

## **Digital Tools for Personal Tutoring for First-Year Undergraduate Students: Harnessing Digital Potential and Fast-Tracking Relationships**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the under-researched use of digital tools to enhance personal tutoring for first-year undergraduate students in a UK university. The digital tools adopted were a Google form for pastoral questions, and a website with support resources. These tools mobilised the potential of digital tools for pastoral support in higher education, where typically research has focused on digital pedagogic practice. With learning dependent on a number of factors for individual students, this study aimed to identify the potential of digital tools to support pastoral support as an integral aspect of the student journey. This knowledge gap is significant as students face increasing mental health and wellbeing issues, making the personal tutor relationship valuable for student success. The study found that digital tools provide a ‘way in’ to the tutor-student relationship and a pastoral website introduced a ‘self-service’ element to pastoral support; a welcome feature with academic staff workload concerns. Key findings were that students felt that the digital forms enabled them to voice personal issues to their tutor with some anonymity, that students held high expectations of the personal tutor role and that wellbeing issues were prevalent in the degree journey.

**Keywords:** Personal Tutoring, Digital Tools, Pastoral Support, Relationships, Higher Education.

### **1. Introduction**

This study investigates the role of personal tutoring in Higher Education (HE) and how the use of digital tools can facilitate relationship development. As best practice, personal tutoring is embedded within academic teaching teams, supplementing teaching and degree programme management (Knight, 2002). Traditionally, for undergraduate (UG) students in HE within the United Kingdom (UK), personal tutors are the first point of contact for pastoral support and thus are integral for the student experience. They are tasked with building learning communities, and bridging the gap between learning programmes and central university support services (Yale, 2019).

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There is little evidence however linking tutoring practices to the use of digital tools, despite exhaustive research in the area of digital pedagogy, particularly linked to distance learning (Hilliam & Williams, 2019). Educational technology adopted in various forms centres on the ‘facilitation of learning’ (Simonson, 2016) and thus its potential to meet other educational needs is less explored.

Combined with this, pastoral care has often been perceived as low priority, suffering neglect in education institutions (Ojewunmi, 2019). Selwyn (2012) argues that academic work in the field of educational technology has failed to engage with ‘the “wider” aspects of education and society’ (p. 82), and in the rapid uptake of digital technologies for learning, further interrogation of the relationship between learning, digital technology and young people’s identities is needed (Selwyn, 2012, p.46). With little evidence of the role of digital tools for non-academic, pastoral support, the increasing potential of digital innovation in this aspect of Higher Education is being overlooked. When building relationships, communication is integral, and asking pastoral questions in education has been largely explored in primary and secondary education. These insights are less prevalent however in a higher education setting.

The aim of this research was to practically enhance the student experience by adding value to pastoral support through the use of digital tools. The objectives were to:

1. Evaluate the use of digital tools in Higher Education for pastoral support;
2. Implement the pastoral use of digital Google forms and a Google website by personal tutors with undergraduate Childhood Studies students;
3. Collect data from participants in response to the pastoral digital form and website.

Digital tools and their potential to ‘drive innovation’ (OECD, 2016, p.3) could be particularly welcome for personal tutors, who as academics are increasingly expected to wear a plethora of ‘hats’ (Knight, 2002). Stretched workloads, the need for quality working relationships, and a focus on student well-being (Carter et al., 2018), are putting ever-increasing pressures on lecturers’ time (Por & Barriball, 2008). Being time ‘stretched,’ inevitably means that in some cases, pastoral support does not meet student’s expectations, such as a demand for individualised support packages which scaffold and oversee progress (Earwaker, 1992). This is problematic as student perceptions of their HE experiences play a major role in the success of any university. They govern national university strategy, supporting public accountability and informing students’ choices of where to study (Office for Students, 2020). It is therefore important that actions are taken to listen, respond and appeal to the personal needs of students, and that is arguably where the role of the personal tutor lies (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009).

This paper discusses the role of the personal tutor in Higher Education, digital tools, pastoral support and shares findings from a qualitative, case study approach. The study sits within an interpretivist theoretical framework, adopting a phenomenological approach (Willig, 2008). As the research is a case study, it is idiographic as it is perception based and puts emphasis on individual's perceived realities (Burrell and Morgan, 1999). Data collected was analysed into predetermined themes that were context-specific (Dey, 1993) culminating in recommendations to harness the beneficial nature of digital tools for pastoral support in fast-tracking the relationship between tutor and student.

## **2. The Role of the Personal Tutor**

The personal tutor role has been through many iterations with the marketisation of HE and the framing of students as consumers or 'customers' (Modell, 2005). Universities are externally scrutinised for both student attainment and satisfaction and are placed within tables to promote clearer 'choice' pathways for new intakes. HE is a business that grapples with the dynamic of 'reading for' and 'having' a degree (Molesworth et al, 2009), and this challenge is further exacerbated by growing student numbers (Yale, 2019). With large cohorts, providing individualised support has proven difficult for academic teams, and thus the personal tutor role is vital to connect students to specific resources to meet their needs. By feeling supported and cared for in the first year of a degree, students are likely to build a stronger buffer against more challenging times (Brinkworth et al, 2009), preparing them for their whole degree journey.

Despite this, students can struggle to understand the role of their personal tutor (Ghenghesh, 2018, p. 571), and how to approach 'academic or personal issues' (Bassett et al, 2014, p. 27). Additionally, students need to know what support is available to them and where to access it, which can be problematic if students do not fully understand the university's academic or personal service 'flow diagrams' (Bassett, Gallagher & Price, 2014). This can create undue stress, particularly for those at the start of their university journey, as anxiety levels are likely 'much higher than experienced before starting university,' (Yale, 2019, p.533) and are further heightened by early experiences not meeting expectations (Kreig, 2013). As students' concerns are diverse and characterised by varying needs, tutors can find themselves struggling to fulfil the role, with pastoral support not always appropriately suited to the confinement of 'office hours' (Jorda, 2013, p.2595). Whilst the personal tutor role should be about guidance and signposting to central university services (especially where mental health is concerned), the growing number of students presenting with emotional and/or well-being issues (Lewis & Bolton, 2023) makes this increasingly challenging. If the personal tutor role is compared to that of a counsellor (Jorda, 2013), the academic role boundaries can become blurred, especially when there are professional counselling services available centrally in UK universities.

The role expectations of the personal tutor form a foundation for this research as digital tools assist the academic profession in many ways, mainly linked to learning (Simonson, 2016). By investigating digital tools for pastoral support, the personal tutor role boundaries and workload can be better defined, aiding the professional application of student support. Where digital technologies have been described as the 'saviour of education,' (Haleem et al, 2022, p. 276) harnessing their potential more widely in supporting students underpins this research.

### **3. Digital Technology and HE**

Digital technology in HE tends to be used as a secondary aid to 'traditional modes of teaching,' (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007) and whilst rapid developments have been made, technology use is largely led by technology itself, despite pedagogy and educational processes remaining at the forefront of practice (Sankey, 2020). Research surrounding technology in education can 'romanticise' its potential, and this limits its practical application, dominated by the idea that technology is separate from people, not 'part and parcel of daily life' (Costa, Hammond & Younie, 2019, p. 396). It should be in response to educational needs that technology is adopted therefore, as a solution-based approach, rather than technology for the sake of it. In this study, by appealing to students' pastoral needs, technology is examined in regard to its function, firstly in everyday life, and then tailored to meet students' needs. This is particularly pertinent given that within the UK, smartphone ownership has reached 92% (O'Dea, 2021) and that smartphones are the most used technology on campuses with students using them for social media, emailing and academic services (Ataş & Çelik, 2019). The potential therefore to enhance HE practices using smartphone devices transcends their current routine use, encouraging an integrative approach (Yu & Conway, 2012). Therefore, university experience and students' smartphone use are not separate, with a need to complement each other, increasing accessibility to available resources.

Using smartphones to interact in a virtual space allows users to feel a degree of separation from their communications which in turn gives a level of perceived anonymity. When using the internet, arguably, true anonymity is difficult to acquire, so instead 'perceived anonymity' is a common phenomenon for users and this perception can influence behaviour (Hite et al, 2014). This can be beneficial as interacting with a digital tool instead of a person encourages students to open up, with added value if their answers are collected via digital means (Dijks, Brummer & Kostons, 2018, p.1260). The same effect is evident with social media, as it plays an important role in university life, aiding psychological well-being and providing "a source of social support and self-expression" (Chester et al, 2020, p. 405). Accessed via smartphone, UK internet users spend four times longer on these apps than on computers (Ofcom, 2021), mainly using social media apps. To reflect this, social interaction in a virtual space has evolved quickly

over recent years, and this has changed the way that students wish to communicate with tutors and each other. The opportunity to communicate online through written dialogue instead of face-to-face can remove time constraints for students and personal tutors. Using digital tools, students are able to interact after working hours and express feelings in a convenient way, especially with an unfamiliar person. These modes of communication are increasingly utilised for “maintaining everyday interaction with friends” and as a way to mitigate “problematic situations,” or “when someone needs contact and support but does not wish to talk” (Thulin & Vilhemson, 2007, p. 245). As evidence supports the use of technology in everyday interactions, and as it facilitates communication without the need for face to face interaction, its potential can be harnessed for pastoral support. The rise in smartphones and social media use by students (Ataş & Çelik, 2019) provides a key context and foundation for the study. Students’ familiarity with smart phones, combined with the ability to communicate “without limits of space and time” (Mohammadi et al, 2020, p.2) is an attractive prospect and therefore is a beneficial tool in HE. For pastoral support therefore, the use of mobile technology to communicate with personal tutors is an under researched area, further acknowledging the research gap.

#### **4. Digital Tools for Personal Tutoring**

In regard to the personal tutor role, using a virtual environment for students to access anywhere and anytime, can explicitly outline expectations of the ever-important student-tutor relationship (Yale, 2019, p. 542). Using an online forum for ‘self-service’ can also limit the need for personal tutor time to be taken by individually contacting students, leaving time free for tutor-student interactions (Porter, 2006). By using a purpose-built website for ‘blanket’ needs and by signposting to support services digitally, useful knowledge and information can be presented effectively (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p.4). This does not however mean replacing face-to-face contact needed between staff and students (Carter et al, 2018), where dialogue is needed for students to be encouraged to ‘respond individually to learning opportunities,’ (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p.4) and to take responsibility for their own learning. With integrative digital tools for personal tutoring, it is important not to alter the ‘fundamental relationship between learner and teacher’ (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p.4). To complement online forums such as websites for personal tutoring, digital forms can be used to collect data from students to identify specific needs. One study has shown that this method offers convenience for both students and HE staff, being easily tailored to the nature of the need’s assessment being carried out (Ulum et al, 2023). This case utilises Google Forms and has recognised digital tools’ effectiveness in obtaining meaningful data. Ulum et al’s case study however purposed these digital means for obtaining learning objective and student achievement data, not for pastoral support (Ulum et al, 2023). Using Google Forms at the beginning, and throughout the academic

year can be a valuable process for personal tutoring alongside learning objectives, determining any actions needed or improvements necessary (Ghenghesh, 2018). By digitising the process of collecting data on student needs, time can be saved, staff typing errors (if reproducing data from another source) are minimised, and instant sharing can occur between colleagues (Schoenbart, 2017). Universities have been criticised for working in silos within departments, limiting the ability of academic staff to manage student transitions (Lochtie et al, 2018, p.10). By having one place where information is sourced, easy access can create opportunities for collaborative working. For personal tutors, this information can surround well-being (UK Universities, 2015), transitions into university (Jorda, 2013), overall feedback, and positive elements of students' experiences. This information collated in one place can inform tutor discussions with individual students, and provide a cohort overview from the student perspective. This is a valuable approach when exploring tutor programme effectiveness and relationships (Yale, 2019).

Completing an online form is more effective with a perceived sense of anonymity, something that is not achieved in a face-to-face student-tutor conversation. Being anonymous in an online format can empower individuals by facilitating privacy and freedom of expression, especially if when offline, users feel marginalised (Joinson, 2008). This is beneficial as students feel safe, thus adding value to their answers if collected via digital means (Dijks, Brummer & Kostons, 2018). If asked by a tutor what concerns they may have, students may aim to please, and not give an honest answer. The use of a digital form to collect perceptions therefore alleviates students' 'pressure to conform' (Raes, Vanderhoven & Schellens, 2015, p. 180), and can also encourage students to participate in general (Draper & Brown, 2004). There are limitations, however, as digital tool responses can be rushed or not fully invested in, collecting untruthful answers causing superficiality (Raes et al, 2015, p.181). This may skew the personal-tutor relationship as a result and undermine the value of the role, which is ultimately to support students (Lochtie et al, 2018). It is the faithful engagement with personal tutoring from students (using digital tools or not) that fulfils the potential of personal tutoring, enhancing the student experience as a whole.

The idea of 'self-service' in personal tutoring can be provided in a digital format, where tutors bridge the gap between support services and learning (Porter, 2006). In this study, a website was used to showcase the services available to students at the university to provide an avenue for 'self-service.' Support services that have increased student engagement are student mentors, study support, adequate childcare, the communication of expectations and quiet workspaces (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p.172). With particular regard to the communication of expectations, having a central site to access these resources, with links to all services within the university proves valuable. Where students can be seen as 'customers' accessing a service, the rise in self-service is highly rated to 'solve customer problems' (Bridgwater, 2019). Providing

students with a ‘one-stop shop’ to access support services relieves the tutor workload, being beneficial as overloaded duties are a common barrier for academics when carrying out the personal tutor role (Lochtie et al, 2018).

Considering the commodification of HE, in a ‘constantly evolving mass education system’ (Yale, 2019, p.542), the emphasis on the student experience is growing increasingly important to the success of universities. This adds further emphasis on the personal tutor role and the potential of digital tools to enhance its effectiveness. Technology for pastoral support can however be a contentious approach, arguably being associated with a number of challenges that educators are not equipped to deal with. Teaching staff are not generally specifically trained in digital approaches (Toktamysov et al, 2021), therefore the use of technology for pastoral support may not come naturally to personal tutors. It can be argued also that digital tools can perceptibly raise ethical challenges, and where student wellbeing is concerned, questions about where data is stored and student consent create a barrier to digital practice (Timmis et al, 2015). If technology is adopted deterministically, it poses the risk of being novel, when in order to be effective, digital use need to adhere to cultural, social and institutional contexts (Timmis et al, 2015). The balance of these considerations plays a role in how digital tools can be effectively adopted, not only in the context of pastoral support, but in education more widely. The next section details the context of the study to outline how digital tools were used in practice.

## **5. Context**

Participants in the study were first-year undergraduates enrolled on a suite of four degrees in the Humanities faculty at a University on the South Coast of England. The cohort size was 150 students, and of this, approximately 120 responded to the study, with 78 giving consent for their answers to be used for research. Tutorial support offered to these first-year students is within a year-long academic module that incorporates study skills and key subject-related content. The design of the module encompasses lectures, seminars, workshops, and group and individual tutorials. The cohort is split into tutor groups and assigned an academic member of staff (‘personal tutor’) to address academic and personal matters. Individual tutorials consist of a 10-15-minute face-to-face conversation between tutor and student and are held at various points throughout the academic year, with particular focus on the first and final meetings (the first being held in September, the last in May). Whilst this module design allows a holistic approach to study skills and personal tutoring, it relied upon students approaching their personal tutors for support. To do this, students were expected to articulate their needs, which feedback showed they were often reluctant to do. Additionally, end-of-module feedback highlighted the need for a more ‘personal’ relationship with tutors as students valued opportunities to share details of personal circumstances with a view to tailoring



support options. Despite this, the personal tutorial system is often incumbent on the student being proactive beyond the initial meeting, so significant numbers of students rely on their personal tutors only in acute times of crisis. This can result in the re-emergence of a relationship as students are readying to progress into the following academic year. Thus, a motivator for this research was to enhance personal tutoring outcomes by facilitating relationship development between the student and tutor.

## **6. Methods**

The method adopted for this study is a small-scale case study used to understand a local issue that can benefit other HE institutions in the UK. Yin (2009) praises this method as one that elicits a depth of understanding of real phenomena, acknowledging the pertinence of important contextual conditions. This method was chosen specifically as having identified context-specific challenges with the nature of the tutor-student relationship within a time-poor environment, digital tools were called upon to explore possible solutions. Google forms for students were constructed to improve systems already in place. It was apparent however, when the data was collected that this approach not only strengthened practice, but also had the potential to enhance the practice of others. University ethical clearance was sought, and granted, and participants were approached for permission to use their responses within the Google forms in this research project. The responses were collated using core categories of ‘useful’, ‘indifferent’, and ‘not useful’ in the analysis phase, and the key responses were used verbatim to contribute to the findings. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, demographic data was not collated, but it should be acknowledged that the cohort was predominantly white and female.

Two Google forms were designed and released. An initial one to ‘welcome’ students during induction week and a follow-up in the middle of the second semester which asked students to reflect on current progress and strategies for the forthcoming academic year. The first form gauged self-perceived levels of competencies and contained pastoral-related questions so students could articulate specific needs and give feedback on their course, department, and university. The form also contained a link to a Google site that housed key information about a range of support services and personal tutor details. This aimed to add an element of ‘self-service’ (Porter, 2006) if a student needed to access central university support (such as student finance or wellbeing) and could be accessed whenever necessary. The Google site with pastoral information was consistently available to students throughout the academic year, updated with contact details and information where appropriate. This was linked in the main Virtual Learning Environment and signposted by tutors where needed. The site hoped to capitalise on students’ attitudes towards engaging with online forums with perceived anonymity (Rösner & Krämer, 2016), harnessing the convenience of



filling in a form online using a smartphone (Ataş & Çelik, 2019) and not verbally in a ‘manufactured’ environment (such as an academic’s office).

The full cohort of 150 first-year students was tasked to (optionally) complete the form before their first individual tutorial. Prior to this, the tutor was asked to read the individual students' forms, using the responses to act as a conversation starter to ‘break the ice’ between student and tutor, enabling the tutor to discuss information volunteered by the student. This avoided any student needing to articulate verbally or ‘find’ appropriate questions to ask, with a focus on giving the students ownership of the information they shared. Adding ‘digital distance’ to these conversations explored an increased likelihood of honesty as students expressing their needs with a 'keyboard' provides a veil of perceived anonymity, resulting in a level of ‘disinhibition’ (Rösner & Krämer, 2016, p. 1). It is to be noted that the digital pastoral tools were used in conjunction with, not in place of, the existing digital provision linked wholly to academic content. Of the 150 students in the cohort, 82 gave permission for their data to be used in this study.

The form’s open questions ranged from asking students how they were feeling about starting university and independent living to identifying any support needs they may have. These questions identified expectations of university life as a starting point for the personal tutor relationship. Sharing knowledge and perspectives was particularly evident in the last question that asked the students to finish the sentence “I wish my tutor knew...” The qualitative data from these questions were interpreted contextually (Dey, 1993) using predetermined themes from literature. The approach invited students to share their realities by taking a phenomenological approach, relying upon specific contexts in specific circumstances (Willig, 2008, p.52). This sought to elicit a richness of meaning forged through reflective, subjective understandings (Finlay, 1999, p.299). Asking students to finish “I wish my tutor knew...” indicated that tutors showed a willingness to listen, facilitating a safety for students to share their truth (Schwartz, 2016). The impact of this question linked directly to the purpose of the personal tutor role in HE and formed a bridge between tutor and student. This was even evident in instances where a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ answer was provided by the student to enable a humorous exchange in face-to-face meetings.

The second form issued contained further pastoral questions to generally evaluate the academic year and asked the student to reflect on strategies to aid progression in their degree journey. It also collected feedback about the first form’s role in ‘fast-tracking’ the relationship with their personal tutors which formed a key part of this study’s data collection.

Data was analysed initially using predetermined themes that had been identified from the literature, classifying findings within these but also recognising any erroneous data that did not originally ‘fit.’ The

four themes included: Using digital tools for personal tutoring, the personal tutor role and relationship, feelings towards the university experience, and personal tutoring whilst remote working. Of the data assigned to themes, it was split into ‘relevant’ ‘indifferent’ and ‘irrelevant’ to discriminate more clearly where data belonged and its contribution to the study. Any data that did not fit or fit in multiple themes was grouped and valued accordingly. As a conceptual process (Dey, 1993), this classification considered the context-specific nature of the study’s methodology and therefore a conceptual framework was established to make sense of the data in a useful way. Once classified, data was then grouped, identifying how findings could connect to other themes or create new categories. The data analysis was then coded to link to the literature and the findings presented.

## **7. Findings and Discussion**

### **7.1 Using Digital Forms**

The findings suggested that the majority of students (76 in total) students overwhelmingly felt that the digital forms enabled them to voice personal issues to their tutor with some anonymity: ‘I think it helped to open up further dialogue and ease the worry of having to physically disclose something to a stranger.’ The most common positive response was that it was an ‘easier’ way to reveal personal information that may impact study: ‘I think so, it was easier than having to bring things up out of nowhere, and ‘it’s an ice breaker and allows students to open up if they feel they want to, without having to bring it up themselves.’ The digital forms were seen as a way to ‘break the ice’ or as a ‘way in’ to the personal tutor-student relationship. These responses indicated that the form was beneficial in two ways; firstly, through the students’ experience, and secondly in its role in the development of the student-tutor relationship. Linked to its functionality, responses included; ‘I don't mind, they are easy to use,’ ‘[it is] very easy and accessible for everyone, no extra accounts need to be set up either which is good,’ and ‘it’s very straightforward and time effective.’ In contrast; ‘some of the questions are hard to answer in the format given,’ ‘I like google forms but sometimes they can be too long,’ and ‘It's okay just a bit time-consuming.’ The Google form was also effective in its purpose: ‘I feel it gives me a chance to say what others may also be concerned about and tutors will pick up on feedback and address it as a whole to everyone.’ This was supported by further findings; ‘I think it helps me to reflect on how I am feeling and to raise any concerns that I didn't realise were affecting me as much as they were,’ ‘it's a good way to express feelings’ and ‘I could discuss my mental health issue and home life situation.’ The form allowed students to share information, providing reassurance; ‘[the form is good] to hear my thoughts and understand them so I'm not alone with anything as other students are probably feeling the same.’ This also contributes to a sense of belonging; ‘I feel like

I belong, after making some good friends in and outside the course. Not to mention all the lecturers being inviting and offering out help when it's needed.'

## 7.2 Personal Tutor Website

The tutorial website with tutor profiles, contact information and details for central support services received mixed responses. These ranged from positive interactions such as: 'helpful,' and 'useful' for 'starting university to know what support is available,' and 'clear and well presented.', to ambivalence: 'I didn't know it existed' and, 'I have never used it.'. Whilst the site was 'well laid out and approachable for students who might be struggling,' or 'gives a good insight on the personal tutors,' and allowed one respondent to 'associate names to faces' students engaged less with the site than with the forms. The data indicated this as 46 of the respondents answered the tutoring site question indicating that they were not familiar with it. The site's main use seemed to be to 'look at the office hours of staff and remember how to spell their emails at the beginning of the year,' or to find 'tutors' information if you were having any difficulties,' and 'useful info without making it difficult to get to.' One student noted that 'it's a bit time-consuming'. There were also suggestions for improvements such as linking the tutor website to some form of practical support to enhance the first-year student experience:

*'An improvement would be to make it clearer that if you needed support, other tutors could help you if there was a reason that you couldn't see your personal tutor. I think that knowing the provision of care is there, and any tutor could be approached would be helpful, as sometimes I had to do this and I was nervous at first if they weren't my tutor.'*

This shows the value of the relationship between student and tutor, with the 'provision of care' indicative of how the site can increase the availability of support. Other suggested additions for the website involved 'an outline of the year/timeline,' 'background information about where each tutor specialises,' 'hobbies of tutors or their degrees,' and 'a list of things your personal tutor can help you with.' The suggestions encompassed personal management for students and gaining a better insight into tutors as individuals.

## 7.3 The Personal Tutor Role

This theme identified perceptions on the personal tutor role and relationship. The findings highlighted students' expectations about the pastoral role, and responses were strongly supported by literature in the disparity of expectations. General comments surrounding the tutor role included: 'My tutor has been the first person in uni that I felt comfortable speaking to, they don't need to have a solution to everything but continue to guide me and listen when necessary,' and 'Tutors must know the students: their names and

backgrounds. Students must attend and trust their tutors, not being afraid of expressing any issues. Tutors should be efficient in helping students and not just send them to other university support units. Both must keep in touch regularly.’ This highlighted high expectations from students about the personal tutor role and indicated a desire from students for tutors to be more involved than the nature of the role dictates. The finding that stated the need for efficiency in personal tutor actions, and not simply to ‘send them to other university support units,’ showed that the role may be misunderstood, as tutors cannot step into a ‘counselling role.’ Jorda’s (2013) case study supports this as defining the personal tutor role to encompass academic, professional and personal aspects, this similarly highlights challenges of adopting alternative approaches to personal tutoring. Despite expectations, institutionally in this study and Jorda’s (2013) study, students instead need to rely on university services for focused support.

A strong onus is on the personal tutor and ‘getting to know one another,’ with one particular enthusiastic response; ‘my personal tutor has been absolutely amazing!!! I couldn’t ask for more support,’ highlighting the contribution of the tutor to the student experience. 40 responses to the free text question ‘I wish my tutor knew...’ emphasised the relationship development between student and tutor, and personal connection: ‘I felt like it let the tutor know about us so it’s more personal,’ ‘[it was] very helpful as every tutor should get to know their students’ and ‘it’s helpful to give background information to tutors, in case you need advice or support.’ Linked to reciprocal interaction, one student acknowledged that ‘[the form] showed that there was communication between students and staff to better enhance our learning,’ and ‘this developed a better working relationship if staff know the students better.’ The personal impact of this question was evident, with 13 responses reflecting its value. These included; ‘I could discuss my mental health issues and home life situation,’ ‘it can give your personal tutor a good indication of problems you may experience, for example mine was I struggle with anxiety and my grammar isn’t the best so when I had difficulties around placement my tutor could have already known how to support me which she did.’ Moreover, the inclusion of this question gave an opportunity for the student to consider personal needs such as wellbeing or additional mental health needs that may not have been identified before: ‘Yes I think it is a good question, it made me reflect a lot,’ and it ‘made it feel like they were treating us individually with our problems,’ showing its effectiveness in fulfilling the underpinning principles of effective personal tutoring. The form did not seek information about learning needs, but this question inadvertently collected this from one respondent; ‘it was good to encourage people to get the support that they need because for me to help finally identify that I do have dyslexia. I received a lot of support for my studying which helped me be more confident in my life knowing that this is not something to hide from anymore.’

## 8. Conclusions

Research has indicated the potential for digital innovation is somewhat overlooked in response to pastoral support and student-tutor relationships in HE. With these relationships' imperative for successful transitions, adjustments, and student progress, academics as personal tutors have often been found to lack the correct training, skills and workload allowance needed to be effective. As student wellbeing issues and learning needs increase, pressure on effective personal tutor practices, and ways to maximise its potential is growing, widening the gap for solution-focused approaches that harness the benefits of digital tools. The implications of the study's findings align with its aim to enhance the student experience by adding value to pastoral support through the use of digital tools. This has been evident from the study as the digital forms specifically were positively represented by the data as an ice breaker to the tutor-student relationship. The study's objectives were to evaluate digital tools for pastoral support in a case study approach, eliciting data from the student population involved. The wider implications from meeting these objectives highlight the knowledge gap in using digital tools in higher education pastorally, where typically the focus is on teaching and learning. Further findings interrogated expectations around the personal tutor role and the increase in personal needs from students in HE.

### **8.1 Using Digital Tools for Personal Tutoring**

This study has found that a website and digital form for personal tutoring introduces an opportunity for pastoral support 'self-service,' and can remedy some of the challenges faced by constrained workloads or students not engaging with their personal tutors. This is not to replace valuable face-to-face contact with tutors but aims to assist tutors in responding individually and personally to the factors that impact students' learning and wellbeing. Using digital means to collect student responses regarding support needs can avoid misinterpretation, and staff can hold information in one place, allowing tutors to support each other in response to student answers. It also serves to fast-track a relationship between the personal tutor and the student, not requiring them to ask or articulate issues or needs in an initial 'cold' meeting with a stranger. The key finding from the use of the digital form in particular is that it facilitates a 'way in' to the tutor-student relationship that removes the social pressures of having to articulate needs or disclose personal information in a face-to-face meeting. This 'ice-breaking' tool was found to make students less anxious at the first meeting and able to communicate to their personal tutors what they expected, opening up a two-way dialogue that is often not associated with a tutor-student dynamic. Using digital tools to provide support in this way was firstly found to be user-friendly and accessible but due to the exploratory nature of the questions, were also reported as time-consuming by participants. The form allowed for reflection on personal needs and contributed to a sense of general reassurance. This signifies the clear benefit of using a digital approach to initiating the student-tutor relationship and this practice should continue. Of

both tools included in this research, the digital form elicited higher levels of engagement and positive feedback from students than the website. The student responses on the form's success reiterated the vital role of the personal tutor-student relationship, and that valuing students as individuals is at the forefront of successful tutoring. Using the tutor website was positive for accessing important information and being able to contact other tutors if there were absences was helpful, but some respondents didn't know it existed and saw it as time-consuming. It did however provide an additional layer of student support and although had mixed results, was a valuable resource. Essentially, it was better to have the personal tutor information website than not to.

For general personal tutor practice in HE, digital tools can remedy academic staff's time constraints, 'fast-tracking' relationships between students and personal tutors. The ability to write answers to facilitate an initial meeting using digital tools without relying on a 'cold,' face-to-face meeting was proven effective and is recommended to be widely adopted. Recommendations to improve this digital approach to personal tutoring, are to update the personal tutor site with further information and encourage better access and awareness of it as a resource, reiterating its purpose. The nature of the digital forms meant that they were time-consuming, however, detailed answers were required so the necessity itself led to a barrier for students to fully complete it in some cases.

## **8.2 The Personal Tutor Role**

Students held high expectations of their tutors and this aligned with the conflict identified in the literature that academic staff can have competing or unrealistic demands on their time. It also reiterated the inability of personal tutors to double as 'counsellors,' as this is outside of the remit of the role, but is indirectly expected by students nonetheless. A key finding is that students wish to be seen as individuals, putting an emphasis on the working relationships needed to learn about their backgrounds and needs. With this in mind, the findings referenced multiple mental health and complex personal life challenges, exposing an immense need for students to be signposted to further support services at the university.

## **9. Recommendations**

As a recommendation for future practice, the use of a referral system directly from the tutor to central services with information about specific student interactions would be a positive development. Introducing a formal process for personal tutors to make referrals to central services removes the expectation of students to go to support services themselves on advice alone. This would further bridge the gap between university services and personal tutors while reducing the expectations of personal tutors to overstep into

a counselling role. Finally, asking students to complete the sentence ‘I wish my tutor knew...’ in a digital format allows for freedom of interpretation and an avenue to express needs related to study, in a personal and individualised manner, and is recommended to be applied across other areas in HE to harness its effectiveness to further support students. Personal tutoring can benefit from the use of digital tools and a wider acceptance of their use in a pastoral sense is beneficial. Further research regarding pastoral support and digital approaches is needed to fully harness the potential identified by this study with a specific focus on personal tutor role expectations and using digital means to facilitate relationship development. Findings from this study have identified introductory scope to further investigate utilising perceived anonymity through digital means to articulate student needs linked to degree study. This would benefit from a wider context approach, not focused on case study research so findings are applicable to various student populations in varying HE institutions.

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