Mynott, GJ

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Article

Personal tutoring: positioning practice in relation to policy

Gwenda Mynott

Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Clarence Street, Liverpool L3 5UG, UK

Contact: g.j.mynott@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Most academic staff will at some point in their career be asked to take on the role of being a personal tutor for a group of students. It can be an ill-defined role that lacks focus in terms of what it is trying to achieve. This paper is a reflection on my own practice as a personal tutor, and views this within the context of the policy drivers and changing nature of higher education. In particular, it identifies three levels of interaction: the macro, meso and micro. The macrolevel is informed by the wider national and strategic debates on issues such as retention and transition; the mesolevel's focus is on staff responsiveness to enact policy; and the microlevel on student well-being and satisfaction. The paper argues that there are tensions between how personal tutoring is identified and pursued, especially if it is approached with managerialist intentions.

Introduction

Most academic staff will at some point in their career be asked to take on the role of being a personal tutor for a group of students. It can be an ill-defined role that has a lack of focus in terms of what it is trying to achieve (McFarlane 2016). At the same time, it is often seen as having a key role in supporting students and improving the student experience. Policy initiatives such as the soon to be introduced Teaching Excellence Framework (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016) with implications for retention and social mobility, amongst other things, all have the student experience and student support as key themes. Personal tutoring (PT) can be seen as a key mechanism in delivering on this agenda. This paper starts with an overview of policy and policy implementation which positions my role as a personal tutor in relation to national and institutional policy, followed by a critique of PT and concludes with a discussion on some of the tensions in the practice of PT as a mechanism in delivering on policy drivers.

The system of PT has a longstanding tradition in supporting students in UK HEIs (Grant, 2006). It is a tradition that is resource intensive in terms of staffing and time but has persisted in the majority of UK HEIs; I am currently personal tutor for a cohort of Level 4 students studying on the BA (Hons) Business and Public Relations programme in the Liverpool Business School. Gidman's (2001) work on the role of PT concluded, "There was a lack of clear guidance for … lecturers adopting the personal tutor role" (p. 363) and also no clear definition, but "that generally it is seen as an all-encompassing role which includes teaching, counselling and supporting" (p.363). My own experience of PT reflects this. This personal experience of delivering PT to a range of students has been built up during a timeframe that has seen major changes for HEIs. Changes in HE funding mechanisms and an increasing marketization of the HE sector have meant there is a

growing focus on transition, student support and retention. McFarlane (2016) asserts that "the role of personal tutor is central to enhancing the student experience and fostering student retention" (p.2) and it can be seen as directly supporting the policy initiatives.

Norton (2009) notes the importance of having a reflective approach to academic practice and this paper is an attempt to reflect on my own positioning as a personal tutor in relation to policy initiatives and the tensions between my own professional practice and the needs of management. This paper is a reflection on my own practice and seeing my place and contribution to the policy drivers and changing nature of HE. As such the paper focuses on the day to day practice of PT within the wider picture of HE changes. Practice is taken to mean "a way of doing something, the pattern of which is reproduced in a social context (i.e. work) according to certain rules" (Saunders, 2000). This paper then does not aim for generalisation but is situation-specific and contextualized in my own professional practice.

Policy context

Policy can be viewed as being implemented at different stages of a policy implementation staircase (Figure 1) (Saunders et al., 2015). This is a useful way to reflect on my own position in relation to policy being put into practice. The staircase illustrates how policy flows down from national initiatives through institutions, middle managers, lecturers and finally students.
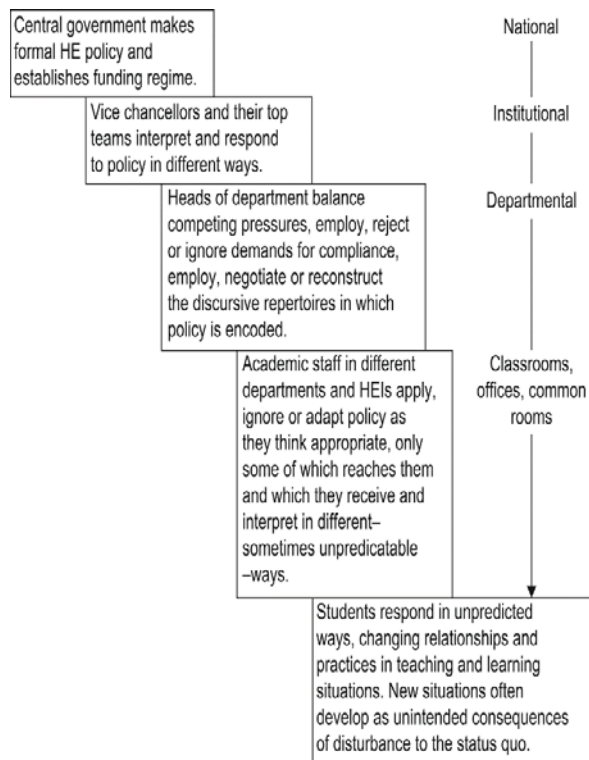
Central government makes formal HE policy and establishes funding regime.	National
Vice chancellors and their top teams interpret and respond to policy in different ways.	Institutional
Heads of department balance competing pressures, employ, reject or ignore demands for compliance, employ, negotiate or reconstruct the discursive repertoires in which policy is encoded.	Departmental
Academic staff in different departments and HEIs apply, ignore or adapt policy as they think appropriate, only some of which reaches them and which they receive and interpret in different– sometimes unpredicatable –ways.	Classrooms, offices, common rooms
Students respond in unpredicted ways, changing relationships and practices in teaching and learning situations. New situations often develop as unintended consequences of disturbance to the status quo.	

Figure 1: *Adapted from Saunders et al., (2015).*

My position can be seen to be the step in the staircase between organisational interpretations of the policy and the students themselves. Changes in policy on funding mechanisms, the agenda to increase participation in HE, the increased focus on student experience have all filtered down from national policy initiatives to more local organisational policy and finally to academic practice. This might be as "little p-policy" as described by Ball (2013), who states, "Policies are made and remade in many sites, and there are many little p-policies that are formed and enacted within localities and institutions" (p. 8). Trowler (2003) states that, "Policies, while formulated in a variety of locales…are always implemented by individuals and groups" (p. 124). It can be argued that the tensions between the managerial necessities of demonstrating accountability and policy as seeing to be done has meant an increasing tension between managerialism and academic professionalism. 'New managerialism' is described by Deem and Brehony (2005) as "emphasising the primacy of management above all other activities; monitoring employee performance (and encouraging

self-monitoring too); the attainment of financial and other targets, devising means of publicly auditing quality of service delivery and the development of quasi-markets for service" (p. 220).

Three levels of policy and policy enactment can be identified: the macro, meso and micro. At the macrolevel PT can be seen to directly support the increasing focus on issues of retention, transition and student support that has filtered down due to a number of national policy documents over the last few years. The Green Paper on teaching excellence stated, "all students receive effective support in order to achieve their educational and professional goals and potential" (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015: 33) while the subsequent White Paper states, "we expect higher education to deliver well designed courses, robust standards, support for students, career readiness and an environment that develops the 'soft skills' that employers consistently say they need" (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016: 43). This followed on from the 2011 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills White Paper which put the student experience at the fore. Student support is a focus throughout these policy documents and retention, progression and learning gain are all thought to be increasingly important metrics that will impact not only on the student experience but also on funding formulae for HE in the near future. The 2011 White Paper advocated putting "the undergraduate experience at the heart of the system" (p. 4) with three key challenges: funding, delivering a better student experience and increasing social mobility. The Green Paper states, "all students receive effective support in order to achieve their educational and professional goals and potential" (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015: 33).

At the mesolevel the strategic plan for LJMU 2012-17 does include statements on student support such as "a university that

sets consistently high standards for pastoral and tutorial support" and also states that retention and student satisfaction will be used as metrics. This filters down to the institution-wide policy on PT (LJMU, 2016). It states that the primary purpose of the personal tutor is: "to assist tutees in their academic development whilst at university, in addition to having a role in supporting their personal and professional development" (LJMU, 2016). The policy goes on to highlight the following three roles:

o Academic Guidance and Monitoring of Student Engagement – this encompasses promotion of student engagement beyond their programme of study and also introduces a monitoring role in terms of identifying and responding to "at risk students through reference to data including attendance, assessment submission, and academic background."
o Pastoral and Personal Development and Referral - offer pastoral oversight with referral and signposting to specialist student support and advice services.
o Professional Development and Referral – linking to employability and also the responsibility for writing references.

These themes reflect the literature on good practice and, as Smith (2005) states, support given by PT can be categorised as academic, pastoral and developmental. Academic support is stated to include "supporting the student to attain academic success and achieve the desired qualification"; pastoral is "supporting the student on a more personal level to address any difficulties that they might experience in life that have an impact on their studies" while development support "includes general personal development" (p. 45).

It is at the mesolevel that these broad ranging roles are enacted. There can be tensions and difficulties here. McFarlane (2016) suggests that personal tutors often lack training, time and confidence to deliver PT. There can also be problems of

consistency of approach between different academic staff and links can be made to academic identity and practice. As McFarlane (2016) states these include "boundaries both of the personal tutor role and between current and prior professional roles, the impact of previous professional, personal and academic experience, the impact of workload on ability to form relationships with students, adapting to the academic identity and associated language" (p. 85). I operate at this juncture and policy implementation at this stage can be difficult, messy and inconsistent.

What does PT do?
In order to understand my position and role it is important to understand some of the historical development, background and wider practice of PT. While there is a large body of literature on PT much of it focuses on best practice, evaluation and student attitudes to PT. Myers (2013) considers most of the literature to be of a technical nature with very little that "problematises the issues" (p. 591). This review of the literature will mainly focus on the small body of literature that does provide a more critical analysis of role of PT. Wheeler (1993) stated that the purpose of having a personal tutor system is "primarily to provide an anchor on which the support system of the university rests" and that it can reduce student anxiety, provide academic assistance and also has a "welfare component" (p. 3). Wheeler and Birtle (1993) went on to say that "the personal tutor is needed by all students, including those who enjoy a relatively straightforward passage through university" (p. 3). Grant (2006: 19) stated that "the personal tutor system can still offer an effective way of delivering an excellent and consistent teaching and learning experience for a diverse student body".

Myers (2013) discusses how student support systems have a historical context and that "ancient forms of English higher education involving pastoral supervision and a

residential model have had an important influence on the present" (p. 591). Up until 1970 there was a legal requirement for universities to act *in loco parentis* for students under the age of twenty-one (Grant 2006). The model of residential and pastoral oversight has continued as a strong theme in PT, despite the changes in the policy drivers in HE over the course of time.

While there is no single definition of PT most of the literature points to a similar range of roles that can be played by PT. Wheeler and Birtle (1993) describe the role of the personal tutor as a member of academic staff whose function may include personal development, monitoring progress, providing a link between the student and university; to be a responsible adult in whom the student can confide and to intervene with university authorities on behalf of their tutees. Thomas (2006) summarised the role of PT as providing "information about higher education processes, procedures and expectations, academic feedback and development; personal welfare support, referral to further information and support; a relationship with the institution and a sense of belonging" (p.22). Developing a sense of belonging between students and the HEI has been identified as key to improving retention. Grant (2006) discusses PT roles as involving forming an ongoing relationship of support that provides "holistic guidance" that is both academic and personal. Grant also suggests that there is an advocacy role and links this, in particular, to writing references and discusses the link to PDP. Academic support is described as "supporting the student to attain academic success and achieve the desired qualification"; pastoral support is "supporting the student on a more personal level to address any difficulties that they might experience in life that have an impact on their studies", while development support "includes general personal development" (p. 45). The focus in all these statements is that of support. Smith (2005) asserts that support given by

PT can be categorised as academic, pastoral and developmental.

The traditional pastoral model of PT involves a named member of staff being "assigned to each student to provide personal and academic support" (Thomas, 2006: 25). Thomas also discusses professional and integrated curriculum models of PT. These all place emphasis on who and where support is delivered. Professional models of support "are centred around the provision of welfare and academic student services by professionally trained staff" (Thomas, 2006, p.26). The integrated curriculum model sees PT as delivered as part of a module as part of a curriculum framework. This more proactive approach can see PT as part of study skills and also personal development agendas generally being delivered by academic staff. It is this delivery of PT by a named member of academic staff that persists in the majority of HEIs and that is reflected in my own practice and experience.

The concept of support is key within all the different models and roles of PT. This support can be for academic learning, personal and pastoral support and, more recently, support in PDP, gaining employment and identifying and building on transferable skills. It can be argued that underlying the concept of support is the concept of student need. Myers (2013) discusses this as central "to a critical examination of why students are supported" (p. 592). Students are often viewed as vulnerable and "if need is linked to vulnerability, then models of support can follow a pastoral tradition" (p. 592). The question that needs asking at this point is, what vulnerability means in this context? Is the student vulnerable to failing modules, or leaving university or of the student not achieving to their fullest potential? These questions can be linked to policy issues such as retention, learning gain and achievement in terms of class of degree or award. Myers (2008) argues that in a time of mass participation "when participation levels increase interaction becomes impersonal

and formal. Personal, informal student support becomes a symbolic representation of an earlier, highly prized form of higher education" (p. 745).

The concept of control comes to the fore at this point. Myers (2013) states that "forms of student support can focus on protection or control rather than challenge and development" and points to the contradictions in terms that, "it is likely that this will conflict with the educational mission of the university" (Myers 2013: 597). This sees PT as a controlling tool of the organisation and the student seen as a child that needs supervision. Attendance monitoring can be seen as one of the mechanisms of this control and such systems can "assume that students are not making valid decisions and need protection from the consequences of their decisions" (Myers 2013: 597). Students then are seen to be needy and this is reflected in "university websites [that] assure students and their parents that there are sources of support to address potential problems" (Myers 2013: 597). The tensions here are that "in some cases support that works in terms of increasing satisfaction or retention may actively contradict developmental aims" (Myers 2013: 599).

As Myers (2013) discusses "one reason students are supported is to produce desired outcomes for the institution" (p. 594). This can be because of "support via policy drivers, such as funding formulae that reward retention of students, or less direct influences, such as increased demands and expectations from parents and students" (Myers 2013: 594). When looking at PT as linked to national policy initiatives it becomes apparent that PT is not only used as a support tool for students but that there are organisational risks if there is a perception of PT not working or being effective. Grant (2006) discusses how "exposure through the results of the National Student Survey, and individual problems may lead to damaging and time-consuming complaints and appeals" (p. 19). As retention becomes a key policy driver

there are numerous links made between PT and retention: "personal tutors and other departmental staff are in a unique position for spotting a student who is experiencing difficulties at an early stage" (Grant, 2006). While Smith (2005) states that "personal tutors are well placed to help with the identification of sudden onset or accumulating problems" (p. 44).

Simpson (2006) explicitly looks at the financial benefits of PT and states that "the first step in following the money is to link personal tutoring with student retention" (p.33). Simpson (2006) states that personalisation can be done through PT and this impacts on retention. Issues of monitoring also surface in the literature. As Simpson (2006) encourages organisations to "develop methods of identifying your most vulnerable students so that proactive contact resources can be targeted on them" learning analytics and attendance records start to become things that personal tutors should be utilising. This is reflected in LJMU's PT policy. Simpson (2006) goes on to suggest a cost-benefit analysis for any PT strategy. This view is symptomatic of the view of the "student as investor" who wants guarantees of return on their investment and that PT can be seen as one method of demonstrating this support (Simpson 2006).

Discussion in relation to practice

As Beaty (1997) states, "professional practice requires the development of insight and wisdom in responding to the idiosyncrasies of the situations that face us" (p. 7). How then does my practice fit in relation to both the literature on PT and the recent policy drivers and shifting focus of HE? Ball et al. (2011) state that those involved in delivering the practical, day to day aspect of policy are:

> …*not naïve actors, they are creative and sophisticated and they manage, but they are also tired and overloaded much of the time. They are engaged, coping with meaningful and the*

meaningless, often self-mobilised around patterns of focus and neglect and torn between discomfort and pragmatism" (p. 636)

I find this useful in trying to interpret and position my role and practice in terms of delivering and supporting institutional drivers. Having recently completed a series of Level 4 PT meetings what is evident is the range of issues students have. These range from homesickness, anxiety about assessments, health issues, accommodation issues, family problems and more. While most of the students turned up this is not always the case, particularly in the second semester of the academic year. It is often the ones that do not engage and do not turn up that require the support and help. Follow up phone calls, emails and re-arranged meetings all take time and effort and a lot of PT work happens outside of the timetabled meetings mentioned in the PT policy. Blythman (2006) suggests the mesolevel is very important but often overlooked and that "this required a definition of personal tutoring, which became the systematic monitoring and support of individual academic progress" (p. 105). This links to ideas of PT as mechanisms for control and monitoring and to managerialism. In practice this means better record keeping, reporting of my interactions with my tutees and being seen to deliver against objectives. In some respects, it can be what Ball et al. (2011) discusses as policy as needing to be seen to be done. There can be a disconnect between policy at institutional level and the tick box culture that can accompany and reality of practice on the ground. The interactions personal tutors have with students are often difficult to capture and the less tangible benefits in terms of student belonging, student experience and student attainment are difficult to capture. While policy often focuses on quantifiable metrics such as number of PT meetings with students it is often the *ad hoc* chats and emails that have the greater impact on the 'at risk' student.

The apparent tension between institutional and individual outcomes can be seen as an increasing concern in light of national agenda and policies. Smith (2005) identifies intrinsic and dynamic student risk: "it is argued that students arrive in higher education with a potential point of entry risk factor" and that "monitoring the student body to look for an increase in their dynamic risk factor can be done by monitoring attendance and engagement or participation" (pp. 46-7).

Is this what my PT practice should be doing? As argued in the literature the need to provide student support can be counter-productive to university strategies in developing independent learners capable of entering the job market as autonomous and self-supporting workers. Myers (2013) states that "the need and desirability of the development of independence, or autonomy, as part of the process of acquiring a higher education is virtually axiomatic" however "provision that supports students to achieve institutional engagement and retention outcomes can contradict provision that seeks to enable students to achieve a sense of their own capabilities" (p. 594). There are professional and managerial tensions here. To what extent should we consider the student to be an adult able to make their own decisions about attendance and attainment? Myers discusses how "forms of student support can focus on protection or control rather than challenge and development. It is likely that this will conflict with the educational mission of the university" (p. 597). This can result in questioning differences in approach from delivering PT as either a student focussed support system or a managerial tool focusing on institutional benefits. Increasingly there can be tensions between the two. Myers supports this by stating that "student support practices have the potential to render students less capable and it demonstrates the complex relationship between different outcomes, in this case development, student satisfaction and institutional" (p. 595). The ways in which

we view students can be multifaceted and as Myers states "the way in which the student can be simultaneously constructed in many ways, for example as a vulnerable child, as a demanding customer and as a collaborating partner" (p. 599) can make the practice of PT a challenging and inherently complicated issue.

Conclusion

It is useful to position practice within the broader context of the policy and change with HE. Practice needs to be situated and there needs to be a broader understanding of how policy plays out in different situations and the impact it has. This is what Ball (2013) describes as the "wild profusion" of policy at implementation level. The increased pressure to adopt a more managerialist approach brought about by the national policy agenda means metrics on transition and attainment are being linked to funding. This could result in an increased focus on the role PT can play. It has been useful to question my own practice in delivering PT in relation to this and to see how my role fits in the implementation staircase as described by Saunders at al. (2015). This can better inform my own practice although it can be argued that the literature indicates a lack of understanding of the problem that PT is trying to fix. Is it for the student or for the organisation? Is it about support or enablement, is it about monitoring and control or about self-development and independent learning? This "role confusion" (McFarlane 2016) may mean that while PT will be increasingly open to more scrutiny to prove its value and to be more accountable there is a lack of clarity at the start as to what its role actually is.

If a more managerialist approach to PT is adopted then PT needs to be supported with discussion around roles, with adequate training and potentially a higher profile for PT as supporting policy drivers. Ultimately while there are tensions between the different roles PT can play these do not

have to be thought of as distinct and conflicting. Rather, as Myers (2013) advocates, "it is possible to use the business model in a way that is in keeping with the ethical purpose of providing support" and that "it is both ethically correct and advantageous to the HEI to support students and this work should form part of academic practice" (p. 594); ultimately positioning the practice of PT within the wider context of national and institutional policy should enable those practicing at the macro-level to more fully understand the contribution effective PT can make both to the student and to the institution.

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