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Editorial

Creating Conditions for Advising to Matter

This second edition of Waypoint offers contributions that we think are particularly timely given the evolving landscape of higher education and the increasing diversity of the student population. Across the articles, the authors encourage us to consider beyond the advising conversation itself and consider a broader question: what conditions enable academic advising and personal tutoring to make a meaningful difference? With this question in mind, the discussions and insights presented take us through the interconnected aspects of effective advising, from the institution to the system, from the practitioner to the conversation, and ultimately to the student. Collectively, they highlight that impactful advising and whether it matters is not the result of a single interaction, but rather the product of a thoughtful, carefully crafted system that supports student success.

In the opinion piece that opens this second edition, [‘The Hidden Curriculum of Time and Space: Why Belonging Is Designed Before It Is Felt’](#), Colum Cronin begins by challenging us to recognise that belonging is shaped before an advising conversation even takes place and cannot be assumed to be simply ‘felt’ by the student. This piece asks the reader to consider the influence of the hidden curriculum on student-perceived belonging. Decisions about time, space, timetabling and transition in particular influence students’ opportunities for connection and communicate powerful messages about whether they matter. Colum leaves us with the challenge of making time and room for belonging to occur by protecting the conditions from which it can emerge.

Rachel Maxwell and colleagues, in their article [‘A Data-People-Theory Approach to Enhancing Student Advising: Findings from a Multi-institution Project’](#), sought to explore how universities might better understand their approach to advising through a model that captured academic advising systems. Their resulting data-people-theory model offers a framework for institutions to examine their existing provision of student advising and to understand its relationship to students’ perceptions of mattering and success. Importantly, they argue the data-people-theory model offers a valuable lens for institutions to articulate their approach to student advising, providing meaningful points of comparison across the sector. With student success at its core, the narrative that scaffolds the model argues that accessibility of support for students needs to increase and be more intentionally woven within the everyday life of the student academic experience.

Rebecca Upsher and colleagues bring us from the broader spectrum of the institution and its systems to the people working within them. In their article [‘The Experiences and Challenges of Personal Tutors in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study’](#), we are asked to consider what the system looks and feels like to the people delivering advising. Their research into the lived experiences of personal tutors highlights that the relational labour

undertaken by personal tutors, alongside role ambiguity, competing demands, and fragmented support, often leads to tutoring being overlooked as a significant form of emotional and organisational labour. This important piece reminds us that such institutional attention towards advising, as noted in Rachel Maxwell and colleagues' article, is warranted if institutions are to strengthen personal tutoring. Aspirations for advising ultimately depend upon institutional structures that enable people to turn them into practice.

Nicola Clarke, in her opinion piece [‘Embedding Reflective Dialogue in Personal Tutor Conversations’](#), takes us inside the advising relationship itself to consider what helps make the advising experience meaningful to the student. To explore this, Nicola focuses on the student experience of mattering to the institution and the advisor through the relational quality of the student-advisor connection. She argues that reflective dialogue can create conversations in which students feel heard and understood while developing greater self-awareness. However, she calls us to action by asking us to engage in our own reflective practice. Nicola advises us that meaningful reflection requires something of tutors too: a willingness to develop and model their own reflective practice.

In our final article [‘What Students’ Use of AI Reveals about Academic Advising and Judgement’](#), Joanne Irving-Walton asks us to consider how that reflective space is changing as students increasingly use generative AI to rehearse ideas, navigate uncertainty and support their thinking, not just to produce outputs. Joanne presents a practice-based framework for our consideration with four overlapping modes of student AI use. It is this framework, aligned to established functions within advising, that she argues personal tutor conversations can evolve. This requires moving beyond the conventional tutor-student interaction towards an environment in which students also use generative AI to test ideas, navigate uncertainty, and support their thinking with the judgement, confidence, and boundaries needed to navigate both human- and AI-supported learning.

Taken together, these five articles ask us to consider how we create conditions for advising to matter. They move us from institutional design, through advising systems and the experiences of tutors, to the reflective conversations through which students develop confidence and judgement. They remind us that impactful advising is not created by any single intervention. It emerges when structures, people and relationships align to create the conditions in which students can belong, reflect and exercise agency.

We are also delighted to welcome Nicola Clarke as one of the editors of Waypoint. Nicola has recently joined the Waypoint Editorial team and is looking forward to being part of the process that has the privilege of supporting authors through their publishing journey. She is a mental health nurse and has over 23 years' experience as a nurse academic in higher education, personal academic tutoring and academic skills advisor, teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Having had leadership roles in academic advising, Nicola is currently the academic lead for Learning and Teaching within the department of Mental Health and Learning Disability Nursing at Birmingham City University. Her greatest area of interest is helping anyone become the best version of themselves through reflection and reflective practice. Therefore, being part of a reflective journal of student advising is an exciting opportunity to contribute to a community committed to

advancing advising practice and the student experience through research, dialogue, and shared learning.

About the Editors

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The Hidden Curriculum of Time and Space: Why Belonging Is Designed Before It Is Felt

Colum Cronin
Marino Institute of Education

ABSTRACT

Academic advising and personal tutoring are deeply relational practices, yet they are often expected to flourish within institutional structures that unintentionally erode connection. This opinion piece argues that belonging is not simply something students feel. It is shaped by the hidden curriculum of institutional design, particularly through the organisation of time and space. Drawing on practice at a small specialist college in Ireland, it explores how timetabling, orientation sequencing, and protected periods within the weekly schedule send powerful signals to students about whether they matter. When time and space are approached as intentional design features rather than neutral administrative decisions, the conditions in which advising relationships can take root are strengthened. For advisors and tutors supporting students with limited discretionary time on campus, developing structural awareness, the ability to notice and influence how design shapes belonging, is increasingly essential.

KEYWORDS

Belonging, Institutional design, Time and space, Student transition, Academic Advising

When Structure Speaks First

One of the clearest insights I have ever had into how belonging is shaped came not from a formal evaluation or student panel, but from a short, matter-of-fact sentence offered by a first-year student. Speaking about why she had stayed on campus to take part in activities, she said, “It is on my timetable, so I can stay.”

She was not describing a friendship, a module, or a support service. She was describing structure. For her, the timetable acted as a form of institutional permission. It legitimised being present, lingering, and taking part. The design of the week itself created the conditions in which belonging could begin.

This moment, simple as it was, crystallised something I had been observing for years across orientation programmes, academic transitions, and peer support initiatives. Belonging is shaped long before any advising conversation takes place. It is influenced by the structures that quietly govern student life: the timetable, the gaps between classes, the sequencing of early experiences, and the physical layout of the campus. These elements are often treated as administrative or logistical decisions, but students read them carefully. Together, they form what I call the hidden curriculum of time and space: the unspoken lessons students learn about their value and place within the institution.

For much of my career in student engagement and support, my focus was firmly on relational practice. I analysed and refined approaches to active listening, empathy, co-creation, and peer-led support. I drew on work around mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), early integration (Tinto, 1993), and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). At conferences such as UKAT and EFYE, I explored how advisors and tutors can nurture confidence, voice, and agency. Yet throughout this work, one insight kept appearing. Relational practice cannot compensate for structural barriers. If students do not share time, if they are rushing between commitments, or if they are simply not present on campus, then even the most skilled advising interventions will prove fruitless.

This is not a deficit in students. It is a design issue.

Understanding the current structural reality

At Marino Institute of Education, a small specialist teacher education college in Dublin with approximately 1,400 students, the profile of the 'typical' student reflects broader shifts across Ireland, the UK, and Europe. While up to 300 students live on campus, the majority commute, often travelling between thirty minutes and two hours each way. Attendance is mandatory. Most undergraduates are preparing for professions with guaranteed employment. That shapes both their motivation and their timetable pressures.

So much of this is not unique to Marino. Across Ireland, nearly half of all students live at home and commute, with an average one-way journey of 52 minutes. This means many spend over two hours travelling every single day (Cullinan & Flannery, 2026). Ireland is also experiencing a significant accommodation shortfall, with a gap of 42,000 student beds. Recent policy proposals to condense timetables into fewer days risk further compressing the time students can actually spend on campus (Burne, 2026).

Additionally, many students work part-time, and some work close to full-time hours. Others have caring responsibilities. Their presence on campus is not elastic. It is carefully planned and often rationed against travel costs or lost income. This pattern is consistent with wider work on the impact of commuting on the student experience (Keogh et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012).

When every hour of the day is already claimed by travel, class, or work, engagement becomes an act of sacrifice rather than a natural part of student life. Advisors and tutors increasingly encounter students who are tired, time-poor, or absent from the spaces where relationship-building traditionally occurs. It is easy to misinterpret this as disengagement or low motivation, when it is more accurately the predictable outcome of structural constraint. Students can only engage within the boundaries of the time and space an institution makes available to them.

This recognition shifted how I approached my work. Instead of asking why students were not engaging, I began asking what our structures were signalling. What did our timetable

teach students about where they should be? What did our orientation sequence suggest about what we valued? What did our use of space imply about who belonged where? The answers were uncomfortable, illuminating, and instructive.

Designing time as a signal of value

One of our most intentional choices was the introduction of a second 'Student Life Hour'. At Marino, this meant blocking out 12–1 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays across all undergraduate programmes. Because lunchtime follows each of these designated hours, students effectively gain a predictable two-hour window of time on both days. This was not an additional programme or an optional event to be managed. It was blank space, built into the timetable and understood as a legitimate time to be on campus. We did not add new required activities into these slots. Instead, we simply stopped scheduling over them so students could choose how to use the time.

Of course, adding structured time carries risks. For students juggling paid work or caring responsibilities, any fixed timetable block can feel like a constraint rather than an opportunity. We addressed this by designing the Student Life Hour as protected time, not a prescribed activity. Students remain free to use it for clubs, advising appointments, library work, or simply catching up. The aim was not to add another obligation. It was to create a predictable shared pause, a structural signal that being present and connecting with others is legitimate and valued.

One telling indicator was that societies that had previously struggled with attendance suddenly had the space to run regular sessions. The Neurodiversity Group launched during this slot, offering weekly drop-ins that would have been inaccessible to commuters in an evening slot. The Students' Union began hosting information sessions that had previously been squeezed out due to time constraints. Students weren't asked to do more. They were given structured permission to stick around.

The effect was visible. Students stayed, and they talked. They remained on campus because the timetable had already carved out the time for them to do so. Tutors have reported that during these hours they now encounter students informally in communal spaces, leading to conversations that would previously have required formal appointments. Students who once left immediately after class are now more likely to linger, ask follow-up questions, or introduce friends. These interactions are small, but they add up. They helped normalise advising as part of everyday campus life rather than something reserved for a crisis. The structure created the conditions, and the relationships followed. The rhythm of the week shifted. The message shifted from "you are here only for class" to "you belong here as a whole person".

We applied similar thinking to orientation. Traditional models often front-load information at a moment when students are anxious and socially unanchored. We reversed the sequence. Day one focused on community and connection through a menu of choice-based activities called 'Campus Connections'. Students could opt into drama workshops,

campus history tours, sports, or discussion groups on AI. Day two addressed transition and support services. Day three finally introduced academic content. This was a simple structural change, primarily a matter of swapping the order of sessions, but it shifted the tone of the entire first week. Connection came first, information second, and academics third.

When advisors and tutors met students on that third day, they encountered cohorts that had already formed early peer connections. Students were more relaxed, more confident, and more receptive. The structure had already done part of the relational work. This does not suggest that structure replaces human connection. Rather, it facilitates it. Good design cannot guarantee belonging, but poor design can certainly make it much harder to find (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Jankowski et al., 2025).

Designing space and the geography of inclusion

Space, like time, clearly communicates expectations. Students read meaning into room allocations, building layouts, and the location of support services. They notice where conversations happen, and where they do not.

At our pre-arrival Tasters and Tours event, we created student-only spaces for taster classes while parents attended parallel sessions elsewhere. This spatial separation supported student autonomy and allowed peer relationships to form without observation or pressure. It also signalled a shift in the parent-institution relationship, offering clarity to families and confidence to students.

The principle extends beyond this event. Advisors and tutors rely on early peer networks to support students over time. These networks do not form by accident. They are shaped by where students are invited to gather, talk, and spend unstructured time. When space supports connection, advising becomes relational rather than remedial.

Taken together, these patterns raised a broader question for me.

From relational practice to structural awareness

These experiences led me to a broader conclusion. If belonging is shaped by design, then advisors and tutors need to develop what I call structural awareness. This is the ability to notice how time, space, sequencing, and signals quietly shape whether students feel they belong, and to influence those conditions through everyday practice and advocacy. I use the term lightly. It simply means learning to read institutional design as a form of pedagogy rather than just a logistical necessity.

This does not mean that advisors must control timetables or room bookings. It means recognising which structural conditions support advising and which undermine it. It also

means advocating for changes that make relational work contributory rather than compensatory. Three starting points are particularly useful when thinking about practice:

1. Map the early touchpoints. Identify the first six or seven interactions a new student has with the institution and ask what each one teaches them about belonging. At Marino, when we mapped those touchpoints, we realised we were asking students to absorb logistics before they had any sense of connection.

By reversing the orientation sequence and building in a 'digital-to-physical' handshake, we changed the signal. On Day two, for instance, students are guided through the VLE to locate their tutor's details. We then built in five minutes of protected time for them to send a brief hello email. It is a small act, but it turns a digital listing into a relational beginning.

2. Advocate for shared time. Shared time is foundational. Even one protected hour per week can transform the possibilities for connection. Advisors can frame this not as a loss of teaching time, but as an investment in student persistence. Our experience with the 'Student Life Hour' suggests that when you stop scheduling over a specific window, you aren't just 'clearing the diary'. You are providing structured permission for the informal interactions that sustain a student through a difficult term.

3. Use space intentionally. If formal offices feel intimidating, we should meet students in communal spaces. Normalising advising as part of everyday academic life, rather than something reserved for crisis, helps lower the barrier to entry.

Sometimes the shift is as simple as where a conversation happens. Advising need not always take place across a desk. Conversations held while walking across campus or sitting side by side in a communal space subtly alter the tone and power dynamics. Space participates in the interaction.

What this means for advising practice

The hidden curriculum of time and space shapes student behaviour every day. Advisors and tutors are often asked to create belonging through care, conversation, and presence. These skills are essential. But they flourish only within structures that allow students to be present, to pause, and to connect.

When engagement is structurally impossible, exhortations to "get involved" risk becoming quietly moralising. Students are subtly rewarded or blamed for behaviours that are largely the byproduct of poor or unintentional design. When institutions rely on students to find their own time and carve out their own space, belonging becomes an individual challenge rather than a collective responsibility.

If advising is to support the whole student, institutional design must do some of the work alongside it.

Conclusion

The goal of structural awareness is not to manufacture belonging through a clever timetable. It is to protect the conditions in which belonging can emerge. Design cannot force connection, but it can certainly make space for it.

The student who said, "It is on my timetable, so I can stay," captured a quiet truth. Belonging is not secured by initiatives or good intentions alone. It is shaped by structure. Advising and tutoring are powerful practices, but they are always influenced by the architecture around them.

If we want students to believe they belong, we have to design the foundations for it.

About the Author

Colum Cronin is Student Engagement Officer at Marino Institute of Education in Dublin. A native of Cork with over twenty years in higher education, his work focuses on student belonging, transition, and engagement. He is particularly interested in how institutional design and the hidden curriculum of campus life shape students' opportunities for connection and participation.

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A Data-People-Theory Approach to Enhancing Student Advising: Findings from a Multi-institution Project

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ABSTRACT

Student advising is gaining prominence with senior university staff in UK Higher Education, driven by the need to retain students and support successful outcomes across diverse groups. Drawing on initial findings from a cross-institutional experiential project, the paper explores institutional enhancement activities related to student advising through a data-people-theory model. Using purposive sampling, participants were invited to join the research because the first and second authors were aware that their institutions were in the process of or about to undergo, institution-wide projects to enhance advising.

The project initially sought to explore whether McVitty and Maxwell's (2024) data-people-theory model could provide a consistent framework for better understanding varied approaches to advising activity. An in-depth overview of the model and its constituent parts is provided, enabling readers to consider how they might use this same lens at their own institutions. Typical use cases include benchmarking existing advising systems and practices to better understand how their input components interact. Gaps in provision can be surfaced through an intentional consideration of the components and their interplay. The model can also be used to articulate a future desired state for advising that enhances student success.

Project findings offer institutions a flexible framework for reviewing and enhancing student advising, drawing conclusions that can help other institutions consider how to proceed. A revised version of the data-people-theory model is also presented.

KEYWORDS

Student advising; Personal tutoring; Engagement analytics; Engagement data; Student success; Academic advising; Quality enhancement

Introduction

In his pre-appointment hearing for the position of Chair of the Office for Students (OfS), Professor Edward Peck, then VC at Nottingham Trent University and Higher Education

Student Support Champion, noted that 'student support is as important to many students as the academic input they receive' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2025).

Effective student support is increasingly at the top of the student experience agenda (McGill et al., 2020). However, it is challenging to identify a single consistent approach as support varies within and between institutions and by regulatory approach.

In England, the regulatory and legal burdens around advising are increasing. The proposed Integrated Quality Model from the OfS will reshape both the Teaching Excellence Framework and Regulatory Condition B3 – the minimum quality threshold designed to prevent poor student outcomes in England. Alongside this is the drive for universities to comprehensively adopt the University Mental Health Charter. In Scotland, supporting student success is a core pillar of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework.

Within an institution, staff undertake different roles to fulfil different support functions or a mix of functions: academic, personal, pastoral, professional and specialist – the latter including employability, finance, disability support etc. While approaches to student support legitimately vary according to an institution's purpose and mission (van Pletzen et al., 2021), inconsistent delivery within an institution often means inequity for individual students, particularly those from marginalised groups.

Inconsistencies and inequities can arise from different priorities and practices at a local level. These reflect variances in staff skills, confidence and ability in the role and with the support available. Concerns that academic staff may not be best equipped to advise students on non-academic matters, or feel unprepared to provide specialist advice (e.g. disability, mental health), are not new (Lloyd-Jones and Smith 1954, cited in Habley 1994). However, current financial challenges across the sector are prompting institutions to consider how they respond whilst simultaneously ensuring the student experience is not eroded and remains a strategic priority. Against this backdrop, the need to improve student advising and ensure it works for students becomes unarguable.

Background to the Student Advising Project

In 2024, Wonkhe (a UK HE policy analysis platform), Solutionpath (the edtech company that created what is now the Kortext stream engagement analytics platform) and Kortext (edtech provider of data, content and AI solutions for HE) co-published a whitepaper outlining the findings from research with seven higher education institutions in the process of developing their academic support system. The whitepaper concluded that 'there is no perfect or "best practice" model of academic support' and that it is the 'capability [of institutions] to describe, evaluate and enhance their academic support system' that matters most (McVitty & Maxwell, 2024).

The whitepaper proposed that academic support systems typically comprise three elements: (1) the people who undertake academic support activity; (2) relevant data; and (3) the institutional 'theory' that underpins how the academic support system is intended to function. The resulting model for student advising has, at its core, student success,

reflecting the authors' conclusions that for an advising system to be impactful, it needs to intentionally comprise all three elements:

Without any one of these elements the system is unlikely to be impactful because it will lack either personal interactions, a framework to orient those relationships or data to inform and enhance them (McVitty & Maxwell, 2024).

Having commissioned the academic support whitepaper, Kortext were keen to better understand what works in student advising. The Student Advising Project (SAP) was established to test whether the theoretical Data-People-Theory (DPT) model has value in helping institutions articulate their approach to student advising. Secondary project aims included exploring whether the model brings consistency to the learner experience across academic, support and welfare structures within an institution and reduces structural barriers to success, such as pressures on staff time, inadequate training and underfunding (Kyte et al., 2023). This article seeks to address the first of these questions: does the DPT model provide a useful lens for cross-institutional comparisons of student advising?

Participant overview

Based on the first and second authors' experiences of working with multiple UK higher education institutions, a purposive sampling approach was adopted when inviting institutional participation. Senior colleagues (the remaining co-authors) from ten UK higher education institutions were invited to collaborate, based on their roles in driving recent or in-progress institutional revisions to student advising. We sought to draw on these participants' strategic and holistic understanding of recent institution-wide revisions to student advising, while capturing insights from universities that employed different approaches to using student engagement data in advising. It was expected that their experiences overseeing these university-wide enhancements would provide a holistic understanding and strategic relevance to the project. Collaborative meetings were held monthly over an 8-month period during the initial project phase reported in this paper. While a mix of institution types were represented (Table 1), we intentionally selected institutions known to employ different approaches to using student engagement data in the advising sphere (Table 2).

Student numbers			Type						Mission Group					Geographic Location	
10,000	10-15,000	>15,000	Campus	City	Public	Research	Traditional	Ancient	Russell Group	Million Plus	Research Plus	Post-1992	University Alliance	England	Scotland
1	5	4	6	4	10	6	2	1	4	0	1	3	3	9	1

Table 1: Overview of participant university characteristics

Who undertakes this role?			Terminology for advisors					Approach		Relationship with Kortext			
Academics only	PS teams only	Academics and PS teams	Academic Advisor/Adviser	Student Success Coach	Pastoral Mentor	Student Advisor/Adviser	Personal (Academic) Tutor	Coaching	Traditional PT/PAT model	Kortext stream (analytics) client	Kortext stream PoC complete	User of other Kortext products	No commercial arrangement
0	1+1n ^a	8+1o ^a	3	1n ^a	1	3 ^b	2+1o ^a	3+1n ^a	6+1o ^a	4	1	4	1

^a 'n' or 'o' is used where a university is transitioning from one model to another: o = old model, n = new model

^b at one institution, Student Advisors are a Professional Services role providing pastoral support and are supplemented by (academic) Cohort Leads.

Table 2: Overview of advising within participant institutions and commercial relationship to Kortext

A data-people-theory model for student advising

McVitty and Maxwell's DPT model surfaced three aspects of a student advising system (Figure 1), while recognising that the specific details of how an institution arranges, defines and structures those aspects will vary significantly. Influences shaping the system include, but are not limited to, the institutional vision and mission, the size and composition of the student body, allocated resources for advising, the structure and location of advising personnel, and the use of any associated analytics or other technologies designed to support student success.

Establishing these foundational 'inputs' further makes it easier for users to understand the practical implications of how these component parts interact and to identify any gaps.

Data

The types of data available to institutions to support student advising include information about the students themselves. Both structural information about how the student is defined in respect to university structures (course, study mode, year of study, etc.) and specific details about who the students are (age, ethnicity, first-generation, international) are useful in this regard. Other relevant data sources include data on student touchpoints with their learning, e.g., attendance, use of library and online resources, VLE access, etc.

Often this information is combined and surfaced within analytics software that captures 'educationally purposeful activity' (Kuh et al., 2008). Learner analytics are effective at identifying students at risk of underperforming in their studies (Foster & Siddle, 2019; Rimmington, 2024; Summers, 2024), enabling institutions to act early to support student retention. Learner analytics impact institutional continuation and completion metrics and identify a positive relationship between student engagement and attainment.

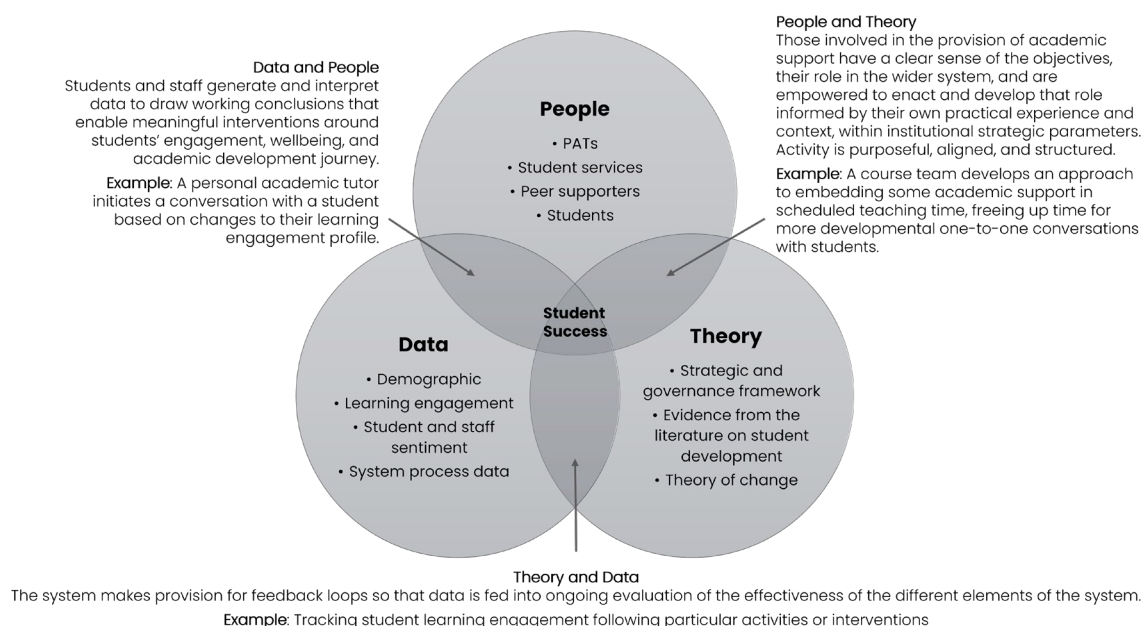


Figure 1: Data-People-Theory model (McVitty & Maxwell, 2024).

Student advising technologies exist in multiple forms, from 'home-made' spreadsheets that track student interactions through to in-house web-based tools (Feghali et al., 2011) and commercial off-the-shelf products, including Kortext stream, Jisc's learning analytics service, Civitas Learning, and IntelliBoard.

People

Multiple people are involved in student advising across an institution. The most obvious stakeholders are the individual student beneficiaries of an advising system. Students also serve as one of the groups providing advising support, e.g., as peer mentors, supporters, or student callers.

Staff who undertake student advising range from educators providing academic input as discipline educators to the traditional Personal (Academic) Tutoring model, where the same staff wear a different hat and are responsible for a subset of students on their course.

As this article shows, academic advising is being increasingly professionalised, with institutions recruiting specialist staff to undertake the advising role. These staff may be located within and funded by academic units such as faculties or schools, or centrally managed and funded.

Theory

When articulating the findings of their research, McVitty and Maxwell (2024) defined 'theory' in this context as those operational documents, policies, frameworks and activities that underpin how the system is intended to work. They go on to say that

‘These “theories” might be tacit and held by lots of different individuals, or they might be explicitly articulated as strategy, policy and a common framework and language for student development. The latter, needless to say, is more likely to drive a functional system!’ (p. 4)

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, ‘theory’ should be interpreted as comprising everything that articulates how the university is intentionally building a system around student advising. More broadly, as Figure 2 shows, the conceptual framework for advising informs all three inputs. Making this context explicit helps those leading advising enhancement activities better frame their institutional context for advising, within a clear understanding of the institutional mission and goals for student advising more broadly (Habley, 2005).

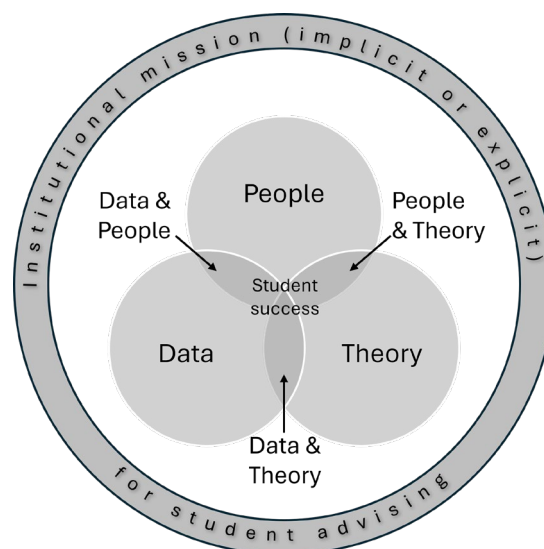


Figure 2: Revised version of the Data-People-Theory model

Student success at the heart of the model

‘Student success’ sits at the heart of the DPT model for a simple reason. If, as Peck suggests, students are as interested in the academic support on offer as in the disciplinary input, then academic support has a key part to play in student outcomes. ‘Student success’, viewed both as the quality of the student experience and the end goal of a successful advising system, for the purposes of the project would ultimately be evidenced through measurable improvements in sector-level metrics around student continuation and satisfaction.

Of relevance here are the National Student Survey indicators associated with the relevant provisions of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assessment, run by the OfS, the regulator for higher education in England. Feature 5 of the TEF covers the learning environment and the provision of academic support, with the latter measured by responses to the academic support questions in the National Student Survey (NSS) of final-year undergraduate students (Office for Students 2022).

The implication of situating student success as the goal of any student advising system is, as McVitty and Maxwell (2024) point out, that ‘academic support strategies ... need to be intentional about positioning student success as the core purpose of academic support’. They continue:

without any one of these elements [data, people or theory], the system is unlikely to be impactful because it will lack either personal interactions, a framework to orient those relationships, or data to inform and enhance them.
(p.4)

Understanding the DPT overlaps

In addition to concluding that each element of the DPT model is essential to the functional effectiveness of an institution’s academic support system, McVitty and Maxwell (2024) identified that

it is also the interactions between the different elements of the system that generate knowledge about the system and create space for targeted enhancement activity (p.4).

Explanations for, and examples of, activities that might sit in each of the overlaps are provided in McVitty and Maxwell’s original research and shown in Figure 1.

The three core aspects of the DPT model function as inputs into any student advising system. However, unless those inputs interact, they are siloed, operationally divorced from the rest of the system, and act independently rather than being aligned around the purpose of enhancing student success.

It is therefore the overlaps that bring the model to life and create meaning within the system. The overlaps also identify the implications for practice within an institution:

- Does the *data* help the *people* know which students might need a supportive conversation?
- Do the *people* know what is expected of them (the institutional ‘*theory*’ for student advising) and understand how their actions contribute to operationalising that theory?
- Are institutions collecting the right *data* to support the institution to understand whether the *theory* is working?
- Collectively, is the system as a whole working effectively for the individual students it seeks to serve and supporting their academic and personal success?

As a practical example, data is seen as essential for institutions to make evidence-informed decisions about what action to take. However, data only derives meaning and value when it is situated and contextualised within a wider theoretical or strategic understanding of academic support, and when staff involved in student advising have access to the ‘right’ data to help them undertake advising activity aligned with their strategic theory of advising and support. These connections are recognised in research from TASO (Transforming

Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) that concluded that even where relevant data drive wellbeing support for students, it is no match for the human connection:

*While learning analytics offer opportunities to reach more students, **the data** underpinning these systems **must be** meaningful, monitored and **accompanied by relationship building activities between staff and the students who need the most help** (emphasis added) (Khan, 2026) and see further (Kozman et al., 2026).*

Applying the data-people-theory model in practice

Prior to the student advising project, the DPT model had been presented in the original whitepaper. Two of the authors had utilised it during a conference workshop, presenting an example of how the model works at one English university. Workshop participants were then invited to explore what the model would highlight in their own advising contexts (Maxwell & Gilani, 2025).

When planning the student advising project, it was anticipated that the DPT model could provide a consistent and structured opportunity at the macro-level for participants to articulate their institutional approaches to student advising (our preferred term) given the complex and multi-faceted nature of staff-student interactions that support student learning (Grey & Osborne, 2018).

To test this assumption and, by way of introducing the project and participants to each other, colleagues created an institution-specific slide of the DPT model to reflect on the different components of their student advising ecosystem and to present this contextual overview to the rest of the project team.

No additional guidance beyond that in the original whitepaper was provided to participants on how to complete the model, although the completed conference version was presented as an example. Participants were invited to complete the model in a way appropriate to their institutional advising ecosystem and reflective of any enhancement activity underway.

As institutional leaders of student advising enhancement activities, participants descriptively populated the model by reflecting on and assessing the effectiveness of current practice, sourcing additional information from colleagues where required. For some institutions, the model was applied retrospectively to a newly revised approach to student advising, whereas for others, it helped them situate and explain planned activities across the three elements. Participants also reported that the model helped inform some formal processes or provoke different ways of thinking.

Examples of the information placed in each of the circles and in the overlaps, drawn from all participant institutions, are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Examples of information placed in the DPT circles and overlaps by project participants

Data	People	Theory
Learner analytics dashboards using engagement data e.g. attendance, VLE engagement, submissions, alongside survey data (e.g. pre-arrival) Differentiated dashboards – engagement, apprenticeships Formative and summative assessment data including extension requests, resit info, MCs/ECs and adjustment requirements Individual digital advising record/learning plan Staff / self-referrals	Students: Student beneficiaries, peer mentors, callers Academic: personal (academic) tutors, apprenticeship coaches, cohort leads, advisors, teaching teams Student Lifecycle Management Group Specialised roles: Success Coaches, Student Journey Advisors, Pastoral Mentors, Wellbeing Advisors, academic skills tutors, academic librarians Student Union: advice centre	Coaching approaches +/- nudge theory Belonging and mattering prominent in induction and transition Comprehensive policy suite (engagement, advising, interventions & outreach) Compassionate and transformative pedagogies Prior evaluations (support to progress, support to succeed) Data-informed approach – early identification of risk supports retention / early intervention Learning from schools/FE Often captured in an institutional theory of change that frames student advising at the institution
Data and People		
Data-triggered outreach using analytics dashboards or staff/student referrals aligned to policies and routine schedules to flag concerns, initiate (early) contact and pre-empt issues through proactive risk-based escalation using identified and structured referral routes Appropriate de-escalation without removing all support Automated communications enabling multiple, personalised interventions where risk is greatest Senior leaders and teams review dashboards to track in-year metrics and impact Survey data shared with relevant people at the start of the year, with overviews for students Early engagement with support interventions Personalised goal setting		
People and Theory		
Training/framing to ensure compassionate, inclusive conversations, strengthen practice and provide layered support for students based on clear referral routes and pathways Enhanced consistency from role specialisation (role descriptors and defined outreach expectations) clarifies responsibilities and approach, provides support to staff, and facilitates agile deployment to meet demand Professionalisation of academic support frees up academic time and removes barriers for academics Duty of care training and scaffolded wellbeing interventions Clear messaging and documentation to support practice		

Embedded peer support: communities of practice, tutor networks supported by professional accreditation (e.g. UKAT)

Single entry point for student information and advice

Embedded learning enhancement within library

Aim for meaningful PT: students understand it, stakeholders see benefit

Relevant data used to enable better decisions about student support needs and prevent students getting lost in the system

Theory and Data

Evaluation frameworks combine quantitative dashboards and qualitative feedback

Piloting across faculties with inbuilt feedback loops

Oversight groups review use of analytics and analysis of impact of activity on associated KPIs.

Oversight groups also use evidence loops to identify gaps and iterate models accordingly

Governance routes used to monitor trends and initiate enhancement activity and projects (QA, Teaching Committees, Senate)

Plan for engagement analytics

Timely response to changing patterns of engagement

Table 4: Examples of information placed in the DPT circles and overlaps by project participants

Learning along the way

As an exploratory project, participants agreed in the early discussions that it would be valuable to adopt an experiential approach, capturing learning during the project meetings. Initial reflections following all DPT presentations were sought in response to four prompts, selected in advance by the first two authors, to help structure the responses. Responses were captured anonymously in a collaborative, open online space using [Lucidchart](#) and are summarised in Table 4.

Further discussion on the themes that emerged from project meetings will be explored in a future article.

Identified value in using the data-people-theory model

The DPT model was initially envisaged by the first two authors as a useful means for participants to articulate institutional approaches to student advising. In practice, however, the utilisation of the DPT model went beyond simply providing a means by which institutions could factually articulate their individual approaches to student advising. Rather, the model provided both a useful lens through which participants could consider and reflect upon work to enhance student advising within their institution, and enabled meaningful and consistent discussions *between* institutions that deploy different

approaches to each of the three core elements – data, people and theory. Adoption of the DPT approach enabled these different perspectives to come together and ensured multiple

Focus	Key themes
Principles of student advising	Student advising should be: student-centred and outcome-focused; co-created with students and stakeholders; have a clear structure and role clarity; be proactive, provide expert support with dedicated time and CPD; be grounded in transformative education (inclusive, authentic, compassionate); deliver inclusive practice for diverse communities; operate a tiered model with clear first contact and specialist escalation; be fully and realistically costed.
Challenges and pitfalls to consider when revising advising	Fragmented or insufficient technology (no integrated dashboards); an inconsistent student experience in devolved models due to competing staff demands, change-management challenges, and poor service awareness; where students are unclear on advising purpose/scope; where there is growth in complex student needs increasing workload or the wider support ecosystem is difficult to navigate.
What defines a good advising experience?	Trusted relationships; timely, responsive support; personalised and proactive/reactive advising; availability of local and contextual expertise; continuity of care (handover not handoff, with follow-up); clear purpose and specificity in outreach; clarity of expectations for both advisor and student.
Redesign recommendations – what would you do differently?	Co-create the advising model with students (starting from a blank page where helpful); ensure role clarity and boundaries across academic, peer, and professional services; simplify institutional signposting; design for flexibility with a minimum entitlement/expectation; fully cost and align the model to available resources; reduce complexity and reliance on individual capacity; implement simpler, integrated dashboards for triage and follow-up; ensure broad cross-service coordination (“many voices in the room”).

Table 5: Summary of experiential findings recorded in Lucidchart

voices could be heard. Consequently, we posit that the model can facilitate shared understanding and transfer of learning across the sector.

As a mechanism for baselining the status quo before identifying areas for future enhancement, the DPT model was found to be a valuable way for institutional leaders to intentionally consider the component parts of an effective advising system. In particular, the individual data, people, and theory ‘circles’ help capture what exists and prompt institutions to identify what might be missing from the current approach. As an example, one participant reported via the Data-People overlap that the activity surfaced gaps in relevant data and identified that there was no shared or agreed way of storing PAT records or monitoring PAT engagement with tutees.

Another participant explained how the model has directly led to enhancement activity within their institution after recognising how separated the data was from the people who need to use it:

... it seems to me that we have failed to factor in the importance of gleaning insights from the data to enable action in a timely way. ... [T]he model showed me one of the main weaknesses in our system – that we provide academic staff with a wealth of data, but with minimal insights from / analysis of that data that could help them identify which students need additional support, when and why. For this reason, the data – people – theory model was instrumental in helping us identify where we could improve our systems.

Some challenges with the process were identified in discussions with participants following work to explore the emergent themes from the different DPT presentations. When asked whether the summary resonated, one participant observed that

Different institutions are at different levels or stages of implementation. So for some people, what you've just laid out is the operational reality and for some institutions it is the objective and that perhaps is a spectrum we want to articulate as well in terms of the current progress of the implementation.

AI was also used to provide a first-pass review of the differences between the presentations. Raw counts and normalised heat maps of the number of times a participant referenced a particular theme were generated and shared with participants for discussion. Unlike the high level of agreement among participants with identified themes, heat maps based on differences arising from how the DPT model was used to articulate approaches to student advising were perceived to be problematic and thus rejected:

The question that occurs to me is whether this really reflects the state of play in those institutions or whether it reflects the way that we happened to capture and present on this occasion. And whether we could have presented the same underlying facts using slightly different vocabulary, a different set of keywords and then would have got more mentions in these categories for the same underlying story. So I wonder if this is capturing a quirk of presentation, rather than it being a reflection of the absolute state of play in these universities in a deep way.

Ultimately, project participants concluded that the DPT model is useful in providing a shared framework for different types of advising conversations between and within institutions, for intentionally baselining existing activity before identifying areas for enhancement, and for articulating an intended future state. It should be recognised that articulating the model through this lens may require presenting a system in a slightly different way than any individual institution might have chosen, to enable consistent comparisons between systems.

Conclusions

Fundamentally, student advising is designed to further academic success for all students, whether by maximising 'good' degree outcomes or by identifying risks to continuation and completion at the point when students first start disengaging from their studies or when

they take longer than expected to develop productive learning behaviours. Data on student participation in their learning has an important role to play in supporting an effective and efficient approach to advising, enabling staff at the frontline of advising to understand better how their work supports institutional objectives for student success.

Through an experiential approach, the DPT model has been shown to offer a valuable lens for institutions to articulate their approach to student advising, providing meaningful points of comparison across the sector. However, any enhancement of advising activities would benefit from being situated within a broader understanding of the institutional aims and purposes of academic advising.

Returning to our starting point, if Peck's statement that advising is becoming as important to students as academic input is to be realised in practice, then a fundamental shift in how advising activity is delivered within universities is required. Up to this point, advising has been seen as supplementary, less structured and often less visible within an institution. An evolution in how student advising is viewed is needed to enhance visibility and prominence internally. Support initiatives should become further integrated as an equal aspect of the holistic student experience rather than simply existing as fallback options. This means institutions must make support more accessible, more conspicuous, and more actively embedded within the fabric of everyday academic life.

Having a student advising system that is fit for purpose needs to be on the agenda of all institutions. In a time when notions of 'the student experience' are now seen to be more about 'student experiences' plural, when there are valid questions about the use of the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' student (Briggs, 2025) and when the ways in which technology supports student advising are transforming, it is timely to take stock and ask some serious questions about the appropriateness of universities' approach to advising. The institutions participating in our project have intentionally asked or are in the process of asking themselves these very questions. We strongly endorse Professor Peck's view that the need for student support has never been greater, but that institutions need to be clearer on the purpose of student support, its design and delivery.

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

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

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

Introduction

Personal tutoring is widely used across UK higher education as a means through which students can access academic guidance and pastoral support. Tutors are commonly positioned as a point of continuity within their programme, expected to help students interpret administrative processes, navigate academic difficulties, and direct them toward appropriate services when required (Braine & Parnell, 2011; Grey & Osborne, 2020; McFarlane, 2016). However, the remit of personal tutoring varies between institutions and often within them. Students and staff report uncertainty over what tutoring entails, how it should operate, and which responsibilities fall within or outside its scope (Bassett et al., 2014; Yale, 2020). This ambiguity may shape what tutors believe they should do, what students believe they can ask for, and how universities design support systems around the

tutoring function. This lack of clarity has coincided with a gradual expansion of the issues that are brought into the tutoring space.

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

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

Sector-level initiatives recognise this gap but do not resolve it. For example, the UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) Professional Framework outlines competencies around information management, referral, academic development, and interpersonal communication, providing a route for staff recognition (UKAT, 2023). However, the framework does not specify workload allocation, institutional accountability, or minimum standards of provision, leaving implementation largely voluntary. Relatedly, the University Mental Health Charter reframes student support as a shared institutional responsibility. It argues that student wellbeing should be embedded across all aspects of university life rather than outsourced to individual actors or services (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Although many of its principles, such as supporting belonging, academic challenge, and compassionate guidance, logically intersect with tutoring, the Charter does not provide explicit structural guidance for tutoring roles. Other sector initiatives similarly promote the integration of wellbeing into core academic practices. The Education for Mental Health toolkit demonstrates how pedagogic choices around assessment, feedback, and academic belonging can contribute to student wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2022). These approaches are typically embedded in teaching and programme design; however, there are again few explicit references to tutoring or advising. As a result, tutors often interpret their responsibilities through personal judgment, ad hoc experience, or departmental culture rather than formal training or institutional policy (Grey & Osborne, 2020; McFarlane, 2016). Therefore, there is a need for evidence-based guidance for personal tutors.

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

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

Methods

Researcher positionality

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

Study Setting

To support the transferability of findings, details of the institutional and personal tutoring context are reported in line with the Checklist for Intervention Description of Education Research (CIDER; Upsher et al., 2025), which emphasises reporting the institutional setting,

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

Design

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

Participants

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

The specificity of the participants, the use of semi-structured interviews, strong interviewer-interviewee dialogue, and rigorous analysis methods contributed to the richness and depth of data collected. This justified a sample size of 21 participants, based on information power criteria, as sufficient to provide rich and meaningful data (Malterud et al., 2016).

Topic guide

The whole research team was involved in developing the topic guide, which was piloted on two members of staff. The interview was designed to be both inductive and deductive, with deliberately broad, open-ended questions to allow for a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Questions were initially developed based on existing literature on tutors'

experiences of personal tutoring (e.g. Hughes & Byrom, 2019; McFarlane, 2016; Raby, 2020; Walker, 2020) to ensure key issues were addressed. Members of the team who were experienced personal tutors (FC, RU) helped further refine the questions to ensure practical relevance. In line with our research focus, interview questions centred around the lived experience and challenges of personal tutors. Specifically, questions covered staff experiences of being a personal tutor, the personal impacts of the role, and any additional assistance required to fulfil their role. Sample questions include “What has your experience been as a personal tutor?” and “How does your role as a personal tutor affect you in your day-to-day life?” Pilot interviews indicated the need for minor linguistic revisions to improve clarity. These changes were made before resuming data collection. The pilot interviews were included in the final study sample.

Data collection

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

Data Analysis

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

Results

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

Theme 1. Relational Labour: Tutoring as Personalised Care Work

1.1 Relational reward as validation of invisible work

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

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

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

1.2 Relationship-building as strategic emotional work

Some tutors emphasised the importance of being warm and approachable to encourage engagement. They perceived that approachability influenced whether students would use the tutoring system. One tutor expressed this view clearly: *"I think you really probably need to have a specific character if you want to do personal tutoring... if you are... jolly and caring and funny and helpful, they will come back to you."* (P1, Lecturer, Male). In these accounts, being approachable was not treated as optional; tutors framed it as part of what made tutoring effective.

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

These descriptions suggest that tutors did not assume students would naturally engage. Instead, they employed interpersonal strategies such as showing warmth, regular

communication to maintain connection, and reassuring students that assistance was accessible.

1.3 Navigating diversity without structural support

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

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

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

2.1 Learning the role through experience

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

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

Female). Such accounts suggest that collegial support helped tutors interpret dilemmas and feel reassured, particularly when formal guidance was limited.

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

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

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

2.2 Workload strain

Many tutors described the tutoring role as difficult to manage alongside other responsibilities. One explained, *"I find that having the number of students... I'm a personal tutor for... I don't have enough capacity... and the college is not necessarily offering the level of care that some of these students need."* (P16, Reader, Female). These tutors expressed concerns about being allocated too many tutees, which could result in students not receiving the care they need. This suggests that tutors working beyond their capacity may not only influence their mental health, but also potentially that of their tutees.

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

2.3 Emotional exposure and burnout

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

Some tutors associated these experiences with fatigue or emotional strain. *"I'm just tired and more or less close to burnout... which isn't perhaps how I'd like it."* (P16, Reader, Female). Others indicated that talking with colleagues helped them cope: *"A support*

network... to talk to each other about difficult cases... somebody... to get things off my chest." (P10, Other academic role, Female).

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

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

3.1 Administrative and communication systems as obstacles

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

On the other hand, some tutors appreciated practical resources, such as template emails or curated updates. *"emails every month... templates... so nice... take this off your plate..."* (P8, Lecturer, Female). These differences across accounts demonstrate the challenges of developing resources that are helpful to all tutors.

3.2 Ambiguous responsibility and boundaries

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

The first theme indicated that tutors viewed relationships as central to meaningful tutoring. This aligns with relational pedagogy literature, which highlights the importance of social connections in learning environments (MacMahon, 2020; Allodi, 2010). Tutors described satisfaction when students shared achievements, returned after graduation, or expressed appreciation directly. This demonstrates the importance of relational interactions for tutor satisfaction, mirroring previous work showing that caring student–teacher relationships increase the sense of meaning at work (Lavy & Ghanayim, 2020). What is notable in our findings is that tutors presented these moments as a key way they assess the effectiveness of tutoring. Instead of relying on formal indicators such as attendance, progression, or institutional feedback, tutors used relational signals to evaluate their practice (McFarlane, 2016).

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

When interacting with neurodivergent students or those from different cultural or generational backgrounds, tutors emphasised uncertainty and expressed a desire for

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

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

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

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

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

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

Implications for Practice

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

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

Third, the findings suggest collegial networks played a central role in helping tutors navigate uncertainty. Senior tutors, colleagues, or peer groups were often used as sources of reassurance, interpretation, and advice. Creating structured opportunities for tutors to share experiences or consult with others, whether through mentoring, departmental

meetings, or reflective spaces, may help ensure that such support is not contingent on individual relationships or departmental culture. The finding that tutors often learn through doing also suggests a need to highlight, within training for new personal tutors, that experiential learning is a central and expected aspect of the role.

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

Finally, tutors' accounts indicate that relational work is intrinsic to how the role is enacted. Practices such as proactive communication, encouragement, and continuity of contact were not described as optional; they were the means by which tutors enabled students to engage with the system. Recognising the time and emotional energy associated with these efforts may help institutions to set realistic expectations and avoid treating relational engagement as an informal or invisible aspect of the role.

Limitations

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

Conclusion

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

workload, and accessible avenues for support and referral. Providing tutors with these resources may help ensure that relational engagement remains a valued feature of personal tutoring, rather than a form of labour that tutors must navigate alone.

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

Table 1 – Participant Demographics

About the Authors

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

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

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

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

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Embedding Reflective Dialogue in Personal Tutor Conversations: A Powerful Tool in Mitigating the Smoke and Mirror Illusion of Student Mattering Within Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Reflective conversation is a powerful relational pedagogical tool. When embedded within personal tutor conversations, it can enhance the student experience of mattering in higher education, where increasing student numbers can reduce the relational quality and experience of learning. Personal tutor conversations that embed reflective dialogue therefore have the potential to become purposeful conversations, empowering students to feel heard and understood. As key components of mattering, feeling heard and understood when achieved, enable personal tutors to develop accurate, empathic understanding of the student's lived experience of learning and teaching. Furthermore, reflective dialogue embedded within personal tutor conversations can empower students to get to know themselves. Supporting the student to develop an enduring curiosity into who and why they are creates space for the generation of knowledge that can enhance self-awareness. However, this piece argues that for this to be truly meaningful, personal tutors need to recognise the value of reflection for themselves, have the courage to develop their own reflective mindset and skills, and model reflective behaviours if students are to perceive they matter through the relational reflective pedagogy inherent in personal tutor conversations.

KEYWORDS

Personal Tutor; Conversations; Reflection; Relational Pedagogy; Mattering

Mitigating the smoke and mirrors of student mattering

Relational ontology advises that learning and development for an individual does not occur in isolation but occurs against the rhythms of how individuals relate to the world around them, with relating being co-constructed through dialogue, belonging and a coming together of people (Stetsenko, 2008). Relational pedagogy within higher education, being influenced by relational ontology, places emphasis on the importance of the humanness of the connection between student and teacher, and the experience of this as central to learning and knowledge exchange (Riddel and Hickey, 2023 and Hinsdale, 2016). Personal tutoring, I would argue, is one such space where the relational connection between student and personal tutor ought to happen; where through the expression of qualities such as

respect, empathic regard, warmth, genuineness, combined with reflective dialogue, personal tutors can create the relational quality for human-to-human connection to occur, where the student may perceive they matter.

The current landscape of higher education means the quality of the student experience is often framed through satisfaction metrics driven by teaching evaluations and National Student Survey (NSS) scores. What troubles me here is that strategies relating to enhancing the student experience are often driven more by meeting performance targets and what universities think students need, than genuine understanding and relational care. This could be perceived as a smoke-and-mirror approach to the student experience of mattering. In a Wonkhe insight report for Advanced HE, McVitty (2025) observed that as a result, university strategies that over-emphasise meeting learning objectives, so that students pass, indicate that the students' lived experience is not truly understood. This, combined with the increase in student numbers, I believe limits the genuine individual attention that students require to connect in a meaningful way with their course. It can dilute universities' empathic understanding of how students wish to experience their learning. As a result, students I have encountered report feeling lost, misunderstood, and unprepared for the world beyond higher education.

Therefore, I argue that personal tutor conversations that embed reflective dialogue have a powerful part to play in affording the individual attention students deserve within relational pedagogy and increasing the quality of the overall student experience of mattering. A core message I shall return to is this: to help our students understand the empowering quality of reflection personal tutors need to embrace and experience the value of reflection themselves. Personal tutors need to have the courage to afford time and space to be reflective educators, modelling the reflective practice we hope to encourage in our students. It is this stance of ongoing self-enquiry through our own reflective practice that will naturally enrich the meaningfulness of conversations with our students (Brookfield, 2017).

Integrating reflective dialogue within personal tutor discussions establishes a rare and authentic space, where the student should feel they are heard and understood. Through being supported to explore their thoughts and feelings and how these shape their behaviours, students can make sense of their experiences within higher education (Gibbs, 1998; Mesirow 1981 and 1991). By creating space for reflective conversation the personal tutor can demonstrate genuine interest in how students experience learning, and can engender the relational quality where a sense, that I matter, can be perceived by the student. Therefore, embedding reflection into the personal tutor conversation will create a framework that increases the relational quality of connections. It will encourage students to make sense of their experiences, enhancing self-awareness. It will enable personal tutors to have a greater understanding of their students' lived experiences, helping to fill the deficit in mattering.

Importantly, personal tutors can embed reflective dialogue into their conversations almost immediately, without requiring formal permission, intensive training, or wider cultural or systemic change within their higher education institution. Reflective dialogue embedded

within the personal tutor conversation is therefore an important tool to mitigate what could be perceived as mere symbolic smoke-and-mirror strategies to address student mattering.

Reflective conversation – embedding, not forcing

Although I argue that embedding reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations does not require intensive training, as personal tutors we must still review our understanding of reflection, as this provides the foundational basis from which the facilitative skills required to embed reflective dialogue will emerge. We must also look inward and have the courage to develop and model our own reflective mindset.

Reflection recognises that every experience we have in life contains information about who and why we are. Reflecting is process-orientated and requires us to develop a purposeful and enduring curiosity into self (Brookfield, 2017; White, 2004; Wieringa, 2011). Questioning inherent assumptions, exploring what influenced our thoughts and feelings and examining how they shaped our behaviours in those experiences will increase knowledge of self (Robins et al., 2003 & Roberts, 2015). This increased knowledge leads to greater self-awareness, a key component of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2008). It can be used to inform how we wish to navigate future experiences, leading to transformational change and empowering us to ‘the best version of’ ourselves (Clarke 2024: 2). Reflection has been found to enable emotional growth, providing a perceived safe space within which to develop the emotional bravery to be honest about how experiences affect us (Barbagallo, 2021; Hazen et al., 2020; Jarvelainen et al., 2018). Reflection therefore casts a critical eye over experiences, where the focus of that exploration is on how the person reflecting perceives what occurred.

But moving through the reflective process is not meant to be formulaic, linear or forced. Johns (2022) likened reflecting to a fine stream, authentically meandering its way to the river, moving with the flow in whatever direction it may take. A student undertaking reflection with their personal tutor would therefore shuttle back and forth between describing their experience to their personal tutor, being aided through gentle, probing, exploratory Socratic questioning to view the experience through a critical lens, to making sense of that experience, to drawing conclusions about the self that can be used to inform future experiences (Clarke, 2024).

Embedding reflection within personal tutor conversations creates a space where we can interact carefully with our students, ensuring their experiences are recognised as unique and subjectively individual (Gravett and Winstone, 2022). With genuine curiosity, the skills and attitude of empathic regard held by the personal tutor, a climate of safety can be created that supports the student to be their authentic self. As a result, the student can be encouraged to view their experience through a critical lens, exploring the meaning of their experience and meander through aspects of the reflective process. Requiring the student to ‘think’ in this way will enable them to view and understand their experience from different angles. The personal tutor conversation therefore becomes a conversation space

for relational pedagogy to occur and supports the student to “learn how to think well” and “acquire the general habit of reflecting” (Dewey, 1933: 35).

I am not suggesting that in every conversation with students the personal tutor should facilitate reflection of an experience through the entire reflective process. It does not need to be that ‘tidy’. The purpose here is to embed reflection into these conversations where the personal tutor is comfortable asking questions about how students feel about what they are experiencing. Asking questions that relate to and explore feelings can be powerful in demonstrating the personal tutor is genuinely interested in how the student is experiencing university, and from the student’s perspective can be very validating. Asking questions about their thoughts and helping them to explore what influences this thinking will enable students to get to know themselves, and the personal tutor to gain far greater insight and understanding of their lived experiences.

Beyond the student: attending to your reflective mindset matters

I am, however, certain that many of you reading this would not dispute the need for relational pedagogies in the quest for students to perceive they matter. And you may have already embraced the empowering nature of reflection for yourself. For me, that enduring curiosity into self, framed within reflecting on the unscripted critical moments in life, holds such power for generating self-understanding (Clarke, 2025). I embraced this enduring curiosity over thirty years ago, when first introduced to reflection as a student by my mentor. As a result, I believe I have far greater self-understanding, meaning I have agency over how I experience my life. In getting to know myself I have also been able to have a better understanding of why and how people respond to me in the manner they do. I am by no means a perfect person, but I no longer move through life in an uninformed manner.

Some of you will also further embrace embedding reflection into personal tutor conversations. However, if we want students to reflect, personal tutors should endeavour to be the tutor who embodies a reflective approach towards themselves (Brookfield, 2017; Clarke, 2025). Therefore, not only do personal tutors need to ensure they are theory-informed in their understanding of reflection, they also need to develop the skills to embed reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations while developing their own reflective mindset.

To model what it means to be a reflective practitioner, we as personal tutors need to:

- Recognise that getting to know **yourself** is important.
- Recognise that **every** experience in life has something to tell **you** about **who** and **why** you are.
- Recognise that understanding **your** thoughts and feelings will give **you** information about how these shape **your** behaviours within **your** experiences.
- Develop curiosity into and about **you**.
- Investigate **you**.

- Practice empathic regard towards **yourself**.
- Be brave and honest about how **you** experience life.
- Know that by the time you finish reflecting, you will know more about **you** than you did at the start.

It is important to matter

Embedding reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations provides personal tutors with a way to create meaningful connections with students where they can feel heard, understood and perceive that they matter (Tang et al., 2022, Gravett and Winstone, 2020 and Clarke, 2024). Creating purposeful relationships through relational reflective pedagogy is what can mitigate the smoke-and-mirrors illusion of student mattering within higher education. However, I argue that this can only occur if what we want to matter to students, truly matters to us as personal tutors. Students will experience authentic mattering through personal tutor reflective conversations so much more when these conversations are grounded in our own commitment to being reflective.

Therefore, matter to yourself as personal tutor. Become a reflective educator, develop the courage to model reflective behaviours and engage in your own reflections. Get to know yourself. Claim your own voice, so you can empower your students to claim theirs. Engage in CPD to develop the required skills and find space to embed reflective dialogue within personal tutor conversations. As a result, students will perceive they matter, develop the inclination to think for themselves and in doing so, find their own authentic voice..

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What Students' Use of AI Reveals about Academic Advising and Judgement

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is now widely discussed in higher education in relation to learning, assessment design, and academic integrity. Much of this discussion, however, treats students' use of AI as a set of discrete academic practices, rather than as part of broader decision-making that spans learning and everyday life. This piece argues that students' academic and non-academic uses of AI increasingly shape one another, influencing how they approach uncertainty, manage emotional pressure, and make judgements when learning feels high-stakes.

Informed by academic advising and personal tutoring conversations, it shows that students are not using AI solely to generate outputs, but to talk ideas through, test interpretations, and steady their thinking when confidence and academic identity are in play. These practices closely resemble the relational and cognitive work advisers already support and reveal how AI is now being used to sustain the emotional work of learning that underpins sound judgement.

A simple practice-based framework is presented describing four overlapping modes of student AI use – instrumental, dialogic, metacognitive, and affective-regulatory – each aligned with established advising functions. The framework highlights how AI is increasingly woven into the reflective and decision-making processes that advisers already support. Rather than positioning AI as a threat to advising, academic integrity or professional judgement, the piece argues that advising conversations can help students recognise how AI shapes their thinking and develop the boundaries and judgement needed to use it well.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI, Artificial Intelligence, emotions, advising, framework

"We had the experience but missed the meaning." T.S. Eliot (1943)

The most revealing thing about generative AI in higher education is not its novelty, but its familiarity: what it makes visible about how students already navigate learning and uncertainty. Students use generative AI in many everyday ways: to draft and refine writing, summarise ideas, manage volume, and sometimes even to help them decide what to wear and where to eat. But when you sit down and speak to students about their AI use, a more telling pattern comes into view.

They also turn to AI to talk ideas through, test interpretations, and steady their thinking when learning feels complex or high-stakes in ways that closely mirror the conversations at the heart of effective academic advising and personal tutoring. AI is being used not only

to produce work, but to support the kinds of sense-making, reassurance and decision-testing that advisers have long recognised as part of learning under uncertainty (Lowenstein, 2005). Seen in this light, students' use of AI is not a challenge for advising practice, but a potentially valuable extension of it. It offers another means through which students can rehearse ideas, clarify thinking, and build confidence before bringing those questions into human conversations. For some students, particularly those who find it difficult to access support or who are hesitant to ask for help, this low-stakes sense-making, reassurance, and decision-testing may provide an important bridge into the kinds of dialogue that academic advising has always sought to foster.

That matters, because these are precisely the moments when students most need support, yet they are increasingly navigating them quietly and alone. These moments in learning are shaped as much by anxiety around getting it wrong as by questions of skill or knowledge (Newton, 2014; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). The challenge for academic advising is not that students are replacing tutors with AI, but that many of these early sense-making processes now occur privately before students bring their questions into human advising conversations. The question, then, is how academic advising and personal tutoring can more explicitly recognise these practices, and how we can help students develop the judgement, boundaries, and confidence needed to use AI well in these circumstances.

What advising conversations are already telling us

In personal tutoring and advising meetings, students rarely arrive saying, *"I don't understand the content"*. Instead, across advising conversations a familiar pattern appears. Students describe difficulties in ways that sound more like this:

*"I can't get started."
"I don't know if this is any good."
"I'm worried I've misunderstood the task."*

Advisers will recognise this pattern immediately. The difficulty is not simply cognitive; it is shaped by anxiety, discomfort with challenge (Pekrun, 2006), and concerns about what struggling might say about who they are as learners. Learning stalls not because students cannot think, but because thinking feels risky, overwhelming, or hard to sustain alone (Damasio, 1994, Nussbaum, 2001).

Increasingly, students are turning to AI in exactly these moments. Some do so confidently, using it to rehearse ideas, test language, or regain momentum. Others are far more tentative: unsure where to start, uncertain about what is allowed, and anxious about admitting to any AI use at all. Despite its pervasiveness, AI use remains something many students still downplay or hide, even when it is being used thoughtfully and legitimately.

In advising conversations, students increasingly describe using AI first to "check whether their thinking makes sense" or to "work out where to begin" before deciding whether they need to seek tutor feedback.

For advisers, this creates a familiar dynamic. Important learning work is happening, but often just out of sight, shaped by emotional pressure, uncertainty, and concerns about judgment.

The institutional paradox advisers now sit within

At an institutional level, AI is often framed through assessment design: tasks where AI is banned, tasks where limited use is permitted, and assessments where AI is deliberately integrated.

All these approaches are legitimate. From an advising perspective, however, they also create a tension. AI is clearly embedded in students' learning lives, but it has not yet become just another tool in the learning repertoire, something to be used openly, with judgment and care across contexts. Instead, it remains something to be managed, disclosed or justified (Perkins, 2024).

This places advisers in a familiar position: working at the boundary between formal rules and lived student experience and supporting students to make sense of expectations that may feel fragmented or opaque. In practice, this ambiguity often pushes early sense-making about AI into the informal learning spaces described earlier, where students experiment privately, often without bringing questions into advising conversations.

How students are already using AI through an advising lens

When we listen carefully, students' use of AI aligns closely with the core functions of academic advising. It is helpful to think about this across four overlapping modes, each of which advisers will recognise (Table 1).

It is this final mode – emotional regulation – that is least often named, yet most deeply aligned with advising practice. Students are not only asking AI what to think but using it to help them remain engaged with thinking at all. What students' use of AI brings into view is how often it is being used to support the emotional work of learning that advisers already recognise as central to sound judgement.

Advising as guidance, not gatekeeping

From this perspective, generative AI does not replace academic advising; it makes its value more visible. Students are already engaging in advising-type conversations with AI before bringing them into human spaces. They rehearse ideas, test language, explore options, and steady themselves when work feels uncertain or high-stakes.

These dynamics resonate strongly with established principles of academic advising and personal tutoring. Frameworks such as the *UKAT Professional Framework for Academic Advising and Personal Tutoring* (2026) emphasise reflective dialogue, empathy, and non-judgmental support as central to effective tutoring relationships. Students' private use of AI

Mode of AI use	What this involves for students	What this looks like from an advising/tutoring perspective
Instrumental use: <i>"Do this for me"</i>	Students use AI to summarise readings, improve phrasing, generate examples, reformat text, or manage volume and time pressure.	This is the most visible form of AI use and the one most often addressed through guidance and regulation. Advising conversations tend to focus on boundaries, academic integrity, and appropriate attribution.
Dialogic use: <i>"Talk this through with me"</i>	Students ask AI to explain ideas back to them, test interpretations, rehearse explanations, or help articulate thinking that feels unclear or unfinished.	This closely mirrors early-stage advising and personal tutoring conversations, where students are supported to clarify understanding, explore ideas safely, and gain confidence before committing to a position.
Metacognitive use: <i>"Help me think about my thinking"</i>	Students compare approaches, identify gaps or weaknesses, question assumptions, check whether an argument holds together, or decide between possible next steps.	In advising practice, this is the work of helping students slow down, reflect, and make choices about how to proceed. The focus is not on answers, but on supporting students to tolerate uncertainty and decide what to do next.
Emotional regulation: <i>"Help me stay with the task"</i>	Students use AI to break work into manageable steps, reduce overwhelm, regain momentum after difficult feedback, or rebuild confidence when motivation dips.	Advisers will recognise this as emotional and relational support work: normalising challenge, helping students persist, and reframing difficulty as part of learning rather than evidence of failure (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Table 1: Modes of AI use and what this looks like in personal tutoring and academic advising.

suggests that many are seeking a similar exploratory space for thinking through uncertainty before bringing ideas into advising conversations. What AI cannot replicate is the relational continuity at the heart of effective advising: the accumulated knowledge of a student across time, the ethical responsibility for their development, and the trust that allows genuinely difficult conversations to happen. These are not incidental features of advising; they are its core value, and they remain irreducibly human.

The opportunity here is significant. Used well, AI can extend the kinds of reflection and preparation advisers already support, helping students arrive at conversations better able to articulate what they are wrestling with and what they need next. The risk is not that students do this, but that they do it in isolation, without shared reference points for quality, limits, or when it is time to stop asking questions and start making decisions. Recent work

on AI, trust, and judgment in assessment reinforces the importance of supporting students to make these distinctions explicitly (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023).

This is where personal tutoring and academic advising can play a crucial role: not as gatekeepers of AI use, but as guides in how to use it well. Bringing these practices into advising conversations requires a small but important relational shift. Students often assume that AI use will be judged primarily in terms of compliance or misconduct, which can discourage open discussion. Advisers therefore need to signal early that the purpose of the conversation is reflective rather than evaluative: exploring how AI shaped the student's thinking, what it clarified, and where it may have narrowed possibilities. In this way, AI becomes a shared object of reflection within the advising relationship rather than something students feel they must disclose defensively. Advisers can help students recognise when their AI use is supporting their thinking, when it is narrowing it, and how to notice their own patterns of reliance, avoidance, or overconfidence.

There are, of course, considerations to hold in view. Used uncritically, AI can smooth over uncertainty, simplify complex thinking, or offer reassurance without depth. But these are not reasons to retreat from its use; they are reasons to teach discernment explicitly. Students need to decide when to trust a response, when to question it and when to step away, and advisers need the confidence and shared language to support those decisions constructively. At times advisers may need to challenge these tendencies as well as guide them, encouraging students to remain with uncertainty rather than bypass it too quickly.

Supporting advisers to feel confident in these conversations is therefore part of the broader professional development context for advising and tutoring practice.

A small shift with significant implications

One practical change advisers can make is to shift the question from:

"Did you use AI?"

to:

"How did AI help you think? What worked – and what didn't?"

This reframes AI use as part of the learning process rather than a moral test. It invites reflection on judgement, limits, and responsibility, the very capacities academic advising exists to develop, and helps normalise open conversations about AI use in all its forms.

Advisers might extend this reflection with prompts such as:

What were you hoping AI would help you with at that moment?

Did the response expand your thinking, or narrow it?

What did you decide to keep, question, or ignore?

AI has not made learning less human. If anything, it has made the emotional and relational labour of learning more visible.

Students are already using AI to manage uncertainty, regulate emotion, and rehearse judgement; sometimes skilfully, sometimes clumsily, but often silently. Academic advising and personal tutoring can bring that work into the open, not to control it, but to support it well. The task for advising is not to police AI use, but to help students recognise how it shapes their thinking and develop the judgement needed to use such tools thoughtfully, critically and with confidence.

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About the Author

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