

Personal Tutor Perspectives on the Implementation of Academic Families Within the Personal Tutoring Structure to Encourage Near-Peer Support and Build a Sense of Community

Wendy Leadbeater
University of Birmingham

ABSTRACT

Personal Tutoring is key to supporting students in Higher Education. The Personal Tutor supports their tutees by meeting individually or in groups, resulting in lone working of the tutor. A new mixed group meeting was implemented within the personal tutoring structure, where two or more tutors collaborated to support their tutees in their 'academic family' group meeting. Semi-structured interviews with eight out of 47 Personal Tutors, ranging from new teaching fellows to senior academic staff, revealed this collaborative approach was beneficial. Personal Tutors found reassurance in their approach to tutoring tutees and shared valuable insights. The academic family structure offered an opportunity to share facilitation, enabled staff members to know each other, and led to additional insights for their tutees from their paired tutors that could not be offered alone. However, with more participants in the meeting, scheduling and larger group sizes posed challenges. Overall, the academic family structure fostered a positive experience, and the tutors valued sharing practice and building a tutor network. With time and learning from the experience, it was felt this was an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging for both staff and students within the programme.

KEYWORDS

Personal tutoring; Academic families; Mixed group meetings; Community of Practice; Shared learning

Introduction

Personal tutoring and the role of the Personal Tutor are central to student support in Higher Education (HE) and are important to enhancing the student experience, facilitating transition and improving retention (Lochtie et al., 2018; Thomas, 2012). All students at a Midlands-based university are allocated to a Personal Tutor upon arrival, and this tutor is a member of academic staff affiliated with the school. Personal Tutors meet their tutees one-to-one to discuss their individual academic learning and progression, and the tutor is a point of contact for pastoral

support, providing the opportunity to discuss challenges when needed (Earwaker, 1992). Using the curriculum model of personal tutoring complemented this pastoral approach, where personal and professional development skills are embedded in the curriculum and supported through discussion with the Personal Tutor at scheduled meetings (Earwaker, 1992, Lochtie et al., 2018). Providing both academic and pastoral support throughout the students' academic experience will help the students make connections with the curriculum, their learning environment and university support services, all with the intention of fostering a sense of belonging (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006, Stevenson, 2009).

To further develop the student experience through personal tutoring, I explored the value of group meetings. Group meetings have been described mostly in the context of nursing programmes, where one Personal Tutor meets simultaneously with all tutees assigned to them (Braine and Parnell, 2011, Roldán-Merino et al., 2019, Watts, 2011, O'Donnell, 2009). The group meetings emphasise the value of peer support, vertical integration, information sharing, social integration, and feeling safe. Near-peer support, across academic years in a medical programme, has also been attributed to easing student transition to university and maintaining wellbeing (Akinla et al., 2018). This group meeting approach supports the student's development of a network or building of a community; however, the Personal Tutor is often the lone member of staff supporting this group of students.

I was interested in developing the concept of mixed group meetings with tutees further by bringing two or more Personal Tutors together and forming a partnership (Wenger, 2010) to coordinate and facilitate the meetings. Two or more Personal Tutors and their respective tutees formed an 'academic family'. This approach was inspired by the theoretical framework of communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2004), which refers to a group of colleagues connected by a common interest that share knowledge, work together and use resources to facilitate learning (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010), in this case, the community was formed through the allocation and pairing of tutor groups. Where possible, I grouped Personal Tutors with mixed experience, expertise and roles to ensure a different skill set and knowledge were represented in each academic family to encourage learning from each other (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and offer different perspectives during the meetings. Working with Personal Tutors, we wanted to ensure there was an opportunity for dialogue and sharing practice, which is known to be vital to supporting Personal Tutors (McFarlane, 2016). These small CoP or academic families were embedded within the broader structure of personal tutoring. The purpose of personal tutoring was for the tutee to receive pastoral and academic support, personal and professional development and encourage a community of learning. Personal Tutors were provided with structured activities to prepare for both one-to-one and academic family meetings. However, in academic family meetings, the Personal Tutors had a higher level of autonomy in deciding how to run the group meeting, and tutors were encouraged to focus on building relationships through 'getting to know each other', particularly in the first meeting. The Personal Tutors held a minimum of two academic family meetings during the academic year (November and May). Each academic family meeting was themed; the first meeting was

'Reflect on student approach to learning', and the second meeting was 'Reflect on student academic year and planning ahead'. Students were encouraged to prepare for the group meetings by answering questions using an e-portfolio workbook for personal tutoring on the platform PebblePad. Personal Tutors accessed their tutee reflections to help prepare for the academic family meetings. These academic family meetings then provided an opportunity to encourage social interaction, learning from each other and sharing experiences and resources from a student and staff perspective, which align with the three domains of Wenger's CoP: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, Wenger, 2010). Mutual engagement refers to interacting together with members of the community, building relationships and shaping their community of practice. This leads to joint enterprise, where there is a common purpose which keeps the community together to learn from each other. Learning is developed through shared repertoire, where the members of the community use and share resources, ideas, and artefacts for their continual development. A further motivation to introduce academic families was due to the year 3 students being in off-site work-based placements, which, like nursing placements, can potentially lead to feeling isolated from their main source of support (Braine & Parnell, 2011). Academic families were introduced during the pandemic (2020-21), when remote working was also reported to have an impact on feelings of isolation (Knight et al., 2021), and due to the lack of campus experience and loss of social connectedness, these were negatively impacting on student wellbeing (Lyons et al., 2020). Remote working impacted staff too, making communication difficult, negatively impacting their sense of belonging to the workplace (Krug et al., 2021) and necessitating that staff quickly upskill their digital capabilities (Dinu et al., 2022) to maintain connections with colleagues. Implementation of these mixed group meetings with several Personal Tutors and their tutee groups was, therefore, timely.

To research the academic families intervention, I first created and implemented academic families within the personal tutoring structure, then evaluated the use of academic families through semi-structured interviews with Personal Tutors. In 2020-21 the 47 Personal Tutors supported 293 students across the three academic years. In total, there were 17 academic families, with an average size of 18 students per family. I designed the academic families to ensure all students from each cohort were represented in each family. Students were introduced to the concept of academic families during their induction (year 1) or reorientation (year 2 and 3) of personal tutoring at the beginning of the academic year. Within the annual Personal Tutor training, I introduced the concept of academic families and included suggestions for the approach to facilitating meetings, themes to cover and the importance of an effective and safe environment. Brewster et al (2022) report the importance of supporting staff to empower Personal Tutors to work together, share practice and create an effective CoP (Brewster et al., 2022), particularly as Personal Tutors had previously worked independently, had not facilitated group Personal Tutor meetings and did not know all Personal Tutors within the school. Correspondence regarding the purpose of academic families and topics to discuss during the meetings was provided by email from the Senior Tutor within the school, and an e-

portfolio workbook was created to offer asynchronous communication in preparation for all meetings with their tutees.

Through the introduction of academic families and the subsequent evaluation, I aimed to (i) provide Personal Tutors access to colleagues with different levels of experience and different expertise within the school to work with each other and learn from each other, building Personal Tutors confidence in the practice of personal tutoring and (ii) develop a safe and supportive environment for tutees to ask questions, share and learn from each other in their tutor group. When interviewing, we were interested in the Personal Tutor experience of working with other Personal Tutors and their perceived value of academic families with respect to learning from each other, sharing of resources and whether the use of academic family meetings helped to foster a sense of belonging for Personal Tutors and for students within the tutor group. As academic families were a new initiative, we were interested in learning if and how to develop group meetings further within personal tutoring and identify if there were any challenges or limitations to these academic family meetings.

Methods

With permission from the Head of School and approval from the University Education Team Research Ethics Committee, I approached all Personal Tutors associated with the school to invite them for interviews on academic families within the personal tutoring system. All Personal Tutors were emailed the invitation, participant information sheet, and consent form and were asked to respond to the email if they were interested in volunteering to be interviewed. No incentives were offered, and online interviews were scheduled and conducted through Microsoft Teams at the convenience of the interviewee. Eight Personal Tutors responded and provided consent to be interviewed.

I interviewed the participants on Microsoft Teams due to the limited in-person contact during Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews took place in July and August 2021 and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. I, the researcher, had a dual role as both the interviewer and the Senior Tutor supporting Personal Tutors on the same programme. I ensured that I shared this dual role with the participants, in case they felt conflicted to reflect on the implementation of academic families as I had designed and integrated this activity within the personal tutoring structure and was now interviewing on how this intervention was perceived. No concerns were raised and there was an appreciation this was an opportunity to inform practice and development. The advantage of the dual role was having a good understanding of the intervention and the role of the Personal Tutor. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain in depth perception of participants engagement and their perception of student engagement in the academic family meeting. The same questions were asked of each participant, they were open-ended to allow the opportunity to pursue areas of interest relevant to academic families. The questions aligned with the three domains of Wenger's CoP to identify areas of joint enterprise, mutual

engagement and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010) (see Table 1). Participants were reminded that they did not have to complete the full interview. A debrief at the end of the interview explained the next steps of the analysis of the data and the time frame for when they could withdraw their data.

All participants consented to be audio recorded using Panopto and the transcripts were created verbatim by the researcher. During the interview, any references to colleagues were removed, and pseudonyms were used in place; care was taken to anonymise individuals. The transcripts were coded to ensure comments were attributed to the same participant. Participants were given one week to withdraw their data from the research. The Panopto recordings were deleted once transcription was complete and checked for accuracy by the researcher. All interviews were included in the analysis and all data was pooled for thematic analysis. Besides email communication to invite colleagues for interview, all recordings, consent forms, transcripts and analysis were stored securely on a password protected computer.

The process of thematic analysis was conducted through reading and familiarising the transcript(s) and then re-reading the transcript (Braun and Clarke, 2008). The responses to each question were tabulated for each transcript. The transcripts were separated into each question and the responses from each participant were pooled together into a spreadsheet. The eight participants responses for each question were then read together. The responses were analysed and coded for similarities, repetition, topics that were stated to be beneficial or important, contrasting points, and areas aligned to improvements in the academic family provision and those that related to Community of Practice (CoP). From this coding, themes were identified by grouping topics together and looking for patterns. Key points, keywords and integrated topics were highlighted for each question. The themes emerging were reviewed and discussed with a colleague (not interviewed) to discuss their interpretation, to enable exploration beyond my perspective and interpretation. Excerpts from the interview transcripts were used to support the themes.

Table 1 - Questions and prompts when interviewing Personal Tutors (PT) on their experience of academic families. Reasoning for the questions is provided and how the questions aligned with Wenger's three domains of Communities of Practice: Joint Enterprise, Mutual Engagement and Shared Repertoire (Wenger, 1998, Wenger, 2010)

| Question / prompts | Reason | Communities of Practice Criteria | | |
|--|--|---|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>PT experiences</i> | | Mutual engagement | Joint enterprise | Shared repertoire |
| Tell me about your experience of Academic Families this last year (include perception of working with other PTs and students) | Overview of PT perception on academic families. | Work together to prepare and deliver meeting | Shared purpose | share resources to facilitate learning prior to and during meeting, students share resources to support each other |
| Tell me about your interaction with the other PT(s) in your family (prior to and during meetings) | PTs collaborative working | Share ways of running meetings and practice personal tutoring, building relationships | Work together for a common goal | Share tools, methods, standards |
| What did you personally gain as a PT from the Academic Families meetings? (Did you find yourself supporting your colleague / being supported?) | Was this beneficial for PTs; did they feel supported/ work together? Did they learn from each other? | Building relationships | PT engaged and working together. | Share resources and understanding / experience to facilitate learning. |
| <i>PT perspectives on student experience</i> | | | | |
| Tell me about how students engaged and interacted during the Academic Family meetings? | PT perception of student engagement | Interaction between colleagues (staff and students) - discussed issues shared ideas | | |
| Do you think students benefited from the Academic Families meeting? (Meeting peers, vertical integration, getting to know each other and other PT) | PT perception - interaction, collaboration, value of meeting | Communication, near-peer learning, interacting | | Share resources, share ideas, share stories |

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <p>Were there any shared resources students engaged in to enable communication prior to, during or beyond the group meetings? (set up online group, meet at another time?)</p> <p>Did you feel the Academic Families structure was an opportunity for students to get to know one another and meet across academic years? (what about PTs too – do you feel part of school?)</p> <p>Do you think this has helped, or will in time help, develop a community /sense of belonging? (For staff and students)</p> | <p>PT perception – students engagement in academic family, sense of belonging, vertical integration</p> <p>PT perception, sense of community or belonging over time (lead to sustained mutual engagement?)</p> | <p>Interacting.</p> <p>Feeling of being a member of the group</p> <p>Building relationships</p> | <p>Working together.</p> <p>Common purpose, keeps community together</p> | <p>Share resources to facilitate learning.</p> |
|---|--|---|--|--|

Challenges and recommendations for improvement

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Were there any challenges for students or you as a PT to prepare for and/or deliver /facilitate the Academic Families meetings?</p> <p>What can we do / or what additional support will help you with Academic Families meetings? (Set up meetings / training/ introductions)</p> <p>Do you have any other suggestions?</p> <p>After first two interviews – added question on their perception of the group size and mixing of PTs.</p> | <p>Identify how to improve academic family meetings</p> <p>Improvement of Academic Family provision</p> <p>Improvement and PT perception on what to do</p> <p>Improvement and PT perception on what to do</p> | <p>Interacting and building relationships</p> | | |
|--|---|---|--|--|

Table 2 -Participants interviewed showing their position. In parentheses, the years of experience as a Personal Tutor

| Position | Clinical | Non-clinical | Total |
|-----------------|----------|--------------|-------|
| Teaching Fellow | 2 (1; 3) | - | 2 |
| Lecturer | 1 (2) | 1 (3) | 2 |
| Senior Lecturer | 2 (2; 3) | 2 (10; 21) | 4 |

Results

All eight Personal Tutors had different positions in the school and, depending on their expertise, taught students at different stages in the curriculum. Participants had a minimum of one year and a maximum of 21 years of experience as a Personal Tutor; two had two years of experience, three of the Personal Tutors had three years of experience, and one Personal Tutor had 10 years of experience. Among the participants, all were teachers, five were clinical, two were researchers, and one colleague was an external honorary member of staff (Table 2).

Shared experiences and an opportunity to make connections

The first academic family meeting for students was perceived as perhaps a challenge; students did not know each other, and due to the pandemic, the meetings were conducted online through Microsoft Teams. Tutors commented on the challenge of engagement because the meetings were online and related this to the same struggle as in tutorials (not switching on camera, not speaking up and limited comments in the chat). Students were often perceived as quiet and shy; however, with support and encouragement from the Personal Tutors and senior students (year 3), the younger years were willing to engage and talk. The first meeting was focused on introductions and getting to know each other. The second scheduled meeting was perceived as more comfortable and productive, with increased engagement, sharing of resources, and an opportunity for students to share experiences, particularly across the years. Overall, the experience of talking to each other and students giving advice and encouragement was perceived as positive and useful for the students by Personal Tutors, having conversations that were different than if they were in one-to-one meetings. The students interacted with their peers across different year groups and shared their experiences, so they were able to hear about the wider experience of the programme. From a Personal Tutor's perspective, they commented that some students had the realisation they were not alone.

"It worked well. I think it's quite useful to have the different year groups together in a meeting. The more senior students were kind of giving hints and tips to the younger

students who were asking questions too, that kind of peer support and advice was quite useful in that academic family setting” (participant 6).

“I think the academic families were quite good in the sense that it was a good opportunity for the students from different years to come and interact” (participant 5)

“The third year [students] were very enthusiastic and very engaging. Could spend a lot of time chatting to the younger ones about what to expect, to manage their time and how to study, tips and advice” (participant 3).

“It helped to know, especially the first-year students, that the students in the years above that were more experienced were finding things a little bit tough, and there was this great realisation in the first academic family meeting that I am not alone” (participant 1).

Personal Tutors commented on the value of working together, which relates to the joint enterprise domain of Wenger’s CoP, in that working with colleagues [other Personal Tutors] was helpful and informed their practice of personal tutoring. They felt they had reassurance from colleagues, both staff and students, on their approach to tutoring, and working together was an opportunity to share experiences and information relating to the mutual engagement domain to facilitate learning.

“These conversations [PT colleagues] help reassure you that we are going in the right direction” (participant 7).

“It was interesting to hear how the other tutors were supporting their tutees. There were some reassurances that questions coming up from my tutees were like what was coming up with others” (participant 2).

“How they [personal tutors] were approaching personal tutoring gives you some insight in how other people were doing it, and that can bring me on in my approach, and use good practice and how I can engage my students, and I can share with them what I did. It became a good support network” (participant 1).

“My personal gain from this meeting is I have the opportunity to learn the good practice of other Personal Tutors” (participant 8).

Staff perceived academic families as a positive experience and a good opportunity to make connections for students and staff, which complements mutual engagement and interaction among members of the community. Staff were grouped with colleagues who had different roles and expertise, as novices and experts can learn from each other (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to acquire and develop their personal tutoring skills. Being grouped as Personal Tutors was a great way to share personal experiences in the meetings, which helped make connections with their colleagues. Some Personal Tutors perceived this grouping as a challenge, adding to the complexity of communication when trying to coordinate meetings. With time and further meetings, it was felt that this building of relationships with a common purpose is a form of joint enterprise that will improve.

"I was quite excited because I got to meet some of the other tutors, so one of the guys that is in my academic family is a GP who I have never met before. So, it was great to make that connection" (participant 1).

"It was a really good opportunity to meet up with a colleague and you know, share views, and get to know each other better. I thought it was good, and not just for students, I think it was a good opportunity also for us as colleagues" (participant 3).

"Through the academic family initiative, we know each other more, and we move forward together" (participant 8).

"I was partnered with another tutor, someone I didn't know. The main problem initially was communication between the two of us, to coordinate diaries and setting up meetings" (participant 4).

The diversity of staff in each academic family was a strength and was perceived as adding value during the facilitation of meetings. The benefit was not only through shared facilitation, but the diverse skill set meant that working together, Personal Tutors could share more breadth in the discussion, covering more topics than if working alone with a group of tutees. Working with other Personal Tutors not only led to personal reassurance in their approach to personal tutoring, but they were also able to share good practices and help develop an understanding of student perspectives on the curriculum across the years. Personal Tutors were able to learn from the students by listening to their experiences.

"They [external Personal Tutor] can add different things we can't add from being within the university... Talking to the external Personal Tutor was the biggest gain" (participant 7).

"It was useful being paired with somebody from a different background, I think it was a useful combination of skill sets in the academic family" (participant 4).

"Interaction with other Personal Tutors is great through academic families, we come from very different backgrounds. The experience might be different, this initiative is very good practice in modern medical education" (participant 8).

"Good mechanism to share information about the tutoring system and how we can support each other" (participant 2).

Development of a community of practice

Academic families were perceived as a good initiative, an opportunity to make connections and for students to share resources and develop as a group, aligning with the three domains of Wenger's CoP (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010). Sustained mutual engagement was demonstrated as some groups were connecting through the online platform WhatsApp to set up a forum to communicate. Most families used the meetings to share revision notes and resources. The sharing of resources (shared repertoire), setting up additional meetings and using an inclusive online forum to communicate were encouraged by Personal Tutors and were not monitored. This was an area perceived by Personal Tutors to be student-led if there was a demand and motivation from the students. The development of these communities is

still in its infancy, and the academic family was an opportunity to get to know each other and for the Personal Tutor to get to know their tutees too.

"They set up a WhatsApp group, but I don't know if there has been any activity on it. They shared their revision resources and websites... they wanted to hear perspective of an actual student" (participant 4).

"I think it was brilliant to share resources... second years shared their revision notes... third years shared their flashcards they have been pretty good in sharing documentation" (participant 2).

"They did share screenshots of their revision notes etc. I encouraged them to set up a WhatsApp group. I'm not too sure how far they got with that, if they can have that sense of community, I think this would be great here" (participant 5).

"Opportunity to get advice... I got permission to share their email... so they could ask questions" (participant 3).

The perceived benefit was the value of getting to know each other as well as increased awareness of opportunities for staff and students.

"It [the meeting] facilitated all years being there and the crosstalk conversations that they had was really beneficial" (participant 1).

"I think the students who asked questions really benefited" (participant 5).

"I got to meet more students, got to hear more opinions of the students, and got to hear about research. So it did broaden my awareness of things going on in the school" (participant 4).

"A lot of us as staff have felt a little disconnected from the students; we don't see them walking down the corridor... it was a good opportunity to meet some of the wider cohort" (participant 1).

The academic family meetings were a good opportunity to develop a community and sense of belonging.

"There was a feeling it would really be for the benefit of the students, but I found, actually, it would benefit me, both in my development as a Personal Tutor, but also in my ability to support tutees... so it was mutually beneficial" (participant 1).

"There are not many opportunities to meet people from different years, this was a really good opportunity to meet others. It was a good opportunity to know colleagues a little bit better" (participant 3).

"I think having a group where you are mixing with other students from other years because I suspect that's probably the only time that's formally happened, I guess that's probably been helpful to kind of, have awareness and meet people from the early years. Otherwise, you've been probably pretty isolated in working from home and only seeing limited people" (participant 6).

"It [academic family] made it a lot more collegiate... that kind of school spirit rather than individual silos of learners" (participant 4).

The academic families have run for one academic year, and although many benefits were seen, there was an appreciation that developing a community and a sense of belonging takes time. The intervention is still in its early days, and academic families are worthy of further development to help create a sense of belonging. There was a general feeling that academic families had the potential to improve and to do this, we need to maintain motivation.

"It gets people mixing and sharing ideas, so you know it's got a lot of promise" (participant 7).

"The academic family is a new initiative... it is a little premature to make a comment on this activity [sense of belonging] we need to look into two or three academic terms... yes it will take time" (participant 8).

"Just need to keep the momentum going... Personal Tutors to think a little more about how they can make the academic families work better, so they do not go off the boil" (participant 2).

"I think in time it will help [sense of community]" (participant 7).

"The key is to keep the phase 2 students [year 3 and above] engaged... make sure we keep all years in the family. I think it will work really, really well to create that community" (participant 1).

Challenges of academic family meetings

The main challenges for academic families were (i) scheduling of meetings where there were multiple timetables and conflicting work commitments, (ii) the large (and future-proofing of) group size to maintain engagement, and (iii) encouraging the quieter students, who did not know each other or were shy, to contribute.

"It was a little tricky with the external colleague, the external one has other commitments and can only commit on specific time or day, so I found that a little more difficult (participant 3)... Organisation and scheduling people is always going to be a challenge, because of busy timetables" (participant 7).

"There was a load of students who did not know each other and two tutors who did not know each other, I guess that was a little bit of a barrier... the first meeting was a little bit uncomfortable, but the second wasn't because we were all a little more familiar with the process" (participant 4).

"I don't think you could do this with a bigger group, they might be more likely to sit on the side lines. If it's a smaller group, it is easier to join in. I think two tutors would be sufficient (participant 4)... I think up to 30 students could work well (participant 3)... group size was too big, if there is a smaller group it definitely encourages them to interact more" (participant 5).

"Biggest challenge was if the students do not start opening up (participant 1)... The challenge is those students who have had a difficult time over COVID, who are feeling a bit isolated and find these sorts of things with different people just a bit overwhelming" (participant 2).

Discussion

Overall, Personal Tutors perceived the implementation of academic families to be positive. Personal Tutors felt the introduction of academic families to be beneficial to both themselves and their tutees. They felt that students in the earlier years benefited from hearing about senior students' experiences on placement. Year 3 placement students engaged well, providing advice and tips to younger years, benefiting from honing their mentoring skills as well as linking with peers and improving their social interaction with the school.

Having the opportunity for social interaction, sharing resources and working together in a safe, supportive environment through academic families helped the development of a CoP for each mixed group (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010). With time and with further development of the academic families through learning from each other and experience, it was felt this intervention was worthwhile, with the potential to develop the CoP and improve a sense of belonging in the groups. We appreciate that developing these mixed group meetings will take time, and with the familiarisation of the process and getting to know each other (staff and students) this intervention has the potential to continue to improve, provided support and momentum are maintained.

Personal Tutors felt they supported each other and learned from each other; working together reassured them of their approach to personal tutoring. The training and guidance offered were to share the purpose and the vision of academic families to create small CoP through recommending themes to discuss and approaches to facilitating a mixed group meeting. At the same time, Personal Tutors were encouraged to work together and decide on how to deliver the sessions. Tutors learned through talking to each other and experience, and this collaborative support structure mitigated some of the uncertainty of the new intervention of academic families within personal tutoring. Personal Tutors value working together by creating this immediate Personal Tutor support partnership of two or three Personal Tutors, along with sharing of workload, which should reduce the negative impact workload has on the ability to form relationships with students and provide adequate support (McFarlane, 2016; Watts, 2011). Employing academic families is a strategy to enhance personal tutoring, increasing staff confidence and the student experience. Working together also offered authentic role modelling to the students in a family and offered the group broader expertise to share and learn from experiences (from both staff and students). Personal Tutors did not explore the issue of workload, although indirectly referred to it when discussing the challenges of scheduling meetings and the complexity of working with multiple timetables to identify a convenient time to meet. Working together potentially provided a reduced workload for at least one of the Personal Tutors in the family, as one Personal Tutor in the group would co-ordinate and organise the meetings; perhaps the Personal Tutor interviewed was the colleague who organised the meeting and therefore did not feel that benefit.

Reflections on the research process

The use of semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth exploration of Personal Tutors' views and their perception of academic families. It was interesting to hear different perspectives on the use of academic families, where everyone was given the same instruction and Personal Tutors interpreted the events differently (Tullis Owen et al., 2008), likely due to the students involved, their experience and confidence in themselves and their Personal Tutor colleague, so having the eight interviewees provided breadth of experience from different academic families. The interviewees were a limited subset from a total of 47 Personal Tutors in one school from one Higher Education Institute. As other research used eight interviews to inform practice on effective personal tutoring (McFarlane, 2016), I perceived this as an appropriate starting point. I also needed to balance the workload (interviews, transcription) with the depth of findings that would lead to a better understanding and improvements to be made. A further limitation was that the perceptions were gained only from Personal Tutors and not their tutees. I appreciate that academic families involve Personal Tutors and their tutees, creating an effective and supportive environment. Learning from the student perspective is also important to develop tailored and relevant meetings that work for everyone. Another potential bias in this research was my dual role as the researcher and the advocate for academic families. I was aware of and recognised my dual role as a researcher and Senior Tutor supporting Personal Tutors and implementing academic families; this was discussed with all participants, and participants were supportive of sharing their experiences. This awareness and preparation was important for the credibility of the research and to reduce bias when reporting on the findings (Unluer, 2012).

Lessons learned to regroup academic families

Personal Tutors enjoyed working with their colleagues and learned from each other. They valued the diversity each colleague brought to the meetings; however, the increasing group size in the original approach was a concern. To minimise increased group sizes as new year 1 students joined the academic family each year (the programme will have five years of cohorts by 2022-2023), the groups were reorganised for the next academic year (2021-2022). The positive features of the academic family maintained were (i) the diversity of Personal Tutors skill set, (ii) the representation of all students from each cohort in every family, and (iii) maintaining Personal Tutors in at least pairs to support each other and share good practice. The main changes were to ensure inclusivity for all staff by considering Personal Tutors working days (particularly part-time and external colleagues) to ensure colleagues were working on the same days of the week. Group sizes were to be kept to a minimum, with two personal tutors rather than three. Three Personal Tutors were grouped only when one Personal Tutor (usually external) had two or four tutees in total. A further challenge to maintaining smaller group sizes was that the size was limited by the year 4 cohort (59) in 2021-22. There were 47 Personal Tutors to support 430 students. Twenty-one academic families were created

to consist of mostly two Personal Tutors per family and an average of 21 students in each group from all four academic years of the programme (Table 3).

Table 3 - Comparison of the academic family structure over two academic years. Indicating the changes made for 2021-2022. *Four Personal Tutors left the school, and four new Personal Tutors joined, which impacted on the distribution of tutees

| Criteria | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|
| Cohorts of students | 3 cohorts | 4 cohorts |
| Number of Academic Families | 17 groups | 21 groups |
| Average group size of students | 18 students | 21 students |
| Total number of Personal Tutors | 47 Personal Tutors | 47* Personal Tutors |
| Academic Families with two Personal Tutors | 4 | 16 |
| Academic Families with three Personal Tutors | 13 | 5 |

Future direction

Personal Tutors interviewed felt the introduction of academic families was a worthy intervention to continue and keep developing. The next stage will be to interview students to gain their perspective on academic families and listen to their experiences to develop the provision. Overcoming some of the challenges raised by the Personal Tutors should help improve inclusivity and opportunities for staff and students. To help develop a rapport within the groups quickly and safely, an additional earlier meeting will be introduced to the schedule to provide an earlier opportunity to meet each other informally at the beginning of the academic year. The multiple commitments and timetabling differences between staff and students, respectively, posed one of the main challenges in scheduling the meetings. Next academic year, to try to alleviate this scheduling challenge, the academic families will be embedded into the student timetable across all years. With more than one opportunity for the meeting to be timetabled to accommodate differences in Personal Tutors' workdays and commitments. Braine and Parnell (2011) highlighted the need for timetabled group meetings to develop a mutual rapport and feeling of being safe. Academic families will continue to be monitored to ensure we learn from experience, we maintain effective group sizes, and all Personal Tutors feel supported, particularly if there is a change of tutors.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the intervention of academic families was to create a CoP for students to learn from each other, develop a near-peer network and improve a sense of belonging with their course through their peers and Personal Tutors, particularly during transition, re-orientation and periods of change. The introduction of mixed group meetings within the personal tutoring structure offered an alternative approach to support students, with the added value of providing a support structure for Personal Tutors too. From a Personal tutor's perspective, this intervention provided a valuable supportive environment, where they shared practice and, together with students, shared experiences. Personal Tutors were grouped to get to know each other and work together to share responsibility and learn from each other. This was an opportunity to increase their confidence through observation and led to feelings of reassurance in their practice of personal tutoring, particularly when paired with colleagues of differing experience and expertise. Therefore, maintaining diversity when grouping Personal Tutors is a strength when working together and facilitating academic family group meetings. The generation of academic families within the personal tutoring structure provided an efficient, sustainable mixed group structure where year 1 students, when allocated to their Personal Tutor, automatically joined an academic family. Group size needs to be monitored, which may result in restructuring the groups in order to maintain an effective size and ensure the inclusion of all participants. Offering different types of personal tutor meetings will provide different opportunities for staff and students to engage with their peers and help enable colleagues to approach each other for support and advice. Overall, embedding academic families within personal tutoring supported Personal Tutors' engagement and development, aided students in working and learning together and, in time, helped foster a sense of belonging.

About the Author

Wendy Leadbeater is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biomedical Sciences, School of Infection, Inflammation and Immunology at the University of Birmingham. She is recognised as a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Wendy leads the undergraduate Biomedical Science programme and is interested in the enhancement of student support and experience; she has had several roles aligned with Personal Academic Tutoring, including Senior Tutor in Biomedical Science at the University of Birmingham and Head of Student Support at Aston Medical School, Aston University. Wendy completed her Masters in Education on building communities of practice within the personal tutoring structure through academic families.

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3141-9421>

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