

Evaluating Personal Academic Advisers' Support Strategies for First-year Events Management Students

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Keywords: *personal tutor schemes/pastoral care, student experience, transition to HE*

Introduction

The current drive to widen participation and associated changes in the number and diversity of students have made pastoral support more important than ever in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). By 2005 there were over 2.3 million students in HEIs, including many who have not been through a traditional educational path (HESA website). In 1960 only 7% of 18-19 year olds went to university whereas the current figure now stands at around 42% (HEFCE 2007). The government target for 2010 states that 50% of youths aged between 18-30 should be in HEIs. At London Metropolitan University (LondonMet) the number of students is now approaching 35,000 with 7,000 of these international students. Analysis of the entry qualifications for first-degree students in 2004-05 indicates that only 30% entered with traditional A-levels or equivalent, compared with 67% in other higher education institutions in England (London Metropolitan University, 2007, p.72). With widening participation HEIs must confront how to address issues arising from these transformations and ensure that students have adequate support to cope with the demands of academic study, to progress and complete their degree.

Pastoral care may take different forms; this paper refers to the Personal Academic Adviser (PAA) system as it is used in London Metropolitan University. It is an attempt to evaluate the support strategies provided by Personal Academic Advisers (PAAs), based on my initial experience in the role of PAA to first-year Events Management students in Business School. It focuses on my role and the contribution of a PAA to the students' learning development, their needs and wants. Finally, some suggestions are provided as to what needs to be done to improve the quality of the PAA scheme, particularly the relationship between the staff, students and institution.

The data for this paper draws on students' reflective logs from the Higher Education Orientation (HEO) module on which I taught in both semester 1 and 2 of 2005/06. Being a PAA coordinator as well as being responsible for 250 students in Events Management (on single and joint courses), I have documented whenever I met the students and their emails have been logged. Questionnaires were circulated at the end of the year; 55 out of 120 were filled in and returned.

Context

A sector review report by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) revealed that most students in HEIs were not getting enough support. In response to this challenge nearly all HEIs have moved to provide an extensive range of student support and services in the area of pastoral care. At LondonMet various Undergraduate Centres have been set up to provide support for students and academic departments. Members of academic staff from different departments - working closely with UG centres – are assigned to each student to provide academic guidance and pastoral support around matters such as module choice, progression, results, awards and referencing.

The support is based on educational strategies, introduced and implemented nationally with general emphasis on a student-centred approach. The PAA is seen as complementary to this process. In their various examinations of students' support, Wheeler and Birtle (1995) use the term 'anchor' while Bruner (1998 cited in Woodhead *et al.* 1994) suggests the concept of 'scaffolding'. The notion of 'scaffolding' in this sense is about the way the PAA constructs a support for learners which is gradually removed as individuals become more competent. The PAA's role is to lend support to the learner's own constructive activity, enabling them to gain the necessary understanding of the institution and requisite skills, and then to remove the support progressively in such a way that the learner can function autonomously. This will embed students into the system, helping them to stay in higher education longer and is specially needed when the students begin the transition to life as an under-graduate. As an anchor, the PAA provides support to the students to undergo institutional processes, procedures, to face expectations and reduce the anxiety that students may have when they first enter HEIs.

The pastoral tutorial model (Thomas & Hixenbaugh 2006) is similar to the PAA system in respect of providing academic support for the students. However, this model appears to be reactive rather than proactive, as access to members of staff depends on the adviser's availability and is restricted to consultation hours. This makes it difficult for part-time or adult learners to be able to see their adviser when it suits them. Owen (2002) explores a model aimed at a more proactive and structured approach whereby each student is given a personal tutor. In this model, students must see a member of teaching staff at regular intervals regardless of whether they have a particular problem. Finally, there is the integrated curriculum model in which each student undertakes a module with their adviser or in a group covering learning skills and introduction to HE generally. Personal tutoring by a PAA is time-tabled and sometimes accredited.

Experience of first-year Events Management students

A key issue for the new students when they come to HEIs is apprehension. This is because education is not just an intellectual process but an emotional experience

too, all arising from joining a new educational institution, meeting lecturers, making new friends, engaging with new concepts, terminologies, theories and evidence, or having to meet deadlines for assessments of different types (essays, reports, oral presentation, exams or portfolios). This may manifest itself in a variety of forms as pointed out by one of the first-year students in this study:

“First week I was confused and scared, since this has been my first semester at University. . . I enjoyed it a lot [later on] and became more and more interested and curious about the whole subject area” (“J”, June 2007).

Anxiety about where they are coming to and what they are studying arises as a result of not knowing what is expected from them academically. As Murphy & Flemming (2000) show, quite often students making the transition to HE are confused and do not know how to study and learn. The level of support within the teaching environment thus becomes a key factor in both students’ retention and their progression, as research into student withdrawal indicates (see, for example, Laing & Robinson 2003). Appropriate intervention and being proactive as a PAA is crucial for some students who are motivated to stay and complete their degree but who may be unfamiliar with what HEI is all about. For some students who are from different countries the issues can be extremely difficult:

“When I started this course I was apprehensive if I can complete this degree because it was the first time I was staying away from home, that too in a completely different country where I knew absolutely no one when I left home... But with the support from my parents and PAA I managed to do my first year pretty well”. (“C”, June 2007).

The degree of success or failure varies but recent cross-institutional research (see Dodgson & Bolam 2002) indicates that a key factor in students’ success is the quality of support students receive from staff and the relationship between the two. How it occurs, and when and where the main focus of support should be is also very important.

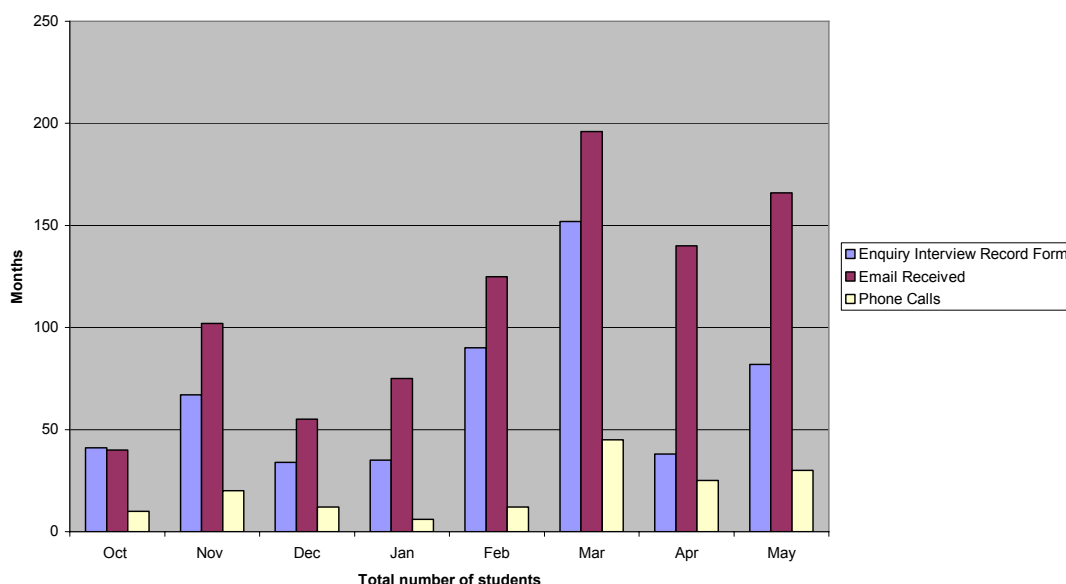
The PAA’s role in the HEO module during semester I and throughout year I can be a vehicle for the initial contact, building up a relationship and providing support for the students. The PAAs can act as a bridge between students and institution to break down barriers, especially for those students who are not familiar with HEIs. Tracking students’ participation, checking their progression and offering them feedback can show the caring side of the institution to the students. However, the opposite can also be true as students may have difficulties finding their PAAs, as illustrated in the following comment:

“My PAA is only around during his office hours [but] as he is not teaching me any of my modules and I also work. So I find it difficult to see him as much as I need” (“S”, April 2007).

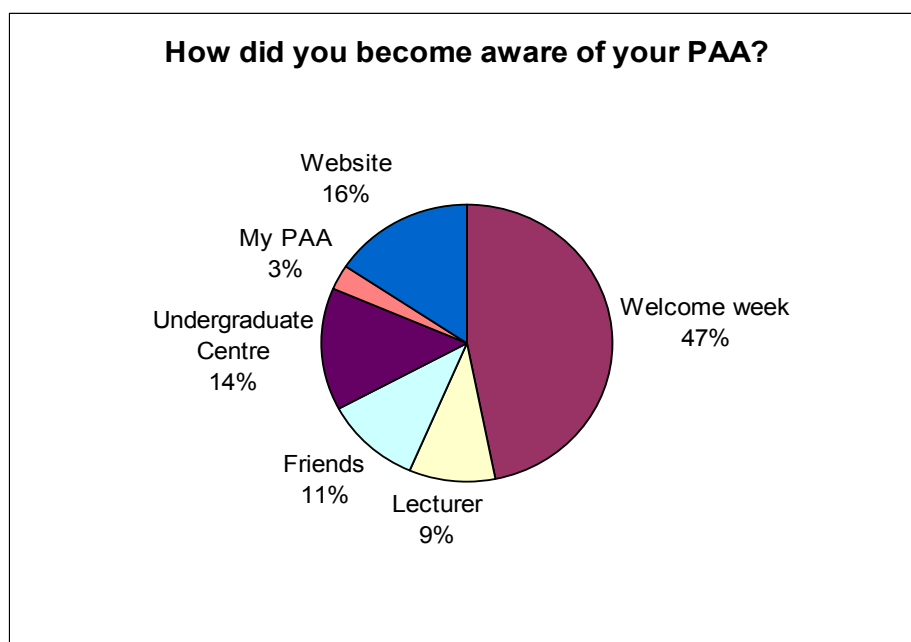
Maintaining regular contact between the students and PAAs is not always simply a problem that PAAs create when they have fixed hours. Students who are working part-time, or have family responsibilities, are also less likely to be around the University to meet their PAAs even when they are available.

Students also have to have confidence in their PAA if they wish to raise personal academic difficulties. This is more likely to happen if the PAAs meet their students often, both in and outside of the classroom, as demonstrated in this study. As the bar chart below shows, I only managed to see only 20 of my students and received 30 emails from my students in October 2006 compared to May 2007 when I saw 68 of my students and received 136 emails (the data includes other students I had to see as PAA coordinator, besides first-year Events Management students). As time went by the figures increased as the relationship between students and me became stronger and students had less apprehension if they wanted to come to see me.

A Summary of Queries Oct 2006 - May 07



Inability to see their PAA could be caused by various factors, among others not knowing them individually. As the pie chart below shows, half (53%) of the Events Management students did not know who were their PAAs during or after their induction. Thus they came to be aware of their PAAs through friends, the University website, Undergraduate Centres, their lecturers or from the PAAs themselves.

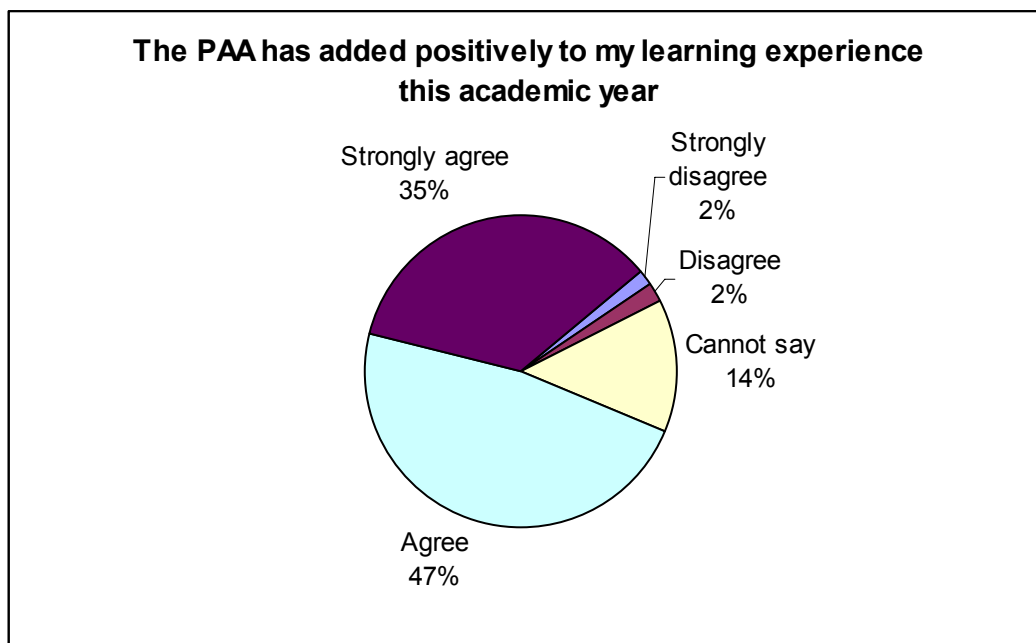


While the induction is still very important for the students to learn who their PAA is, more can be done to ensure that all students get to know their PAAs at the beginning of the academic year, as a respondent in this study recommends:

“I think there should be a proper induction at the beginning of the year so students can get to know their PAA. Possible time slots where you can just chat about university, life and problems etc” (reply to Student Questionnaire).

The initial contact between the PAA and the students can easily be made through the HEO module and Personal Development Planning (PDP) process, as this provides an opportunity to discuss their achievements, their goals for the future, and the obstacles to their study. PAA can be in a crucial position to support students at risk in their early period: during the first three weeks of a student’s course, the PAA together with the HEO module can be a platform by which students can become aware of the institutional expectations.

Out of those who responded to the questionnaires, four out of five (82%) agreed that the PAAs have added very positively towards their learning experience during the year. As in other personal tutor schemes, PAAs can be pivotal in providing support with academic procedures and practices, engagement with the subject matter, giving formative feedback, in general developing the students’ skills to handle the different modules (Thomas & Hixenbaugh 2006). The involvement of PAA in PDP schemes ‘can help to encourage a broad discussion of students’ achievements and aspirations and of any difficulties that are impeding their progress’ (*ibid.*, p.16).



Limitations and Suggestions

With ever-growing intake of students, the level of the student/staff ratio is a problem, particularly in the first year. In the case of LondonMet, the PAA on 0.1 duties (half a day per week) has approximately 67 students to look after. This can be difficult to manage for various reasons not least in getting to know all the students individually. Modularisation has compounded the problem because the average student studies across several academic departments or schools.

Many PAAs experience students who are unable to make academic decisions, to meet their deadlines for assessments or to complete their Programme Planning by the deadline. This is especially frequent during the first year and first semester when students are unfamiliar with the HEI system. PAAs may feel that they have to spoon-feed their students. The role of PAAs can be significant, to foster calmness rather than over-reaction, encouraging the students to express their anxiety without having unnecessary fears, and also to avoid over-protecting the students. However, this is not a simple mechanical process and PAAs may not be able to play this role as they see themselves as lecturers rather than providing counselling services.

Despite the difficulties some academic staff welcome the PAA role in principle but in practice feel reluctant to take on more tasks on top of teaching, research and administration duties, even though the PAA role can be a very rewarding aspect of the academic profession.

Their role can be made easier, especially for the first year students if the PAA is built into the HEO module and PDP process. The general purpose of the PDP is to give students the necessary tools to reflect upon and improve their learning and performance. However, this should be seen in the wider perspective of the possibilities to improve the support provided to students by developing and

enhancing interaction between the PAA and students. PAA engagement in the HEO module and PDP potentially enhances student support as their intervention – both in and outside of the class room – can play a proactive role in assisting students to recognise and communicate their own achievements. The integration of HEO, PDP and PAA system can clarify the role and responsibilities of the PAA. It provides students with the opportunity to discuss issues of concern to them with their PAA. In this way the PAA could provide academic guidance in a holistic manner rather than just dealing with one or two issues: to support students with time management, decision making, research and report writing, exams, to facilitate their personal development, monitoring their progress, programme planning and providing a vital link between the students and the university. This process can be smoother if PAAs are involved in another first year core module during the second semester, one that their students are studying. This would allow PAAs and students to maintain contact, even if they cannot meet during the PAA hours, and gives a forum to track students' progress.

It is clear from the students' feedback and questionnaires responses in this survey that relationships lie at the heart of the students' experience of university and that the PAA can play a pivotal role in this. However, most of the first-year Events Management students surveyed felt reservations about bringing their problems to their PAA unless forced to do so. The majority of them felt that pre-arranged meetings with their PAAs, possibly twice each semester, enabling regular contact throughout the first year, would be the best forum to discuss their issues and general progress. A proactive PAA, accessible, easy to talk to and dependable, is an asset to their time at university. Students want an enthusiastic PAA who is considerate to their individual needs. However, this requires a structure provided by the university that enables PAAs and students to develop a relationship from the first day of students' entrance to university.

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