

The challenges faced by senior tutors in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

The senior tutor role has been a feature of personal tutoring models in universities for nearly two decades. The role was first introduced to address rising student support needs and inconsistency in the delivery of personal tutoring. Since this time there have been dramatic changes in the higher education sector. This study investigates the role and responsibilities of the senior tutor in the context of current challenges in higher education, particularly focusing on the experiences of staff taking on this role. Based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 11 senior tutors, I show that senior tutors provide more direct support, in particular wellbeing support, than is set out in institutional expectations. Moreover, the senior tutor role is highly challenging for academics because of the emotional burden and the high workload associated with it. By providing safeguards and support that are standard in other helping professions, universities can better support academics taking on this vital role.

KEYWORDS

Senior Tutor; Pastoral support; Mental health and well-being; Burnout

Introduction

In the last two decades, it has become increasingly common for universities to have 'enhanced personal tutors' as part of personal tutoring arrangements in their schools or departments (Lochtie et al., 2025; McIntosh, 2018). These tutors are often referred to as senior tutors, but may also be called departmental, chief, or lead tutor or advisor. Senior tutors coordinate and oversee personal tutoring in their school or department (Greenway, 2022; Lochtie et al., 2025; Luck, 2010; McIntosh, 2018), and champion personal tutoring within the institution (McIntosh, 2018). They provide support for personal tutors by developing resources (Lochtie et al., 2025) and by advising them on more complex student cases, enabling tutors to signpost effectively and set clear boundaries (Luck, 2010). Senior tutors also provide direct support to students. These are usually students with more complex academic or pastoral issues (Lochtie et al., 2025; McIntosh, 2018). Senior tutors liaise with university support services (Lochtie et al., 2025; Luck, 2010) and often play an important role in the mitigating circumstances process (Luck, 2010). Generally, the role is taken on as an administrative role by an academic member of staff

(Luck, 2010), although, in some universities, it is taken on by a professional for whom being a senior tutor is their primary role.

The senior tutor role can be difficult for academics to take on. When the role was first introduced, Luck (2010) described the challenges faced by senior tutors as a result of working at the boundary between personal tutors and professional counselling services. She outlined that the role was particularly difficult because the work was similar to that undertaken by counsellors and was further complicated by the fact that senior tutors provide support to their colleagues as well as students. Significant changes have occurred in higher education since the senior tutor role was first introduced. The role is now relatively common and well-embedded in the organisational structure of universities (e.g. Newcastle University, n.d.; University of Birmingham, n.d.; University of Bristol, 2022; University of Exeter, n.d.; University of Nottingham, n.d.; University of Warwick, 2017). At the same time, there are significant challenges in the higher education sector that impact the experience of staff taking on this role.

Current challenges in higher education

The past 15 years have seen considerable changes in the higher education sector, including rises in tuition fees, the removal of student numbers caps, and the cutting of government funding, resulting in an ongoing expansion of the sector and rising marketisation (Kastelic, 2024). In 2017, the Higher Education and Research Act established a new regulatory framework for higher education, which included the formation of the Office for Students (OfS) and the launching of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which has led to an increasing focus on performance metrics (Lochtie et al., 2018). At the same time, students are increasingly seen as consumers (Gupta et al., 2023; McIntosh & Cross, 2017), which has led to a greater emphasis on student experience and satisfaction.

The student population has also changed during this time. More young people now go to university. In 2017/18, more than half of young people in England entered higher education, and this proportion has kept increasing steadily (Bolton, 2024). The profile of the student population has changed, with more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university (UUK, 2024), and the number of international students from outside the EU has doubled between 2010 and 2023 (Bolton, 2024). As the student population has broadened and diversified, so has the range of student support needs (Banahene, 2024; McFarlane, 2016). As a result, existing models of personal tutoring can be inequitable (Myers, 2008) and, therefore, increasingly inappropriate (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Universities have identified that they need to adapt to the changing demographics of the student population (Wakelin, 2023; Walker, 2022), and many institutions are reviewing how they deliver personal tutoring (e.g. Claase, 2019; Grey et al., 2024; University College London, 2023; University of Warwick, 2017).

Student mental health has been a growing concern across the sector (Auerbach et al., 2018). The past two decades have seen dramatic increases in the prevalence of mental health

conditions among students (Thorley, 2017). Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated this trend (von Keyserlingk et al., 2022; Zarowski et al., 2024), the rise in the number of students with mental health problems was seen prior to the pandemic (McLafferty et al., 2023). The proportion of home students disclosing a mental health condition has increased sevenfold in the last decade (Lewis & Bolton, 2023), and one in five students now have a current mental health diagnosis (Pereira et al., 2020). As a result, universities have seen significant increases in demand for disability and counselling services (Thorley, 2017). The sector has responded to this by making mental health and wellbeing a strategic priority and moving towards a *'whole university approach'* to mental health and wellbeing (Hughes & Spanner, 2024; UUK, 2017), recognising that student mental health is affected by all aspects of university life. As a result many institutions have invested heavily in wellbeing services that are focused on early intervention and low-level support, and who can refer on to specialist support (Lewis & Bolton, 2023; Thorley, 2017). At the same time, pressures on academic staff have been growing due to severe increases in workloads (Morrish, 2019; UCU, 2022; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Wray & Kinman, 2022), heightened scrutiny (Jayman et al., 2022; Wray & Kinman, 2022), lack of institutional support (Urbina-Garcia, 2020), job insecurity (Urbina-Garcia, 2020), and increasing student expectations for individual support (Wray & Kinman, 2022).

These challenges come at a time when the sector is in financial crisis (Kastelic, 2024; Office for Students, 2024b), which has caused many universities to have to make dramatic organisational changes to remain financially sustainable (Office for Students, 2024a). These financial constraints have made addressing the current challenges in higher education difficult. Moreover, in this challenging working context, the impact of providing pastoral care to students (Augustus et al., 2023; Brewster et al., 2022; Halstead & Herbert, 2024; Smith & Ulus, 2020) has been of particular concern to staff.

The senior tutor role in the current HE context

Although the senior tutor role is now common in UK universities, remarkably little has been written about it. Greenway (2022) and Millmore et al. (2022) do mention senior tutors in their descriptions of models of personal tutoring. They characterise the senior tutor role as a somewhat neglected role (Greenway, 2022) that often lacks adequate support (Millmore et al., 2022) and the prestige of other leadership roles in universities (Millmore et al., 2022). As a result, senior tutors do not feel empowered to make changes to personal tutoring as they see fit and the role is often focused on resolving concerns rather than strategic leadership (Greenway, 2022). Beyond these observations, the senior tutor role remains largely unexplored in the current literature. To my knowledge, there has been no investigation of the senior tutor role and the demands it places on staff, particularly in the context of increasing student numbers, rising student support needs, the marketisation of education, and the financial pressures universities are under. No studies have investigated specifically the experiences of senior tutors.

Aims of this study

The aim of this study was to examine the current role and responsibilities of senior tutors following the significant sector changes, and to improve our understanding of the experience of staff taking on the senior tutor role, given the current challenges in higher education.

Methods

The current study is a qualitative case study that investigates the perceptions and lived experiences of senior tutors at a single university, using phenomenology as the methodological approach (Tight, 2012; Van Manen, 2023).

Setting and local context

This study took place at a research-intensive university in England. In 2022/23, the university had approximately 32000 students, of which 73% were undergraduate and 31% were international. Of home undergraduate students, 21% were from Black, Asian, and ethnic minoritised backgrounds. There were around 8700 staff at the university, including 3700 academics and 125 senior tutors. The university has 25 academic schools, which are grouped together under six faculties. Schools decide on specific arrangements for personal tutoring in their school in a way that suits their programmes and student body while adhering to minimum expectations set out in a central policy. One such expectation is that each school has at least one senior tutor. Whilst the policy defines personal tutoring as academic support, a range of personal tutoring models are used in schools, including versions of the pastoral, curriculum-integrated, and professional mentor models (Alberts, 2024; Lochtie et al., 2025).

The senior tutor role was introduced in the university in 2010/2011 in response to increasing student support needs and a recognition that some students required levels of support that went beyond what personal tutors were able to provide. The senior tutor role was introduced to handle these more complex student cases. It was expected that senior tutors would build up expertise in the support students could access within and outside of the university, and they were offered additional training such as Mental Health First Aid and Suicide Awareness. The role was also introduced to address issues in the inconsistency in the delivery of personal tutoring by having someone oversee personal tutoring in each school, providing support and training to personal tutors, and ensuring that individual personal tutors engaged appropriately.

The senior tutor role is generally taken on by academics as one of their administrative roles, which usually accounts for 10-20% of their overall workload. Some schools, however, have professional senior tutors for whom being a senior tutor is their primary role. Institutional support offered to senior tutors includes an induction programme, senior tutor network, and monthly drop-in 'offloading' sessions, which are group meetings facilitated by the head of staff counselling. The university has had 'supporting students' as one of the criteria in its academic

promotions framework for several years, and academics can use their senior tutor role as evidence in their case for promotion. Senior tutors also work closely with student administration staff in their schools.

In 2018, in line with a 'whole-university approach' to mental health, the university invested heavily in central wellbeing advisors who provide low-intensity, professional wellbeing support, in addition to existing support services. Wellbeing advisors focus on early interventions, signposting students to appropriate services and resources, and liaise with a student's school and central services.

Participants

Data for this study come from a larger research project which looked at different models of undergraduate personal tutoring at the university, taking into consideration the experiences of students and university staff. Five academic schools, each from a different faculty, were chosen to take part, reflecting the range of disciplines, sizes of schools, and models of personal tutoring at the university. This study is based on interviews with 11 senior tutors in these five schools. In each of the five schools, all 12 senior tutors with responsibilities for undergraduate students were invited to an interview. One senior tutor declined to take part.

One of the senior tutors interviewed was a professional senior tutor. All others were academics on traditional and teaching-only contracts. Participants ranged in level of seniority and included Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, and Associate Professors. The term of appointment of a senior tutor is usually three years, although, in some schools, senior tutors take on the role indefinitely. Therefore, participants varied in their level of experience as senior tutors, ranging from nine months to over a decade. In each school, multiple senior tutors were interviewed, apart from the school with the professional senior tutor, who was the sole senior tutor in their school at the time.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place online in 2022 and 2023 and, on average, took 60 minutes. Data used in this study come from part of these interviews, where senior tutors were asked about their role and what they perceived to be the major challenges and barriers to being a senior tutor. Interviews were recorded online and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive coding approach was used, in which codes are derived from the data rather than based on preconceived notions of what those codes should be. Inductive coding is particularly useful in exploratory studies that focus on the lived experiences of participants (Naeem et al., 2023). Following this approach, transcripts were coded after initial familiarisation with the data,

looking specifically at the senior tutor role and responsibilities and challenges faced by senior tutors. Once all transcripts were coded, the codes were analysed to identify patterns and relationships, and codes were organised into broader themes and subthemes. These themes are presented in the findings.

Thematic analysis was also used to identify themes in the senior tutor role description as given in the university's personal tutoring policy. Here, a mix of deductive and inductive coding was used. First, a deductive approach was used, in which a pre-determined set of codes was used to analyse data. The codes that were applied to the text were the codes that were identified in senior tutors' descriptions of their roles to see if the codes and themes matched up. Subsequently, an inductive approach was used to identify any further codes and themes in the role description.

Survey

Following the identification of the main tasks and responsibilities of senior tutors in interview transcripts, a short survey was distributed to senior tutors from all six faculties across the university, in which they were asked to indicate the proportion of their time as senior tutors they spent on each category of activities (see Appendix). This survey was open for one week in 2023 and was shared with the university's senior tutor network. A total of 30 senior tutors filled out the survey (24% response rate). On inspection, three survey responses were incomplete and were therefore excluded. A total of 27 survey responses were used to estimate the time allocation to various senior tutor tasks.

Findings

The senior tutor role and responsibilities

The responsibilities of the senior tutor generally fell into four broad themes (Table 1). Firstly, senior tutors provide direct support to students. They work with students who have been referred to them by colleagues within the school to provide academic and wellbeing support and signpost students where appropriate. Senior tutors also monitor students in their school to provide this support proactively. Secondly, senior tutors support personal tutors by taking on or giving advice on more complex cases and by providing resources and training. Thirdly, they serve on committees, boards, and panels within their school to advise on the circumstances of individual students or, more generally, on student wellbeing issues and personal tutoring arrangements. This includes meeting with individual students to discuss academic decisions that have been reached by the school. Lastly, senior tutors oversee personal tutoring in their school, including decisions on how personal tutoring will be run, overseeing the allocation of tutees, and evaluation. They disseminate information about

personal tutor arrangements to other staff and students. Senior tutors thus have a leading direct and indirect role in the provision of local student support.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes in the role and responsibilities of the senior tutor.

Responsibilities of the Senior Tutor
1) supporting students
monitoring of students
academic support
wellbeing support
signposting or referring students
2) supporting personal tutors
referral point for personal tutors
advise on specific cases
providing resources for personal tutors
training and induction
3) committees, boards, and panels
student progress panels
school committees
exam board and related committees
4) overseeing personal tutoring
evaluation of personal tutoring arrangements
setting of personal tutoring arrangements
inform about personal tutoring in school
oversee the allocation of tutees

Time allocation to senior tutor tasks

Tasks outlined in Table 1 were used in a survey of senior tutors across the university to determine the proportion of time in the senior tutor role they spent on each task (Figure 1). Senior tutors said they spent the majority of their time as senior tutors providing direct support to students (56%), with providing wellbeing support taking up most of their time (18%),

followed closely by academic support (17%). Preparing for and attending committees, boards and panels took up a quarter (24%) of senior tutor's time, and providing support for personal tutors 13%. Overseeing personal tutoring arrangements took up least amount of senior tutors' time (7%).

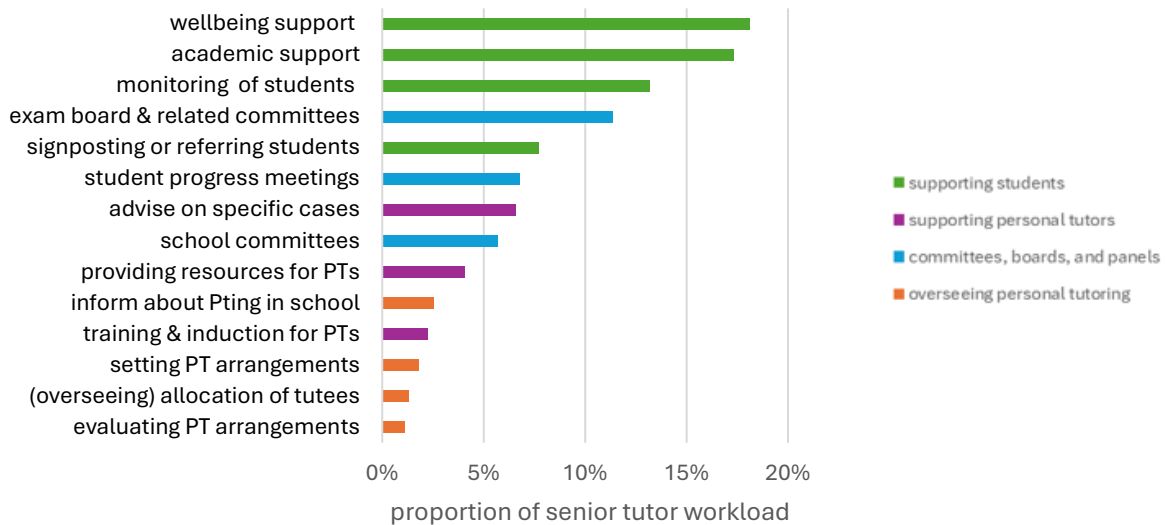


Figure 1: Proportion of time spent on each task as indicated by a wider group of senior tutors (N=27). Colours indicate the broader area of responsibility.

Next, tasks outlined in Table 1 were used as deductive codes to code activities in the senior tutor role description to investigate to what extent institutional expectations of the role match up with what senior tutors say they do. In the senior tutor role description, the focus was mostly on overseeing personal tutoring arrangements in the school (47% of codes) and on supporting personal tutors (24% of codes). While supporting students was part of the senior tutor role description (18% of codes), importantly, this did not include either wellbeing support, signposting students, or being a referral point. Rather, in the role description, student support consisted solely of helping students navigate institutional policies and processes and checking in with exam-only students. Thus, institutional expectations of senior tutors differ from senior tutors' experience of the role. Specifically, senior tutors say they provide wellbeing support, signposting students, and are a referral point, and that this is what they spent the majority of their time on.

The challenges faced by senior tutors

Senior tutors were asked what they thought were the main challenges in their role. Their answers identified three broader themes. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail.

Theme 1: Emotional load and impact on wellbeing

Senior tutors most frequently identified challenges that were related to the 'emotional load' of their role; the emotional costs (Cameron et al., 2016; Figley, 1995) of dealing with students who are in difficult and complicated situations that impact their studies. Senior tutors act as a referral point for personal tutors, and this can result in them having to deal with a lot of harrowing stories.

"We take on the cases that the personal tutors don't... you know, it's too much for them to manage or deal with. That's what we take on for the personal tutors." Senior Tutor 5

Senior tutors feel they 'hold' these stories and carry around worries about students and feel the responsibility of making sure that these students are supported.

"These are really high-risk students you're really worried about. And then you carry all that worry." Senior Tutor 4

"It's really hard. It's the hardest thing about the job, I think, is, is that holding of knowledge and responsibility at some level for students some of whom are in really bad places." Senior Tutor 8

"It feels like responsibility for students' wellbeing is back on you" Senior Tutor 4

This feeling of responsibility is a source of anxiety because tutors are concerned about the potentially catastrophic consequences if they miss something or make a 'mistake'.

"I worry about people falling through the cracks and often it's the ones that don't communicate with you" Senior Tutor 1

"It's so easy to miss an email or for something to slip through your fingers and to miss something and of course the consequences then if you do" Senior Tutor 2

"I really worry about things coming into my inbox and me missing them" Senior Tutor 5

Senior tutors usually do not have any formal qualifications to respond to students in distressing situations, which means they do not have a framework with which to interpret behaviour and manage risk. As such, responding to students in distress can be stressful for tutors.

"I still find it really alarming, you know, the amount of risk in some cases" Senior Tutor 5

Senior tutors said there is a lack of clarity around the boundaries of the role and their responsibilities, which can be stressful because they worry that they are either too involved with students or they worry they are not doing enough.

"I worry for myself that maybe I'm not being precise in my role. That maybe I'm slightly shadowing what the [central student support services] are doing and that I've interpreted the senior tutor role a little bit too broadly." Senior Tutor 10

"How much we are supposed to be trawling through to catch every student who's really struggling? ... I hold that fear of, what if? What if it's wrong? What if we missed the student who is in a really devastating situation? I feel unsure about the extent to which that is my responsibility." Senior Tutor 11

The emotional demands, level of responsibility, lack of training in managing risk, and unclear boundaries of the role have a real impact on the wellbeing of senior tutors themselves.

"It does keep me up at night" Senior Tutor 11

Within schools, it was widely recognised the senior tutor role is overwhelming, stressful, and emotionally demanding. As a result, it can be difficult to find people willing to take on the role of senior tutor because academics often do not feel comfortable dealing with the responsibilities and stress associated with the role.

"There's a certain fear of the role. Of the breadth and expectation of it. For a lot of academics it feels like way beyond anything that they're comfortable to take on." Senior Tutor 8

Analysis of the senior tutor role description showed that there was no institutional expectation of the senior tutor to provide ongoing support for students with complex pastoral or mental health issues. Like other academics, they are expected to signpost students to central student support services and focus instead on providing academic support to students. It is important to understand why there is this gap between the institutional expectation and the lived experiences of senior tutors and why senior tutors from across the university feel that they need to support students in this way.

Senior tutors themselves said they have no option but to provide this kind of support because there is such need amongst students. Senior tutors said there has been a marked increase in the number of students who need support, and the complexity of issues they are dealing with, such as mental health issues. In all schools, senior tutors had a 'watch list' of students they are concerned about, and 10-15% of students are on such a list.

"It is the worst it has ever been" Senior Tutor 4

Senior tutors also say that they have many student cases because some personal tutors are quick to refer a student onto the senior tutor because they do not feel comfortable with the responsibility.

"They're keen to just refer on. I think that's because they're worried about, you know, their own liability if they get it wrong." Senior Tutor 9

“Also, people don't like taking responsibility, they want to get things off their desk. So, it ends up on our desk as the senior tutor” Senior Tutor 10

Moreover, students often still seek support within their school even after being referred to central student support services because students are not getting the support they would like; waiting times can be long, because central services are not sufficiently aware of the academic structure of the programme to advise students, or because students seek support from multiple sources simultaneously. As a result, senior tutors say the majority of their work involves directly supporting students even when this is not set in the institutional expectations of the senior tutor. This is in line with the findings from the time allocation survey.

“The other, in practice bigger, bit is supporting students who have challenges that exceed what a personal tutor should be dealing with” Senior Tutor 11

“Most of the time is spent dealing with students with complex, difficult circumstances” Senior Tutor 6

“The vast majority of it is around student wellbeing” Senior Tutor 9

“Most of my time is spent with students in more complicated circumstances”
Senior Tutor 10

“[student mental health and wellbeing] seems to take up a hell of a lot of time whatever I do. I mean, it is literally most of my job.” Senior Tutor 2

Senior tutors felt they would like more institutional support to help process their emotions resulting from some of the more distressing cases they deal with.

“I do absorb, hear, read, really distressing material from the students all the time. And I don't really have anywhere to take that. I don't have a supervisor that I can go to regularly and say, well, I've just heard my sixth sexual assault case in a week, and it's really having an impact. You know, we don't get to do that.” Senior Tutor 5

The university provides emotional support for senior tutors through monthly drop-in sessions with the staff counselling service. While these sessions were hugely appreciated by senior tutors, they are open to all 125 senior tutors at the university and, therefore, are not comparable to small-group supervision. Some senior tutors mentioned using the staff counselling service for ad hoc debriefs on specific cases. Again, tutors found these sessions useful but said waiting times could be long, which meant sessions were not timely.

Theme 2: Workload

Workload was the second theme in the challenges for senior tutors. They felt that their workload was often unmanageable because of the high number of students they were looking after and the limited amount of time they had allocated for this work.

“Workloads. We're all just crushed all the time.” Senior tutor 4

A high workload and lack of control over it can make staff feel overwhelmed and anxious. Some senior tutors said they felt they were constantly firefighting, which can lead to anxiety.

"It's just kind of swimming to keep your head above water" Senior Tutor 9

"Workload. Makes me want to cry. And it makes me really anxious. It's a constant firefighting. Prioritisation. Have I done the urgent things? I always worry that I'm letting someone down." Senior Tutor 5

Senior tutors said that the way their role is currently organised is not sustainable. Senior tutors often put in extra hours because they care for their students and worry about them, but they say it is difficult to maintain that level of workload, particularly in combination with the emotional demands of the role, and that it risks leading to burnout.

"As it stands, you need to really care to do the role. My worry is that it is just not sustainable because you're just going to burn everyone out." Senior Tutor 7

Theme 3: Lack of recognition

The third theme that was identified in the challenges for senior tutors was a lack of recognition and reward for the role. Senior tutors felt that, whilst there was enormous informal appreciation for their work, there was little formal institutional recognition in terms of pay or career progression.

"I'm not sure that that appreciation extends to anything else meaningful, right? In terms of career development, progression, promotion, salary, it's worth approximately zero." Senior Tutor 9

Tutors felt being a senior tutor had associated costs because it was holding them back in their career progression. This was particularly the case for senior tutors on traditional academic contracts (i.e. teaching and research rather than teaching-only), because they were not able to meet the regular expectations of academics, such as bringing in funding and publishing.

"I need to up my research activity. I need to spend more time grant writing, thinking, reflecting, brainstorming, writing papers. All of that is taken away by, you know, the heavy load of senior tutoring." Senior Tutor 3

And some senior tutors had made a conscious choice to be a senior tutor rather than pursue their academic career.

"I had to decide, I'm going to do this, or I'm going to pursue my career. There's just no way you can carry on with your research." Senior Tutor 2

Overall, while senior tutors feel their role is appreciated by colleagues, they feel it is undervalued institutionally.

Discussion

This study sets out to describe the role and responsibilities of senior tutors in a UK university and to investigate the demands that the role places on staff. Thematic analysis was used to identify the main responsibilities, as well as the main challenges senior tutors face in their role. A survey provided further insights into the proportion of time senior tutors spent on various areas of responsibility. This study found that senior tutors coordinate personal tutoring in their school, provide support and guidance for personal tutors, and serve on boards and panels related to student progress and wellbeing. Most of the workload of the senior tutor, however, consists of casework, where senior tutors provide direct support to students, often regarding their mental health and wellbeing and its impact on their studies. Senior tutors are thus a crucial part of local student support. Nevertheless, senior tutors feel their role is undervalued by the institution and that it comes with significant costs to their academic career and own wellbeing.

As this study is based on a relatively small sample of senior tutors at a single institution, its findings are not necessarily generalisable to other institutions or the whole sector. However, at this university, decisions about senior tutoring are made at the level of the school rather than at the institutional level, and similar challenges were found in all five schools. The current study can, therefore, give some insights into the current challenges faced by senior tutors in higher education. Further cross-institutional research on the experiences of senior tutors would show whether these challenges are indeed widespread across the sector.

Institutional expectations versus lived experience

This study found there was a mismatch between institutional expectations of senior tutors and their lived experience. Whilst the university senior tutor role description focused mostly on overseeing personal tutoring arrangements in schools and advising students on matters of academic process, senior tutors indicated they, in fact, spent the majority of their time providing direct support to students, particularly providing wellbeing support. This does not match up with institutional expectations of senior tutors; since the introduction of a wellbeing advisory service in the university in 2018, senior tutors are expected, like all academics, to signpost students to this service rather than provide ongoing wellbeing support themselves. One explanation for this discrepancy could be that, in addition to the institutional expectations of senior tutors, the five schools in this study have additional expectations that include providing wellbeing support to students. However, when looking at the time allocation survey, all but one senior tutor said they provided wellbeing support. As the senior tutors who completed this survey were based in schools across the university, this suggests that this discrepancy lies at the institutional rather than at the school level. In other words, either individuals or schools across the university feel that there is a need for senior tutors to provide this type of support over and above institutional expectations, which points to more structural issues in the way student support is provided. An inconsistency in institutional expectations

and staff experiences around pastoral care and student support has also been found in other studies (Augustus et al., 2023; Stuart et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2023).

Studies have suggested that this discrepancy exists because when universities introduce specialised support services, including low-intensity wellbeing support, they wrongly assume that academics no longer provide wellbeing support to students (Huyton, 2009). However, if the underlying structure of university support has not changed, students will continue to seek support from academics even when signposting policies are in place (Hughes et al., 2018; Hughes & Byrom, 2019). Students will also continue to seek support within their school or department when central support services have long waiting times, or students do not get the support they want from those services (Hughes et al., 2018). Studies show students prefer to seek help from academics in their school because they are more immediately accessible, they have a pre-existing relationship with the student (Hughes et al., 2018; Payne, 2022; Walker et al., 2023), they have academic expertise and therefore know the subject, the programme and the demands placed on the student (Kevern & Webb, 2004). Students may also prefer to have an informal chat with a senior tutor rather than make an appointment with a professional advisor or counsellor (Luck, 2010; Owen, 2002).

Failure to recognise the full extent of the work of senior tutors puts them in a difficult position where they are on the frontline of student support without adequate training or support.

The challenges faced by senior tutors

Senior tutors said the emotional burden of the role, along with the demanding workload and lack of institutional recognition, were the most difficult parts of their role. This differs from the main challenge described by Luck (2010) who found it was having to deal simultaneously with anxieties from students and colleagues, as well as managing colleagues' emotions in response to their interactions with students. In this study, supporting colleagues was not raised as a difficulty or challenge by any of the senior tutors. The thematic analysis of the senior tutor role and responsibilities suggests that this is because colleagues do not regularly bring their anxieties and seek emotional support from the senior tutors. The 'supporting personal tutors' theme identified in this analysis included advising personal tutors on specific cases, developing resources, and delivering training rather than having to manage colleagues' anxieties. Colleagues within the schools, including personal tutors, are often acutely aware of the pressures senior tutors are under. Perhaps personal tutors do not wish to add to this burden and, therefore, seek emotional support elsewhere. Both studies did find, however, that supporting students is a source of stress for senior tutors.

The emotional burden on senior tutors

Whilst senior tutors find providing pastoral care rewarding, it is also a hugely stressful part of their role. Senior tutors often care deeply for their students and feel responsible for students'

wellbeing. It is this responsibility and the possible tragic consequences if they make a ‘mistake’ or miss something that makes the role particularly stressful. Academics more generally find supporting students much more challenging than their other tasks (Augustus et al., 2023) and pastoral care has the biggest impact on academics’ wellbeing because of the urgency of the work and the emotions involved (Augustus et al., 2023; Brewster et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2018; Huyton, 2009; McAllister et al., 2014).

Dealing with student disclosures of difficult or traumatic experiences in and of themselves can be a source of stress. Senior tutors in this study said they found it challenging to hear or read about the difficult situations some students are in, and these disclosures affect their wellbeing. Senior tutors have to deal with a wide range of disclosures, some of which include harrowing stories and traumatic events, including sexual violence, loneliness, racism, domestic violence, grief, unplanned pregnancy, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Huyton, 2009; Walker et al., 2023). The impact of being witness to other people’s suffering is well-known. Exposure to the traumatic or distressing events experienced by others can lead to secondary trauma (Leung et al., 2023), which is an acute response (Mento et al., 2020) with symptoms similar to posttraumatic stress disorder (Leung et al., 2023; Mento et al., 2020; Palm et al., 2004). Other studies on the experiences of academics found shocking disclosures from students can bring about an emotional response (Laws & Fiedler, 2012), cause anxiety, distress, and exhaustion (Stephen et al., 2008), and ‘*can leave the academic feeling suddenly exhausted, paralysed and unable to function*’ (Luck, 2010: 282).

Exposure to the suffering of others can also have a cumulative effect. Vicarious trauma describes the cumulative, transformative effect of a person’s beliefs, worldview, and inner experience that take place over a longer period (Cunningham, 2004; Leung et al., 2023; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Mento et al., 2020). These types of secondary traumatisation occur not only in professions that directly assist people involved in traumatic events (Clohessy & Ehlers, 1999; Leung et al., 2023; McCann & Pearlman, 1990), but also in professions where people witness the trauma of others, such as journalists (Simpson & Boggs, 1999), solicitors (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008), and social work students (Cunningham, 2004). Indirect traumatisation is seen as ‘*a natural consequence of caring*’ (Figley, 1995: 11), which suggests that these indirect forms of traumatisation can occur in all helping professions, including the senior tutor role. Moreover, such indirect traumatisation is more likely to occur in those without appropriate support (Aafjes–Van Doorn et al., 2021).

Workplace stress and burnout

The specific way the senior tutor role is organised impacts the wellbeing of staff taking on the role. Research on workplace stress and burnout has found that the context of the workplace is as important as the characteristics of individual workers (Leiter & Maslach, 2004), and the focus should, therefore, be on ‘*fixing the job*’ rather than ‘*fixing the person*’ (Maslach, 2017).

Various of the barriers that senior tutors have identified are known risk factors for workplace burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2017).

One such risk factor for burnout is a high and overwhelming workload (Maslach & Leiter, 2017), which occurs when the demands of the job are too high or there is too little time to complete the work, leading to exhaustion. If the workload is chronically high and there is little time to rest or recuperate, this can lead to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). High workload was one of the main barriers identified by senior tutors in this study. Moreover, a lack of clarity on the remit and boundaries of the role left senior tutors unsure to what extent they should get involved, which contributed further to the stress associated with the role. Whilst the institution does provide a role description for senior tutors, this study found that this description does not match senior tutors' experience of the role. As a result, some senior tutors were not sure to what extent they were responsible for students' wellbeing and how involved they should be. Other studies have found there is a lack of clarity around the role and responsibilities of the personal tutor (Augustus et al., 2023; Hughes & Bowers-Brown, 2021; Hughes et al., 2018; McFarlane, 2016) and around the term 'pastoral care' itself (Earwaker, 1992; Hughes & Bowers-Brown, 2021; Hughes et al., 2018). This study shows this ambiguity also exists in the senior tutor role. Such ambiguity could mean some tutors get too involved in their tutees' problems at a detriment to their own wellbeing (Augustus et al., 2023).

Second, lack of control at work contributes to stress and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Senior tutors, at times, feel a lack of control over their workload because they have many conflicting demands. Moreover, senior tutors said they found the lack of control over when they might hear shocking disclosures from students difficult to manage. Senior tutors can come across such disclosures at any point in their working day, in, for example, a meeting with a student, emails they receive, or within paperwork for meetings, and that these are '*unplanned intrusions*' (Laws & Fiedler, 2012). The unpredictable nature and sense of urgency of these disclosures are difficult (Walker et al., 2023), and can leave senior tutors feeling they are not in control.

Third, a lack of reward for the work done is a risk factor for burnout and stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Senior tutors in this study felt that, whilst their work was appreciated informally by their colleagues, there was little institutional recognition in terms of pay, career progression, and prestige for the role.

Fourth, a perceived lack of fairness in workplace decisions can contribute to burnout and stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). There was a sense of unfairness among senior tutors in the lack of recognition and reward despite the level of responsibility and the highly demanding workload of the senior tutor role. Some senior tutors felt that the role had come at a cost to their own wellbeing or career progression. Furthermore, the disconnect between institutional expectations and the reality of the senior tutor role was also perceived as unfair.

Senior tutoring as a helping profession

Senior tutors in this study highlighted that there was a lack of support to help them manage the emotional demands of the role and to reduce its impact on their own mental health and wellbeing. Given that senior tutors spend the majority of their time supporting students, the role should be seen as a ‘helping profession’. Helping professionals are not just counsellors or psychotherapists; they are any professional who is working to support and help others (Westergaard, 2016), and helping and counselling skills are central (Egan, 2007). Following professional and ethical guidelines, people in helping professions generally have access to support to help them manage the impact of their role. Such support includes having a clear framework of responsibilities, training, and professional supervision. Supervision is a facilitated space for reflection in which staff can process and make sense of their own emotional responses within a safe relationship, which reduces stress (Augustus et al., 2023; Easton & Laar, 1995; Huyton, 2009) and risk of burnout (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). It also allows staff to evaluate their practice and explore their professional boundaries (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). Currently, universities do not recognise that academics who work closely with students, such as senior tutors, are in a helping profession (Hughes et al., 2018; Huyton, 2009; McFarlane, 2016), and therefore university staff do not routinely have access to support such as supervision (Hughes et al., 2018; Huyton, 2009; Luck, 2010; McAllister et al., 2014; McFarlane, 2016; Millmore et al., 2022; Watts, 2011). Recognition of the senior tutor role as a helping profession and provision of support commensurate with such a role would allow senior tutors to improve their practice, help recognise the boundaries of their role, and avoid secondary traumatisation and burnout.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine the role and experiences of senior tutors in UK higher education. This study found that senior tutors play an important role in local student support, both directly and indirectly by supporting students, guiding staff, serving on boards and panels, and overseeing personal tutoring. It also highlighted key challenges faced by senior tutors, including the emotional demands of the role, unclear role boundaries, high workloads, and a lack of institutional recognition, which combined put at risk the wellbeing of senior tutors.

An important finding of this study is the misalignment between institutional expectations and the lived experiences of senior tutors. While in the institutional policy, the senior tutor role is focused on academic support and encourages tutors to signpost students with issues affecting their wellbeing, senior tutors themselves say that providing direct and ongoing wellbeing support is the largest part of their role.

Universities should recognise the role senior tutors play in local student support. As more institutions introduce senior tutors as part of their personal tutoring arrangements, they should

ensure institutional role descriptions reflect the realities of the role and that there are adequate institutional rewards. Universities should recognise senior tutoring as a 'helping profession' and provide clear role frameworks, adequate training, and professional supervision to support senior tutors in managing the emotional demands of their work. Without such recognition and support, the senior tutor role will be unsustainable, affecting both staff wellbeing and the quality of student support.

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Appendix – Survey questions

1. What proportion of time as ST do you spend on the following areas? Please indicate the proportion by filling in points for each area. You have 100 points in total.

Supporting personal tutors

Overseeing the PT system

Supporting students

Attending and preparing for committees, boards & panels

2. What proportion of time as ST do you spend on the following tasks? Please indicate the proportion by filling in points for each task. You have 100 points in total. If you don't do a particular task, you can leave the entry at 0.

Academic support for students (incl. study plans & advising on policies and regs)

Wellbeing support (incl. checking in and meeting with students & chasing up WBS)

Signposting students

Advising PTs on specific cases

Developing resources for PTs (e.g. PT handbook, reminder emails)

Monitoring of students (incl. case review meetings)

Training & induction for PTs

Preparing & attending student process meetings (e.g. STS, FTS, RTW, suspension, transfers)

Preparing & attending EC committee & exam board

Setting PT arrangements

Disseminating info about PT arrangements (e.g. welcome talks)

(Overseeing) allocation of tutees

Evaluating PT arrangements

Preparing & attending school committees (e.g. SSLC, education committee)

3. What faculty are you in?

4. What pathway are you on?