

**“Personal tutors for first year law students:
Adding to the pressure or lightening the load?”**

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The most recent Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) Report comments that “the interactions that students have with staff have been shown in numerous research studies to be among the most important determinants of high-quality learning” (2009, 20). Further, researchers such as Astin (1993) and Kuh & Hu (2001) have established that the student learning experience improves when academics engage with students as individuals, and when students have opportunities for contact with academics that extend beyond administrative matters or the formal curriculum.

It is significant, therefore, from a quality of learning and teaching perspective, that in most institutions of higher education in Britain individual students are assigned to an academic who takes some responsibility for their welfare. This role is given a variety of titles including “moral tutor”, “welfare tutor” and “personal tutor”. Because the essence of the relationship is that of student and academic, it is inevitable that academic matters will be discussed. However, the principle role of the personal tutor is to be the person to whom the student can turn with concerns about his or her general welfare.

In Australian universities, a high disparity between the ratios of students and staff is increasing, and we are unlikely to see much improvement in student/staff ratios given the current economic climate. The most obvious repercussion of large class sizes is the inability of academics to relate to, or get to know, individual students. The most recent AUSSE data indicates that on a metric of 1-100 the engagement scale of staff/student interaction scores an average of only 22.2 (this average represents a score of 19.8 for first year students, rising to 24.5 for later-year students) (2009, 20). The implementation of a personal tutor scheme may counter this problem and has the potential to result in better student engagement, leading to a richer educational experience for students.

The scholarship of teaching project to be discussed in this nuts and bolts session investigates the role of the personal tutor and how it might fit into the law school setting in the Australian higher education context. A thorough initial literature review has been completed, the results of which will be presented at the workshop to evidence existing workable models of personal tutoring schemes, and their positive aspects as well as the difficulties that can arise with their implementation. The literature review will also be used to show a significant gap in terms of the documentation of initiatives in this area in Australian higher education institutions.

This workshop seeks to take some first steps in addressing this gap in the literature. It is the presenter’s intention to do further research work in this area, perhaps involving a later survey of all Australian tertiary institutions. However, at this preliminary stage of the project, the

aim is to collect narratives on experience of personal tutoring schemes, and to catalogue the range of approaches that are currently in existence in Australia. This workshop represents the first step in drawing together a community of practice around personal tutoring, and of establishing a scholarly network for the sharing of initiatives.

With these aims in mind the workshop will be structured as follows:

The first 5 minutes of the presentation will be spent to set the scene – data from recent CEQ surveys; the perceived need for increased engagement on individual level; AUSSE data re lack of staff/student interaction.

The next 10 minutes of the workshop will allow for a sharing of the results of the literature review, with an outline of the key existing models of personal tutoring that are currently practised, both in the UK and in Australia, and an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of such schemes.

The final 15 minutes of the session will seek sharing of lived experience from participants, via means of a brief one page survey. The survey will ask attendees whether such a scheme exists at their institution, how it operates, and with what effect – in short participants in the session will be asked to briefly share their narratives of real, lived experience of such schemes. Discussion around those narratives will take up any remaining time. Those attendees who are willing will also be able to provide contact details for the establishment of a scholarly network/community of practice for further ongoing discussions.

References

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