



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH

A Guide for Personal Academic Tutors

Summary Guide

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This summary guide is a brief, practical guide to the main functions and boundaries of the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) role. The summary aims to clarify expectations, provide guidelines for PAT/student meetings and outline good practice for effective support and referral procedures. The extended guide covers some aspects in more detail.

PAT role:

- Discuss and advise on module choices
- Advise on assessment extensions, problems with organising timetables
- Where appropriate, provide support and facilitate placements
- Provide information to Boards of examiners and Programme Committee as required
- Provide students with advice on specific recommendation from Boards of Examiners
- Provide records of documentation (clinic reports, letters relating to progress through programme, extenuating circumstances) relating to students to School Office for storage with student's file.
- Be prepared to advise on careers issues related to own professional expertise, particularly regarding programmes with professional body connections. All other careers issues can be directed to the careers service.
- Provide references where appropriate
- Review performance, and be aware of issues which may impinge on the student's learning
- Liaise with relevant support staff where necessary and offer suggestions for sources of advice and help
- Offer adaptive strategies for dealing with academic problems and learning skills issues
- Address identified student difficulties, including absence

PAT role: key skills

(for further discussion, see extended guide)

- Effective listening skills and the ability to use open questions to go beyond presenting issues.
- Understanding and observation of boundaries and a readiness to seek advice and to refer on.
- Awareness of and respect for the diversity of student backgrounds.
- Awareness and understanding of the power relationships that mediate tutor-student and female-male relationships.

Expectations

(available as a handout for students – see template Appendix E)

What can the student expect of their PAT?

- To be a source of advice and guidance on all matters relating to academic progress.
- To arrange a meeting at least once each semester.
- To keep an agreed record of meetings.
- To respect confidentiality.
- To respond to requests for meetings promptly, and refer to other sources of help if an early meeting is not possible
- That matters discussed with the PAT will be confidential except in instances where keeping confidentiality might result in harm to the student or others.
- To be aware of the broader network of support services at QMU and to be ready to refer on when appropriate.
- To act as a link with other members of academic staff and as an advocate for the student in appropriate circumstances.

What can the PAT expect of their student?

- To respond promptly to requests from their PAT for a meeting and to bring any agreed notes or information to those meetings
- To respect the times which the PAT has said they will be available
- To keep the PAT informed of circumstances that may have an effect on their studies

Meetings

- Routine PAT/student meetings should take place **once a semester**
- PATs should contact students, and follow-up non-attendance
- Meetings with new students should take place within the first 4-6 weeks of semester 1.
- First contact with new students is best arranged as a group meeting (see below).
- 30 minutes is a good length for a first group session – after that, as appropriate.
- Additional individual meetings in semester 1 for new students are advised to help address issues early
- For individual meetings, issues and actions should be recorded (see Appendix E)

1st meeting - possible group session:

It will be easier to arrange group meetings in some subjects than others, but it is highly recommended.

Merits of a group session

A good aid to retention - encourages social contact with fellow students, speeds up the settling-in process, students feel part of the institution and feel listened to

- Encourages students to raise issues early on
- Sets a pattern for staff-student dialogue, as well as peer dialogue
- A time-efficient way to see all tutees at once
- A useful forum for dealing with specific topics – E.g. referencing, plagiarism and principles of good group work.

Agenda

First impressions count. New students are overwhelmed with new information. A first PAT meeting should aim to help them start to relax and ask questions, as well as clarify the PAT role.

- Quick introduction and interaction between students if a group - allows students to engage briefly with each other, reflect on experience so far, ask questions and feel reassured.
- Introduction and outline of the PAT role - clarifies role, responsibilities and expectations for PAT and student .
- Clarify PAT contact details, when and how to contact, how often to meet, who is responsible.
- Clarify links to other services - where to find the information (mention the student diary) & emphasise wider support that is available.
- Questions - pick up on issues raised earlier.
- What happens next - establish that the routine is that you will arrange a meeting each semester, but allow for front-loading of support in semester 1 to achieve maximum retention.

Dos & don'ts for 1st meeting

- **Do**
 - keep input and general information brief – students are already overloaded.
 - keep the session social and interactive
 - make time at start and finish for the students to interact
 - refer to support services as a positive resource not as an emergency service
 - encourage individual follow-up appointments in semester 1
 - notice who's involved and who's not, anyone who looks uncomfortable or unsure and follow up if necessary.
- **Don't**
 - give out loads of information
 - spend all the time talking or see it as a mini-lecture
 - assume that a nil-response to your questions means that the students don't have any queries

Ideas for further meetings

The notes below are intended to make meetings, and any actions or referrals, more effective for both PAT and student.

Timing

The 'Student Life-Cycle Model' gives a useful overview of typical pressures on new students at particular times of the academic session (see diagram in Appendix D):

- First 6 weeks...information overload, dealing with lectures, reading lists, 'new' skills, homesickness, especially young students
- First assignment, especially 2 weeks before the deadline...procrastination, fear of failure, high expectations of self, uncertainty about what's expected...
- End of first semester/Christmas...finance, essay deadlines, stress, thoughts of leaving....
- First feedback on assignments...crisis of confidence, failure of expectations, not understanding feedback/language used...
- Exams....particularly if special requirements need to be in place, such as extra time for dyslexia, a scribe, separate room

Well-timed enquiries and interventions that show awareness of these crucial times can make a huge difference. A reminder about a service that provides specific support can make the difference between drop-out and retention.

Similarly, being aware of the likely 'crunch' points can help a PAT give a general piece of advice to a tutee group via email (see below).

In order to broach the tangle of circumstances that might be affecting a student's academic progress, it is helpful to look beyond the presenting issue in a follow-up meeting, by enquiring about general as well as academic concerns. Some useful areas for 'open questions':

Academic issues

- Organising, managing workload, juggling responsibilities?
- Getting things done –adapting to independent study?
- Communication, especially with other students – group work?
- Writing skills – developing? More confident?

General issues

- Accommodation – working out OK?
- Adapting to possible cultural changes? Conventions?
- Time pressures – family, travel, paid work, stress?
- Seasonal pressures –holidays, finance around Christmas?
- Contact with peers – making friends, meeting friends to discuss work with?

Keeping in touch

Tutee mass-emails

- A useful way to flag up related issues/support services is to use a **tutee-list email** for timely reminders about where a specific service can be found and how they can help.
- The advantage is that you can tailor the timing and the content to your own subject area. Brief and occasional tutee-emails are also a quick and easy way of providing basic reassurance that the institution is serious about having student welfare at its heart.

'Open Hour'

- Some tutors have an open hour once a week when students can drop in with quick queries. This won't suit everyone, but a similar arrangement, maybe once a month, could help pick up and address smaller issues before they become more time-consuming.

Role boundaries and referrals *(see extended guide)*

The PAT role is to provide advice, guidance and support on academic matters, but, as outlined earlier, this usually involves students raising other support issues. Although a PAT is not expected to have detailed knowledge of a particular support service, it is important to know what they are (see diagram of the support services available, including Student Services). In specific instances, when boundaries of responsibility seem unclear, working through a few stages on an issue can help tutor and student identify a course of action:

- Encourage the student to focus on how an issue might be affecting academic performance,
- Explain and arrange the practicalities that can be put in place by subject staff, and be clear about any limits to these e.g. extension
- Identify further support needs and suggest who to contact, or provide information for student to follow up e.g. give out leaflet re: a specific service

Support as positive

There is still an image of seeking support as 'deficit' – that it is embarrassing or a sign of some inadequacy. Often students only contact Student Services at a crisis point, when an issue may be harder to resolve. Bear in mind:

- Students are more likely to seek support early if the positive aspect of the support is emphasised - the advisory rather than emergency aspect of the services.
- A decision to use support services has to be the student's own. As staff, we advise or recommend, but that is all. This should help to clarify boundaries: a recommendation of a service does not commit the PAT to any further involvement in the matter.
- If you think a student might want to consider using a service, it's best to give them information – a leaflet for that service – and let them think it over and take the next step. In extreme circumstances only it may be advisable to take the distressed student down to Student Services, having first telephoned to ascertain the relevant member of staff is in.

Confidentiality

At QMU, good practice in confidentiality is governed by the Freedom of Information Act, and the Data Protection Act. The guidelines below are based on general good practice. For further guidance, PATs should approach heads of subject and school.

- Ensuring confidentiality is vital in encouraging students to come forward and seek help when they need it. Students need to know that any information they give will be treated with respect and passed on only with their agreement to those who need to know.
- If a PAT is in receipt of sensitive information, which has implications for the student's academic process, the student needs to be clear what will happen with that information. This includes who is told, what they are told, why they are told, and where the information is to be held or stored. The student needs to understand any steps to be taken, and give their consent to the information being passed on to the appropriate parties.
- If the information does not have immediate implications for their academic work, the PAT may want to recommend another source of support or information, but there should be no need for the information to be passed on to a third party.
- Confidential information about students should not be sent by email. Written information should be marked 'confidential'.
- There are exceptional circumstances in which there might be a need to break confidentiality without the student's consent:
 - If it is felt that there could be safety issues for the student, or for others
 - If there is a legal requirement to disclose information

For safety reasons, it is never a good idea to promise to keep information secret. Always reserve the right to break confidentiality in the circumstances outlined above.