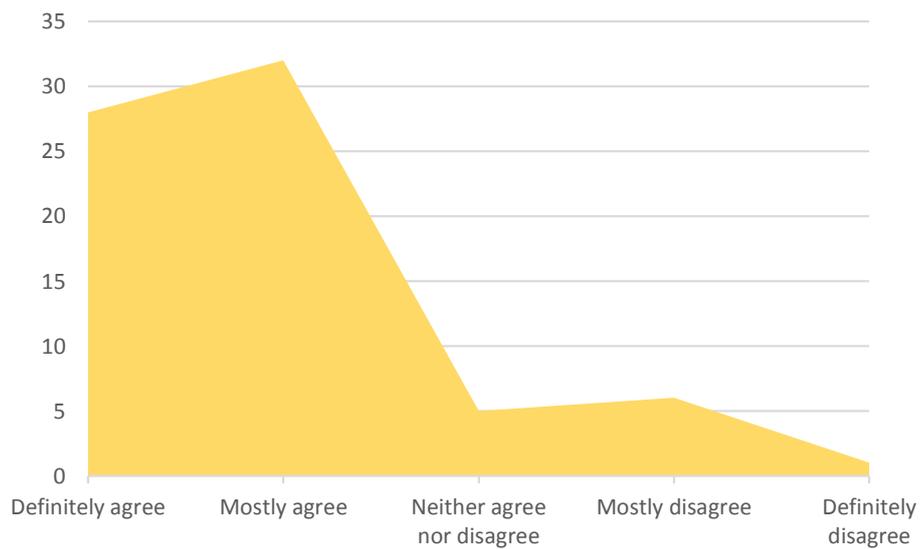


Fig. 7

Statement 6: “I feel confident in the academic support aspect of the Personal Academic Tutor role.” (Figure 8)

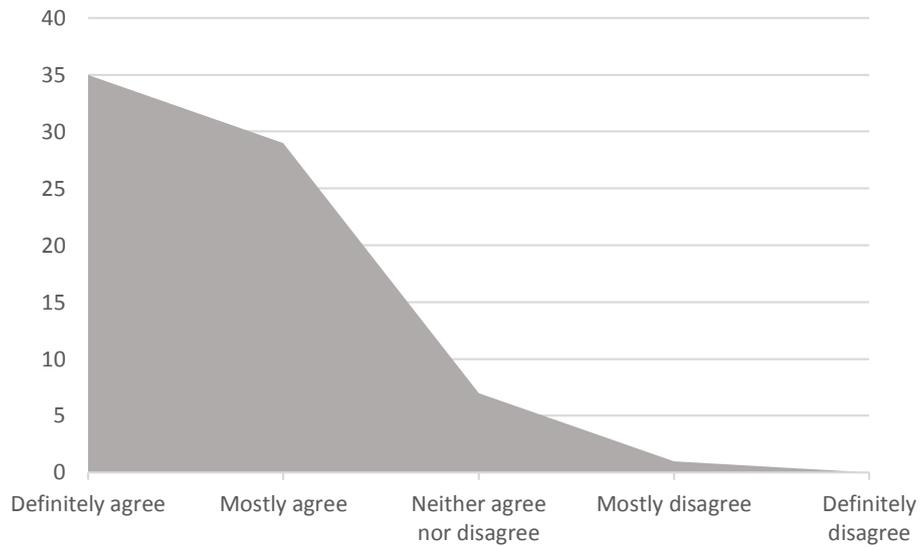


Fig. 8

While many staff feel adequately trained, there are staff who do not feel supported in this way. The PAT Staff Handbook is recognised and used by some yet others do not access this (or other) resources. Overwhelmingly, staff do not feel they have enough time to carry out administrative tasks associated with the role, such as scheduling meetings, keeping notes, monitoring students’ progress, writing reference letters and so on. Broadly speaking, staff feel confident in their abilities to carry out the dual-roles of providing academic guidance and pastoral care.

2.3 Perceptions of format and delivery of tutoring

Staff were asked to comment on a series of statements about how personal tutoring is delivered.

Statement 7: “As a Personal Academic Tutor, I am happy to support students via group tutorials.” (Figure 9)

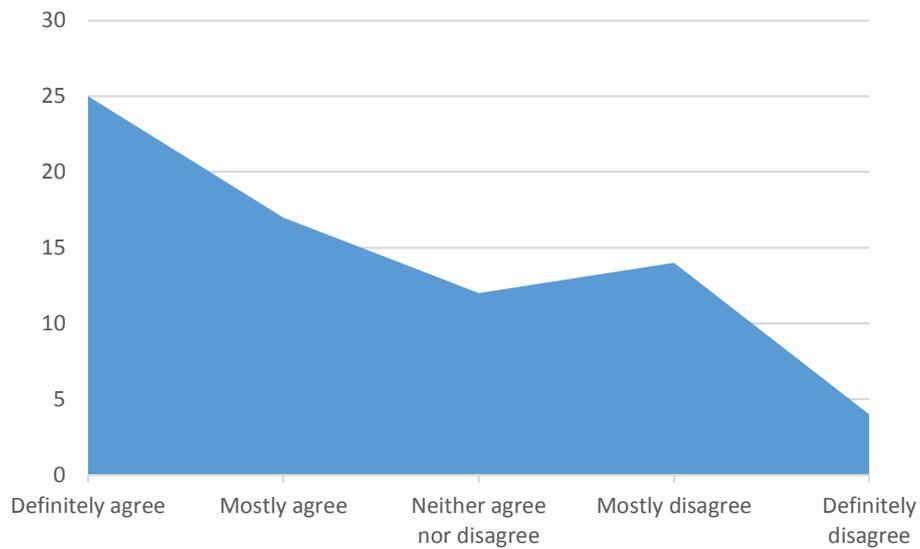


Fig. 9

Statement 8: “As a Personal Academic Tutor, I prefer to work with students on a one-to-one basis.” (Figure 10)

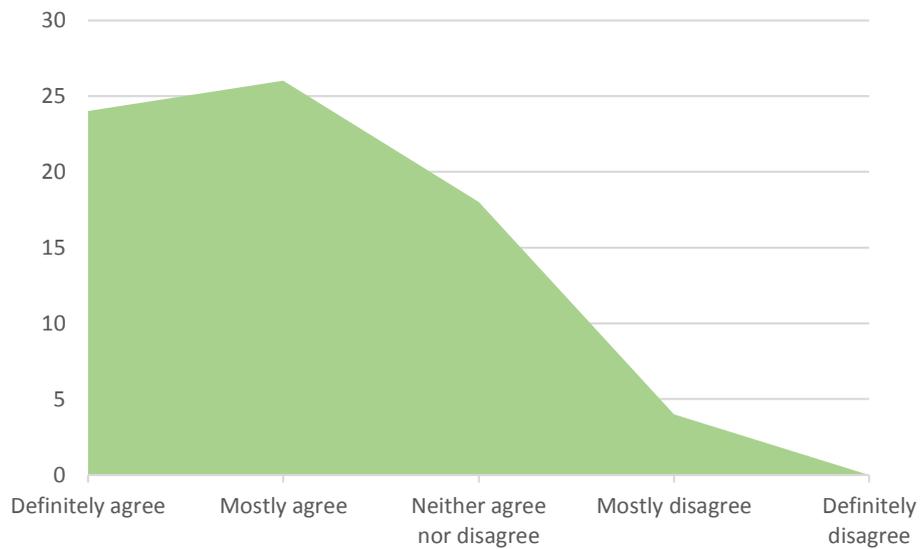


Fig. 10

Statement 9: “I think that some of the support that a Personal Academic Tutor provides to students could be easily done via email, Skype, and/or other technologies.” (Figure 11)

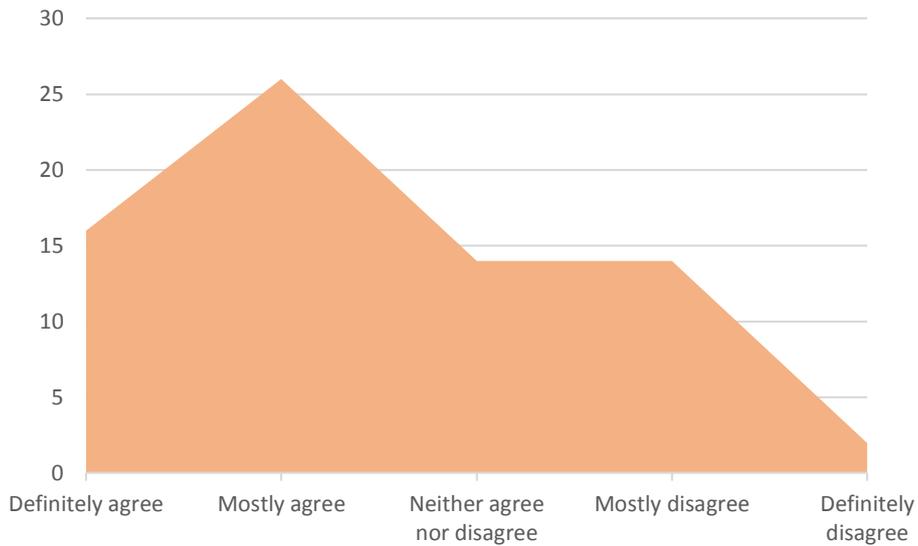


Fig. 11

Statement 10: “Students who are not assigned to me (as a Personal Academic Tutor) still come to me for support.” (Figure 12)

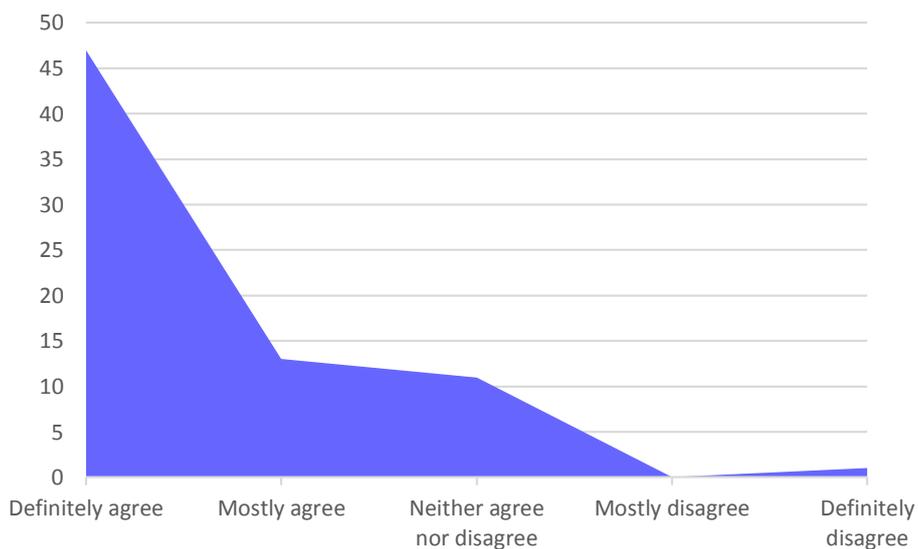


Fig. 12

Most staff surveyed preferred to provide personal tutoring on a one-to-one basis although some were also open to the idea of holding group tutorials. With some exception, staff seem to think that personal tutoring can be facilitated by technology: over the phone, through email/Skype, etc. The majority of staff also provide similar tutoring provision to students who are not assigned to them as tutees.

2.4 Perceptions of importance and impact

Staff were asked to comment on several statements about the important and impact of the PAT role.

Statement 11: “I feel that the Personal Academic Tutor provision is essential to a quality student experience.” (Figure 13)

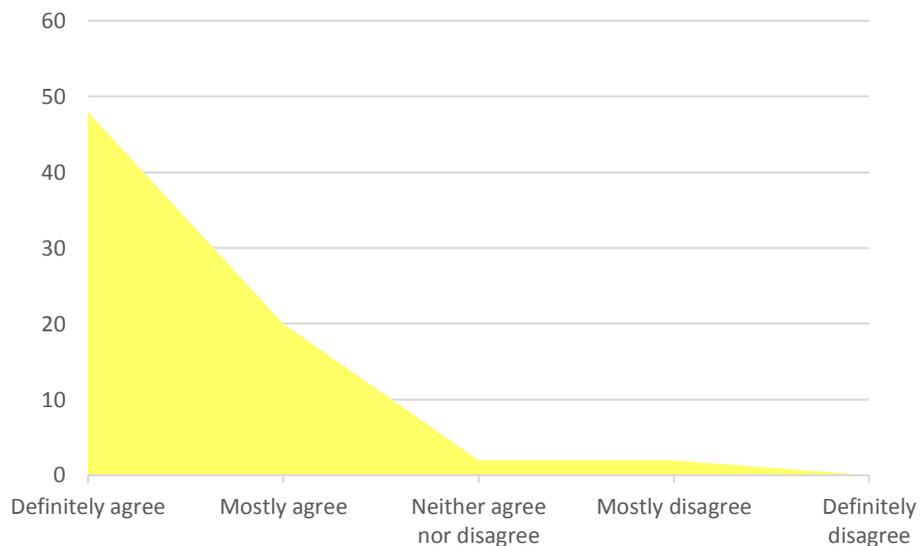


Fig. 13

Statement 12: “In my work as a Personal Academic Tutor, I know I have made a positive impact on the lives of my students.” (Figure 14)

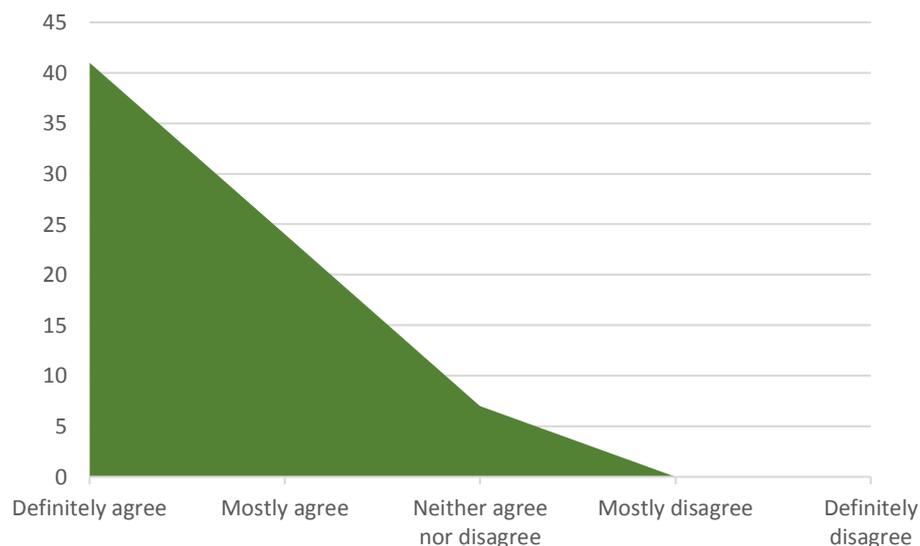


Fig. 14

Largely speaking, staff perceive the personal tutoring provision as important and impactful to the student experience.

2.5 Qualitative responses

In the survey, staff were given an opportunity to provide free-text input on their experiences of working as a PAT and their ideas for improving the current PAT scheme. These data are summarised in this section.

2.5.1 Experiences of working as a PAT

Several of the participants mentioned that their experiences of working as a PAT were positive and that, largely speaking, the role was rewarding. There were a few key themes that emerged in the qualitative data. These are outlined in this section.

Key Theme 1: Overwhelmingly, staff feel they do not have enough time to perform the PAT role.

More realistic allocation of time within the academic work load planning. Either PAT is important or it's not. If it is, give us the time to do it!!

Being a PAT should be part of the lecturer role but this should be supported with time to do it effectively...

In past years I have had 90 tutees - impossible to manage! This year I have just over 50. Still a large group to manage. I don't feel I'm able to provide the support I should be due to time constraints.

As a PAT Team leader, I would like far more time to both administer and carry out the role. I have nearly 30 PATs working in Year 1 and with staff changes, Associate Tutors who cannot continue their role, I am left with an increased number of trainees without an allocated PAT.

The hours allocated for PAT per student but also overall are very low and need to be reviewed in real terms and expectations of students.

However there is little time to meet with students and ensure they are on track. Sometimes it is too late when we find out the student is finding the course difficult.

The time allocated to elements of the PAT work, such as post placement tutorials is far too short considering all the elements we are expected to cover. This time as reflected on our workload is not a true or fair representation. There is also no acknowledgement of all the other PAT work, such as impromptu meetings when students are in crisis. These meetings are usually when the important support is given as the planned tutorials are often more of a box ticking exercise to check files etc.

The role is significantly under-resourced. The additional allocation of hours which was promised when the new PAT system was introduced has never materialised, so the system is effectively reliant on goodwill.

Being a P.A.T. is rewarding but we are NOT allocated time for this.

The PAT role is essential. However, this needs to be considered in light of programmes with large cohorts and less staff.

Key Theme 2: As PATs, some staff feel they are expected to work outside of their areas of expertise (i.e. offering specialist support, counselling, etc.)

I think I know who to refer students to who fall outside my role, but I do find some aspects a bit harrowing. In the last 2 weeks for example students have discussed child abuse and what was described as an attempted suicide. Over the years I have dealt with rape, domestic violence, arranged marriages, and forced abortions amongst many things.

The principle area of difficulty for me is the significant proportion of 1st year students that have medical issues, particularly mental health: Asperger's, autism, clinical depression, bipolar, personal disorders, etc. This requires specialist support that I am not particularly able to provide.

There are blurred lines between academic and pastoral support, and sometimes it feels like we are expected to provide support which is outside of our realms of expertise. However, referring on can be a problem when the resources that students do need (such as counselling, assist, mental health etc.) are over-subscribed and they have to wait so long for an appointment.

Staff should be aware of the limits of the personal tutor role, specifically in relation to students with mental health difficulties where a mental health advisor is more appropriate.

As students pay more money and become more anxious ("I have to get a 1st/2:1") it is easy for this stress, anxiety and pressure to be "passed on" to the PAT.....some whom are not emotionally resilient to deal with this raised pressure etc...

My main concern is dealing with some of the very emotional and difficult subjects that often come up. I think we need better guidance on how to deal with this. In the past I have also felt threatened by students behaving aggressively.

I feel that in the role and the type of students in nursing we deal with a lot of emotional problems and as a PAT we have no means of debriefing or checking we are coping.

I sometimes feel unable and/or inadequately qualified when dealing with trainees who exhibit signs of emotional stress, etc. I would also like to explore the idea of an SoE 'in-house' MH Counsellor. Only by offering this service could we offer specific support our trainees on our many programmes.

Key Theme 3: Some staff do not feel supported through training or resources for being a PAT.

Tutoring is a crucial aspect of student experience in my view and formal training should be given to all those who are undertaking it.

Being a personal tutor needs some form of induction / training.

[PATs need] ongoing staff development with web support including links to key services and staff.

PAT role combines many skills and is effective if the PAT has a thorough knowledge of University support services and the academic regulations.

I received no training when I started working here for the personal tutor role. I do not feel we have ever had a system that works. This is an area that seriously needs addressing. It is crucial for the student experience.

A lot of learning of the actual practicalities of the role comes from custom and practice rather than a more systematic approach which often means there can be inaccurate ways of doing things being passed on.

I feel the PAT role works well for established and full time colleagues but would suggest that others may welcome further training on programme specific elements. I too feel that I would benefit from more shared PAT training to ensure my own contribution is aligned to requirements and expectations.

As a relative newcomer to the HE environment there are many aspects about student life and services available that I am not fully acquainted with yet. I would like an induction into the University of Northampton PAT structure.

As a relatively new member of staff I have received no training on being a PAT.

I feel entirely untrained for this - I wasn't even aware a handbook existed until taking this survey.

2.5.2 Ideas for improving the current PAT model

Participants offered many ideas for improving the current PAT scheme. Most of these had to do with ways to more effectively in the role, through training, resources and having more time to dedicate to this work. The ideas collected from the survey are presented here.

A quick and instant checklist of where to direct students to with specific issues/ problems would be helpful. E.g. Counselling/ Focused Academic Support

The link that was available for 'Students in Crisis' was very valuable. Please can it be restored?

We get more hours for first year students than for third year students, but it is third year students who require the most tutor support, and of course references.

[It is] often difficult to find private space when needed.

I would like the dates for personal tutor meetings to be given to me at the end of August so I can have them in my diary and timetabling and teaching to stop then this important meeting with students can occur.

We should all be doing meetings at the same time this would ensure continuity for the students.

An ongoing CPD for PATs could be created - what about an accredited, work-based module for PATs to recognise and reward best practice?

If the system has to remain in place, I would advise no more than 10 students to be allocated to each member of staff.

I understand that in future we will be allocated students for the duration of their career in UoN and I think this will be of benefit to all.

Perhaps a series of FAQ on the module NILE site a sort of virtual PAT?

PAT should be considered who are given sufficient time allocation and recognition for dealing with students.

Clearer guidelines on what the role is and isn't for.

It is difficult to engage the post-graduate students in the students union and it would be good to hear their thoughts on how we might improve this.

It might be useful to have some training in e.g. depression / other mental health issues to help us support students better within the academic context.

Stress need to keep in touch with students in years 2 and 3 as this will help retention/ progression/ achievement.

I think clearer guidelines and perhaps a suggested timetable of meetings and topics.

Also support for dealing with difficult or vulnerable students.

A mentor for new members of staff would be helpful, training and some space in the timetable to complete the role would also be beneficial.

Training sessions for PATs; clear briefing on what additional support the university offers students and how to access it.

Communication might always be improved so that the PAT is included in communications re their student.

Having a PAT mentor would be useful or some regular interval updates of issues that may be emerging for all students to help be prepared for the more likely issues.

An induction session for all new members of staff. Not just in PAT but any induction session would be useful.

Offer regular debriefing sessions for PATs.

I think an email from your PAT during placement would be helpful.

Identified days for all sign offs/tutorials so that time is organised in advance to see students on a regular basis. Times are often changed at the last minute and this impacts on student and tutor workload.

Improve the handbook. The PAT handbook is poor and patronising.

More Skype and 1-2-1 sessions held weekly and timetabled into our workload.

NILE PAT site for ALL resources for tutors.

More time allocated per student across their studies not graduated and reduced.

Lead PAT in each school as a model / mentor for this role.

Better than Skype, would be video answers to frequently asked questions that could be professionally commissioned.

PAT meeting at the beginning of the academic year to clearly define role, workload and expectations.

Periodic audit of the student experience of using a PAT with follow up workshops for staff.

If there were a collated picture of students' attendance at lectures, this would really help monitor engagement prior to non-submission of work or some personal crisis alerting our attention to a problem.

Although I inform students who their tutor is, most of them would say they don't know! So we need to find a way of making this clear - perhaps putting it on their NILE site?

Automatic transfer of disabilities information, particularly in relation to declarations of dyslexia, to programme teams when students enrol.

3.0 Discussion and next steps

The data presented here suggest there is scope for significant improvement of the current PAT scheme. Constraints due to workload management seems to be the major issue. There is also a need for improved training and resource development. Administratively, there are several areas that could be enhanced. Below is a set of possible action points that will inform further work in the Partners for Progression project.

3.1 Possible action points (to inform the PfP project plan)

1. Understand the rationale for how students are allocated to PATs within each School (i.e. number of students per PAT, number of hours allocated for each student, how this is spread over the student experience). This will illuminate the variation of how this is done across the Schools and give some idea as to how it could be managed more effectively.
2. Understand what processes are currently in place to oversee the PAT provision (administratively). This means investigating: how students are informed of their PAT, how PATs are informed of their students, how/when meetings are scheduled, how is the PAT scheme introduced to students at the start of the year?
3. Design and deploy a meaningful PAT development programme, possibly through the CPD C@N-DO framework, that deepens capacities for academic staff to understand the aims, scope and support for their role.
4. Incorporate PAT development into standard staff induction processes.
5. Create opportunities for ongoing conversations around being a PAT (e.g. in-school PAT forums, a PAT newsletter, a PAT discussion board).
6. Create a web-based repository of tools for supporting PATs.
7. Conduct student and staff evaluations of the PAT scheme to ensure it is effective and responsive to student/staff needs.

8. Explore the idea of having a lead-PAT who can mentor others and may have a role in overseeing the PAT provision in a subject area or School.
9. Revise the existing Handbook so it is more meaningful to the issues that PATs and students face.

A project plan for a revised PAT scheme will be proposed in May/June 2014 for implementation in the 2014-2015 academic year.

A student survey of the PAT experience will be conducted at the end of April 2014.

4.0 References

Wheeler, S. and Birtle, J. (1995). *A Handbook for Personal Tutors*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.