

# The Experiences and Challenges of Personal Tutors in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

Universities increasingly rely on personal tutoring to support student wellbeing, belonging, and academic progression, yet the role remains structurally ambiguous and inconsistently resourced. This qualitative study examined the lived experiences and challenges of personal tutors at a large UK Russell Group university. Twenty-one tutors from diverse academic disciplines participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were generated: *Relational Labour*, encompassing the emotional and interpersonal labour required to build and sustain student trust; *Navigating the role* characterised by inconsistent training, reliance on informal peer support, and the strain of managing complex student issues alongside competing academic duties; and *Structural fragmentation*, highlighting fragmented communication systems, role ambiguity, and the absence of coordinated structures for tutor support. Collectively, the findings show that personal tutoring functions as an undervalued form of emotional and organisational labour, sustained by individual goodwill rather than institutional design. The study demonstrates the need for clear role definitions, recognition of workload, competency-based training, and integrated support systems to safeguard tutor wellbeing and improve the quality of student support.

## KEYWORDS

Personal tutoring; academic advising; higher education; qualitative study; student wellbeing; quality education

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## Introduction

Personal tutoring is widely used across UK higher education as a means through which students can access academic guidance and pastoral support. Tutors are commonly positioned as a point of continuity within their programme, expected to help students interpret administrative processes, navigate academic difficulties, and direct them toward appropriate services when required (Braine & Parnell, 2011; Grey & Osborne, 2020; McFarlane, 2016). However, the remit of personal tutoring varies between institutions and often within them.

Students and staff report uncertainty over what tutoring entails, how it should operate, and which responsibilities fall within or outside its scope (Bassett et al., 2014; Yale, 2020). This ambiguity may shape what tutors believe they should do, what students believe they can ask for, and how universities design support systems around the tutoring function. This lack of clarity has coincided with a gradual expansion of the issues that are brought into the tutoring space.

Staff increasingly report being approached about academic performance, disability-related needs, financial pressures, family circumstances, and complex mental health presentations (Hughes & Byrom, 2019; Hayman et al., 2023). Studies indicate that tutors often become the first, and sometimes only, individuals to whom students disclose distress or personal difficulties (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Raby, 2020). This pattern has emerged alongside a rise in mental health difficulties among young adults in the UK (McManus et al., 2016; Tabor et al., 2021), coupled with pressure on central student services. Consequently, tutors are frequently required to operate at the boundary of their professional competence. For example, attempting to support students who may require specialist intervention despite lacking clinical training (Hughes & Spanner, 2019).

This ambiguity contributes to emotional and operational strain. Personal tutors report discomfort with pastoral expectations, anxiety about causing harm, and a sense of institutional vulnerability when they are unsure how to respond to student needs (Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McFarlane, 2016). Some describe the role as emotionally demanding, time-intensive, or in tension with research and teaching workloads (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Walker, 2020). Others note that the quality of tutoring often depends on individual personality, interpersonal skill, or goodwill rather than any institutional design (Raby, 2020; Hayman et al., 2023). This suggests that personal tutoring in many universities is carried out as a form of hidden or informal labour, valuable to students but structurally under-resourced and inconsistently supported.

Sector-level initiatives recognise this gap but do not resolve it. For example, the UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) Professional Framework outlines competencies around information management, referral, academic development, and interpersonal communication, providing a route for staff recognition (UKAT, 2023). However, the framework does not specify workload allocation, institutional accountability, or minimum standards of provision, leaving implementation largely voluntary. Relatedly, the University Mental Health Charter reframes student support as a shared institutional responsibility. It argues that student wellbeing should be embedded across all aspects of university life rather than outsourced to individual actors or services (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Although many of its principles, such as supporting belonging, academic challenge, and compassionate guidance, logically intersect with tutoring, the Charter does not provide explicit structural guidance for tutoring roles. Other sector initiatives similarly promote the integration of wellbeing into core academic practices. The Education for Mental Health toolkit demonstrates how pedagogic choices around assessment, feedback, and academic belonging can contribute to student wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2022).

These approaches are typically embedded in teaching and programme design; however, there are again few explicit references to tutoring or advising. As a result, tutors often interpret their responsibilities through personal judgment, ad hoc experience, or departmental culture rather than formal training or institutional policy (Grey & Osborne, 2020; McFarlane, 2016). Therefore, there is a need for evidence-based guidance for personal tutors.

Most empirical research focuses on student perspectives, such as engagement, satisfaction, or expectations of support (Bassett et al., 2014; Calabrese et al., 2022; Yale, 2020). Studies that examine tutors' experiences tend to be discipline-specific or reflective commentaries that highlight role conflict, burnout, or emotional burden, particularly when supporting mental health concerns (Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McFarlane, 2016; Raby, 2020; Walker, 2020). What remains limited is systematic, institution-wide qualitative research that explores how personal tutoring is experienced as an everyday practice: how tutors construct its boundaries, how they navigate its competing demands, and how institutional structures shape the work they perform.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of personal tutors at a large UK Russell Group university. Rather than evaluating compliance with institutional expectations or measuring student outcomes, the study focuses on how tutors understand their role. By foregrounding the perspectives of tutors across multiple faculties and academic roles, this research provides insight into how personal tutoring is enacted within real institutional contexts. Understanding these dynamics is critical to developing tutoring systems that are both sustainable for staff and meaningful for students.

## **Methods**

### **Researcher positionality**

This qualitative study employed a critical realist ontology and objective epistemology, adopting a post-positivist research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researchers adopted an empathetic, reflexive judgement as their positionality, with continuous reflection on the process, its implications, and their role within it. Two final-year undergraduate psychology student researchers (SH, KE) contributed to the data collection, analysis, and dissemination stages of this study. Being beneficiaries of the personal tutoring system at their university, the student researchers were subjective spectators in the research process. This undoubtedly shaped their perspectives and framed their understanding. Student researchers received qualitative training and mentoring from the project's supervisors (RU, FC). The supervisors contributed to the analysis, interpretation, and write-up of this research. As personal tutors themselves within the psychology department, the supervisors assumed a co-creator role in the research process, bringing their expertise in student mental health, education and pedagogy research and practice. As psychologists, the supervisors could also better

understand the boundaries surrounding pastoral care in a personal tutoring context. This added another layer of understanding and reflexivity to shape the themes generated.

### **Study Setting**

To support the transferability of findings, details of the institutional and personal tutoring context are reported in line with the Checklist for Intervention Description of Education Research (CIDER; Upsher et al., 2025), which emphasises reporting the institutional setting, provider characteristics, and delivery context in educational research. The study was conducted at one large urban Russell Group university in the United Kingdom (UK), comprising approximately 42,000 students and 8,000 staff. Personal tutoring is implemented across all faculties for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students and is designed to provide proactive academic and wellbeing support throughout students' university experience. Personal tutors act as a first point of contact for students, supporting academic progression, facilitating access to university services, and signposting specialist support where required. Personal tutors are expected to undertake institutional training and utilise university support resources, although local delivery arrangements (i.e. student-tutor ratio), meeting frequency, and additional training requirements vary across faculties. Personal tutoring is delivered through a combination of individual and group meetings, conducted either in person or online. Data collection occurred during the post-COVID period, when universities continued to respond to evolving student support and wellbeing needs.

### **Design**

The study aimed to explore the experiences and challenges of personal tutoring for personal tutors. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting an average of 45 minutes. The recruitment period was between January and March 2023; all participants were interviewed once. University ethical approval was obtained (HR/DP-21/22-29341).

### **Participants**

Participants were staff (N=21) recruited from any subject discipline across the university via university research and personal tutor email circulars, social media, and word-of-mouth advertising. Staff were required to have recent experience in a personal tutor role (self-assessment) with undergraduate or postgraduate taught students and to be at least 18 years of age. The majority of the sample was female (n=17), of white ethnicity (n=20), and in a Lecturer role (n=9) (Table 1). The mean age was 46.85 years (SD = 12.37), and the mean personal tutoring duration was 8.80 years (SD = 8.2).

The specificity of the participants, the use of semi-structured interviews, strong interviewer-interviewee dialogue, and rigorous analysis methods contributed to the richness and depth of

data collected. This justified a sample size of 21 participants, based on information power criteria, as sufficient to provide rich and meaningful data (Malterud et al., 2016).

### **Topic guide**

The whole research team was involved in developing the topic guide, which was piloted on two members of staff. The interview was designed to be both inductive and deductive, with deliberately broad, open-ended questions to allow for a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Questions were initially developed based on existing literature on tutors' experiences of personal tutoring (e.g. Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McFarlane, 2016; Raby, 2020; Walker, 2020) to ensure key issues were addressed. Members of the team who were experienced personal tutors (FC, RU) helped further refine the questions to ensure practical relevance. In line with our research focus, interview questions centred around the lived experience and challenges of personal tutors. Specifically, questions covered staff experiences of being a personal tutor, the personal impacts of the role, and any additional assistance required to fulfil their role. Sample questions include "What has your experience been as a personal tutor?" and "How does your role as a personal tutor affect you in your day-to-day life?" Pilot interviews indicated the need for minor linguistic revisions to improve clarity. These changes were made before resuming data collection. The pilot interviews were included in the final study sample.

### **Data collection**

Posters shared on social media and on the university campus directed participants to an online Qualtrics survey, where participants were provided with an information sheet, indicating a willingness to be contacted for an online interview, consent items, and demographic information. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Subsequent interviews took place on Microsoft Teams, which were video recorded and saved as audio recordings before being transcribed verbatim. No incentives were offered to participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcripts were imported into NVivo software for efficient data management. Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis was employed. The process began with a thorough familiarisation with the data. During this phase, the student researchers transcribed their own interviews and wrote extensive field notes for each interview, outlining emerging topics and reflecting on their interview techniques. Weekly meetings between student researchers and their supervisors facilitated in-depth discussions and reflections on the interviews, further aiding the familiarisation process. The supervisors listened to all interview recordings and read all field notes, consistently engaging the students throughout the data collection process. This led to the generation of initial codes and the subsequent organisation of these codes into potential themes. The themes were then refined and named to ensure they

were representative of the data. The final phase involved producing an analytic narrative supported by relevant data extracts.

## Results

Analysis generated three themes representing how tutors described their role and the challenges they encountered: (1) Relational Labour: Tutoring as Personalised Care Work, (2) Navigating the Role: Learning to Tutor by Doing, and (3) Structural Fragmentation: Doing Institutional Work from the Middle. Subthemes capture variation in emphasis and suggest shared experiences across the sample.

### Theme 1. Relational Labour: Tutoring as Personalised Care Work

#### 1.1 Relational reward as validation of invisible work

Tutors positioned relationship-building as central to their personal tutoring role. Rather than treating tutoring as an administrative responsibility, they described investing emotional energy and personal concern to cultivate trust and continuity. This labour was frequently framed as personally meaningful. One tutor explained, *"Sometimes they email you and they will say thank you so ... I'm I get very happy when they achieve whenever...for example, one of my second year tutee has just passed [exam] towards the interview application for accessing the [redacted] course and she was we were very happy because we prepared it together."* (P2, Senior Lecturer, Female). Moments of gratitude and student success served as emotional validation, reinforcing tutors' commitment to the role.

For some tutors, these relationships extended beyond graduation, suggesting a sustained connection: *"It's just hugely rewarding to support people. Develop academically and personally and... they pop up intervals and ask for references or pop up and speak for us, or pop up and tell us what they're doing. One of them invited me to the [company name] for her book launch. Which was fabulous."* (P16, Reader, Female). These accounts revealed how ongoing relational continuity became a marker of meaning and identity in tutoring, supporting tutors' sense that their efforts were valued even when the role itself was not consistently acknowledged.

Across interviews, tutors consistently framed positive student feedback and continued contact as indicators that their involvement had made a difference. The sense of appreciation appeared to sustain tutors' motivation and confidence in their role.

#### 1.2 Relationship-building as strategic emotional work

Some tutors emphasised the importance of being warm and approachable to encourage engagement. They perceived that approachability influenced whether students would use the

tutoring system. One tutor expressed this view clearly: *“I think you really probably need to have a specific character if you want to do personal tutoring... if you are... jolly and caring and funny and helpful, they will come back to you.”* (P1, Lecturer, Male). In these accounts, being approachable was not treated as optional; tutors framed it as part of what made tutoring effective.

Other tutors described initiating contact proactively, rather than waiting for students to seek help. *“I send my tutees emails I guess probably every sort of two to three weeks just kind of check again and seeing how things are going... some students I see them quite regularly.”* (P3, Professor, Female). This regular outreach appeared to function as a way of signalling availability, maintaining student confidence, and reducing the risk that difficulties would go unnoticed.

These descriptions suggest that tutors did not assume students would naturally engage. Instead, they employed interpersonal strategies such as showing warmth, regular communication to maintain connection, and reassuring students that assistance was accessible.

### 1.3 Navigating diversity without structural support

Tutors also discussed challenges related to working with students whose needs or expectations differed from their own. Several described uncertainty when supporting neurodivergent students, particularly when behaviours or academic progress differed from what tutors anticipated. One tutor reflected, *“You have students that have like ADHD... I can't really understand... it can be frustrating at times... that's probably another area I'm not really familiar with.”* (P1, Lecturer, Male). In this account, the tutor expressed how a gap in their knowledge of ADHD made it difficult to support their tutee, leading to feelings of frustration.

Similar concerns arose when tutors supported students from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. One tutor commented, *“I'm from a different generation, right and different geographical places as well. We just, you know, go on with things that not necessarily the best way to do it, but that's how it was and is. Yeah, I have the time to listen, but that's really all I have.”* (P1, Lecturer, Male). Some tutors expressed concerns about not having the cultural competencies to respond sensitively to students' needs, and about lacking the time or information to adapt their approach. *“You can't necessarily tailor your oversight... you then either... offend their cultural sensitivities, but you don't necessarily address their needs in a way that might be good for them.”* (P4, Professor, Male). For these tutors, uncertainty did not reflect reluctance to work with diverse groups, but a lack of clarity about how best to do so.

## Theme 2. Navigating the Role: Learning to Tutor by Doing

### 2.1 Learning the role through experience

Tutors commonly described learning to tutor through experience, developing confidence gradually as they encountered different situations. *"All those things is something that I learn as I go... I learn more and I'll be more prepared there."* (P2, Senior Lecturer, Female). Tutors suggested that their skills developed through repeated encounters rather than structured development, and that much of their confidence was built informally.

When support was available, it often came from peers or senior colleagues. One tutor emphasised the importance of this type of infrastructure: *"My best resource... is the senior tutor in my department, who is just very responsive, extremely helpful."* (P11, Postdoctoral Researcher, Female). Another tutor highlighted the value of learning through others and sharing what works: *"...it was really quite nice. Uh, when you were thinking about sort of specific issues that people had had or, you know, just kind of thinking about sharing, you know, approaches that sort of thing that was probably one of the most helpful things actually, you know, just feeling as if you were learning from what other people were doing as well as having the kind of the formal trainers at the front as well."* (P2, Senior Lecturer, Female). Such accounts suggest that collegial support helped tutors interpret dilemmas and feel reassured, particularly when formal guidance was limited.

Some tutors reported feeling more confident after receiving training, particularly when it explained available processes or where to direct students. *"Now that I've done the training, I actually feel better equipped to support students."* (P6, Lecturer, Female). This highlights the importance of formal, structured training approaches and the implications this may have for improving staff mental health.

Other tutors pointed to areas they felt training did not address. *"It would be really helpful to have some training and safeguarding... how to detect signs of anxiety or stress... as the first point of contact... understanding these behaviours... would be very beneficial."* (P10, Other academic role, Female). While tutors commonly encountered distressed students, they often felt unsure about recognising or responding to emerging concerns.

Together, these reflections show how training served as reassurance for some tutors but left others wanting material that spoke to the kinds of situations they actually encountered in practice.

### 2.2 Workload strain

Many tutors described the tutoring role as difficult to manage alongside other responsibilities. One explained, *"I find that having the number of students... I'm a personal tutor for... I don't have enough capacity... and the college is not necessarily offering the level of care that some*

*of these students need.*" (P16, Reader, Female). These tutors expressed concerns about being allocated too many tutees, which could result in students not receiving the care they need. This suggests that tutors working beyond their capacity may not only influence their mental health, but also potentially that of their tutees.

Some tutors discussed prioritising tutoring over other aspects of their role. *"I will prioritise students... over things like research... which means less time for other duties."* (P1, Lecturer, Male). These accounts suggest that tutors were aware of competing demands and often made difficult judgments about where to invest their energy.

### 2.3 Emotional exposure and burnout

In supporting students through personal or emotional challenges, tutors reported situations that were distressing or difficult to navigate: *"It can be quite stressful, especially if you've got a really difficult, upsetting case to deal with."* (P7, Professor, Male). Another tutor commented: *"Students are really in distress... there probably isn't anything you can really do... other than just be there... someone who can listen to them."* (P21, Professor, Female). Listening and reassurance were often described as the most feasible responses when other avenues were unclear.

Some tutors associated these experiences with fatigue or emotional strain. *"I'm just tired and more or less close to burnout... which isn't perhaps how I'd like it."* (P16, Reader, Female). Others indicated that talking with colleagues helped them cope: *"A support network... to talk to each other about difficult cases... somebody... to get things off my chest."* (P10, Other academic role, Female).

These accounts illustrate the emotional burden tutoring can have, particularly when tutors are not certain how to respond or where additional support cannot be accessed.

## Theme 3. Structural Fragmentation: Doing Institutional Work from the Middle

### 3.1 Administrative and communication systems as obstacles

Tutors often described difficulty locating information or navigating systems designed to support them. One tutor reflected, *"I do use the personal tutor portal... I don't find it hugely easy to navigate."* (P20, Lecturer, Female). In such cases, accessing student details or processes required effort, which tutors did not find straightforward. Others described receiving too many emails relating to personal tutoring, making it hard to identify what was relevant: *"We don't want a million emails a day... keeping up to date."* (P4, Professor, Male). Across several interviews, tutors spoke about spending time sorting through information to determine what was necessary.

On the other hand, some tutors appreciated practical resources, such as template emails or curated updates. *"emails every month... templates... so nice... take this off your plate..."* (P8,

Lecturer, Female). These differences across accounts demonstrate the challenges of developing resources that are helpful to all tutors.

### 3.2 Ambiguous responsibility and boundaries

Participants frequently described not knowing where the boundaries of the role should lie. One explained, *"Never understood my role as a mental health supervisor... I'm not prepared... don't want to do it... but it seems to be inevitable."* (P2, Senior Lecturer, Female). This tutor expresses how she feels she has taken on the role of *"mental health supervisor"* in addition to personal tutor, a role she doesn't wish to take on. Tutors described discomfort at feeling accountable for situations they did not feel qualified to manage.

In other cases, tutors noticed differences between departments in how tutoring was enacted. *"Making sure people use these resources... more consistency... between departments."* (P1, Male Lecturer). Inconsistency made it difficult to know what students could expect or how tutors should respond.

Some tutors described the tension between offering support and maintaining professional boundaries. These reflections often arose when tutors considered how closely to involve themselves in students' lives and how to balance encouragement with students' autonomy. One tutor captured this ambivalence clearly: *"I'm not your mother... but also I am the person that will probably write their reference..."* (P15, Female, Senior Lecture). For this tutor, tutoring involved getting to know students well enough to speak on their behalf, while also resisting expectations to monitor or *"look after"* them.

Without a shared institutional definition of appropriate tutor–student boundaries, tutors relied on their own discretion, experience, and comfort, resulting in variation in how the role was enacted.

## Discussion

This study examined how personal tutors at a large UK university experienced their role. Across interviews, tutors consistently understood tutoring as relational work, learned in practice, and enacted within systems that did not always provide clarity or support. Rather than a clearly defined professional activity, personal tutoring was described as a set of responsibilities that tutors interpret, negotiate, and sustain individually. The findings illustrate how tutors reconcile these demands through interpersonal effort and judgement, and how this shapes the consistency of student support.

The first theme indicated that tutors viewed relationships as central to meaningful tutoring. This aligns with relational pedagogy literature, which highlights the importance of social connections in learning environments (MacMahon, 2020; Allodi, 2010). Tutors described satisfaction when students shared achievements, returned after graduation, or expressed appreciation directly. This demonstrates the importance of relational interactions for tutor

satisfaction, mirroring previous work showing that caring student-teacher relationships increase the sense of meaning at work (Lavy & Ghanayim, 2020). What is notable in our findings is that tutors presented these moments as a key way they assess the effectiveness of tutoring. Instead of relying on formal indicators such as attendance, progression, or institutional feedback, tutors used relational signals to evaluate their practice (McFarlane, 2016).

Tutors also described engagement as something they actively cultivate. Warmth and approachability were highlighted as being key to ensuring continued engagement. This aligns with work suggesting that students value tutors who are approachable, demonstrate care, and form sustained connections (Lochrie et al., 2018; Yale, 2020; Lavy & Ghanayim, 2020). Regular check-ins were also used to encourage students to seek help. Rather than relying on institutional processes, these strategies were rooted in tutors' own judgment of what students might need. Research indicates that students may hesitate to approach tutors due to uncertainty or unfamiliarity (Grey & Osborne, 2020). This pattern is also reflected in studies of help-seeking in relation to mental health, which show that uncertainty is a common barrier (Broglia, Millings, and Barkham, 2021). Our findings extend previous research by showing how tutors respond: not by directing students through official structures, but by compensating for perceived limitations in those structures through personalised outreach. In these accounts, relational effort operates as a practical tool rather than a discretionary enhancement. Together, these findings suggest that relational impact does not merely supplement tutoring: it is experienced as its core validation mechanism.

When interacting with neurodivergent students or those from different cultural or generational backgrounds, tutors emphasised uncertainty and expressed a desire for guidance. They did not describe reluctance to engage; instead, they identified gaps in preparation and a lack of practical examples. This is consistent with the literature suggesting a broader need for training in cultural competence, diversity, and inclusion among educators (e.g., Eden, Chisom & Adeniyi, 2024). Many tutors sought reassurance about how to respond appropriately. This aligns with literature suggesting that tutors often feel they are expected to support student wellbeing without adequate training (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). In our findings, uncertainty applied not only to wellbeing but also to more everyday questions about communication, expectations, and academic progress. In the absence of clear models of practice, tutors were left to interpret differences on their own.

The second theme revealed that tutors developed confidence through exposure rather than through structured support. Many described "*figuring out*" tutoring by encountering different situations, reflecting on their responses, and adjusting their approach. This is consistent with Dreyfus's Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus, 2004), which suggests that expertise develops through experience and practice, rather than solely formal training. Senior colleagues or departmental contacts served as informal points of reference. These accounts echo observations that tutoring knowledge is often implicit, acquired through local networks rather than formal development (McFarlane, 2016). Whilst this suggests a need for more formal

training for tutors, these findings also highlight the importance and value of informal training avenues (e.g. peer support), which can complement formal training programmes by offering more flexibility and ongoing support for professional development.

Where training was available, this was experienced as helpful when it clarified administrative routines or signposted referral routes. Tutors felt more comfortable when they knew how to direct students toward specialist services. However, they felt less prepared for situations involving interpersonal sensitivity or significant distress, even though such situations were common (Walker, 2020). This mismatch between content and practice may lead tutors to rely more heavily on personal judgement and informal support than on institutional training. Tutors also described difficulty balancing tutoring with their wider academic responsibilities. Some tutors accepted these trade-offs as part of their role, while others expressed concern about sustainability. These experiences do not portray tutoring as universally burdensome, but they highlight the importance of time, discretion, and boundary-setting in determining how support is enacted (Augustus, Goodall & Williams, 2023).

The third theme emphasised how institutional structures shaped tutors' experiences. Tutors described uncertainty when navigating communications or support systems intended to help them. Although some resources were useful, they were experienced as intermittent or inconsistent. Rather than reducing workload, systems often required interpretation. Tutors became intermediaries who translated institutional information for students. Similar observations have been made regarding fragmentation in student-support infrastructures (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). In this study, structural ambiguity did not appear as a misunderstanding of processes but as a routine feature of practice that tutors must manage.

Ambiguity around role boundaries was also common. Tutors questioned whether they were responsible for wellbeing, academic oversight, or broader personal support (Hughes & Bryom, 2019). They did not question the importance of supporting students; rather, they were uncertain which aspects sat within their remit. Differences between departments further contributed to variation. Without shared expectations, tutors developed their own strategies, relying on personal values, experience, or perceived student needs. These accounts illustrate how organisational ambiguity translates into interpersonal negotiation.

Taken together, the findings portray tutoring as relational work sustained through individual effort rather than consistent institutional design. Tutors' relationships, personal experience, and informal networks become the mechanisms through which the system functions. Initiatives such as the UKAT professional standards framework and the University Mental Health Charter emphasise the need for clarity and shared responsibility (Hughes & Byrom, 2019). The present study suggests that supporting tutors to enact their role confidently may require not more procedural requirements, but clearer expectations, context-sensitive examples, and accessible referral pathways that help tutors translate relational commitment into sustainable practice.

## Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several implications for the design and support of personal tutoring. First, the accounts highlight the importance of providing tutors with greater clarity about what the role encompasses. Tutors consistently described uncertainty about expectations, particularly regarding student wellbeing, boundaries, and levels of engagement. Clearly articulated guidance, developed at the programme or institutional level, may help tutors distinguish between responsibilities that can appropriately sit within the tutoring relationship and those that require referral or external intervention.

Second, tutors repeatedly requested practical and context-relevant preparation. Formal development opportunities that focused on referral pathways and administrative processes were valued. However, they did not always equip tutors to address the interpersonal challenges that characterised their day-to-day experiences. Approaches that draw on realistic examples, student cases, or discussion of common dilemmas may enable tutors to develop confidence without relying exclusively on trial and error. Such forms of support would also acknowledge that tutors' work involves interpreting needs in real time, rather than applying prescriptive procedures. Importantly, this includes navigating culturally and neurodiverse student experiences, which may shape how needs are expressed, understood, or acted upon (Clouder et al., 2020; Bartram, 2007). The findings therefore suggest a need for tutor development that foregrounds cultural competency and inclusive practice, rather than treating these as peripheral or optional components.

Third, the findings suggest collegial networks played a central role in helping tutors navigate uncertainty. Senior tutors, colleagues, or peer groups were often used as sources of reassurance, interpretation, and advice. Creating structured opportunities for tutors to share experiences or consult with others, whether through mentoring, departmental meetings, or reflective spaces, may help ensure that such support is not contingent on individual relationships or departmental culture. The finding that tutors often learn through doing also suggests a need to highlight, within training for new personal tutors, that experiential learning is a central and expected aspect of the role.

Fourth, the findings highlight that both students and staff experience difficulties in navigating communication and support systems. This seems to reflect a broader issue across institutions where multiple forms of communication lead to confusion and fragmentation. This highlights a need for more integrated and streamlined approaches. This may include consolidating platforms, improving the accessibility and organisation of key resources, and ensuring clearer communication channels. Addressing these structural issues could help tutors navigate their roles more effectively and ultimately enhance the consistency and quality of support provided to students.

Finally, tutors' accounts indicate that relational work is intrinsic to how the role is enacted. Practices such as proactive communication, encouragement, and continuity of contact were

not described as optional; they were the means by which tutors enabled students to engage with the system. Recognising the time and emotional energy associated with these efforts may help institutions to set realistic expectations and avoid treating relational engagement as an informal or invisible aspect of the role.

## Limitations

As a qualitative study, the findings presented here reflect the perspectives of a specific group of tutors and do not claim universal generalisability. The research was conducted at a single large Russell Group university, and participants' experiences were influenced by the institutional structures, training provision, and organisational culture of that setting. Personal tutoring may be conceptualised or implemented differently in institutions with other student demographics, curricula, or resource environments. Although tutors were drawn from a range of disciplines and career stages, the sample does not necessarily capture the full diversity of practice, including those who may have disengaged from tutoring roles or who did not volunteer to participate.

## Conclusion

Personal tutoring in this study was experienced as a relational practice enacted through individual effort rather than through clearly defined structures. Tutors relied on interpersonal strategies to maintain engagement, interpreted differences in students' needs without established models, and developed confidence by encountering situations over time. While the role was often viewed as meaningful, tutors described persistent uncertainty around expectations, preparation, and institutional systems. These accounts suggest that strengthening tutoring provision does not necessarily require additional administrative protocols, but may instead benefit from clearer articulation of responsibilities, practical examples that reflect everyday realities, ways to reduce workload, and accessible avenues for support and referral. Providing tutors with these resources may help ensure that relational engagement remains a valued feature of personal tutoring, rather than a form of labour that tutors must navigate alone.

| <b>Demographics</b>                   |           |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Gender, N (%)</b>                  |           |
| Female                                | 17 (81.0) |
| Male                                  | 4 (19.0)  |
| <b>Age (years), N (%)</b>             |           |
| 30–49                                 | 14 (66.7) |
| 50–64                                 | 5 (23.8)  |
| 65+                                   | 2 (9.5)   |
| <b>Ethnicity, N (%)</b>               |           |
| White (British, Irish, other)         | 20 (95.2) |
| Other ethnic group                    | 1 (4.8)   |
| <b>Academic Role, N (%)</b>           |           |
| Lecturer                              | 9 (42.8)  |
| Senior Lecturer                       | 3 (14.3)  |
| Postdoctoral researcher               | 1 (4.8)   |
| Reader                                | 1 (4.8)   |
| Professor                             | 5 (23.8)  |
| Other                                 | 2 (9.5)   |
| <b>Subject discipline, N (%)</b>      |           |
| Social Science & Public Policy        | 7 (33.3)  |
| Life Sciences & Medicine              | 6 (28.6)  |
| Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience | 4 (19)    |
| Nursing, Midwifery & Palliative Care  | 2 (9.5)   |
| Arts & Humanities                     | 1 (4.8)   |
| Business                              | 1 (4.8)   |

Table 1 – Participant Demographics

## About the Authors

Rebecca Upsher is a Senior Lecturer on the BSc Psychology programme at King's College London. Her area of research interest is supporting student wellbeing and learning within the context of higher education curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Rebecca is the deputy senior personal tutor for the programme, designing the curriculum for tutorial sessions. She runs a special interest group, holding monthly presentations from experts on supporting student wellbeing within the curriculum.

Selin Hasgul has a bachelor's in Psychology from King's College London. Research on the impact of personal tutoring constitutes part of Selin's research project in her final academic year. Her research interests centre on the investigation of leading organisational change and its impacts on employee well-being.

Katherine Embleton is a King's College London BSc Psychology graduate. Her dissertation supported research regarding personal tutoring in higher education. She has an interest in the detection and treatment of early psychosis and is currently completing an MSc in Early Intervention in psychosis.

James Findon is a Senior Lecturer who teaches on the BSc Psychology programme at King's College London. He holds a PhD in Neuroscience and Psychology from King's College London. He is chair of the Psychology Education Research Group, which coordinates and promotes pedagogic and scholarly research in the department. He also leads a lab which studies the interplay between brain and body with a particular focus on mind-body interactions in the context of neurodevelopmental conditions and the role of physical exercise in mental health.

Francesca Cotier is a Senior Lecturer on the BSc Psychology programme at King's College London. She completed her PhD at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 2016. Her thesis considered the relationship between social defeat and psychosis proneness in a Chinese population. Francesca's primary research interests lie in identifying the social and cultural determinants involved in the development and maintenance of Psychosis.

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