

Case study 20

Professional large group mentoring as an alternative to the 'traditional' personal tutoring system

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Introduction

In my case study I will reflect on how the newly introduced large-group mentoring system at the Management department at the London School of Economics (LSE) impacted the student experience on the BSc Management programme. The case study will shed light on the way large group mentoring and student support is designed in terms of organisational structure and how the roles are defined and shared within the mentoring team. The case study is based on my personal and professional insights gained through working in small group based tutoring systems, as well as in a large-group system, where a small group of professionals cover the personal tutoring of a whole undergraduate programme. My case study will showcase the differences between the two systems from an organisational point of view and walk the reader through how the new solutions introduced at the LSE - which may be considered an innovation in UK higher education – have made an impact on the student and staff experience.

History and context of personal tutoring at the Management department at the London School of Economics (LSE)

Large group mentoring had been introduced at the LSE's Management department as an innovative way to improve the student experience. The 'traditional' organisational arrangement of personal tutoring originated from *the 'in loco parentis'* tutor system of Oxford and Cambridge (Earwaker, 1992), where tutors provided pastoral care for their students in groups of 11 to 15 (Lochtie et al, 2018). Our department decided to change this approach. The new system integrates academic and pastoral support and is delivered by a team of four professionals for all the students on the BSc Management

programme. By 'professionals' I mean staff members who are responsible for mentoring for at least 50 percent of their time.

As with most innovations, the new system was triggered by a necessity. The Management department's National Student Survey (NSS) scores - which measures undergraduate student satisfaction of the BSc Management - had been relatively low since the UK's Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Department of Education, 2017) was introduced in 2017.

According to the department's survey in 2016, undergraduate students felt that they do not receive enough support and attention from their personal tutors and the quality of the tutoring relationship was dependent on the academic tutor's personality and priorities. Indeed, not all tutors are well equipped to address the needs of students whatever their background (McFarlane, 2016). The experiences of students at LSE were in line with findings of earlier studies claiming that changing student expectations related to the drastic increase in tuition fees in the UK, rising student numbers and challenging staff-student ratios (Grey and Osborne, 2018), and led to a situation in which both students and staff were unhappy and unable to meet each other's needs. We needed to find a way to improve the student experience, while also creating more realistic expectations for faculty members who felt overwhelmed by the amount of academic and pastoral issues they were required to manage as personal tutors of undergraduate students.

Large group mentoring as an alternative practice

The introduction of the new system was phased in gradually over three years. First in 2017, LSE introduced a new structure of mentoring in which first year students were allocated to one professional mentor, while second- and third-year students - who were still mentored by faculty members in small groups - were offered two meetings per term with their personal tutors. Although these changes led to some improvement, the dual challenge of students needing more specialised and accessible academic and pastoral support, and staff's inability to provide this support due to time constraints, pressures on research outputs and lack of training, has not been resolved.

The complexity of mentoring

Our institutional practice suggested that while postgraduate students require less personal, pastoral and progress-related support, those studying for their first degree need guidance and care on multiple interdependent areas. The lack of congruence between what is expected from the role and what is experienced by the student can lead students having strong negative emotions (Yale, 2019), which

inevitably may lead to low NSS outcomes. After identifying the complexity of the issue, the Management department decided to restructure its personal tutoring system. The department introduced a new structure for personal tutoring at the undergraduate level and - along with LSE's new institutional approach - rebranded it as 'academic mentoring'.

Large group mentoring in practice

Large group mentoring refers to the nature of the role: instead of allocating 11 to 15 students to an academic, four mentors cater for a large cohort of 150-200 students in each year group. The programme has around 500 students enrolled overall in general.

<i>Year group BSc in Management</i>	<i>Mentor role</i>	
Year 1	Academic/pastoral mentoring provided by one mentor (professional services staff)	
Years 2 and 3	Academic mentoring provided by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - one academic for 2nd year students - another academic for 3rd year students 	Pastoral mentoring provided by a professional services staff for both 2 nd and 3 rd year students

Table 1 Staff responsibilities

As Table 1 shows, academic mentoring is provided by a team of two professional services staff members and two academics. The two academics are both on the education career track. The team's roles and responsibilities are divided along clearly identified boundaries which makes the management of issues transparent and easy to communicate to the students.

Mentoring for first year students is based on the pastoral model (Grey and Osborne, 2018) whereby students are advised by one person on academic and personal matters (Lochtie et al, 2018). Students transitioning from secondary schools and colleges go through an adaptation or a sense-making process (Yale, 2020) and therefore need pastoral and academic support at the same time. It is beneficial if this support is provided by the same person, since the nature of the challenges that students are facing may overlap the boundary of academic and personal issues. In the second and third years however, most students will be able to identify whether they require academic or pastoral

support. In these year groups the academic side of mentoring includes all areas related to progress and learning while the pastoral side of mentoring relates to personal challenges, attendance, wellbeing, stress and anxiety or being referred to other university services.

Roles and responsibilities of academic mentors

Allen and Smith have identified five domains in which quality advising contributes to student development as outlined below.

1. *'Integration of the student's academic life and career goals with each other and the curriculum and co-curriculum'*
2. *'Referral to campus resources for academic and non-academic problems'*
3. *'Provision of information about degree requirements, policies and procedures'*
4. *'Individuation, or consideration of students' individual characteristics'*
5. *'Shared responsibility', to help students become responsible for their own education.*

(Allen and Smith, 2008 p 609)

Applying Allen and Smith's framework (2008), I illustrate below how the role of academic mentoring is divided along roles and responsibilities, some of which are distinct, whereas others overlap (see Table 2). The overlap in roles shows that mentors need to work closely together to meet student's needs.

<i>Allen and Smith's five domains of student development (2008 p 609):</i>	<i>Responsibility within the team</i>		<i>Rationale</i>
Integration	Academic mentor		The academic mentor has a better understanding of the curriculum, academic sessions and the link of these with career pathways
Referral		Pastoral mentor	The pastoral mentor has a broader understanding of the student's personal

			needs and university services
Provision of information	Academic mentor (course choice, help with interruptions, resits, inclusion plan, deferrals, degree classification, etc)	Pastoral mentor (administrative issues such as attendance monitoring, keeping in touch with unregistered students, referrals to services etc.)	Shared between academic and pastoral mentors depending on type of information
Personalisation	Academic mentor	Pastoral mentor	Both mentors through one-to-one meetings
Shared responsibility for their own education	Academic mentor	Pastoral mentor	Both mentors through one-to-one, mini-group and group sessions

Table 2 Roles and responsibilities of the academic mentor team – for second- and third-year undergraduate students - based on Allen and Smith’s 2008 Framework

To provide continuity of personal relationships with the students, the academic members of the mentoring team teach all incoming first year students on one of their core modules and then start mentoring them in their second year.

Evaluation, impact and outcomes

Based on the student feedback and the substantial improvement of the NSS results, the large group mentoring system has been positively received by the student body. The scheme was phased in from 2017/18 and became fully functional by 2019/20. Compared to 2015/16, seminar attendance for first year students increased from 82 per cent to 91 per cent in 2017/18. Students also showed increased academic attainment in first year quantitative courses such as Statistics and Mathematics. In 2016/17, 19 per cent of students achieved a first in Maths, in 2017/18 this increased to 34 per cent, while in Statistics 47 per cent of the students achieved a first compared to 27 per cent a year earlier. Whilst not directly attributable to large group mentoring these are indicative of the positive improvements in students’ progress.

Furthermore, the department's NSS results have increased from 64 per cent in 2018 to 79 per cent in 2019 and 85 per cent in 2020. Satisfaction with Academic Support increased from 62 per cent in 2018 to 68 per cent in 2019 and 81 per cent in 2020, when the scheme became fully functional for all year groups. Satisfaction with learning resources increased similarly from 67 per cent in 2018 to 81 per cent in 2020.

Conclusion

Although the system is new and hence long-term impacts are not measurable yet, it is evident that students on the undergraduate programme are happier with the support they receive today than they were a few years ago.

Key messages

The key takeaways regarding large group mentoring from this case study are as follows.

- As the needs and skills of undergraduate students evolve, during their first year and beyond, the support provided should also.
- Second- and third-year students can better identify whether they require academic or pastoral support, so the two can be more separated and specialised.
- The division of mentoring tasks along academic and pastoral lines makes responsibilities transparent, tasks manageable for staff and a reality which more closely matches expectation.
- Large group mentoring, led by more closely specialised mentors, can positively affect the student experience by increasing student satisfaction and progress.

Critical reflections

1. From your own experience as a personal tutor and as a student, analyse whether you believe it is possible and desirable to effectively dissociate academic and pastoral support. If this approach is adopted, what key factors would need to be considered to ensure it is effective?
2. Devise two feasible strategies to ensure your practice is personalised to address individual student needs.
3. Even if academic staff do not undertake a designated personal tutoring role but continue to teach or work with students individually, identify the key personal tutoring skills, behaviours and values which will enhance their educational practice.

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