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1 ***Undertaking the Personal Tutoring Role with Sports Students at a United Kingdom***  
2 ***University***

3  
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## Abstract

1  
2 Personal tutoring is renowned for the positive role it can play in supporting student  
3 satisfaction, engagement and attainment outcomes in higher education. Surprisingly though,  
4 few studies have specifically investigated the demands of this role from the perspective of the  
5 personal tutor. Through the theoretical lens of Role Theory (Biddle, 1986), this study  
6 explored university tutors' experiences of their personal tutoring role within a sport  
7 educational setting at a United Kingdom university. All data was collected through face-to-  
8 face semi structured qualitative interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Key  
9 findings were the negative impact of personal tutoring on participants role multiplicity, intra-  
10 role accumulation and role identity. Most participants viewed the role as being time  
11 consuming, emotionally challenging and one they would prefer not to undertake (role  
12 multiplicity), feeling under qualified and ill-equipped in assisting their tutees because of the  
13 increasingly serious and complex nature of non-academic related issues presented (intra-role  
14 accumulation). Several lacked confidence and interest in the role, finding it to be stressful and  
15 instead favouring greater research responsibilities within their workloads (role identity). The  
16 collective findings provide academic colleagues and senior university management teams  
17 with evidence to inform future institutional policies and practices. This will help ensure  
18 personal tutors working across multiple disciplines and academic levels fully understand  
19 what the role is, the demands they are likely to encounter, the continued professional  
20 development required to facilitate and support the role and how the role should be better  
21 recognised in academic promotion criteria. Study limitations and future research avenues are  
22 discussed.

23

24 **Keywords:** academic experiences, higher education; personal tutoring; role theory, sports  
25 students

## **Introduction**

Personal tutoring is widely renowned for the positive role it can play in supporting student satisfaction, engagement and attainment outcomes in Higher Education (HE) (Hagenauer & Violet, 2014; McFarlane, 2016; Watts, 2011; Yale, 2019). Examples include aiding the transition from school or college into HE, reinforcing learning in core academic modules, promoting transferable skills development, improving student retention, progression and achievement and supporting in the building of self-confidence, emotional well-being, student-staff relationships, career awareness and graduate attributes (Evans, 2013; Kim & Sax, 2009; Neville, 2007; Ross, Head, King, Perry & Smith, 2014; Stork & Walker, 2015).

### **Student Personal Tutoring Experiences**

Studies spanning several decades and many academic disciplines have shown how HE students perceive effective personal tutors as being approachable, accessible, caring, non-judgemental, good at signposting to specialist services and effective communicators (Calcagno, Walker & Grey, 2017; Ghenghesh, 2018; Race, 2010; Smith, 2008; Yale, 2019). Laycock and Wisdom (2009) found personal tutoring played a key role in enhancing retention levels whilst McFarlane (2016) found those students who interacted more frequently with their personal tutor achieved higher satisfaction and progression rates.

Further evidence indicates that HE students studying across wide-ranging academic disciplines have encountered mixed experiences of personal tutoring, often lacking a general understanding of key personal tutor roles and responsibilities (Hayman, Coyles, Wharton & Mellor, 2020; Myers, 2008), sometimes viewing it to be disorganised and poorly integrated within the curriculum (Hixenbaugh, Pearson & Williams, 2006) and that they do not always fully understand their tutor's value, both in the present and future, in supporting their academic success and offering of career guidance (Ghenghesh, 2018; Gubby & Nicole, 2013).

## 1 **Academics Experiences of Undertaking the Personal Tutoring Role**

2 Personal tutors have a multifaceted role to play in the academic, personal and professional  
3 development of their students (Race, 2010). Principally, they have responsibility for  
4 providing a personalised approach to university life, but this can often be lost when students  
5 are part of large departments. Whilst research has tended to focus more on exploring personal  
6 tutoring from the student perspective, several recent studies have now investigated the  
7 experiences of academics who have undertaken the role (Ghenghesh, 2018; Grey &  
8 Osbourne, 2018; Gardner & Lane, 2010; McFarlane, 2016; Por & Barriball, 2008; Stephen,  
9 O’Connell & Hall, 2008; Wakelin, 2021). Collectively, this work illustrates the effectiveness  
10 in personal tutors helping students to encounter a happy and successful university experience  
11 and supporting and signposting them to specialist student support and institutional welfare  
12 services when necessary.

13 However, research has also reported dissatisfaction towards the role, citing how  
14 formal recognition of the personal tutoring role is not always included in workloads and a  
15 lack of formal training opportunities (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007; McFarlane, 2016 Watts,  
16 2011;). Studies further demonstrate how academic staff have long expressed displeasure and  
17 concern about the complex boundaries between academic and pastoral aspects of personal  
18 tutoring, where interpretations between individual tutors may differ, thus potentially leading  
19 to inconsistencies in student experience (Gubby & Nicole; 2013; Luck, 2010; Stephen,  
20 O’Connell & Hall, 2008). The personal tutor role has been found to be ill defined, time  
21 consuming and a source of conflict for academic staff due to high demands and expectations  
22 placed on them (Gidman, Humphreys & Andrews, 2000). Wakelin (2021) confirmed the  
23 issue of boundaries in the personal tutor role due to the way it overlaps with other academic  
24 responsibilities and Ghenghesh (2018) found how success of the personal tutoring system  
25 depends on the ‘buy in’ of tutors and their ability to balance the escalating demands of their

1 academic work and research. Richardson (1998) and Rhodes and Kinks (2005) both  
2 examined personal tutors views of their role with pre-registration nurses, finding they cared  
3 greatly about and wanted to support their students as best possible, but had uncertainties  
4 about the specific nature of the role. Collectively, these study findings suggest regular  
5 professional development opportunities should be made available to all personal tutors,  
6 irrespective of subject expertise and experience, and that by doing so may help to ensure  
7 colleagues feel suitably trained and confident to best support their tutees as they transition  
8 into, through and out of HE.

### 9 **Theoretical Framework**

10 To date, the personal tutoring role has not been examined from a role theory  
11 perspective in general, and in particular the role multiplicity framework (Jackson & Schuler,  
12 1985). The nature of being an academic requires them to enact multiple simultaneous roles  
13 within and between different roles, including teaching, research and administration. Role  
14 multiplicity also applies to the role of personal tutoring. As indicated previously, the personal  
15 tutor often has responsibility for the academic, personal and professional development of  
16 their students. Although most research has examined the negative aspects associated with role  
17 multiplicity (e.g., role strain, role-overload) more recently it has also been suggested how this  
18 can result in role efficacy and positive emotions (Rothbard, 2001). The negative or positive  
19 influence of role multiplicity has been shown to depend on the salience of the role (Thoits,  
20 2012) as well as an individual's polychronic orientation (Berger & Bruch, 2019).

21 The negative aspects of role multiplicity have been explained using Role Strain  
22 Theory (RST). Role strain has been defined as a 'felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations'  
23 (Goode, 1960, p.483). RST is a psychological theory that in previous research has been  
24 applied across educational, sport and organisational psychology settings to explain problems  
25 faced by individuals when fulfilling multiple role demands. RST focuses on four interrelated

1 stressors: overload, conflict, underload and ambiguity arising from life role demands (Fenzel,  
2 1989; Holt, 1982).

3         When applying RST principles within teaching and learning contexts, overload would  
4 occur when demands exceed personal resources, such as teaching across a number of  
5 modules or programmes at once and leaving limited or insufficient time to prepare resources.  
6 Conflict would happen when there was disagreement between what an individual intends to  
7 do, and the demands imposed by the system and/or others. An example would be opposing  
8 beliefs with those of senior management towards prescribed workload and expected outputs.  
9 The underload element of RST emphasises a perceived underutilisation of an individual's  
10 capabilities and lack of challenge, including frequently undertaking roles which sit outside of  
11 an individual's expertise or skill sets. The final RST concept is ambiguity and refers to  
12 limited understanding or clarity of one's responsibilities, such as the mixed messages  
13 presented to individuals about different priorities in their academic role.

#### 14 **Study Aim and Rationale**

15         The recent growth in HE personal tutoring research has been positively welcomed and  
16 is an encouraging step forward. However, the work has tended to be atheoretical and captured  
17 mainly tutor experiences from across a narrow range of disciplines. This study makes several  
18 contributions to the literature, and to our knowledge is the first to have used role theory, and  
19 in particular the concept of role multiplicity and role strain, to examine university tutors'  
20 experiences of their personal tutor role within a sport educational setting. Findings will  
21 provide university academics, support staff and senior management teams with evidence to  
22 design, deliver, manage and evaluate future student and staff personal tutoring policies,  
23 relevant professional development opportunities and procedures most effectively.

24

25

## 1 **Research Context**

2           This study was undertaken at a United Kingdom university renowned nationally for  
3 teaching excellence (hereafter referred to using the pseudonym BW). The origins of BW are  
4 rooted in the need to provide practical and vocational education, and this remains a core  
5 feature of its current provision. Ensuring fair access and reducing educational inequality are  
6 key strategic outcomes underlined in BW's Education Strategy and 2020-21 to 2024-25  
7 Access and Participation Plan. BW has traditionally recruited high student numbers from  
8 underrepresented backgrounds, although this figure has fallen slightly since 2015. BW has  
9 long encountered retention issues in undergraduate sport students, especially those  
10 characterised as widening participation. A significant proportion of newly arriving BW sport  
11 cohorts now enter from backgrounds not typically considered traditional and who may need  
12 greater levels of support and guidance to settle and adapt into university life. This includes  
13 those from low-income families, are the first in their family to enter HE or who come from  
14 neighbourhoods where HE is not a common destination (Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008;  
15 Turner, Morrison, Cotton, Child, Stevens, Nash & Kneale, 2017).

16           The BW personal tutoring system is designed to supplement the academic, personal  
17 and professional development of all its students. Personal tutors are required to communicate  
18 their contact details, office hours and meeting arrangements to each of their tutees, so they  
19 are aware of how and when they can make contact and meet either face to face or remotely.  
20 Strong emphasis is placed on helping newly arrived students to settle promptly and  
21 confidently into their new learning community and continuing this support through the  
22 duration of their university studies. For example, staff and their personal tutees get to know  
23 each other and establish a relationship at the very start of their university journey by  
24 undertaking a range of team building and practical sport activities together during programme  
25 induction. The personal tutor also monitors their tutees' annual academic progress,



1 attendance in taught sessions and provides further targeted support for those not advancing  
2 satisfactorily.

3 The personal tutor allocated in year one at BW remains with the same student  
4 throughout their undergraduate studies, which helps for an effective and longstanding  
5 professional relationship to be developed. This is particularly important when it comes to  
6 completing reference requests for postgraduate study or employment. If a member of staff  
7 changes role or leaves BW, a 'hand over' of tutees to the new personal tutor occurs. Students  
8 are made aware well in advance of any change to their personal tutor and can request to  
9 change if they wish from the one allocated. As the role can involve complex issues when  
10 dealing with students, several short (2 hours) personal tutor training courses are available at  
11 BW, including 'Positive Relationships', 'Responding to Student's Academic Concerns',  
12 'Preparing and Delivering Feedback' and 'Presenting your Best Self'. Personal tutor related  
13 activities are also embedded into a core year one sport module to raise the currency and  
14 significance of the role with first year undergraduates.

## 15 **Methodology**

### 16 **Participants**

17 In October 2018, all academic staff with personal tutoring responsibilities and based  
18 with the sport department at BW were invited to participate in the study. Once institutional  
19 ethical clearance was granted, a recruitment email outlining the study aims, objectives,  
20 inclusion criteria and procedures to follow, along with participant information sheet and  
21 consent form was communicated. This explained how the research team wished to recruit and  
22 then interview participants about their experiences of undertaking the personal tutoring role  
23 with sports students at BW. A self-selecting sampling approach was adopted, resulting in 10  
24 eligible full-time academics volunteering to participate in the study. This sample contained a  
25 mix of experienced and newly appointed academics whose roles included lecturer, senior

1 lecturer, principal lecturer and Head of Subject. Each participant was either a Fellow (8) or  
2 Senior Fellow (2) of the Higher Education Academy and had personal tutoring experience  
3 across all levels of undergraduate study at BW. All consenting participants were assigned  
4 pseudonyms to protect anonymity and were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

## 5 **Procedure**

6 This qualitative study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews because of their  
7 excellent reputation for gaining in-depth information about an individual's understanding,  
8 perception and experiences of a given phenomenon (Frances, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009;  
9 Jamshed, 2014). This data collection tool also provides structure and allows for asking  
10 participants the same questions but with flexibility. Hence, it provides the researcher with the  
11 opportunity to use prompts and probe deeper when appropriate (e.g., Dearnley, 2005).  
12 However, it might result in social desirable answers and leading questions (DeJonckheere &  
13 Vaughn, 2019). The design and development of the interview schedule was informed by  
14 Ghenghesh (2018). In all cases, interviews were completed at convenient times and locations  
15 for all consenting participants within a safe, comfortable and private location on the BW  
16 campus. In total, ten interviews lasting between 29 minutes and 53 minutes took place over a  
17 three-month period during late 2018 and early 2019. When undertaking qualitative research,  
18 it is important that the interviewer quickly builds trust and rapport with interviewees, so that  
19 they feel reassured and relaxed to freely discuss topics they feel appropriate (Patton, 2002).  
20 The first and second authors undertook the interviewer roles and each had experience of  
21 undertaking qualitatively based HE pedagogic research. Additionally, both had over ten years  
22 of personal tutoring experience with sports students, which ensured good understanding into  
23 likely topics, events and encounters discussed by participants.

24 Every attempt was made to guide participants through a series of open-ended  
25 questions which probed their experiences, views and reflections of acting as a personal tutor

1 for BW undergraduate sports students. Both interviewees knew each participant  
2 professionally and were conscious this may influence their willingness to fully engage and  
3 respond honestly to questions. To ensure participants felt at ease to share personal and  
4 exclusive accounts, each interview started with a reassurance that all data would be  
5 anonymised at every analysis and reporting stage and that there were no correct or incorrect  
6 answers.

7 Example questions included ‘how important do you think it is to have an effective  
8 personal tutor system available to students’ and ‘do you feel you are able to effectively deal  
9 with the majority of requests from your personal tutees’. Supplementary probing was used to  
10 gain further insights, with examples including ‘why did you find this to be so particularly  
11 challenging?’, ‘who instead do you think needs to be involved?’, ‘were there any other  
12 options available to you?’ and ‘why do you think this would have helped you in making a  
13 decision?’. This ad-hoc questioning approach ensured participant centeredness, making it  
14 possible to follow up conversations where appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and enabled  
15 the interview direction to be guided by participants rather than directed by the schedule. A  
16 copy of the interview guide is available on request from the first author. The interview  
17 questions were pilot tested by two BW academic colleagues who each had experience of  
18 engaging with the institutional personal tutor process but were based outside of the sports  
19 department. This confirmed an approximate completion time of 45 minutes, with all  
20 interview schedule wording and terminology considered appropriate and understandable.

## 21 **Analysis**

22 Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and subjected to the  
23 thematic analysis guidelines published by Braun and Clarke (2021). The first, second and  
24 forth authors read all nine transcripts multiple times, with notes reflecting theme statements

1 and their meanings placed within margins. The same authors then independently annotated  
2 each interview transcript with their personalised thoughts and interpretations of the data.

3 Initial thematic coding employed a deductive approach, which is recommended for  
4 qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Once the  
5 deductive approach was complete, an inductive approach was undertaken to identify potential  
6 new or unanticipated findings (e.g., Cho & Lee, 2014; Frank et al., 2016) and to allow for  
7 lower order themes to be derived. There were several marginal differences between the three  
8 separate coding results. To resolve, the first and fourth authors discussed the coding of 10% of  
9 the interviews. Primary associations and connections based on similarities and patterns  
10 between derived themes were made, which generated three main themes. There were some  
11 minor discrepancies in the definition of themes, but this was resolved following discussion  
12 between the first and fourth authors. Once finalised, direct quotes representing each theme  
13 were selected. The final analysis stage involved developing written accounts from identified  
14 themes which were reviewed and redrafted several times until the final version was agreed.

## 15 **Results**

### 16 **Role Accumulation and Competing Demands of Personal Tutoring Duties**

17 The nature of the academic role requires the simultaneous performing of multiple,  
18 teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities (Griffin, 2022). There were clear  
19 differences between participants day-to-day personal tutoring practices and motives.  
20 Participants were committed to best supporting their students as much as possible and did so  
21 effectively when dealing with basic academic queries, e.g., assessment guidance, but agreed  
22 that students across all study levels had misguided expectations and only basic understanding  
23 of the BW personal tutoring system (Ghenghesh (2018). As indicated by Stephen, O’Connell  
24 and Hall (2008), participants spoke about students not always engaging with their formal  
25 personal tutor, but instead approaching staff members who they knew well and felt most

1 comfortable with. This created significant workload increases for some participants over  
2 others and tended to occur with final year students. This is reflected in the below passage by  
3 DCM who spoke about frequently supporting students who were not in their formal  
4 allocation of tutees. They said:

5 *I must write fifteen to twenty PGCE applications each year for students (who are*  
6 *not my personal tutees) but this is supposed to go through the formal channels of*  
7 *using their personal tutor’.*

8 DCS explained how students consider some tutors to be more accessible and  
9 approachable than others, thus tending to gravitate to those having taught them previously or  
10 who they think will be able to help the most. They said:

11 *I certainly think that the word spreads amongst students and they know what*  
12 *staff are renowned for. I have had students from other programmes that I do not*  
13 *even teach coming and asking me for meetings’.*

14 Students placed high demands on personal tutors, expecting them to provide  
15 immediate support, which at times took over their daily schedule (Grey & Osborne, 2020;  
16 Gidman, Humphreys & Andrews, 2000; Gubby & McNab, 2013). Participants were  
17 especially concerned about the escalating expectations of their tutees (Walker, 2022) and how  
18 they should be immediately available to provide answers to all requests and concerns  
19 (Hayman et al., 2020). Most usually, this involved supporting those with assessment and  
20 attendance issues but also included family, mental health and financial problems (Walker,  
21 2022). This was especially the case for newer staff who were less likely to know who, what  
22 or where to direct students if necessary (Huyton, 2009; Wakelin, 2021). Although  
23 participants felt time pressured and unequipped in the role (McFarlane, 2016; Walker, 2022;  
24 Watts, 2011), they were fully committed to supporting their tutees as best as they could, often  
25 investing considerable time and effort into finding out answers or signposting where

1 appropriate to relevant colleagues across BW. This is highlighted in the following passage by  
2 DCM who said:

3 *'students come to you for help, so if you have not got the knowledge or attitude to*  
4 *go and find out to help them it is pointless. They mostly come to you with stress*  
5 *and worry, so if you have not got that compassion and empathy to deal with that*  
6 *then they are going to go away more demotivated than when they came'.*

7 All participants agreed how being allocated too many tutees (role overload) impacted  
8 negatively on their success in undertaking the role, with several wishing for more manageable  
9 allocations. To illustrate, DCP said:

10 *'in the past, it (personal tutee allocation) has been as high as twenty-five for*  
11 *each year group, which was challenging'.*

12 DCA was in agreement, saying:

13 *'with bigger numbers each year, yes you can get to know students, but it takes a*  
14 *lot longer to get to know the names and the faces'.*

15 Annual changes to personal tutor allocations created overload of work for  
16 participants, with them preferring to supervise the same students who they teach regularly  
17 through all three years of their undergraduate studies (Por & Barriball, 2008). This was  
18 highlighted in the following passage by DCM, who said:

19 *'this way, they know you, they feel comfortable talking to you and if you were to*  
20 *change year on year, I would end up having about forty guidance tutees because*  
21 *all the ones from the first year, who got moved, were still coming to see me plus*  
22 *the ones who I had second year were coming to see me. They would just tend to*  
23 *stick with that member of staff who they knew best'.*

24 Participants explained the escalating workloads that personal tutoring duties can  
25 create and the time taken away to focus on other academic roles, including research and

1 income generation (Gidman, Humphreys & Andrews, 2000). For some, it seems they were  
2 not fully buying into the role (Ghenghesh, 2018), placing other aspects of the profession first.  
3 For example, DCP said:

4 *'there are times where the time pressure on me is that I just need to get out of the*  
5 *office just to make sure that students do not come in and disturb me with'.*

6 *DCP also explained their excessive role overload because of other department duties.*

7 *'when I was dissertation lead, I did loads of personal tutoring for students who*  
8 *were not my actual personal tutees because they saw you as the person who had*  
9 *the answers'.*

10 DCW provided insight into the additional personal tutoring demands placed on  
11 programme leaders, saying:

12 *'almost every student comes to you (as programme leader) because it is almost like*  
13 *some of them do not know who their personal tutor is. Even though we tell them, and we*  
14 *email them, they often do not know who that person is. So, they just go to the person who they*  
15 *think will have the answers to the questions that they have got'.*

16 McFarlane (2016) found new members of staff especially found the role to be  
17 demanding. This was illustrated in this study, both in terms of workload and emotional  
18 labour. To illustrate, DCH who had been employed 12 months at BW said:

19 *'sometimes, I just feel this personal tutoring role is beyond me'.*

20 Another recent addition to the academic staff team said:

21 *'I have had sleepless nights about students who have been telling me things and*  
22 *then worrying that I have done the right thing' (DCS).*

23 As many students enter BW from underrepresented backgrounds, including those who  
24 commute daily, are first generational and from low-participation neighbourhoods, they are  
25 more likely to request support for academic, pastoral, mental health and financial issues

1 (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2008). DCW explained the challenges they  
2 had faced in best supporting their personal tutees with such issues:

3 *'It is hard dealing with people's problems and listening to people coming to you*  
4 *endlessly with, 'I cannot do this, I cannot do that', 'I cannot do the other'. 'I am*  
5 *not well.' 'This has happened'. 'That has happened'. And you almost need*  
6 *guidance on how to have a bit more resilience, or to not take it on board too*  
7 *much. Because if you have a day of dealing with heavy stuff like that, then it can*  
8 *drain you'.*

9 The following passage presents the thoughts of DCK, who said:

10 *'there is a part of me that thinks if they (personal tutees) did all come and see me*  
11 *six times a year, I would be overwhelmed. There is enough to do as it is, and it is*  
12 *never a ten-minute meeting really. It can be, but if there is an issue you can be*  
13 *hours. Last week I worked four or five hours with students with various things*  
14 *they asked for help with'.*

15 DCH further highlighted the emotional demands of the role by saying:

16 *'I did have one week when I had three or four people in with problems and it was*  
17 *quite heavy. It was challenging as you cannot let it go either as you are worried*  
18 *about them because you are a human being'.*

### 19 **Role Accumulation vs Role shredding and Role efficacy vs Role Stress**

20 Studies have shown how role accumulation can have both positive (happiness) and  
21 negative (mental stress and exhaustion) consequences (Berger & Bruch, 2019). A significant  
22 study finding was the conflicting participant views about the importance of personal tutoring  
23 with a clear split between those who were primarily student centred, motivated to do the role  
24 and committed to building positive relationships with tutees and those who were more  
25 focussed on other research focussed academic roles (Ghenghesh, 2018; Por & Barriball, 2008



1 ). From a role multiplicity perspective, personal tutoring was stressful for some. Those who  
2 felt efficacious in carrying out the role did so because they knew how and where to refer  
3 students when necessary, understood the benefits personal tutoring could provide to the  
4 student experience, had effective networks, were empathetic and more focussed on education  
5 over research (Luck, 2010; Por & Barriball, 2008).

6 Some participants questioned their suitability for the role because of limited prior  
7 experience and training and how it was one role to many within their daily responsibilities, as  
8 found by McFarlane (2016) and Walker (2022). Other participants believed their enthusiasm  
9 and goodwill towards the role was not always matched by colleagues, especially those with  
10 successful research profiles and aspirations or recognised by senior management. For  
11 example, DCM said:

12 *'I can imagine those who are more research focused are potentially using this as*  
13 *an, ok, I have got my allocation of three hours a week and I will have those*  
14 *available. If they do not come then that is their prerogative. I am not going to*  
15 *chase anything up whereas there are maybe staff who are probably more*  
16 *encouraging for students to engage and come along'.*

17 Participants discussed having learned from experience to tailor the student support and  
18 guidance they provide to match their specific needs (role efficacy). For example, DCV said:

19 *'where we must encourage students to come in and do the personal*  
20 *developmental plans and things like that, I do not do that with them. I did initially*  
21 *the first few years I was here and they do not engage. They do not want it. They*  
22 *do not see the benefit of it and it becomes a waste of time for me. Most of the time*  
23 *we just talk'.*

24 DCK further stated:

1 *I see the guidance tutees as a bit of, 'we are here to support when you need us',*  
2 *as opposed to shoving it down their throat. So, there is not a one size fits all*  
3 *approach that works for everybody, so why not just let them set the tone and take*  
4 *the lead'.*

5 The ambiguity of how the personal tutoring role is understood by students was  
6 notable (Gubby & McNab, 2013). DCY elaborated by saying:

7 *'students bypass me and go to the programme leader because they know that*  
8 *programme leaders have the authority to get things done, so they are quite*  
9 *strategic learners. They need me when they need me'.*

10 Although the formal personal tutor system exists at BW, mandatory practices are not always  
11 followed by staff (Mynott, 2016). This was supported by DCM who said:

12 *'I think it is important that there is a system formally in there, which students are*  
13 *aware of, but I think there are some pockets of it (personal tutoring) happening*  
14 *but not effectively'.*

15 DCP discussed how only teaching a specific year group can make it difficult in getting  
16 to know personal tutees who may be enrolled across multiple programmes and levels. They  
17 said:

18 *'I would say that the level sixes (final year undergraduates) I know a bit, but I do*  
19 *not teach at level five. So, I tend to lose that contact with them. And I teach very*  
20 *little at level four. So, if they do not come and see me a lot then it tends to be*  
21 *almost starting the relationship from scratch at level six. Level fives do not come*  
22 *that much. There is one or two of them who do'.*

23 In agreement with Walker (2022), participants were concerned at what the personal  
24 tutor role had become and gave advice on what they thought it should be. Several spoke  
25 about incentivising and sufficiently resourcing the role more, including additional work

1 loaded hours and training opportunities. As previously indicated by Hayman et al., (2020)  
2 and Gubby and Nicole (2013), participants thought it very important that newly arrived  
3 students were educated on the wide-ranging personal and professional benefits that the role  
4 provides. For example, DCY said:

5 *'I think for the personal tutor role, it is vital that we create those relationships*  
6 *from day one where the students know that we care about them. That we are there*  
7 *to support them and help them through. We are not just there as problem solvers*  
8 *and firefighters, and I think my experiences are that is what they think the system*  
9 *is for'.*

10 It was suggested how the role could be ringfenced for better motivated and experienced  
11 staff because not everyone views themselves as an effective personal tutor (Walker, 2022).

12 For example, DCA said:

13 *'not everyone wants to be a personal tutor, therefore if you are not wanting to do*  
14 *the role or you feel uncomfortable, are you actually going to give your best to the*  
15 *students'.*

16 Most participants were frustrated with the formal nature of BW personal tutoring  
17 policies and procedures, with DCY saying:

18 *'what I would say is at a higher level the people in charge maybe need to revisit,*  
19 *not what we do, but why we do what we do. I think things need freshening up. I*  
20 *think maybe some sort of involvement of staff and students together to create*  
21 *some potential new policies would be a fruitful idea because sometimes we just*  
22 *do things annually for the sake of it'.*

23 Considering the heavy workload and responsibility, DCW felt there to be a lack of  
24 incentive to effectively undertake the role, saying:

1        *'so if you are a brilliant personal tutor, that will never get recognised. Whereas if*  
2        *you are brilliant at research, or brilliant at business and engagement, that is*  
3        *going to tick boxes. So, if you minimise the churn of your students and deliver*  
4        *good grades, unless I have missed something there is no report at the end of the*  
5        *year which says, right, you have retained all your students. There is no*  
6        *dashboard which says, here is what your three levels of personal tutor students*  
7        *have done, have achieved. It does not fit into anything. It is invisible'.*

### 8        **Suitability of Personal Tutors in Supporting Non-Academic Student Matters**

9        Participants reported how the breadth, severity and complexity of topics students were  
10       now wanting to discuss had escalated in recent years (Ghenghesh, 2018), leading to negative  
11       intra-role accumulation. They talked about tutees requesting support with sensitive personal  
12       issues unrelated to university life (Hayman et al., 2020) and feeling professionally torn as to  
13       intervene or not (Walker, 2022). Some discussed the seriousness of recent discussions and  
14       feeling unsuitably qualified to assist. For example, DCM said:

15       *'students open up to me in numerous situations, you know, from deaths in the*  
16       *family to coming out and identifying as gay'. shared similar encounters, stating*  
17       *'some students have discussed really intimate personal issues with me that they*  
18       *feel that they cannot address anywhere else and to be fair, at times, I have felt*  
19       *that I have not got the skill set to deal with the mental health side of the game, if*  
20       *that is the best way of putting it'.*

21       DCW discussed their encounters of challenging conversations with tutees, saying:

22       *'I had a student in the other day whose sister had an eating disorder and wanted*  
23       *me to work out what to do with that, and how to help her out. And the same day, I*  
24       *had a student come in whose girlfriend had lost a baby last year and then this*  
25       *year developed anxiety and depression and was arguing with her parents'.*

1 DCH talked about several scenarios where they felt under qualified to help. They said:

2 *'one week I had a guy come in that had been involved in a horrific criminal*  
3 *incident. He had been attacked in his car and dragged along the high street with*  
4 *someone on his roof. Then another, a cancer patient, came in saying that he had*  
5 *a sore head and he was panicking and all sorts of stuff'.*

6 DCB provided the following insight into a particularly sensitive topic they faced. They  
7 said:

8 *'this year, I had somebody who come to me with some personal issues that have*  
9 *been going on outside of university. So, his sister was involved in some sort of*  
10 *gang kind of culture. In a nutshell, a rival gang was threatening the lives of his*  
11 *sister and his mum back home. That was something that I had to, kind of, ask for*  
12 *some advice round so you know, what I should do with that'.*

13 DCA had similar experiences, saying:

14 *'last week, I had two students who came in talking about emotional problems and*  
15 *even talking about self-harming. Over the last two or three years, there seems to*  
16 *be more personal problems appearing for whatever reason but I am not sure if*  
17 *this is fully my responsibility'.*

18 DCK told a similar story of having to deal with increasingly complex and sensitive  
19 student issues, saying:

20 *'from a pastoral point of view, I have had everything and anything really. A*  
21 *massive range of things from illnesses and injuries that they have suffered and*  
22 *have missed sessions. Some of them where they have been in trouble with the*  
23 *police or they have been arrested for various things. Pretty much everything, you*  
24 *know, students that have problems with their sexuality and cannot cope with that.*  
25 *They have come to university and they have hidden their sexuality for years and*

1        *years and then realise that they want to come out as it were, you know. I have*  
2        *girls come to me and they are pregnant and they do not know what to do, whether*  
3        *they want to take time off. Everything. I have pretty much had everything’.*

4        Some participants attended a recent face-to-face personal tutoring training course  
5        delivered internally by BW colleagues, which was well received for clearly defining the  
6        personal tutor role and confirming boundaries. As DCW said:

7        *‘I learned you have just got to be very careful about giving any advice. The*  
8        *advice being that people in student services are far more trained and far more*  
9        *qualified than I will ever be to deal with these matters’.*

10       Others felt out of their depth dealing with student mental health matters, suggesting for  
11       senior management to be made fully aware of the magnitude of this problem. Some  
12       mentioned having had to take responsibility for their tutee’s psychological wellbeing due to  
13       oversubscription of university and local community support services. For example, DCH  
14       said:

15       *‘that (mental health) is the biggest thing I have dealt with this year and I have*  
16       *had to deal with people with anxiety and depression and I am just not trained for*  
17       *it. I am lucky, I have got an interest in psychology, but I am not a psychologist*  
18       *and they (BW) cannot expect you to be able to do that’.*

19       Supporting Walker (2022), DCM thought a good idea would be for key BW health and  
20       wellbeing contacts to be shared and publicised more widely, stating:

21       *‘maybe sending information on things to staff like student support services, the*  
22       *wellbeing services and the financial side of things would help as I do not think I*  
23       *have ever received anything like that. I think it has just been a case of dealing*  
24       *with it myself’.*

25

## Conclusion

This study effectively applied Role Theory (Biddle, 1986) and role multiplicity framework (Jackson & Schuler, 1985) to explore personal tutors' experiences and tensions arising within the role. Findings show the negative influence of role multiplicity, in that academics viewed personal tutoring as being a time consuming and emotionally challenging role that they preferred not always to undertake (Barlow & Antoniou, 2007; Gubby & Nicole, 2013; McFarlane, 2016).

Most were more confident in supporting their students with basic academic issues and queries, including study skills and assessment guidance (Walker, 2022). However, participants experienced negative intra-role accumulation through the build-up of many different concerns that the personal tutoring role created. They explained feeling under qualified, ill-equipped and at times reluctant to assist with the increasingly serious nature and high volume of non-academic related issues presented by their students (Stephen, O'Connell & Hall, 2008; Wakelin, 2021). This was exacerbated by the ill-defined nature of personal tutor responsibilities and lack of formal training for non-academic issues (Mynott, 2016; Walker, 2022). This was especially the case for lesser experienced participants and those with predominant research backgrounds and limited teaching experience (Wakelin, 2021).

Some were tokenistic in their personal tutoring approach, lacking interest and the confidence to competently undertake the role and instead wishing to relinquish their role in favour of alternative research commitments. This finding supports the traditional view of an academic in which research is a strong part of their identity whereas personal tutoring is not and how research success can result in recognition and promotion and whereas pastoral care may not.

This study was not without limitations. Firstly, all interviews were conducted by researchers known to the participants as their colleagues. Whilst any pre-existing rapport may

1 have helped participants to feel more relaxed in expressing their views, there was still an  
2 inherent power dynamic between colleagues of different standings which may have led in  
3 some instances to the participants withholding specific information and/or expressing their  
4 views in a less critical manner. Secondly, only male participants who taught across the same  
5 subject discipline were interviewed, making generalizations difficult. This is important  
6 because there is some indication that the gender of tutors may influence their participation in  
7 the role and relationship with students (Grant, 2006).

8 Future research is warranted which examines the consequences of viewing personal  
9 tutoring as a role strain or role efficacy on factors like burnout and emotional exhaustion  
10 (e.g., Berger & Bruch, 2019). Findings provide senior university management teams with  
11 important practical implications for most effectively training, supporting, motivating and  
12 rewarding academic staff with personal tutoring responsibilities. These include the need for a  
13 clearer role description of personal tutoring (McFarlane, 2016; Mynott, 2016), regular  
14 informal and formal staff training opportunities (Ridley, 2006; Watts, 2011) and the  
15 importance of including this role within the promotional and recognition criteria of university  
16 reward systems.

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