

An overview of the Senior Tutor and Personal Tutor relationship, and the role they play when a student is in crisis.

The role of the Senior Tutor

The Senior tutor has the responsibility for the operations of personal tutoring within their department, for example allocating students to personal tutors, most likely in collaboration with professional services colleagues, but also setting the direction and the tone of personal tutoring and working with the university policy.

The Senior Tutor is usually a member of the teaching team from within the department, and importantly they should be part of the management team as well, for example sitting on an Education Committee, so they are involved in making decisions about all aspects of the student experience – this will include personal tutoring but also wider pastoral care, student support, academic support, programme development. This is why the Senior Tutor being a member of teaching staff can be really helpful as they understand things from all sides.

Senior Tutors are a support for both the Personal Tutors and students in the department. For example, a Personal Tutor might refer a student to their Senior Tutor if they felt their circumstances needed more particular support or care. Alternatively, a Senior Tutor might tell a Personal Tutor that they will take a case on because they feel that they want or need to have some responsibility for that particular student's support.

Finally, the Senior Tutor is often a useful point of liaison for student services within the university. Rather than student services having to determine which of possible hundreds of personal tutors they need to contact in a department, they can go to the Senior Tutor. Similarly, the Senior Tutor can, on behalf of the department, talk to central services directly about particular needs or provision to support a student.

Senior Tutor and Personal Tutor roles in support students during a crisis

A crisis situation can often escalate into a situation which doesn't just affect one student, but any number of students and staff. A student experiencing a crisis may talk to their friends, or other students may hear about a situation. The Senior Tutor is an important key single point of liaison for all of the people in a department, affected by an issue or situation. Having this key role can prevent information from being duplicated, and can mean there is a bit more control over who knows what information about a situation. The Senior Tutor is also a key point of liaison for other services, central departments or external agencies that may need to be involved. Again, by having one single point of contact it simplifies lines of communications and ensures that multiples people are not holding or sharing information.

By the Senior Tutor taking a leading role in a crisis situation, it also frees up Personal Tutors to be a neutral source of support for any of their tutees who may involved of affected. It is worth remembering that a student could be a victim of a situation, but they could also be the cause or source of conflict. By the Personal Tutor not being involved in collating information or making decisions about the situation at large, they can support any student in a way that is not biased or may impact outcomes or decisions. They can also be a useful interlocutor for their tutees around regulations, policies, support or processes that may need to be navigated as part of resolving the

issue. Personal Tutors will need to remain aware of their boundaries, to ensure that they do not get over-involved or give up too much of their time, and that they continue to signpost tutees to the most suitable sources of support and information.

The Senior Tutor role can also be important after a particular situation has been resolved, in order to make sure that people involved have the opportunity to come together or reflect and to be supported after the crisis has passed. A Senior Tutor could talk with staff, students, liaise with services etc, to make sure that everybody feels looked after afterwards and can reflect on what was done well and any changes that may need to take place.

It is not that the Senior Tutor is in control of the whole crisis situation, but they will work in conjunction with the Head of Department, or other senior management, and in conjunction with central teams. That also means then that if one of these contacts, for example the Head of Department, has to take a more objective view to make a difficult decision, then they can do so knowing that the Senior Tutor is looking after the broader pastoral and academic support related elements.

Personal Tutor role in the context of the wider university support network

It is important in any situation, and particularly in a “risk” or “crisis” situation, that the Personal Tutor doesn’t become the only person who is supporting and looking after the student, and that they recognise that they are just one of a number of people in the wider university who can play a part in supporting the student. So in most situations the first thing a Personal Tutor would do is refer a student to a support service. Depending on the situation and how serious it is they might not just expect the student to make that contact or appointment themselves, but they might do it on their behalf, seeking consent from the student to get in touch with the relevant service, for example counselling or the Visa Compliance team. Then, ideally what a Personal Tutor does is effectively hand the situation over to the relevant service so that the student can get the specialist support they need. This then enables the Personal Tutor to be a continued neutral source of support, checking in with the student to ask ‘how’s it going?’, ‘have you heard back?’ and also to find out if there is anything that they can offer support with academically during that time. As an example, a student will have their mental health or their visa issue looked after by the relevant professional, but the Personal Tutor perhaps discusses with the student the option of completing a mitigating circumstances form, and signposts them to the information, or maybe even looks into the possibility of suspending/interrupting their studies. Additionally, with the student’s consent the Personal Tutor may also let other module tutors know that that the student may not be attending classes in quite the same way, or that if a student gets upset in a seminar that they might need to leave. All of these things still need to be carried out with the student’s consent, but this is the role the Personal Tutor should play, offering support for the academic side of things that may be affected by any personal situation.

What sometimes happens is if a student is in crisis but isn’t able to immediately get support from a specialist service, then the Personal Tutor can end up taking on the role of someone who holds the situation, and that can become very stressful. The Personal Tutor may feel a responsibility to make sure the student has somebody to turn to even if they’re not the correct person to resolve the difficulty. And this is why it’s really important that the Personal Tutor has a clear set of boundaries so they know how to make sure that they are not doing too much, and feel confident that they don’t have to check their email all hours of the day for fear of what a student might need from them, for

example. This can also be where the Senior Tutor comes in – a Personal Tutor can escalate to their Senior Tutor, either with the student’s consent or even by anonymising the situation, and say ‘I am worried about a student, this is happening. I need you to know this so that I am not the only person holding this.’ That way even if the situation is anonymous they have a sounding board, some feedback and another person aware of the situation.

There are always situations where Personal Tutors, through the best of intentions, actually go above and beyond what is expected of them, and whilst what they mean to do is help the student, actually sometimes that can have a very damaging effect, not only on the situation, but also on themselves – they can become too involved and can become overly anxious. They can even, in worse case scenarios, struggle with their own mental health as a result of being involved too much. In some cases they can also make things worse for the student, if they give the student the impression that they are the only person to go to to resolve difficulties.

There should be an instructional element to the Personal Tutor role, in that they should be helping the student to learn that, as an adult, when they need help there are specific people to go to for that help, and that’s not always just one person. They should find a way to be supportive in a neutral way, to make sure they help the student connect with the right people for more specialist support, and make sure that they share information carefully, and with consent, when required so that they are not the only person holding information. If a Personal Tutor can do all of those things, that is the best role they can play in any sort of welfare support situation, and particularly in a crisis.