

Notes of the StARs Forum - Monday 14th March

17:00 - 18:30 (EEG162)

Topic: Personal Academic Tutor System and Assessment and Feedback

Present:

Lewis Arnold – **LA** (Vice President Education)

Ross Renton - **RR** (Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students)

Sarah Greer - **SG** (Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic)

Marie Stowell - **MS** (Director of Quality and Educational Development)

StARs and Institute Reps present: Chris Desmond, Martin Price, Diane Noble, Lizz Webb, Amy Fleming, Terri-Ann Hynes, Daisy Ward, Kevin Brooke, Emma Brooks, Madalina Brait, Tamsin Bailey, Matthew Sargeant, Danny Gregory, Abigail James, Katie Knight, Charlotte Peterson, Claire Hood, Charlie Russell, Kathleen Winwood, Jordanne Wozencroft, Josie Hartnett

Also in attendance: James Gunther – **JG** (Vice President Education elect); Dave Robson - **DB** (StAR Coordinator for the Institute of Health and Society); Hemaka Pathirana - **HP** (Vice President Student Activities); Ruth Christie - **RC** (Membership Services Manager, note-taker)

Welcome

LA welcomes students and staff to the Forum and introduced JG, the Vice President Education elect who will commence his term of office in June. LA then explained that the key topics for this Forum are the Personal Academic Tutor system and Assessment and Feedback. He invited MS to introduce the first topic.

Personal Academic Tutor system

Information on Personal Academic Tutoring can be found on the [University's website](#).

MS outlined the University's policy and explained how the institution evaluates how it is working. The Personal Academic Tutor system means that all students are entitled to have a Personal Academic Tutor (shortened to PAT for convenience below) normally someone who teaches them at some time during their course. The aim is for students to have the same PAT for the duration of their studies, although this is not always possible when, for example, staff leave the University.

The purpose of the PAT system is to provide students with support particularly at times of transition – when they start their studies, moving into the next year, when they are approaching the end of their course and when they are selecting future modules. Your PAT is someone who can talk about your progress and help you to set goals. PATs will also be able to provide support and signpost you to other services within the University where appropriate, such as Student Services. Your PAT will also provide you with a written reference.

The policy is that students meet regularly with their PAT, especially during their first year. There should be at least four meetings, spread across the year, some of which may involve the PAT meeting with a group of students, rather than one-to-one meetings.

The University's internal student survey (for all students not eligible to complete the National Student Survey) includes three questions about the PAT system and its effectiveness, so feedback from this survey contributes to the evaluation of the system. The University knows that it is variable across institutes and is currently looking at what affects that variability. Marie went on to mention that interviews have been carried out with the person within each of the six academic institutes who has responsibility for organising the PAT system and a draft report has been prepared. This describes examples of excellent good practice and looks at different practices which impact on student and tutor commitment to the system.

LA thanked MS and invited questions and comments from StARs and Institute Reps.

A StAR reported that students have avoided meeting with their PAT as they don't get on with that particular person as a lecturer.

MS said that individual students can request a different PAT and should such a request to be dealt with speedily. Marie also pointed out that naturally, there are variations in tutors' PAT capabilities and there can be tensions when an individual academic has to take on the role of PAT. She suggested that, in the circumstances outlined above, StARs could raise students' concerns with the course leader. SG added that she would be interested to explore the reasons for the students' reluctance to meet with the allocated PAT – might it be something that could be put right. Lewis highlighted the fact that the role of PAT is very different from the role of lecturer, so it is a mistake to pre-judge how effective a particular lecturer may be as a PAT.

Another StAR said students would find it easier if meetings with PATs were compulsory, as students sometimes feel that they “don't want to bother” members of staff.

MS said that there are many variations across the University – at one extreme, meetings with PATs are mandatory and students will fail the course if they do not attend. At the other extreme, there are PATs who, if they remember to, may send a general email to all of their tutees inviting them to make an appointment if they want to. Marie commented that the system seems to work well if meetings are scheduled or if students can book appointments through an electronic system (Psychology use a Doodle poll, for example).

Sarah added that students, particularly those in their first year, should never worry that academic staff are too busy for PAT appointments.

A first-year Nursing StAR said that they have two timetabled sessions with their PAT a year, scheduled at times when they are not on placement and this works well.

A first-year science StAR reported that students find the fact that their PAT is also one

of their lecturers and their course leader difficult – it means that students cannot easily talk about some of the issues they would like to discuss.

MS suggested that it might be helpful for StARs to raise concerns of this kind with their Institute Reps to see if a satisfactory solution might be found.

A second-year StAR pointed out that the policy states that it is the responsibility of the PAT to make initial contact with students, but this is not happening.

MS said that StARs should be encouraged to raise this with their course leader or at the course management committee. Courses should spell out how the PAT system should work. Sarah added that it is not acceptable for students not to have met with their PAT at all in their second year.

An Institute Rep reported that, in Sport, students are sent an invitation to meet with their PAT in their first year and after that first meeting, students may choose to set up further appointments, but some do not and may not see their PAT again. It would be preferable to have an electronic booking system, but it would be better if this could be through SOLE, rather than adding a separate system.

Marie said that in some subject areas, there are mini-inductions for continuing students at the beginning of every academic year and PATs should be involved in these.

Ross explained that the University is currently considering a range of options for developing effective digital platforms, which might include SOLE or Blackboard, for instance. He would welcome the involvement of StARs in a working group to look at what might work best for students. StARs also suggested that the University app and Yamma should be considered.

A StAR reported that her PAT shares an office with two other members of staff, so it's awkward to talk about personal issues.

Marie suggested that students should request a private appointment if they would prefer this – the PAT should be able to book a room or find a space away from other members of staff.

Sarah asked whether academic staff have drop-in sessions.

A StAR from the Institute of Education said that a particular PAT is not available in person and does not respond to emails.

RR and SG both agreed that it is not acceptable for PAT not to be available for students.

One StAR said that there are a couple of tutors who will keep their doors open at times when they're happy for students just to pop in and this is very welcome. Some students, though, feel they should not ask to see anyone other than their PAT.

A StAR noted that Phase 3 of the Personal Academic Tutor system is about embedding the system as an essential part of the student experience. He wondered to what extent this Phase has been achieved.

Marie said that this was work in progress. In her view, a meeting with a PAT should be more valuable to a student than attending a lecture, as it was an opportunity for reflection and goal-setting in relation to personal academic development (whereas there are various ways in which a student can catch up on the content of a lecture); there is no substitute for a Personal Academic Tutor meeting to review progress.

SG asked whether students find the PAT system useful

A first-year StAR said there should be better communication with students if their PAT changes (for instance, if a member of staff leaves) as, in her case, she was not notified. There needs to be a better "handover" procedure.

A Psychology StAR said that every effort is made to match a student on a particular pathway to a suitable PAT.

By contrast, a Nursing StAR explained that there are three branches of Nursing but many students have a PAT from a different branch and this is not helpful.

A StAR from the Institute of Science and the Environment commented that the mandatory requirement for students to attend meetings with their PATs works well.

A Joint Honours StAR said that the PAT is able to provide help in the subject area in which they teach, but is much less helpful in the other subject area, which is understandable.

MS explained that a PAT is allocated from one of the subject areas and all JH students should have a named contact (normally the subject lead) for the other subject area.

Another StAR explained that her PAT is an hourly-paid lecturer and is only available on Tuesdays and Fridays, which is frustrating.

MS suggested that it might sometimes be appropriate for students to have tutorials via Skype (there is a University Skype platform).

LA then asked MS to introduce the subject of assessment and feedback.

Assessment and feedback

MS started by asking how many StARs and Institute Reps are aware that the University has a [Student Feedback Charter](#) and a good number were.

MS summarised the principles outlined in the Charter:

- The importance of assessment for learning and the need for formative feedback

- Feedback should be timely, in order to help students prepare for summative assessment
- Personalised feedback from summative assessments should be received within twenty working days of the assessment
- Marking should be anonymous, wherever possible

Students should also expect to receive feedback on exams and no new types of assessment tasks should be introduced in a student's final year of study. The University has reviewed feedback from external examiners and students in relation to assessment and feedback. One of the key concerns is consistency, particularly within course teams. Every course has been asked to review their approach to better establish consistency. Another area which remains under review is the electronic management of assessment. Currently, a number of different processes are being used.

Comments and questions from StARs and Institute Reps were invited.

An Institute Rep from ISES reported that students are really positive about their assessments and the feedback they receive. The only issue has been that some students did not understand the significance of the term “working days”, so were expecting feedback within three weeks rather than four weeks. All assignments are online, which is very popular, although limited file size is an issue.

Another StAR said that they use [Microsoft OneDrive](#) for video submissions.

A Criminology StAR reported that students don't have any concerns in relation to assessment and they receive great feedback.

There was a comment from students that no-one trusts peer assessment.

RR said there is good evidence that peer assessment is unpopular, but effective. Marie added that research shows that peer assessment is actually as reliable as assessment by tutors. Sarah commented that self-marking can also be very effective.

Audio feedback is popular in psychology, as it's very helpful to hear the tone and intonation in the feedback, which can get missed in written feedback

Sarah noted that can be very frustrating for tutors when they put a lot of time and effort into providing detailed, personalised feedback and all students look at is the grade!

A StAR asked whether it's appropriate for postgraduates to be “guest markers”.

Marie said that there are processes for moderating the marking of whoever is the first marker, but if the feedback is contradictory, students' concerns should be fed back to the module leader.

A StAR from Sport commented that last year in the first semester, students had two lecturers with very different approaches who marked very differently. Now, students have a tutorial with the member of staff who will be marking the work, which is very

helpful.

MS remarked that in the Business School, assignments and assessments are readily available for students.

There was a comment from a StAR regarding sensitive marking – she has found that the sensitive marking forms are rarely signed and acknowledged.

MS said that this process is under review and there is an implication that other marking isn't sensitive, whereas in fact all marking should be sensitive. It's essential that staff understand the principles of fair marking.

A Nursing StAR said that nursing students are required to submit a paper assignment, which they have to collect in person during particular dates and times when they are on placement. This is very problematic, particularly when placements are some distance away.

DR responded that this was an error and should not happen again.

Sarah asked StARs what the quality of feedback is like.

A first-year Education Studies StAR said that students do not understand the feedback they have been given. They do not have a general feedback session – just a few minutes at the end of a lecture.

LA said that he had found the generic feedback sessions in Sport very useful. He suggested that students should also be encouraged to talk to their PATs as they have access to students' feedback and comments so are well informed and can offer useful support.

A StAR asked what the recommended number of formative assessments, quoting the example of there being none in the second year of psychology.

MS explained that there is general advice but not prescriptive requirements. Formative assessments come in many forms and may be quite informal, so sometimes students may not recognise these as being part of formative assessment. Where students are concerned that they are not getting the formative assessment they feel they need, however, StARs should take suggestions for improvement to course management committees.

A first-year PITE StAR explained that they are encouraged to meet with their PAT when feedback is received after the first assignment. Tutorials with subject tutors are also helpful. By contrast, a second-year StAR on the same course reported that students had found no annotations at all on essays submitted. A creative arts StAR asked whether guidance could be provided for laying out work – font size, line spacing etc.

MS said that there is no University policy or standard in relation to layout. MS asked about StARs' experiences of using Turnitin, as the current policy states that first-year

students should have the opportunity to use it as a formative tool.

One first-year said students had to submit essay plans through Turnitin to get used to the process. Another StAR asked whether Turnitin was embedded in Blackboard or whether the website needs to be used.

MS replied that there had been problems at one stage last year with Turnitin, which might explain why students may have been directed to use the website. It is integrated with Blackboard, but not with SOLE.

LA thanked all of the StARs, Institute Reps and members of staff who had contributed to the StARs Forum and reminded students that the next StARs Forum is due to take place on Friday 15th April at 13:15 – 14:45 in BY1150