

Personal Tutorials in Transition: From Periphery to Core

Report of Findings

The research team:

Alette Willis, Principal Investigator

Siobhan Canavan, Co-Investigator

Lorena Georgiadou, Research Assistant

**Counselling and Psychotherapy
School of Health in Social Science
The University of Edinburgh**

This Project was funded by the Principal's Teaching Award Scheme
(PTAS), Institute for Academic Development



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Background

For 25 years, Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh (UoE) has been providing students in professional training programmes with a Personal Tutor (PT), who offers a setting for students to explore and integrate their experience of the programme and of their placement. Personal Tutors are qualified, experienced practitioners who have in-depth knowledge of our programmes and sufficient experience of academic study. According to the two initiators of the system for the Subject Area, Colin Kirkwood and Judith Fewell, the role of PTs was designed to be didactic, enabling and supporting and was pedagogically rooted in the significance of integrating social and personal learning:

“I always argued that (...) personal and social are not alternatives, they are absolutely both required and they have to be the same- part of the same thing, you know. So therefore you need a personal tutorial system, we thought, and above all you need these social learnings, large groups, small groups, pairs, trios, you name it”
(Colin Kirkwood)

The development of the system was explicitly phronetic, coming out of the initiators’ own training. In mid 1980s, Judith Fewell and Colin Kirkwood attended a Human Relations and Counselling course offered by the Scottish Institute of Human Relations, which entailed a Personal Tutorial system. Judith recalls:

“And I know that I found it, em, just incredibly beneficial, eh, it gave me the opportunity to really think about what was actually happening for me during this training and it was, it was, em -I think it was - the educational experience which most profoundly impacted upon me of anything that I have actually ever done and I think a component of that was having this external person because I found what was happening on the course both very interesting and very exciting and deeply disturbing and knowing that I had this person that I could talk to where the- which was, em -you know, who I could trust”
(Judith Fewell)

The system

Since its initial design, the system of Personal Tutorials has been an integral part of the professional training programmes offered at Counselling and Psychotherapy. These tutorials are kept separate from other elements of the programme and have no assessment function. The agenda is open and students are invited to discuss any aspect of their training and learning they wish, including management of course work, personal and professional development, self and other relationships and self-assessment.

The system of Personal Tutorials is currently (2013-2014) in transition, with two models operating simultaneously: The ‘Periphery’ and the ‘Core’¹ models. In the **Periphery** model PTs operate at a distance from the core teaching team, with no assessment function, offering a neutral space for trainees to reflect upon learning and practice. Students meet with their PT fourteen times over a two-year period. PTs write a report, which, along with a final interview (involving the student, a Core Tutor and the PT) marks the end of training. Core Tutors meet with PTs twice a year. At these Tutorial meetings, general themes for the training as expressed in Personal Tutorials are discussed rather than the progress of individual students. The **Core** model was introduced in 2010 to match the requirements of a new, accelerated, professional training programme (Masters in Counselling Interpersonal Dialogue). Here, two PTs support the entire student cohort; they meet monthly with each student and three times per year with Core Tutors, where individual students and their progress are discussed. In the first (2010-2012) MCID programme, Personal Tutors acted also as the students’ practice-based group tutors and were therefore involved in assessment. This dual role was removed from the 2012-2014 MCID programme. This model is now being piloted in an adapted way for the part-time Diploma students in the 2013-2015 cohort.

The Project

To be able to make informed decisions about the system’s future, the Research Team (Willis, Canavan, Georgiadou) designed a study to:

1. Explore the system’s initial development and its overall pedagogical underpinnings. This would allow us to revise and re-contextualise the current system in our training and in Counsellor Education more broadly.
2. Explore the two models of Personal Tutorials in depth. A comprehensive investigation of our system would enable us to understand what works well and what does not work so well for students, Personal Tutors and Core Staff, enabling us to make decisions to improve our practice, based on research and evidence.

To better understand why Personal Tutorials are part of the training provided at the University of Edinburgh we designed and conducted **individual interviews** with the two people who initiated it. In those interviews we explored the roots of this system and its development, as well as the initiators’ perceptions of the advantages and limitations of such a provision in

¹ The terms ‘Periphery’ and ‘Core’ have been selected by the research team to indicate the Tutors’ distance from and involvement in the core training.

counsellor education. Some overarching points of this material have been presented in the Background section above.

We also designed and conducted **group interviews** with the people who are or were directly involved in Personal Tutorials. In these interviews we explored each group's experiences as to what functions well and not so well in the model(s) they have used and their thoughts on what could be improved and on alternatives. The groups we interviewed were:

- Five students that have been using Personal Tutorials under the Periphery model.
- Five students that have been using Personal Tutorials under the Core model.
- Six Personal Tutors who have been working under the Periphery model.
- Five Personal Tutors who have been working under both the Periphery and the Core model.
- Three members of Core Staff who have used Personal Tutorials as students and who are involved in decision-making processes in the Subject Area. Part of this dataset has been merged with the current students' experiences of PTs. Discussions around the development and future of the system have informed our recommendations (p.12).

Finally, in order to locate our system of Personal Tutorials more widely in the field of Counsellor Education in the UK, we are **surveying** the support systems that other HEI training providers² may have in place for their students. As this process is still ongoing, this data is not included in this report.

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the School of Health in Social Science Research Ethics Committee, UoE.

Our Findings

How students use the Personal Tutorials

Our interviews with students, Personal Tutors and Core Staff allowed us to build a robust understanding of the various ways in which students use their Personal Tutorials.

The overarching theme that emerged from participants' contributions is that Personal Tutors are a significant **source of support and learning** for our students. This takes several forms.

² We have identified and contacted the 25 Higher Education Training Providers in the UK whose training programmes are accredited either by BACP or COSCA.

Our findings showed that students used their Personal Tutorials to discuss **‘group stuff’**, that is, share any concerns, thoughts and incidents associated with their relationships with their peers and their Core Tutors in their training. They also used it as a space to discuss **‘personal stuff’**, **theory and academic work**, and in some occasions, **client work**. This multifaceted use illuminates the uniqueness of the system of Personal Tutorials, which entails elements of personal therapy, academic supervision and clinical supervision. That said, it is important to highlight that students distinguished clearly Personal Tutorials from the above-mentioned sources of support and learning.

“So it does feel like a safe environment to say things to her and we can just talk about everything. I don’t feel like she has agenda for me to say certain things but anything, I can talk about academic side of things and I can talk about my personal life and I just feel like the kind of support I get from her has grown me better, em, during the process, em, of this programme. I just generally feel that it helps me cope better knowing that I have a place to go like every month. It is that, em, holding environment I think”
 (Student – Core)

Interestingly, students conceptualised their Personal Tutors as a **‘dual bridge’**: on one hand, Personal Tutorials were understood as the bridge between the different elements of their training, i.e. a space where they can ‘pull it all together’ and integrate theory, experience and practice. At the same time, PTs provided a link between the microcosm of training and the macrocosm of the profession. Personal Tutorials were often seen as a **mentorship** that offered insight into what it may be like to work as a

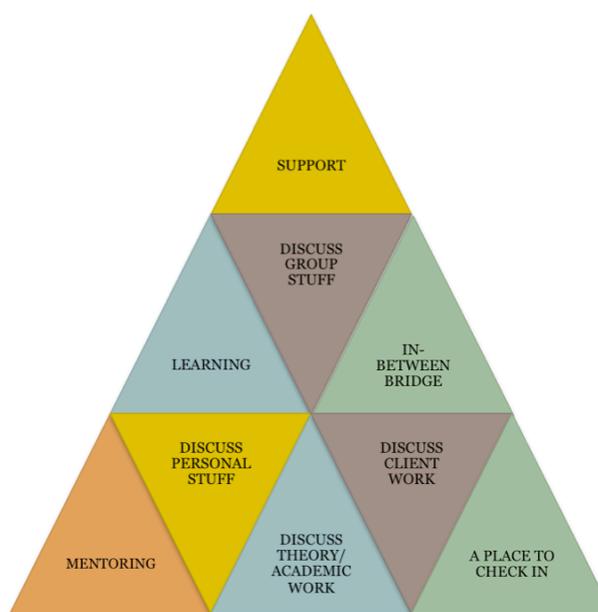


Figure 1: Student uses of PTs

counsellor. Finally, Personal Tutorials were also seen as a **‘a place to check in’**, a constant throughout the two, three or more years of their training where students could ‘touch base’ as they continued to develop academically and professionally.

“...it was somewhere to pull all the strands together because you do, you have supervision, you have- which is quite an intense relationship as well but this was a place you could sort of stand above everything and, and talk- think about your supervision experiences, your client work, bits of the

course, interpersonal stuff on the course, how you felt about the tutors, anything. It's a place you could sort of –

*P3: Pull it all together.

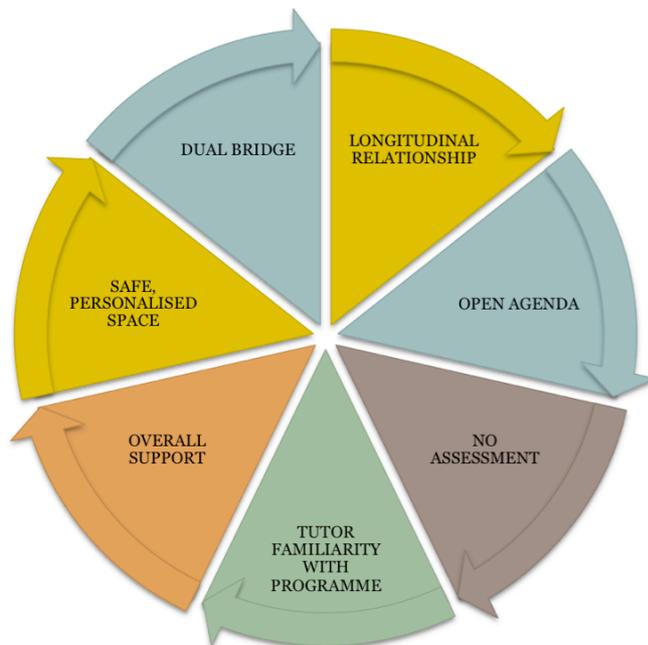
*P2: Pull it all together, em, and I'm not sure where else I would have done that.

*P4: Mm hmm. I agree. They help kinda locate yourself.”
(Students-Periphery)

What works well for students

Alongside our investigation of ‘how’ students used the Personal Tutorials, we also explored the elements that students appreciated in this provision. Students’ responses indicated that the **longitudinal nature of the relationship** with their tutor was particularly valued. As suggested above, having a constant thread over the duration of their training, while relationships with Core Tutors, placement managers or peers might be coming to an end, was

particularly important.



“I think there is something about it developing over the two years that’s really valuable because they do- like you were saying about identity as that emerges and changes. They’re with you and they see that, so it’s quite valuable that it’s a constant thread throughout the 2 years whereas actually placements changed, supervisors can change...”
(Student – Periphery)

Figure 2: What works well for students

Students also appreciated the tutorials’ **open agenda**, i.e. the opportunity to bring and discuss anything that was central to their experience. All students highlighted the importance of Personal Tutors’ **lack of assessment role**, which allowed them to ‘be themselves’ and to discuss openly any difficulties or concerns they may face with their tutors or peers, without fearing that this would influence their or their peers’ assessment.

“the fact that the personal tutor is not tutor and she’s not my, she’s not my therapist, it makes me feel safe. I feel like she’s more like a hybrid, hybrid between therapist and, and, em, tutor and I can bring in everything, eh, without having, em, fear that she might, em, judge me or assess me on what I say”
(Student – Core)

The tutors' **familiarity with the programmes' content and structure** was also identified as a positive component, as it enabled them to receive useful advice without having to explain details and practicalities.

“we got support and encouragement, em, within an attuned and informed relationship by which I mean someone who held an awareness of the course and what that might be like and, you know, was informed about the structure, you know, the challenges of the course and that was quite useful”
(Student – Periphery)

Overall, students valued the very fact that there existed a **support provision** available for them from the Subject Area and that this **space was safe and personalised** for each student to negotiate and develop with their Personal Tutor. Finally, the concept of the '**dual bridge**', a relationship that connects the various elements of the course as well as the training with the profession was also much appreciated as it facilitated students' process of 'becoming' a counsellor.

What does not work so well/could be improved for students

One of the main characteristics of the system that students did not appreciate was the lack of clarity that was often associated with the role of the Personal Tutor and the expectations around the use of the system. Students reported that they initially did **not know how to use the tutorials**. This initial confusion could last for quite a long period of time and often caused frustration due to the time constraints on students during their training. In other words, because they were unsure of how to use the personal tutorials, students sometimes felt they were just 'a box to tick', and occasionally felt as a waste of their time. Similarly, students were not entirely satisfied by the **randomness of the allocation** of Personal Tutors, in relation to the particular orientation of the Personal Tutor (i.e. person-centred vs psychodynamic) and in some cases the physical location. Our mixed focus groups revealed that different allocation models have been used with different student cohorts over the years, and so this criticism may not be valid for all programmes. Nonetheless, some flexibility around the allocation of PTs would be appreciated by all student and Personal Tutor groups we interviewed.

“I felt like you, that I could have used some more guidance at the very beginning because it, it, it's mostly an issue of time because, em, I'm working practically full time so for me to take one hour off for something, I need to juggle and juggle and I suppose like anybody else, we, we all need

to jiggle and juggle to get that one hour. So I wanted to know very clearly- OK, you think it's necessary, tell me why, eh, cos at the moment, I don't see it. Now I see it but at the very beginning I didn't"
 (Student-Periphery)

Up to this point, findings referred broadly to all models of PTs. In this section it is important to also highlight students' dissatisfaction with specific models. Students who had experienced the '**Periphery**' model mentioned that in some cases the tutor was '**too distant from the programme**', which resulted in unfamiliarity with the specific requirements of the courses that students were enrolled on or the complexities of making arrangements for placement. On the other hand, for students using the PTs under the '**Core**' model, tutors were sometimes experienced as being '**too close**' to their training, potentially crossing boundaries and creating a feeling of surveillance and claustrophobia.

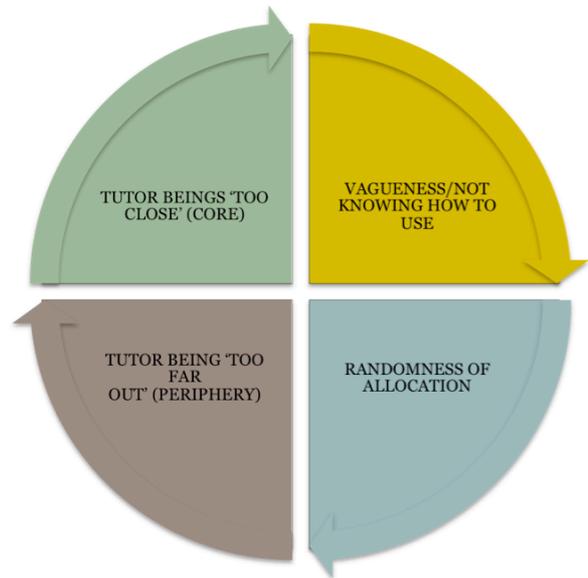


Figure 3: What does not work well for students

"...I always know who has their- at least with my personal tutor, there's six of us and I know who's on what day. [I:OK]And generally what time, which is a little creepy.

**I: Why is that a little creepy?*

**P3: Cos I know six people's personal tutors, tutorial schedules including mine!
 (Student-Core)*

What works well for Personal Tutors

Like students, Personal Tutors also underlined the significance of the **longitudinal nature of the relationship**, which enabled them to develop a robust bond and to work through any complications or ruptures that may emerge. PTs also appreciated **not being involved in the students' assessment**; this 'third position' allowed them to offer the distant space and support that students may need during an often overwhelming or 'claustrophobic' training. Overall, tutors understood their role as facilitative and mentoring for students, an element that they found particularly rewarding. With regards to the particulars of the system, PTs who

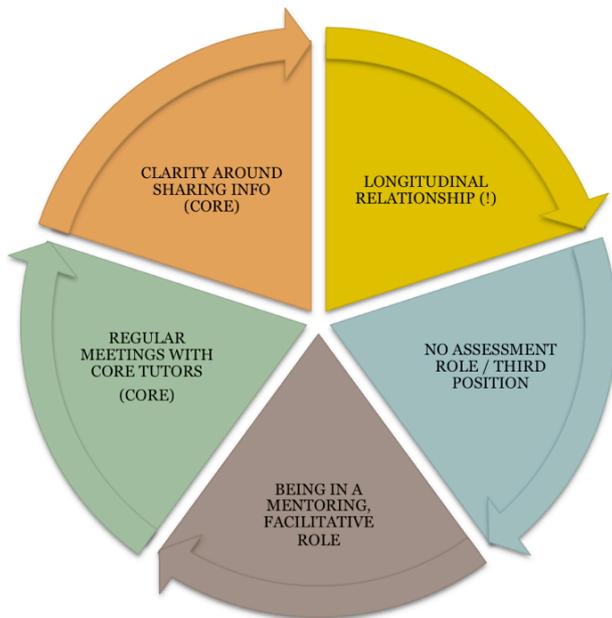


Figure 4: What works well for PTs

have worked under both models, maintained that they appreciated the **regular meetings with the Core Tutors** that offered opportunities for meaningful discussions, as well as the **clarity around sharing information** about the students, both of which are part of the ‘Core’ model.

*“The regular meetings, yeah. I just felt it contained, it contained me much better and then that helped me to contain the group”
(Personal Tutor – both models)*

*“Cos I have a student who dropped out, and I- in, in the core model and I think because I understood more of the background about it which we discussed in meeting, you know, it’s been fine and I’ve been able to sleep at night. Whereas I think if that had happened in the periphery model, I would have wondered more like, you know, wasn’t there more that we could have done or, you know, was this person looked after properly. But those questions were answered without me having to, em, you know, make a big fuss about getting the answers. It was, it was there because we were discussing it and that felt much better, I felt much, em (PAUSE), yeah, more held I suppose, by the model, you know, to do that.”
(Personal Tutors – both models)*

What does not work well/could be improved for Personal Tutors

Periphery Model

In this section findings will be presented separately for each model, as participants’ experiences of the two models were significantly different. In the Periphery model, PTs were dissatisfied by the **confusion around the responsibilities** attached to their role. Their distance from the core training team often left them wondering when it is appropriate to express concerns or check about a student’s progress. This was often associated with the **longitudinal nature of the relationship**, which while it was a valuable element for the reasons explained above, it was also problematic in cases where students’ training got significantly extended. For example, while students on the part-time diploma were expected

to complete their training in two years, in some cases students may need three, four or more years to complete due to personal circumstances.

*“where the problems arose with the periphery model for me were, em, I have one student who took, eh, I, I can’t remember how long, but between three and four years to complete the course, she was virtually running out of time, and I was left feeling really quite isolated. It was very, very difficult. So I think for me that one of the problems with the periphery model is when there are concerns or when a student runs way over the two years.
(Personal Tutor-Periphery)*

PTs’ overall distance from the core training team often left them **feeling unsupported** and as if their **work was not valued**. This seemed to be linked with how decisions were taken and announced to the Personal Tutors by the Subject Area. When the plan to move away from the Periphery model to a model that would require a significantly smaller number of Personal Tutors was announced to the PT team, a participant discloses:

*“that night when I came away feeling, you know, I would say completely undervalued, em, embarrassed probably”
(Personal Tutor – Periphery)*

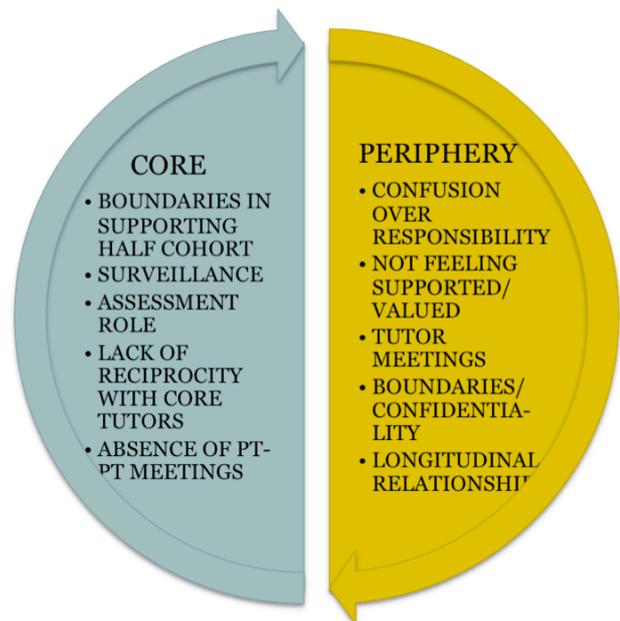


Figure 5: What does not work well for PTs

PTs who worked under the Periphery model did not value the gradual development of the **tutorial meetings** from an intimate and meaningful space for dialogue and support to a huge and impersonal setting where their presence and contributions were not always validated. To that, PTs also added that the Periphery system entailed some **confidentiality issues and boundary complexities** in discussing ‘general themes’ without disclosing specific students, when each PT worked with perhaps only two or three students.

“I was left at some meetings just wondering what we were doing and, em, and, and also your point about, eh, not feeling able to raise issues that I had because of the confidentiality thing and, and yet the other models, you’re, you’re encouraged, you’re, you know, you’re expected to talk about your individual students. I think I was left wondering what the point was sometimes in the tutors meetings in the periphery model if you couldn’t raise individual issues and then if you couldn’t do it there, then how did you do it, where did you do it? Some, sometimes I felt the issues

*got lost a bit. So I think, I, I, think all this about the, the core model does feel more honest in a way and more open.
(Personal Tutors – Both models)*

Core Model

On the other hand, tutors who had worked under the Core model expressed **concerns about supporting half of a student cohort**, as they found it hard to be unbiased when they received information about the same incident from multiple perspectives. Of importance here were issues of managing boundaries around confidentiality, as well as of genuineness in their relationship with each student:

“...So that’s- and of course, of course that’s confidential, absolutely confidential that wouldn’t, you know, be shared between the students but they- you know, I suppose their, their imagination is working with that and I’m wondering, what have I heard, have I heard about that from somebody else?

**P: I would say that also applies to me as a tutor. I suppose it stirs up my imagination as well when a student is talking about another student and I, and I find myself thinking, ‘oh who is that?’ So when we’re seeing six students on the ID course, out of, out of twelve, we’re seeing, each seeing half the course and it’s, it’s a lot.*

P3: I think it’s hard **not to know who they’re talking about because of the nature of how this cohort has developed. You see (number removed) people, don’t you and I see (number removed), it’s just the way it happened.*

**P4: Yeah.*

**P3: Em, and I, I know when any of my (number) are talking about each other because they’re so different and they don’t name each other but (...) so there is that kind of (SIGHS) you try not to go there really (LAUGHS).
(Personal Tutors – Both models)*

Personal Tutors also mentioned the risk of students feeling like they are constantly under **‘surveillance’**, as their role in the Core model did not always provide the desired distance from the training for students to feel safe enough to disclose some concerns. In the case of the first Interpersonal Dialogue programme (2010-2012), where PTs were also tutors on the Practice and Process Groups, their **involvement in the students’ assessment** was explicitly criticised as a malfunctioning and boundary-crossing activity. With regard to the meetings with the Core Tutors, PTs mentioned a **lack of reciprocity** in communication, which sometimes felt obstructing to their job due to limited knowledge being shared by Core Tutors about the students, as well as a feeling of ‘reporting back’ rather than supporting students. Finally, PTs would appreciate **regular meetings between the PTs** that support one cohort, to discuss issues that may arise for the cohort and as a source of support in their work.

*“I feel like, em (PAUSE), I feel like there are boundary issues, em, as to how much we talk about and how much they talk about things. So it, it should be a two way process but sometimes it feels to me like we’re reporting, reporting in and I- I’m not sure that that feels right for me”
(Personal Tutor – both models)*

Our Recommendations for Improvement

Based on the discussions we had with students, Personal Tutors and Staff members in Counselling and Psychotherapy, we came to conclude that having a system of Personal Tutors in place is extremely beneficial for students and the Subject Area and that it should continue to be an integral part of our training programmes. As one of the Staff members noted:

“I, em, I remember one very powerful experience once of going into a personal tutors meeting and there being about thirteen or fourteen people in the room, nearly all women, and a sense of this being like almost a regiment of tutors, you know, like a huge big group of people completely separate from our core team working with our students and I had a sense of what a fantastic resource that was, especially because these people are on the whole much more plugged into practice than most of us, em. They’re working over a number of agencies, they’re working as agency managers, they’re, they’re plugged into professional bodies and all kinds of things and I thought, what a fantastic resource that we have this army of assistants, you know, literally. I’m using words like army and regiment because there was just so many of them, you know, and, and I remember thinking our students are really lucky that they have this. They don’t just have this small group in the academy that know a lot about teaching and, you know, research and writing and marking and all the things that we know about. They actually have access to these incredibly experienced people who are out in the field for the most part more than we are.”

That said, the system can be improved, in order to better suit students’, Personal Tutors’ and the Subject Area’s needs. To that end, we propose that:

- Personal Tutors continue to have **no involvement in any of the students’ assessment**. This is essential for PTs to remain a safe, personalised space where students can feel free to discuss whatever they want without censoring themselves.
- As far as the structure of the system of PTs is concerned, we suggest that the Subject Area offers **more flexibility in relation to the frequency and number of meetings**. Specifically, we would recommend that students are offered something between 12-16 meetings over their two (or more) years of training.
- To avoid the complexity that a large number of Personal Tutors creates (in terms of logistics and support) and to avoid the boundary and confidentiality issues that arise

from splitting one cohort in half and supporting it with only two Personal Tutors, we suggest to employ **more than two PTs per cohort**, but to keep the numbers low (<4). This will allow Core Tutors and Personal Tutors to work closely with each other, via **regular meetings and opportunities for discussions**.

- Finally, our recommendation would be to provide **clarity in expectations** of the role of the Personal Tutor to Personal Tutors, of the system of Personal Tutorials and its potential uses to students, and of the Tutorial meetings to both Core Staff and Personal Tutors. We anticipate that these clarifications will eliminate student anxiety, improve practice and enhance relationships, ultimately benefiting all parties involved.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all the students, Personal Tutors and Staff who took the time to participate in our project and who, by sharing their experiences, allowed us to gain insight into the system of Personal Tutorials at Counselling and Psychotherapy. We would also like to thank Judith Fewell and Colin Kirkwood for their instrumental contributions on the background and development of this system, which enabled us to contextualise our study in the wider field of Counsellor Education in Britain.

Finally, we are grateful to the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh for supporting us financially through their Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS) and making this project possible.