Personal Academic Tutors and student continuation: The importance of establishing relationships

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ABSTRACT

Students studying in higher education (HE) in the UK are reported to be increasingly facing challenges concerning their studies. Personal Academic Tutoring (PAT) systems are widely used in the UK HE sector since research has shown the importance of having an academic mentor to guide students throughout their learning journey. This study contributes to the literature by establishing the relationship between the PAT system, at an English university with a diverse student body, and continuation rates. As such, it responds to the requirement that HE institutions investigate factors that affect student continuation in contexts where there is increasing scrutiny from regulatory bodies. Conducted in 2023, this study explores PAT practices in low and high-continuation courses using a mixed-method approach. Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 47 academics and 18 students, triangulated with additional sources. The analysis includes descriptive and comparative assessments of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative data. Findings indicate that academics and students recognised that effective support is contingent on good personal relationships. PATs acknowledged their limitations in addressing both academic and personal difficulties that students face, as well as the implications of safeguarding and data protection. Comparisons between low and high-continuation courses revealed significant differences in student allocation numbers and clarity about the PAT role and notable differences in strategies adopted to enhance support. The study concludes with an acknowledgment of its limitations, points to recommendations that have been taken forward by the University and the relevance for other universities.

KEYWORDS

Personal Academic Tutors, continuation, relational support, mixed method

Introduction

The main objective of personal academic tutoring is to provide students with academic assistance and personal support throughout their higher education (HE) journey (Yale 2019). UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) (2020) defines the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) role as a *"purposeful personal relationship"*. A PAT acts as a coach or mentor, offering tailored academic, pastoral, and professional advice (Wakelin 2023). This includes informing students about HE processes, enhancing personal development, supporting welfare, directing them to services and fostering a connection with the institution (Thomas 2006). Researchers (McFarlane 2016; Race 2010) assert that effective support is linked to addressing personal challenges that impact academic development and outcomes. Essentially, the PAT role enhances students' sense of belonging (Harding and Thompson 2009) which is vital for a positive educational experience and successful outcomes.

In the UK, continuation refers to the tracking of students from the day they enter higher education to their activity on a census date, which is one year and 15 days for full-time students or their transfer to another institution (Office for Students [OfS] 2024). Accordingly, amid increasingly complex sociocultural, financial and mental health challenges faced by undergraduates, there is a significant need for robust student support (Watts 2011). The implementation of UK government policies aimed at widening participation in HE (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] 2007) has, in effect, compounded the demand for support since they have resulted in a more diverse student population, including previously underrepresented and disadvantaged groups and those with intersectional identities (Wakelin 2023; Stephen, O'Connell, and Hall 2008).

National data over the past decade evidences the increased challenges faced by students. In England, the percentage of students meeting the criteria for a common mental disorder rose from 17% in 2014 (National Health Service [NHS] England 2024) to 25% during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO] 2022). Additionally, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis has negatively impacted mental health (Lawson et al. 2023). This rising demand for mental well-being support has led to calls for the government and universities (Tressler 2023) to respond more effectively. In response, an increasing number of universities are joining the University Mental Health Charter (Student Minds 2024).

This scenario has increased interest in the PAT role, which at UK universities is a well-established element of provision of student support (e.g., University of Southampton 2024; University of Huddersfield 2022). The growing diversity in student demographics, and that attrition rates are higher among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, have prompted

some universities to review PAT systems (McIntosh and Grey 2017; Atkinson 2014; Battin 2014) and heightened interest in their role to retain students and specifically, to support continuation.

Conceptual framings

In a context of increasingly diverse and complex student needs, the concept of relational wellbeing provides a valuable lens through which to examine the role that academic staff, as PATs, can fulfil in fostering safety, confidence and trust to support students throughout their educational journey (Dillon and Pritchard 2022). Relational wellbeing underscores the importance of relationships in the learning process and their role in connecting students with the institution in which they are learning (Pedler et al. 2022). It draws from relational-cultural theory, which embraces the psychological theory of connection as being the core of human growth and development and which can enable individuals, such as educators and students, to connect across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, class and gender (Jordan et al., 2004).

Earwaker (1992) categorises three PAT models: pastoral, professional and integrated. The pastoral model offers individualised support through a dedicated academic member who provides personal and academic assistance. The professional model involves academics specifically trained for tutoring on a full-time basis. The integrated model involves scheduling personal tutoring sessions into timetables requiring attendance from both academics and students (Earwaker 1992; Thomas 2006). Grey and Osborne (2020) highlight that this model is adopted widely in universities in the UK especially for first-year students to facilitate a smooth transition to university and anticipate the value of a directive interaction (Stephen et al. 2008). Hybrid models, which combine the integrated approach with other models, have emerged as prevalent in the UK because these seem efficient and able to promote student engagement and belonging (Grey and Osborne 2020).

Beyond existing literature on the importance of personal tutoring and its potential role to enhance student outcomes (Yale 2019; McFarlane 2016; Leach and Wang 2015; Drake 2011), further research is needed to understand how different PAT systems (specifically, practices and models) impact student experiences such as their engagement and sense of support which in turn may impact continuation. By aiming to establish the relationship between PAT systems and student continuation, this study addresses this research gap. It is timely since in the UK, regulatory bodies like the OfS (2023) are conducting extensive audits of university provision and practices, compelling them to assess practices that influence

student continuation rates, amongst other metrics, and to share good practices with the sector.

Institutional context

This study was conducted to identify practices, experiences and perspectives of the PAT system in relation to different continuation rates at one university located in the East of England. Its student body is notable within the HE sector for including a high proportion of mature learners (70%), learners from lower socio-economic groups (58%) and being super-diverse with 60% of students from minority ethnic, under-represented and vulnerable groups including young people leaving care and with disabilities (Institution, 2023a).

PATs at this university have been in place since around 2007. Executive leadership has informally recognised their role in enhancing student retention rates, particularly given the institution's historically low continuation rates. In 2023, the University's overall continuation rate was 75.7%, which was 4.3% below the sector benchmark, although significantly different rates exist between courses, with some experiencing rates as low as 41% and others as high as 98%. This assumption, namely that PATs contribute to determining continuation rates, defined the approach adopted in this research to compare data from low- and high-continuation courses.

The University's formal policy outlines features of the PAT system (Institution 2023b), confirming Earwaker's (1992) pastoral model in assigning every student to a lecturer, regardless of whether they teach them. Likewise, each academic is assigned a group of tutees. Faculty management are able to determine the criteria for the assignment of tutees to academics according to the type of course and changes in the job roles of academics. Although all efforts are made to keep PAT-tutee pairings the same throughout a student's programme of study, students sometimes have different PATs throughout their period of study. At the outset of this research, there was no centralised record of tutee assignment practices or their underlying rationale, such as for vocational courses which involve external placements.

At the University, the PAT role is a key responsibility, featuring in academic job descriptions as requiring support for students in academic and personal development, including guidance and support for the transition to university and between levels. University policy specifies that PAT meetings should be held within the first six weeks of study, with following meetings in each semester of study. These can be either online or face-to-face, depending on the type of course and student needs. PAT meetings can be held in a group as well as individually

and they can be initiated either by PATs or students. A PAT must refer students to centralised university teams for additional and specialised pastoral, financial, employability and/or academic skills support, as needed, with some allocated one hour per PAT student in their work plans.

During their induction, students are typically notified about the PAT system and given the name of their PAT. Insights from the Students' Union briefing[1] on student experiences of PATs indicate that these contribute to a positive academic experience. An OfS report (2023) also noted the importance of PAT provision at the University's Business School to enhance engagement and attendance.

The training of academics is essential, given that they typically possess varying qualifications, work histories and levels of experience with pastoral support and, even, in the HE sector. New teaching staff receive PAT-related training during their induction while additional resources are available through a PAT handbook and professional development sessions are delivered centrally.

However, anecdotal evidence from academics indicated growing concerns that - before the increasing complexity of student needs - their own ability to deal effectively with these was limited. It also suggested an ambivalence about their responsibilities and competence as PATs in the context of heavy workloads. Observations from other university stakeholders further implied that the existing PAT system did not operate optimally for either students or academics and that there were considerable *de facto* variations in PAT practices across faculties. So, it seemed that reliable and meaningful evidence was required as a basis to recommend institutional changes. To address this need, the current research was undertaken.

The research was conducted between May and December 2023. Specifically, the research sought to answer the following three questions:

1. What challenges do students face that comprise the need for PAT support?
2. What are the different practices, perceptions and experiences of academics regarding their PAT roles and responsibilities, comparing those in low- and high-continuation courses?
3. What are students' perceptions and experiences of, and their engagement with, their PATs, comparing those in low- and high-continuation courses?

[1] Authors (2023)

Methodology

A convergent mixed-method design that combines quantitative and qualitative data was adopted, and the findings were reported comparatively between low- and high-continuation courses. Qualitative and quantitative data were examined separately, and findings were then combined to develop broader conclusions (Creswell and Clark 2017). Quantitative data was obtained from a questionnaire for academics and was analysed descriptively and comparatively between programmes with low- and high-continuation rates. Qualitative data was obtained from individual interviews with academics and students to provide rich, personalised and experience-informed insights into the PAT system. This approach to obtaining student data was underpinned by the recognition of student survey fatigue, which is a growing concern across the HE sector (Possamai et al. 2024; Van Mol 2017) and meant that the use of a tailored survey would be ineffective.

Student data was also triangulated from existing internal metrics and surveys to strengthen the generality of the interpretation of research findings. Specifically, data on student allocation numbers and experiences was obtained from the student records database and – following the granting of permission – from findings derived from a student survey conducted by the University's Students' Union during 2023.

The respective roles of this research team also played an important role in ensuring the rigour of the research methodology and tools, and ethical standards, and that findings would be taken forward in university policy. The research was designed by the first author, who is the Head of Evaluation and Enhancement, and the second author who is a Research Fellow. They work in the same team which is granted the authority to conduct research according to good sector practices and their expertise. The involvement of the third author, a Senior Lecturer of Education Studies and a PAT, contributed to shaping the research tools and enriching the analysis of the findings. Finally, the fourth author, the Director of the central Academy for Learning and Teaching Excellence, is responsible for the development of PAT policy, training and processes, and secured management commitment to adopt the research recommendations.

To provide transparency and stakeholder buy-in, the research team presented the proposed research to key university stakeholders to inform them of the objectives, plans and activities. No changes were requested or made as a result. Ethical approval relating to the protection

of anonymity, management and storage of data was obtained from the University's Institute for Research in Education which adheres to established considerations (BERA, 2024).

Research participants

Academic and student participants were selected from courses with low- and high-continuation metrics (as officially reported data through the Higher Education Statistics Agency). These were courses that were consistently below and consistently above the OfS threshold of 80% for continuation. Another criterion for the selection of the courses was the sample size. Courses with at least 150 students over a 4-year period were included because of their high impact on overall continuation rates. From these courses, first, second and third-year full-time students were invited for an interview. All the PATs in these courses were sent the PAT questionnaire and were also invited to participate in interviews. Forty-seven PATs (out of 95 academic staff, namely 50%) from the target courses responded to the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) and 14 were interviewed.

Eighteen students (2 from each course) were interviewed. Students were informed about the interview via email and incentivised to participate with the offer of a gift voucher commensurate with the value of a 30-minute interview. After their initial expression of interest, details of the project were explained to them verbally and in writing, and they were asked to consent using a form which addressed General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues. Students were subsequently provided with an online link for the interview, arranged according to their convenience. Where multiple students from the same course volunteered (typically from high-continuation courses), only those first to express interest were considered. Multiple efforts were made to secure interviews with some students, typically those from low-continuation courses. Final-year, female, home-domiciled and mature students constituted the majority (see Appendix 2).

Instruments and analysis

A convergent mixed-method approach was adopted, involving quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain data from questionnaires, interviews and triangulated sources (student allocation numbers and Students' Union Survey). Quantitative data on academics was captured from a questionnaire, which was piloted and sense-checked by three academics. Relevant literature and PAT evaluation reports were reviewed when developing the questionnaire. Questions covered experiences, perceptions, frequency and medium of meeting and methods of recording PAT sessions. The questionnaire included a combination of Likert-type (5 points), closed-ended items and an open-ended item for further comments.

Data was analysed descriptively and comparatively across courses, using Mann-Whitney U and Fisher's Exact tests.

Qualitative data involved staff and student interviews, which explored PAT experiences and perceptions. Interview questions were developed through consultation with experienced PATs, a review of relevant literature and an analysis of existing PAT evaluation reports. Staff interview questions addressed issues such as PAT role understanding, allocations, types of communication, record keeping and successful relationships. Student interview questions examined issues such as PAT role understanding and awareness, barriers to engagement, the importance of relationships and system improvement. Interviews were conducted by the first and the second authors of the study in Microsoft Teams. Academic and student interviews lasted approximately 25 and 15 minutes, respectively. All sessions were recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed. The initial transcriptions were reviewed and manually cleaned to correct inaccuracies or misinterpretations. This process involved correcting spelling and grammar errors, removing irrelevant content, such as filler words (e.g., "um"), and adjusting for pauses or incomplete thoughts. Where necessary, the original recordings were used to clarify ambivalences in responses. Once cleaned, the transcripts were anonymised to protect confidentiality.

A reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed utilising Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase guide. Key phrases and words were identified, followed by reading and re-reading the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. For efficient structuring of the data, the qualitative analysis programme NVivo 12 was used. Initial codes were allocated to the transcription data (e.g. family issues, health issues, disability needs, bereavement), then by merging codes that were connected to one another, themes were created (e.g. diverse student needs). Themes were reviewed and given names that best reflected their essence as well as the focus of the research questions. The initial codes were created by the second author and were independently assessed by the first author. The researchers then collectively interpreted the codes and categorised them into themes.

Findings

This section presents the research findings from both staff and student data. Throughout it highlights the similarities and differences between courses with low- and high-continuation rates.

Diverse and complex student needs

This section presents qualitative data that addresses research question one, regarding the issues that the students in this study present to their PATs. The following, from statements by academics and students, reveal some of the personal circumstances and academic needs that students present to their PATs. Academics reported that students typically share with them their feelings when bereaved or depressed. As in the case of a student who had four children, "*two of whom are very ill and she needs to work as her husband is on dialysis*" (T1), PAT support aimed to keep the students on track with their studies and assignments. Another noted that "*many students disclose coercive relationships"* (T2) in which case PATs need to provide sensitive support since *"study is a passport out of their violence and towards independence*" (T2). Where students have a physical disability or are neurodiverse, PATs need to identify the best course of action and referral. For students transitioning to university, or from overseas, PAT support typically includes providing explanations about the UK higher education or university processes.

In these, and more mundane contexts, such as the routine explanations PATs give on assessment briefs or referencing styles, students expressed appreciation of the personal support and encouragement and the academic guidance that PATs provide. One student who unsurprisingly felt overwhelmed having lost several close family members said "*thankfully I have my PAT acting for me …. [meaning] I do not need to worry about my school"* (S7). Another stated that despite being "*somewhere on the neurodiverse spectrum"* yet without a diagnosis, their PAT *"understood [their] learning needs"* (S5). Another, an international student, said after their PAT "*explained policies and how things work with placements"* they understood *"why some things are done in a [certain] way and [about] the academic help that we can get"* (S1).

Students (15/18) from both low- and high-continuation courses recognised that the quality of personal connections with their PATs was essential to the effectiveness of the support experienced. For a student who suffered multiple family deaths, the emotional support and empathy of their PAT "*gave [them] hope and [meant they] could stand again to continue with [their] course" (*S7*).* Another student emphasised that "*if somebody wants to disclose something sensitive, you need to have some sort of rapport"* (S6). Some students made explicit links between their relationship with their PAT and their attainment and completion. One noted that if *"you want to excel in your course, they will guide you"* (S2*);* another that *"having a personal relationship is so important because [the] course is very challenging and sometimes you need somebody to talk to"* (S1). Such positive impacts of PATs on the emotional state of students, their learning experiences and academic and course outcomes highlight the relational wellbeing merits of PATs.

Several students in low-continuation courses emphasised the importance of face-to-face interactions to build and maintain meaningful relationships with their PATs. One stated "*if everything is told to us via emails or messages, nothing is in real"* and continued to note the implications by saying*, "that's when you do not feel like you are at the University or engaging much. Most of my classmates …. we prefer social interaction"* (S16). Another student considered that it was important *"because we are human and social interaction is important [while] the technologies create boundaries between us"* (S17). Clearly, in-person exchanges were essential for them to feel grounded and connected to their university and its academic and student communities.

Across the board, students affirmed the importance of their PATs for support in both or either personal and academic aspects of their education journey. Furthermore, students in high-continuation courses (6/8) stressed the importance of their PATs for their pastoral support. Some similarly said that there were other lecturers whom they felt they could approach if their PAT was unavailable. By contrast, 4/10 students in low-continuation courses reported the significance of their PAT primarily as a source of guidance or assistance regarding purely academic concerns, not necessarily for pastoral support. One student suggested the need for distance in the relationship, stressing that having "*a professional relationship is more important… [the] person should be polite"* (S18). This suggests a more remote relationship where local practices or circumstances do not facilitate the conditions that could lead to deeper connections between PATs and students.

Ambivalent PAT allocations and models

Integral to the examination of the different features of the PAT system across the University, as per research question two, is the issue of the number of students allocated to PATs. The findings showed marked differences between courses across the Faculties. The academic questionnaire revealed that PATs in low-continuation courses have more than 50 students on average compared to 26 students in high-continuation courses. Course data from the student records database revealed a similar ratio, albeit showing slightly lower averages for the corresponding low and high-continuation courses. This triangulation of data validates the comparative number of allocation numbers.

Yet, PATs had different conceptions as to what constituted a high or low number of tutee allocations. For example, PATs on a low-continuation course stressed that "*having more than 30 was a struggle*" (T13), and that *"50 is the minimal right now; it is not ideal nor practical … and is not workable"* (T8). By contrast, a PAT on a high-continuation course

considered that 20 students were too many in a context where other PATs, similarly on high-continuation courses, reported their allocations as "*manageable*".

Findings also revealed that tutee allocations were either clear or opaque to academics. In one high-continuation course, several academics reported that allocations were explicit in being "*very mathematical and tied very closely to our workload planning"* (T2). By contrast, PATs in low-continuation courses were unclear about the allocation of tutee numbers. Indeed, one indicated that it was "*still random"* despite "a *systematic allocation having been floated"* years previously (T8). Unsurprisingly, many academics said that they wanted "clear guidance" from management about the rationale for local number allocations to tutees to rectify ambivalence and understand institutional expectations. Nonetheless, many appreciated that external factors were also at play since at this university, as in others in the UK, personal tutoring has suffered from under-resourcing (Prowse et al. 2021; Stuart et al. 2021), which limits staff capacity (Stuart et al. 2021; Yale 2019).

Academic requests for clarity about the features of the PAT system extended to the matter of the model of PAT delivery that was adopted formally, informally or *ad hoc* in different subject areas. A PAT from a high-continuation course explained that their local approach was explicit in responding to the changing needs of students across their study programme, such that *"when it comes to the final year students, their project supervisors became their PATs"* (T9). In another high-continuation course, a group of PATs aimed to be more effective in "*identifying at-risk students*" by deciding to organise themselves collectively, through meeting *"weekly as a team to talk [about tutees]…. and triangulate attendance, grades and PAT engagement"* (T1).

Nevertheless, the PAT allocation approach did not always align with student needs. The following statement is from a PAT on a low-continuation course who taught units for other levels but was assigned many Level 4 (first-year) students who said that they found it "*difficult to engage with students that you don't know."* (T7). For academics, the prevailing lack of clarity as to the relative wisdom for themselves, and students, of the different PAT allocation approaches seemed to contradict the institution's (and their own contractual) formal commitments to the PAT role. It seems that management directives, or the lack of, play a role in shaping expectations or obfuscating clarity about PAT roles, including time commitments for meaningful support. The responses from PATs suggest that where these are not articulated, the resulting ambivalence has a demoralising effect on academics.

Impacts of high numbers on PAT support

PAT interviewees were uniform in reporting that having too many assigned students resulted in them not being able to dedicate adequate time to keep track of or follow up on students, in other words, to connect meaningfully with them. This, they asserted, had negative consequences on the quality of support that they could provide, especially in the generic contexts where "*you need a minimum of 40 minutes to break the ice and get the conversation going*" (T11).

Responding to too large a number of assigned tutees, PATs, in interviews, mentioned a range of approaches. For some, *"we cannot do one-to-one meetings unless a student has a specific issue that they want to discuss with us privately"* (T13). Indeed, many PATs run small tutee group meetings which approximate tutorial groups and can only, by necessity, focus on academic issues. These are reflective of practices utilised in other universities to overcome the challenge of large student numbers (e.g., Stephen et al. 2008). By definition, these arrangements deprive students of the personalised connections and the deeper type of interactions that can occur during individual meetings (Grey and Osborne 2020) and be tailored to their needs (Mulder et al. 2012).

This finding is also apparent from the findings presented in Figure 1, from the PAT questionnaire. More than half (57%) of respondents acknowledged that high numbers of tutees impacted the approach they took to their PAT meetings and their provision of support. This response was significantly higher (according to Fisher's Exact Test) amongst academics in courses with high-continuation rates, where lower tutee numbers meant the greater capacity of academics to conduct face-to-face, one-to-one sessions, which were locally established as the norm.

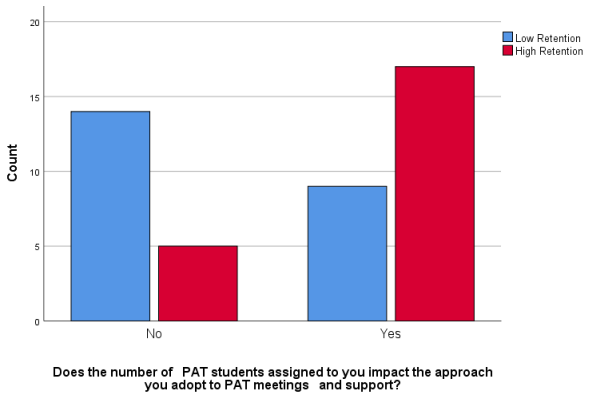

Figure 1. PAT responses as to whether the number of tutees impacts their approach

From interviews, PATs in low-continuation courses reported that having high numbers required them to handle student queries exclusively via email. One even said that they had not had one "*single face-to-face interaction with a tutee student",* although they had *"a number of email exchanges, but that's all"* (T8), which is contrary to the PAT system's intended purpose of deeper and more personal types of interactions.

Correspondingly, from the PAT questionnaire, a significantly higher number of PATs in low-continuation courses, as represented in Figure 1, stated that their approach was not impacted by the number of students. This seems likely to be a consequence of their practices of managing large numbers of tutees already being entrenched. Alternatively, it may also be due to the low levels of student engagement in these courses with their PATs, which are discussed in the forthcoming sections.

Such findings are indicative of how PAT-tutee allocations and approaches may have an impact on the nature and quality of PAT support to the extent that it deprives them of meaningful connections and the benefit of personalised support.

PAT perceptions and experiences

This section further addresses research question two by examining the perceptions and experiences of PATs regarding their PAT roles. In aiming to capture perceptions and experiences, the questionnaire presented 11 items asking PATs about their role, using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses from low- and high-continuation courses were compared and revealed different perceptions and experiences of their role. Figure 2 includes * marks on items where there are significant differences between academics in the two categories.

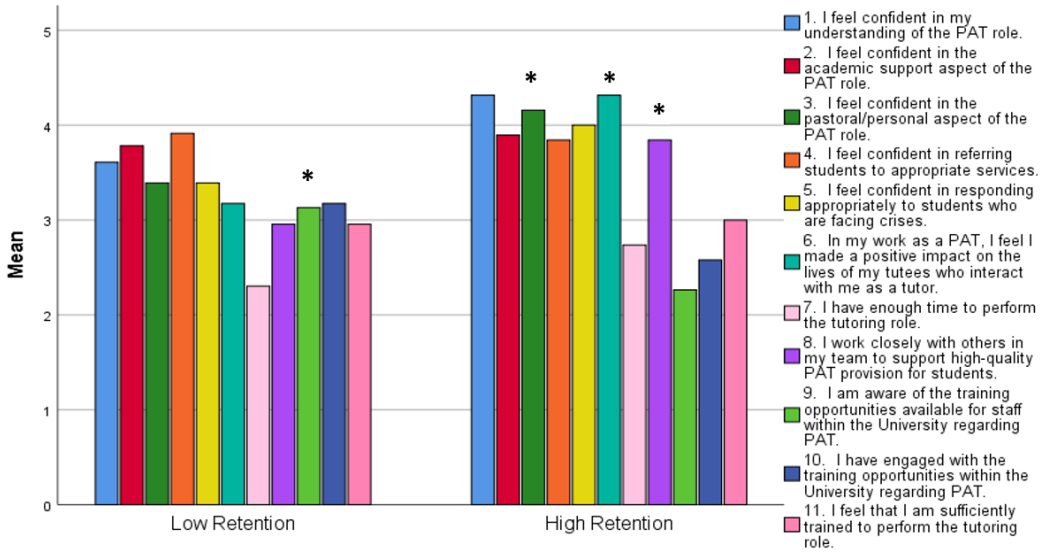

Figure 2. Comparisons of perceptions and experiences between PATs in low and high-continuation courses

Application of a Mann-Whitney U test on these criteria showed significant differences for items 3, 6, 8 and 9. PATs in high-continuation courses rated significantly higher than those in low-continuation courses on items 3, 6 and 8. They expressed greater confidence in their pastoral roles than their colleagues in low-continuation courses and were more aware of the positive impact they had on students. This is likely a product of knowing the students through more regular and closer interactions. *"… I speak to them on a regular basis*" (T3). Also, high-continuation courses reported more collective team responses to student support, where course teams met regularly and "*go through every week about who has been in contact with whom*".

PATs on low-continuation courses were significantly more aware of training opportunities (item 9). Although this finding seems difficult to interpret, it may be a function of their different contexts, where, unlike their colleagues on high-continuation courses, they do not have the benefit of the mutual support that can be achieved through collective teamwork.

Interviews with academics demonstrated their recognition of the importance of their PAT roles to support student learning and experiences, especially for the diverse demographics of students at the University. Despite the University's provision of guidance for members of staff and students detailing the PAT role, findings uncovered a lack of knowledge and awareness of the role and the guidance. One PAT appealed for a "*consistent message of what the PAT role can reasonably offer"* (T11) to be communicated to academics and students.

Interviews with PATs from both high- and low-continuation courses revealed a shared ambiguity about expectations of their responsibility, suitability and competence in the remit of their pastoral role. One asserted that they were "*not a psychotherapist in any shape or form, all [that they could] do really is point students to student support"* (T10). There was also a widespread recognition that while "people-orientedness" is a key characteristic of the teaching profession, not everyone has this trait. This makes the case for the professional PAT model (Earwaker 1992), where trained specialists provide support on a full-time basis.

For several PATs, unrealistic expectations from students about their availability and response times also generated stress in the context where "*being a PAT is an additional thing that you have to do*" (T4). One referred to the practices of colleagues which unwittingly

fuelled student expectations, whereby *"some PATs reply [at the weekend], but I don't. I have boundaries"* (T5). This pressure was compounded for some who felt *"a significant toll because students tell you very personal things, some of which are really traumatic"* (T4). During COVID, many PATs found themselves "*really struggling*". In the context of this mix of circumstances, several PAT interviewees appealed for support to maintain their own well-being.

For other academics, it proved difficult, if not impossible to reach students, involving them in intense efforts to secure student attendance at PAT sessions. One academic noted that engagement in recent years had been low and that despite having sent out "*emails inviting PAT students to engage in one way or another. This year I got 0 responses*" (T8). Yet, for the PATs in low-continuation courses, this lack of student engagement effectively reduced the burden of high tutee allocations. One declared themselves "*very lucky if one or two of [my] hundred PAT tutees actually turn up*" rendering the high allocation *"manageable"* (T10).

Although PATs may find it difficult to reach their assigned tutees, students can and do seek support from other lecturers. Alternatively, as one PAT emphasised, while only one-third of their tutees attended PAT meetings, they interact with all of their tutees one way or another, since they were *"their course coordinator … so this is a case of overlapping roles"* (T12).

In response to low student engagement, some PATs expressed their willingness to be flexible in trying *"to invent new and interesting ways of engaging students, which is extracurricular, outside of the studies"* (T1). In this regard, these PATs demonstrated a degree of proactivity which Calabrese et al. (2022) suggest is required if PAT support is to meet student expectations.

PATs teaching on vocational and apprentice courses provided important additional insights as to what can improve student engagement. This involves the scheduling of PAT sessions, which communicated the importance the institution assigned to them and meant that "*students knew when they had to meet up with their PATs and if they didn't, they would be chased down"* (T7). This points to the merit of timetabling PAT sessions as a routine institutional practice and is in accordance with the integrated PAT model.

Student perceptions and experiences

Addressing research question three, this section examines student perceptions and experiences. Notably, many are consistent with those expressed by PATs.

Students mainly reported that they were told about the PAT role and the name of their allocated PAT during induction. Some learnt who their PAT was via an email from their course coordinator or found this out themselves, via the Student Records Database. Most of the students who were unsure as to who their PAT was were first-year (Level 4) students, a finding which is consistent with results from the Students' Union (SU) survey. These students instead sought help from elsewhere, such as from a lecturer who was familiar to them.

According to interview responses from students in low-continuation courses, their engagement with PATs was low. Four out of ten had never met with their PAT despite their interest in doing so, a finding which is reflected in the SU survey[2]. When prompted about why this was the case, interviewees mentioned a lack of awareness or confusion about the PAT role, a fear of asking for help or shyness or a perceived lack of communication from their PAT. Explanations included "e*ither* [*students*] *don't check their email or they don't understand the whole thing, even though they were told about PATs at induction"* (S13). As importantly, and in reference to the personal, cultural and relational aspects, it may be because *"some students don't like to give much about themselves ... [or are] not comfortable with that person."* (S15)

Students from the high-continuation group said that students may not engage because of a limited understanding of the PAT role beyond providing support in emergencies. Another statement reflected a desire to remain independent, coupled with doubts about the effectiveness of PAT support, expressing *"I have never really needed to meet with my PAT because I've never had any issues that I need to discuss"* (S3). Such findings mirror research elsewhere (Ghenghesh 2016; Thomas 2012) that report students are unaware of the support available to them, and do not fully understand the purpose and benefits of engaging with PATs.

In responding to the interview question about changes students would recommend for the PAT system to improve engagement and quality of support, responses from the low-continuation group covered various aspects. Several students - in contexts where they have been meeting mainly in groups - suggested PATs should provide individualised support. Such findings validate those from a recent study, where students declared their preference for one-to-one meetings with their PATs (Calabrese et al. 2022). Other students recommended that academics have direct access to information on the students. One

[2] Which found that 81% of students said they knew who their PAT was and 19% did not.

student specified the importance of PATs accessing "*academic information, like grades and attendance"* of students from learning analytic systems so that they could "*see if all the students are performing well"* (S14) (which, as it transpired, was being launched across the University).

Other recommendations from students in low-continuation courses included involving them in the selection of their own PATs, running different activities to facilitate PAT interactions and holding coffee hours. Some suggested adopting an alternative term to "tutor", which in the case of international students, was informed by culturally diverse concepts, and considered to have negative connotations implying the need for remedial help.

Students in high-continuation courses recommended more frequent meetings with their PATs and improved response times for communications with them. One also acknowledged the virtue of academic access to important student information, especially in the case of students with disabilities or neurodiverse conditions, since the details *"would make disabled students' lives a lot easier"* (S5). Elsewhere, research (Calabrese et al. 2022) has indicated that students with disabilities report lower levels of satisfaction with PAT support compared to their counterparts. While our study did not research this aspect, this observation suggests a need for particular attention to the support needs of students with disabilities, given the additional challenges they experience.

Discussion

This study has highlighted the complex needs of students, spanning from academic assistance to personal issues and the challenges of providing adequate resources, understanding and expertise in mental health, safeguarding and GDPR issues. It surfaces the critical role played by PATs in providing a valuable relational connection for students towards their institution and improving their sense of wellbeing and educational outcomes. It contributes to existing literature (Drake 2011; Leach and Wang 2015; McFarlane 2016) by establishing an empirical relationship between PAT allocation practices and student continuation rates.

Collective findings from this study also reveal that PAT support is most effective where trust can be built over time, ideally in one-to-one and face-to-face meetings so that academics can get to know and understand students' backgrounds, circumstances and motivations and give discipline-tailored support. They underscore the importance of relational wellbeing secured through the establishment and maintenance of meaningful human interactions in educational contexts, as noted by various scholars (Vincent 2016; McFarlane 2016; Thomas

2006, 2012; Dillon and Pritchard 2022). The significance of PATs in providing pastoral support is further underpinned by advocates of critical pedagogy, including Freire (2008) and hooks (2002), who have stressed that education is fundamentally an act of love, requiring care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust. This study establishes how this can be experienced for students from diverse, non-traditional and marginalised ethnic groups and from overseas.

This study has also surfaced the concerns held by academics and students about how complex personal matters are handled. As PATs in this study indicated, even those with considerable experience lacked confidence in their ability to meet student needs appropriately (in line with Gardner and Lane 2010; Luck 2010; Stephen et al. 2008; Wakelin 2023) and perceived an urgent need for support for themselves to undertake their role. While PATs might routinely refer students to more specialist support services for personal issues, as a first point of contact, they still need to support students in distressing situations. Other research (Luck 2010; McFarlane 2016) has indicated that this can generate emotional exhaustion for academics.

Furthermore, the study found that time allocations to accommodate individual sessions and high numbers of tutees were not, as in other institutions, consistently or realistically reflected in workload planning alongside other teaching, administrative or research tasks (Stephen et al. 2008; Watts 2011; Wakelin 2023). As is found elsewhere (e.g. Augustus et al. 2023; Stephen et al. 2008; McFarlane 2016; UKAT 2021), cumulative workload pressures can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed.

As for PATs in low-continuation courses, this study established that their assignment of more than twice the number of students, compared to colleagues in high-continuation courses, compromised their potential to develop personalised relationships. Data from staff and students confirmed that students in low-continuation courses, particularly first-years, were less likely to engage with PATs for support, despite efforts by PATs to encourage attendance at sessions. Although this was a uniform worry for PATs, limited student engagement rendered their high allocations more manageable but presented a frustrating irony for them as educators.

The study showed that across courses many PATs lack clarity as much about the allocation numbers, and PAT approaches as about the precise scope and nature of their pastoral roles. This echoes literature which points to a sector-wide ambivalence as to where the academic tutor role ends and the personal tutor role begins (Ghenghesh 2017; McFarlane 2016; Race

2010; Watts 2011; Wakelin 2023). However, as with other institutions, confusion and insecurity amongst our research participants as to their PAT role might also be due to the lack of definitions or guidelines provided (Walker 2022; Wakelin 2023). PATs in this study also expressed a need for more extensive training, especially in how to deal with sensitive personal issues, as is echoed in other studies (Watts 2011; Lochtie et al. 2018; Augustus et al. 2023; McFarlane 2016; Walker 2022). These findings highlight the importance of communications on management directives to shape academic expectations of the multiple aspects of their PAT role.

Some students were also uncertain about the scope and value of the PAT role and how it may contribute to their university experience, learning journey and outcome. This accords with research findings from elsewhere (Bassett et al. 2014; Ghenghesh 2018; Stephen et al. 2008). In turn, this may be a factor which limits their engagement with PATs, particularly in low-continuation courses. However low engagement may also result from inconsistencies arising between students' experiences and their expectations of PAT support which can generate feelings of disempowerment (Yale 2019). So, while some students who did not engage with their allocated PATs may seek support from lecturers they were familiar with, ultimately, where they are disconnected from any one academic they may struggle with a sense of belonging, which can lead to higher dropout rates (Pedler et al. 2022; Thomas 2012).

The PAT model at the University conforms to the pastoral model since all academics are tasked with providing individualised support for both personal and academic challenges. Variations in local approaches have been formalised or emerged informally regarding the allocation and delivery of PAT sessions. However, the findings suggest that it may be best to adopt the curriculum integrated model or hybrid versions which universities in the UK are increasingly adopting (Grey and Osborne, 2020). These involve the timetabling of PAT sessions and group tutorials and may be particularly advised for courses with low-continuation and student engagement rates, for first-years (to facilitate their transition to university) and where, as in the case of vocational courses, students an additional type of fit--for-practice support.

Implications and recommendations

The centrality of the PAT relationship to student wellbeing and belonging and the correlations between PAT allocations, models and student retention rates, have provided evidence for recommendations for changes at the University to improve the PAT system and continuation rates. The sharing of research details, progress and recommendations for

enhancement has been successful in terms of securing management buy-in. It resulted in constructive discussions about the feasibility of the recommendations and a rapid institutional response to their implementation. In the immediate instance, the faculty with the highest PAT-tutee allocation numbers recruited considerably more full-time staff. It also established a locally tailored and hybrid PAT pilot, incorporating the professional model to provide students with access to well-trained and experienced PATs. University-wide changes were also actioned including an audit to render transparent tutee allocations within and across the faculties. Further, changes were made to the PAT policy, including the requirement to monitor PAT allocation numbers, and a community of practice was established to facilitate PAT peer support.

The authors aim to conduct a repeat study that examines the student and staff perceptions and experiences a few years after policy and practice changes have been implemented to the PAT system. Thus, the effectiveness of the actions will be evaluated. Further research is recommended to investigate the impact of different PAT models such as professional and hybrid models on student engagement and staff confidence and wellbeing. Finally, the effective integration of learning analytics into PAT to enhance student engagement, improve continuation and optimize tutor support can be the focus of future studies.

Limitations

There were two obvious limitations of this research. First, the number of academics included was representative of the PAT population in relevant courses. However, their participation comprises convenience sampling which may have generated a bias since it resulted in the inclusion of teaching academics who are either especially committed to their PAT roles or particularly frustrated by circumstances relating to these. In other words, the findings do not represent the perspectives or experiences of those who are less enthusiastic or less engaged with their PAT roles.

Similarly, students who participated in the interviews were typically amongst the most engaged in their studies and had good academic standing. The experiences of non-engaged or struggling students are yet to be discovered and would be difficult to access because they did not respond to invitations to participate, despite the offer of financial incentives. Further, although findings from this study related mostly to final-year students, other research (McFarlane 2016) has shown the particular importance of PATs during the initial years of the university journey.

A second limitation was the criterion for selecting courses to include in this comparative research, which was that they had more than 150 enrolled students. As such, the research has not captured the experiences of academics in courses with fewer students, nor has it surfaced the PAT experiences of Black and Asian academics who anecdotally indicated that they typically find themselves being sought by Black and Asian students for support because they identify with them. Methodologically, while this study highlights the correlation between PATs and student continuation and retention, it does not establish causation. Finally, the generalisability of this study may be limited by the particularities of its diverse student demographics.

Conclusion

This study established empirical and qualitative evidence on the relationship between PAT practices and student engagement and sense of support which in turn may impact continuation rates. Its mixed methodology, which was also triangulated with local and national data, provides a nuanced understanding of the impact of PATs on continuation and retention rates. Given the deepening and complex needs of the students entering HE, the findings from this study are pertinent to all institutions that adopt a PAT scheme and in particular those that have a high proportion of students with protected characteristics. Similarly, PAT scheme leaders must be empathetic and mindful of how the growing pastoral demands placed on PATs on top of increasingly heavy workloads, impact negatively on staff mental health and well-being, and define relational well-being and connections to their place of work. It is therefore critical that institutions consider the most suitable configuration of PAT models and how best to enhance support structures and training. Ultimately, establishing an effective and manageable PAT system is a duty of care for both staff and students.

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Appendix 1 Academics' participant information

Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Female	30	64
Male	15	32
Prefer not to say	2	4
Ethnicity		
White	25	53
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	6	13
Asian or British Asian	8	17
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	1	2
Another ethnic background	4	9
Prefer not to say	3	6
Years of experience at UoB		
Less than 1 year	3	6
1-5 years	25	53
6-10 years	11	24
More than 10 years	8	17
Total	47	100

Appendix 2 Students' participant information

Course	Year	Gender	Ethnicity	Maturity
Low-Continuation Courses				
Course A	3	F	White	Young
	3	F	White	Mature
Course B	3	F	Black African	Mature
	1	M	White	Mature
Course C	1	M	Bangladeshi	Young
	2	M	Black African	Young
Course D	3	F	Black African	Mature
	2	F	White	Mature
Course E	2	F	White	Mature
	1	F	White	Mature
High-Continuation Courses				
Course F	3	F	Black African	Mature
	3	F	Black African	Mature
Course G	3	F	Other Mixed	Young
	3	F	White	Mature
Course H	3	F	White	Young
	2	F	Black Caribbean	Mature
Course I	3	F	Bangladeshi	Young
	1	F	Bangladeshi	Young