

Journey together through the three years:

An evaluation of the personal tutor system, a student support model embedded in a Bachelor of Nursing programme in New Zealand.

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Abstract

Student support is an important part of tertiary education with different models, systems and approaches used internationally and nationally. The personal tutor system is one such approach to student support embedded within a new Bachelor of Nursing curriculum in a New Zealand tertiary institution. Through the personal tutor system students were assigned a lecturer, an academic member of staff, at the commencement of their study, for the duration of their programme. The purpose of the personal tutor system was to offer students support with their academic development and personal guidance that involved: scheduled and ad hoc meetings; monitoring of progress; personal assistance; and directing some students to seek additional support.

Using a mixed methods design, the personal tutor system was evaluated at the time the first student cohort completed the new programme. The study focused on factors that influenced the personal tutor system experience. Third year students and lecturers were invited to participate in two-phase data collection that involved the completion of a questionnaire (third year students: n=86 and lecturers: n=19) followed by semi-structured interviews (third year students: n=38 and lecturers: n=10).

Most participants confirmed that their personal tutor system experience was positive. Interpersonal interaction between students and lecturers was a key factor, as relationships were central to the personal tutor system. Flexibility was important as the personal tutor system was not a one-size-fits-all approach to student support. At times, competing responsibilities gave rise to undue tension particularly with lecturers' availability and accessibility for support. Unfamiliarity with the personal tutor system guidelines led to different interpretations for use and consequently confusion with support expectations. However, almost all participants acknowledged the value and potential for the personal tutor system in the BN programme.

Recommendations for changes to the personal tutor system included: the creation a proportional co-ordination role for ongoing management; a review of the guidelines that linked to support resources; time integrated into the BN programme for flexible arrangements with meetings and contact; and a time allocation for lecturers' workload with resourcing for associated responsibilities.

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