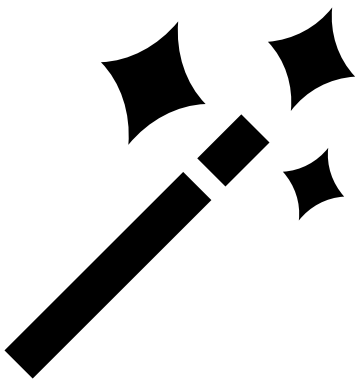




#LTSE2023

There Is No “Magic Wand”: Pressures of Personal Tutoring for Academics



Dr. Helen Millward and Rachel Lee
Keele University

Introduction...who are we?

Rachel Lee



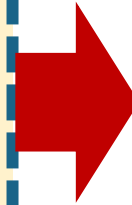
Dr. Helen Millward



We are both Lecturers in Marketing
at Keele Business School

And...

...we are also Academic Mentors (commonly
referred to as Personal Tutors!)



We invite you to consider the following
questions during our presentation:

- What does personal tutoring look like at your institution?
- Do you share any of the issues raised by our personal tutor respondents?
- How could the personal tutoring system be improved for both students and personal tutors?

Please do feel free to come and share your
thoughts with us after the presentation!

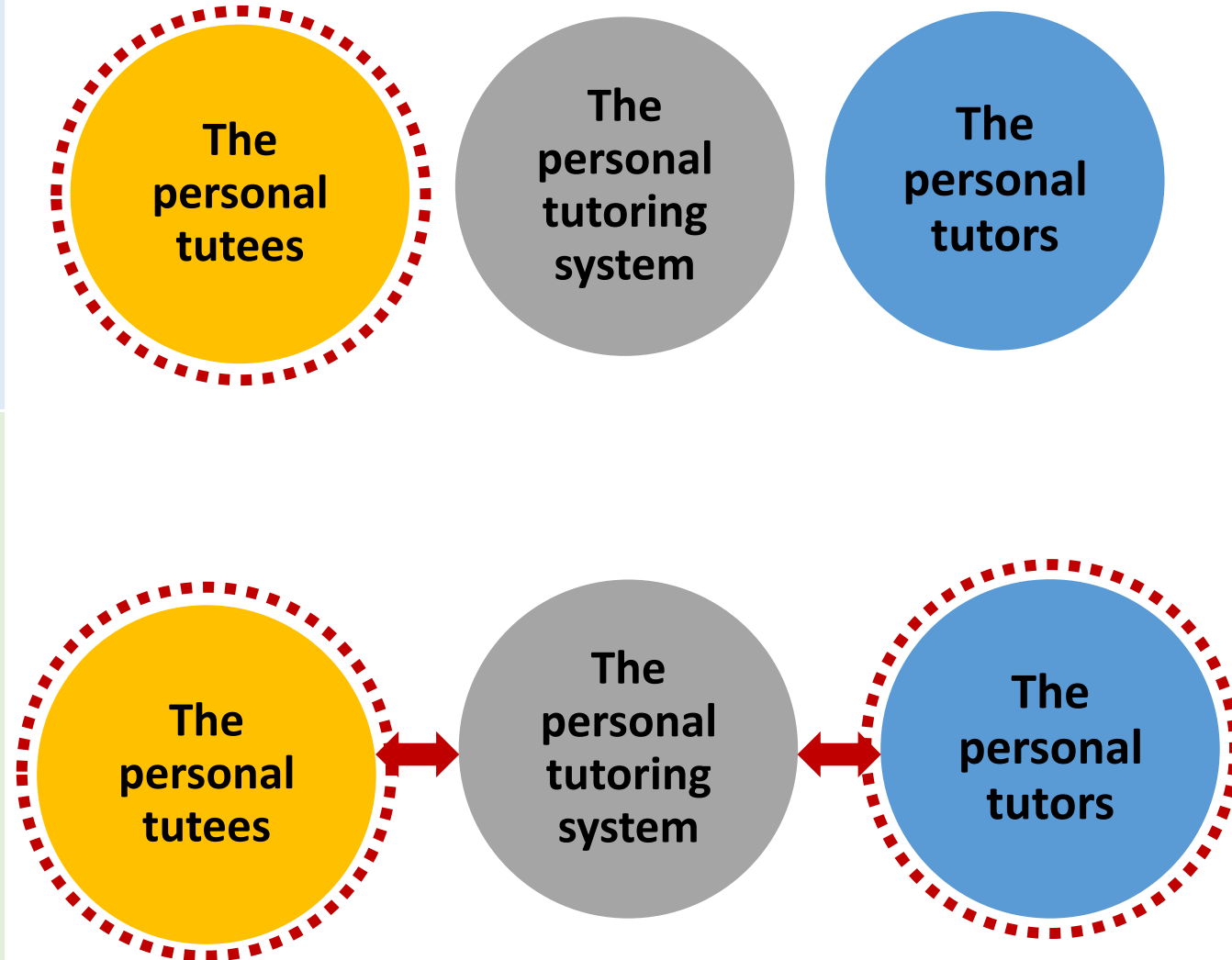
Introduction...what is our paper about?

What it is about?

- A participant wider action (PAR) research study was initially focused on **student engagement** with the personal tutoring system
- Yet, PAR illuminated another salient issue for exploration – the **impact of the personal tutoring role on the role holders**

Why it is important?

- **Staff and student wellbeing are integrally linked** (Brewster et al, 2022) therefore there is a need to understand how the personal tutoring role impacts those who provide it to identify how to make the activity **sustainable for staff and students to help deliver positive outcomes**
- The paper also contributes insights about personal tutoring from a **UK Business School perspective** which is currently an under explored discipline within the education literature



Literature Review...what do we know so far?



Personal tutoring is not a new concept and has been around since **16th century**; with the **massification** of the HE landscape, the 1960s see increased **questions surrounding viability, structure, and purpose** (Walker, 2020).



Personal tutoring might be viewed as ‘an **anchor** on which the support system of the university rests’ (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993:3), providing students with ‘a named person ... to whom they can turn’ (Myers, 2008:8) and also having implications for university **surveys and league tables** (McFarlane, 2016).



It is suggested that personal tutors are a student’s ‘**first port of call**’ for support (Keele University, 2018; Mathew, 2012), whether this is of an academic or personal nature (Grey and Osborne, 2020:285).



There is indication of an onus on personal tutors to provide the **correct amount of support and interaction**, lest tutees find engagement ‘**intrusive**’ (Earwaker, 1992:94), or feel that the **support offered is insufficient**, with further emphasis on the **time intensive nature** of the personal tutor role (Walker, 2020:3).



Particularly difficult, is the notion that the personal tutor is typically an academic who ‘**must wear many hats**’ (McGill et al., 2020:7) with regards to research, citizenship, and educational duties (Ghenghesh, 2018)

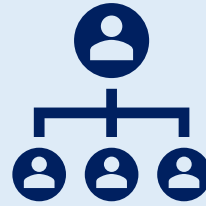
Literature review...models of Personal Tutoring

There are many models of personal tutoring, however, perhaps the most frequently used in the HE landscape are:



The pastoral model, which assigns a personal tutor to each student for the purpose of guiding them throughout their degree

- Requires **academic and pastoral** support (Grey and Osborne, 2020), leading PTs to have 'a foot in each of two very different camps' (Earwaker, 1992:9).
- 'Over and above what a 'normal' lecturer/instructor could be expected to provide'? (Walker, 2020:2)
- Amateur vs. professional counselling care? (Earwaker, 1992)
- Engagement only when there is an issue? Disconnection between academic and pastoral issues? (Stevenson, 2009)



The professional model, which suggests personal tutors 'undertake academic advising as their sole role' (Grey and Osborne, 2020:228)

- Likened to central services - limits Personal Tutors 'irresponsible' (Earwaker, 1992) amateurish attempts to solve issues, when professional support is available?



The curriculum model, aims to embed 'structured group tutoring sessions into the formal curriculum' (Grey and Osborne, 2020:228)

- Circumvents issues related to a lack of student knowledge of personal tutoring (Owen, 2002)
- Increased staff-student recognition, easier to accommodate personal tutor meetings (Earwaker, 1992)
- Similarities to the **interactional model of student retention** (Tinto, 1993), which emphasizes institutional integration as a key component of student success (Walsh et al., 2009)

Literature review...Personal Tutor characteristics and willingness

The responsibilities of a personal tutor can be appreciated as being on a spectrum...

...from monitoring academic progress to recognising mental health issues (Gidman, 2001; NUS, 2015)

...a balancing act between friendly advisor and professional monitor (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006)

TACKLING ISSUES BEFORE THEY BECOME SERIOUS (Watts, 2011), **WHICH RELIES ON TRUST WITHIN THE PERSONAL TUTOR RELATIONSHIP** (Braine and Parnell, 2011)?

A SAFETY NET (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006:41)?

FAMILIARITY WITH A PERSONAL TUTEES OUTSIDE OF THE PROCESS? (Owen, 2002)

PERSONALISED LINK TO UNIVERSITY (Raby, 2020:2)

PATIENCE, APPROACHABILITY, RESPECTFULNESS? (Cottrell et al., 1994; McGill et al., 2020; NUS, 2015)

CHARACTERISTIC EXPECTATIONS



THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF THE PT ROLE IS DEPENDENT ON THE DRIVING MOTIVATIONS OF STAFF MEMBERS, IMPACTING THE DEGREE OF STRESS EXPERIENCED FROM THE ROLE (Hayman et al, 2023)

PTS MAY FEEL 'UNCOMFORTABLE', 'NERVOUS', OR 'RELUCTANT' TO OFFER SUPPORT ON AREAS THEY CONSIDER 'OUTSIDE OF THEIR REMIT' (Ghenghesh, 2018), **DESPITE THEIR EXPERIENCE.**

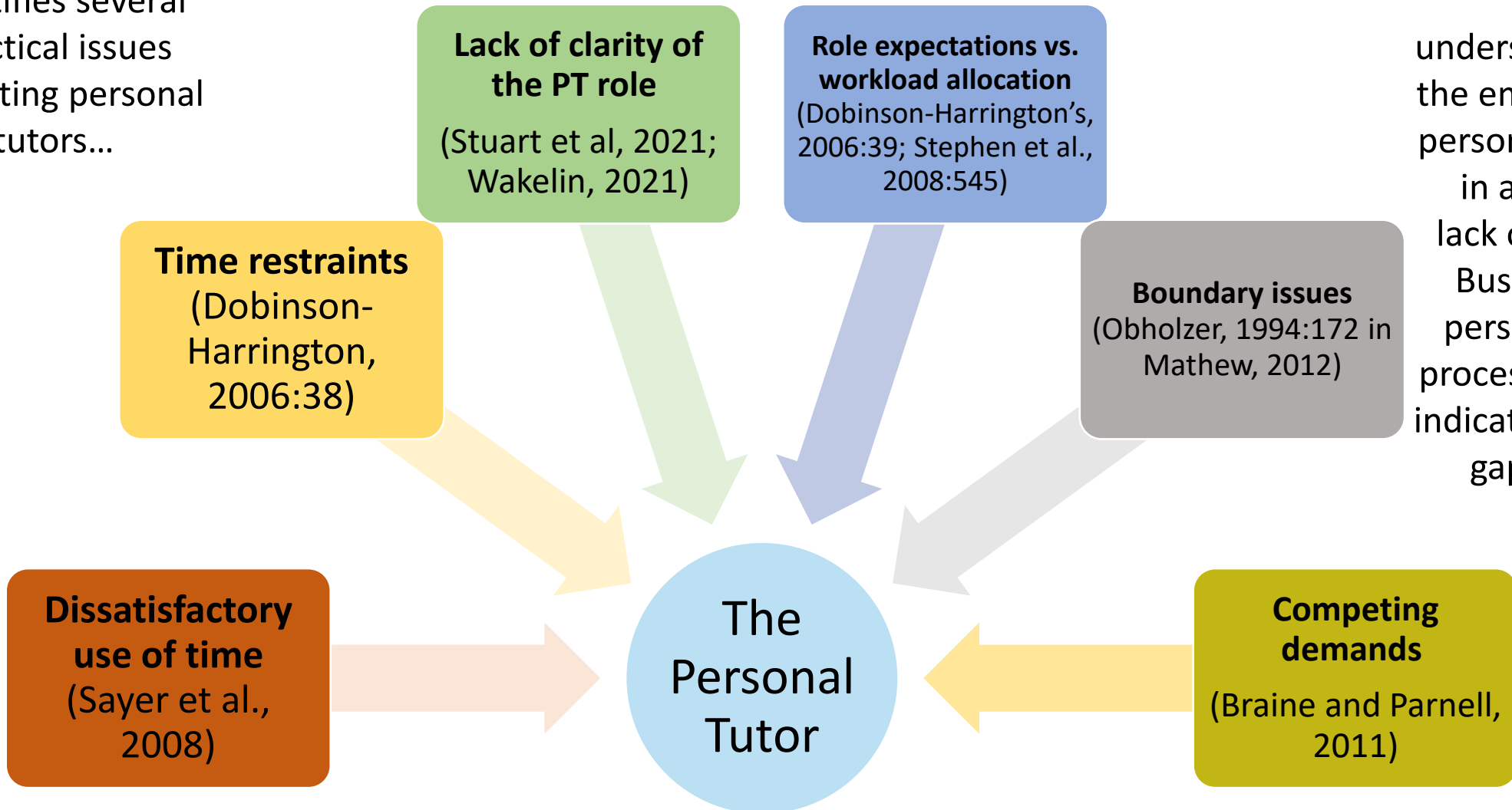
LACK OF LIFE EXPERIENCE OR FORMAL QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENT, WITH LEARNING ON THE JOB EXPECTED (Ghenghesh, 2018; McGill et al., 2020).

STAFF ISSUES AND WILLINGNESS

Literature review...further challenges of Personal Tutoring

The extant literature identifies several practical issues impacting personal tutors...

...yet, there is a limited understanding about the emotional issues personal tutors face, in addition to a lack of insight into Business School personal tutoring processes, therefore indicating a potential gap to further explore.

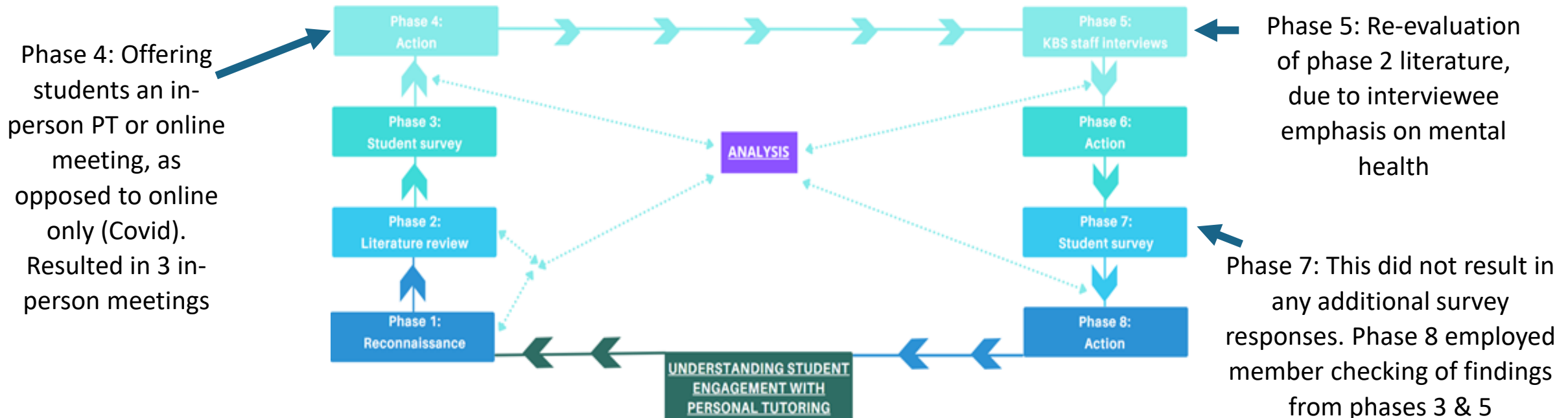


Methodology...how has this issue been studied?

Research method: Qualitative participative action research (PAR), with the aim to ‘resolve a common problem’ (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006:27) of low student engagement with personal tutoring.

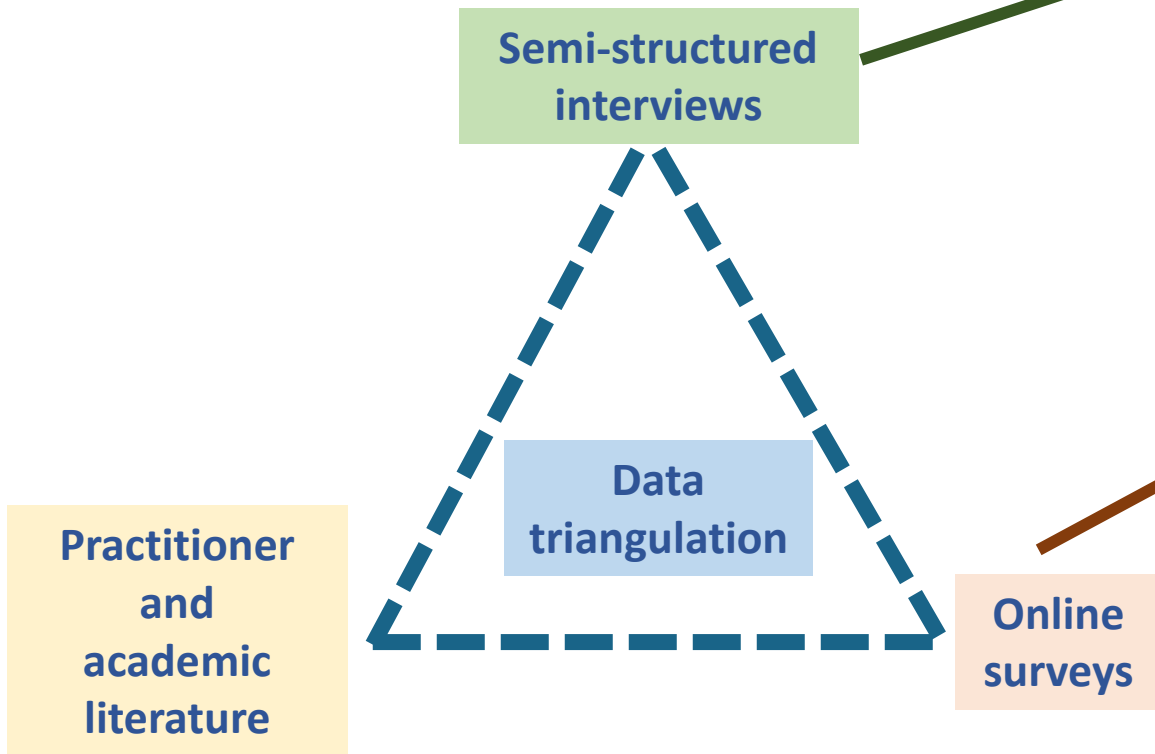
Research philosophy: Interpretivist paradigm, with truth as ‘a product of social definition’ (Bedeian, 2004:199). Challenging existing practice while acknowledging ‘institutional, national, historical and societal influences’ (Arnold and Norton, 2018:9) in addressing the wicked problem under review (Arnold and Norton, 2018).

In line with the ‘twists and turns’ leading to ‘unexpected places’ (Arnold and Norton, 2018) which are to be expected with PAR, the initial research objective was to explore issues such as frequency and modes for personal tutor meetings, rather than personal tutor experiences.



Methodology...how has this issue been studied?

Triangulation is useful as any issues with one data collection method might be 'compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another' (Jick, 1979:604), as with the lack of strength pertaining to survey data



Useful in finding consistency in underpinning themes (Jick, 1979), rather than 'one-off' stories (Hodson, 1999).

7 semi-structured interviews with PTs, who were invited to discuss their experiences at their current and previous institutions

3 female and 4 male academic interviewees

2 in-person and 5 Teams interviews

Duration between 14 and 65 minutes

Anonymous online self-completed surveys for students comprised of 10 multiple choice questions (Saunders et al., 2015) were sent to the researchers' personal tutees and 2 colleagues sent the invite to their tutees, to ensure all levels of study were invited.

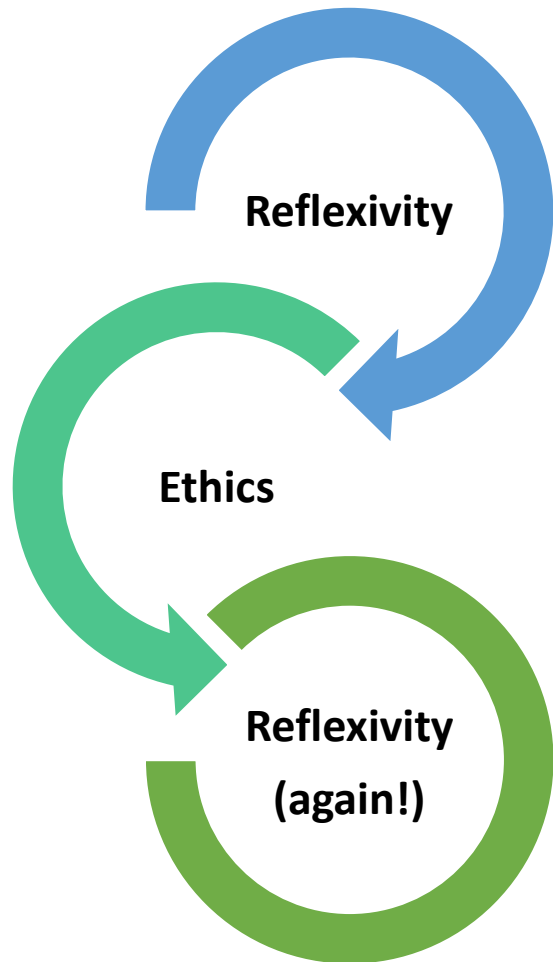
Despite 2 opportunities to complete the survey being sent out, only 1 student response was received.

This led to **member checking** (Livari, 2018) with only 1 student responding to the invitation.

The study employed the use of **thematic analysis** (Ozuem et al., 2022). A critical friend group was also used throughout the duration of the research to offer 'robust feedback' (Arnold and Norton, 2018:10)

Methodology...how has this issue been studied?

A sticky wicket!



- Insider research (Kara, 2015) resulted in a 'common ground' (Abell et al., 2006:277), based on recollections of 'shared experience' (Abell et al., 2006:225) in which interviews might 'draw on local understandings' (Denzin, 2012:342) of which they could be certain the Researcher would have experience.
- Reflection required in ensuring interviews were not just a chat between colleagues, and in considering how as personal tutors, the researchers themselves might impact the process (Beck et al., 2011).
- Reflection viewed as 'on-going' (Holland, 1999:742), particularly due to a 'social and moral responsibility' (Ghoshal, 2005:87) to fairly representing participant views.
- Ethical approval was sought and granted by the university.
- 'Twists and turns' (Arnold and Norton, 2018) leading to unexpectedly emotionally charged comments on personal tutors mental health struggles as consequence of undertaking personal tutoring. Equally, discussion of some of the student issues dealt with by colleagues included disturbing elements such as homophobia, rape, and suicide.
- While such topics were unexpected, in retrospect, this was perhaps naïve as the Researcher has dealt with one of the above issues when supporting a tutee, and as such this perhaps should have been considered prior to the research.
- Revisiting reflection: The Researcher feels confident that such instances were (without naming students) shared by personal tutors for the purposes of making progress with the personal tutoring process, and that those personal tutors felt a particular desire to share this information, as none of the interview questions broached similar topics.

Data analysis...student surveys and member checking

Student Surveys

1 response suggests in itself a lack of student engagement with personal tutoring

The response indicated:

- There were no reasons present as to why the student was reluctant to request or attend meetings with their PT (group or individual meetings)
- A preference for contact from their PT 'more than once each month' and for drop-in sessions
- The key reason for attendance being for advice on specific questions
- Pastoral support being ranked as more important than academic support

Member Checking

Key elements noted as key by the respondent:

- Trust and building a more social relationship as key in allowing the student to “gel” with the personal tutor
- Open conversations and a strong relationship as key
- Speed of the personal tutor in answering queries
- A feeling of the personal tutor prioritizing the needs of the student
- Not being seen as one of many to be dealt with, but rather than the personal tutor really cares about individual progress and well-being

4. Please rank the following personal tutoring activities in order of importance to you (1 = most important / 5 = least important)

Item	Total Score ¹	Overall Rank
Personal tutor offering advice on specific questions	5	1
Personal tutor providing pastoral support	4	2
Personal tutor providing on advice on issues such as study skills or careers	3	3
Personal tutor providing links to other university services	2	4
Personal tutor as a sounding board for study issues	1	5
¹ Score is a weighted calculation. Items ranked first are valued higher than the following ranks, the score is a sum of all weighted rank counts.		answered 1
		skipped 0

5. Thinking about the content of personal tutor meetings, which of the following statements do you most agree with?

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Group personal tutor meetings should have a set agenda	0.00%	0
2	Group personal tutor meetings should be drop-in sessions for student questions	100.00%	1
		answered	1
		skipped	0

Data analysis...personal tutor interviews

Personal Tutoring is “a mess”

Personal tutors felt their experiences of personal tutoring were “comparable across the industry”, with broadly negative perception of personal tutoring being shared with participants calling the process...

“a mess”

“too laissez faire”

“[not] allowing opportunities for academics to pay attention to individual students”

“not working effectively”

Other issues highlighted included concerns around resourcing, **“time to digest”** changes to personal tutoring practice and policies, **“lack of interface”** in recording meetings, and a lack of clarity with how students had been allocated which left one personal tutor **feeling that student didn’t like him**. Frustrations could also be seen with signposting students to materials; **“well if you Googled it, you would have found it”**.

Other views suggested that students **“who don’t engage are likely to be the ones who really need it”**, with students that have never spoken to their personal tutee as potentially **“disengaged”**. This was seen as a particular cause for concern due to the two-way nature of personal tutoring; **“you as an academic can be as keen as possible but if the other side doesn’t want to engage then you’ve got a problem”**. For example, one personal tutor noted; **“I would not know any of my tutees, if I had to pick them out in a police line-up”**

However, views were not all negative, with one interviewee suggesting...

“I think it's quite easy to come up with problems with [it] but ... realistically are you ever going to have any kind of system ... that really meets what you consider to be the aims and objectives?”

Data analysis...personal tutor interviews

Personal tutors “don’t have a magic wand” to be able to “change things”

Regardless of such challenges, it was clear that personal tutors do not...

“mind being the first port of call”

...and that it was important for students to have someone to look out for them...

“exclusively ... [someone] who has got their back”.

In particular, this was due to a feeling that central services would just provide students with **“a response ticket number when they enter a query, they don’t get a person”**, insinuating that slower response times and impersonalized responses might cause additional challenges.

When asked about what they felt student expected from them as a personal tutor, academics suggested characteristics such as...

“a friendly face”

“knowledgeable”

“a listening ear”

“responsible adult”

One interviewee, however, shared an overwhelmingly negative impression when asked *what* they expected of their personal tutees; instead, wondering...

“why I expect from them. I expect in most cases that they come to university totally unprepared ... University is seen to be sort of La La land. Its going to be an extension of The X Factor and great fun and going out and getting drunk. The idea of actually doing any work when you get here, its not really something that’s on the minds of most students”

Data analysis...personal tutor interviews

“I think we do it in good faith”

In considering the personal tutoring role, one participant noted...

“... I think there's a line, we can't cross it because we're not professionals, but neither do I think we should just stay on the academic side. That seems a bit heartless to me ... I think we do it in good faith”.

However, other interviewees expressed a need for help from trained central services colleagues, with the caveat that passing students **“back and forward between us and support services is ... incredibly damaging for the student experience”**.

When such links with central services do work well, they can have very positive outcomes, as demonstrated by one interviewee who had...

“a student who said he had mental problems, was getting really serious and then I had to cry for help, and I was like I don't want to be in the same room with this student on my own. Literally, and then student services got engaged ... I'm happy with it because ... I'm not qualified to do certain things and I'm not alone”.

Data analysis...personal tutor interviews

“It’s like sort of trying to force your Valentine to send you a card”

Equally, participants were keen to emphasise that personal tutors are not **“a font of all knowledge”** as with the comment...

“I really have no idea how the system works, still. I’ve been here two years, but I’m constantly surprised at how things are done and don’t know who to go to, to signpost them ... There’s not much new under the sun, but it’s that knowledge of what to advise them to do”.

Personal tutors also emphasised the need for them to contact students in the first instance, otherwise, **“all you get then is when there’s a crisis, that’s all you get”**. However, interviewees were hesitant with **“chasing students”** with further communications as this may come **“across like a really bad dental appointment or a really bad job interview”**.

One interviewee continued to state that such efforts kill...

“the serendipitous aspect of the whole personal tutor tutee relationship ... And if we try and force that, it’s like sort of trying to force your Valentine to send you a card”.

Data analysis...personal tutor interviews

“This is a system that’s running on fumes”

Interviewees also voiced concerns regarding **“stress and anxiety”** for those occupying the Personal Tutoring role:

“there's no way I could possibly deal with [difficult pastoral issues], I'm not equipped in any shape or form”

“the student is like you don't care about me, but actually I really am not qualified to do that”

“I had a student who was raped in a taxi ... You know, there's no part of my PhD that prepares me to be able to deal with that. Those stories are not unusual. ... There are huge problems here for staff who are then left with the emotional damage and the trauma themselves of having been the people who had to deal with this student”

As one interviewee explained, this pertains to **whether they should “have called emergency services, should I have called the special incident number, will there be a suicide”**

Whilst another interviewee suggested, some situations are **“difficult to handle”**, that many PTs **“are at their wits end. They've got too much work to do ... this is a system that’s running on fumes”**.

Outcomes for Personal Tutors indicated physical and emotional repercussions:

“emotional distress”

“not being able to switch off”

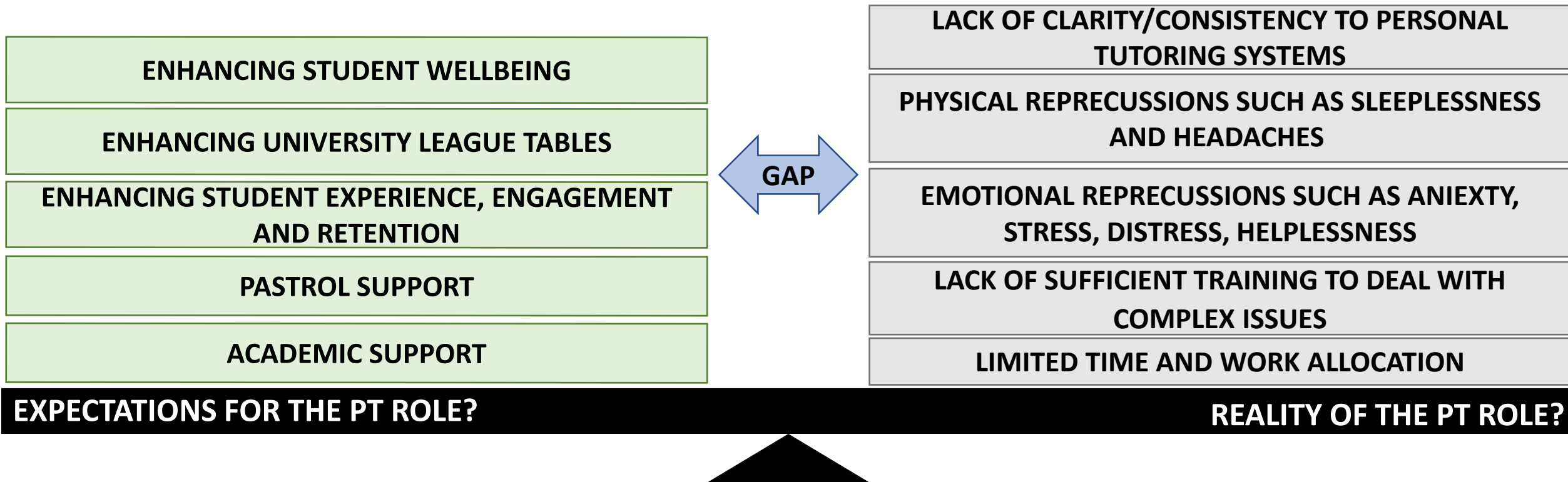
“massive headaches”

unable to “sleep at night”

worrying if they have “done the right thing”.

Conclusion...so, what does all this all mean for personal tutoring?

The research study indicates that whilst personal tutoring is vital in supporting students throughout their University journey, there are some important questions and issues that need to be addressed in helping personal tutors to deliver the expectations of the role effectively, *and* sustainably.



Conclusion...so, what does all this all mean for personal tutoring?

There is a need to consider both student and staff wellbeing together to enhance the personal tutoring system...



While the suggestions raised by the literature seek, in part, to advance the potential rewards of undertaking the personal tutor role, we hold with Earwaker's (1992:785) notion that to use academics 'as blotting paper, single-handedly soaking up other people's troubles, is misguided, even dangerous'.

As such, we suggest that if personal tutoring is to remain an activity for delivering positive student outcomes, further emphasis must be placed on providing meaningful and long-term support for those inhabiting the role – the personal tutors.

Thank you for listening!

**Any
questions?**



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