Guidelines for the Role of the Personal Tutor.

Introduction

1. At the Quality Assurance Advisory Committee (QAAC) meeting held on 22 May 2003 it was agreed that the Registry should conduct a survey of departmental practices regarding personal tutoring with the aim of issuing guidance and share best practice on what is the role of the Personal Tutor.

2. This survey was conducted during summer 2003. Fourteen departments across the Life Sciences, Physical Sciences and Engineering faculties submitted a survey return. The Medical Faculty submitted a single return on behalf of all medical divisions.

3. All survey returns concur that Personal Tutors have an important role in giving due care for the welfare of students studying at Imperial. In addition to Personal Tutors, the student support network comprises a number of departmental and College wide facilities and personnel such as Senior Tutors, Directors of Studies, Registry, College Tutors, the Student Counselling Service, the Health Centre, Disabilities Officer and so forth as listed in the Student Handbook each year. Each offers a range of professional care and advice which students can access directly and/or Personal Tutors can refer to / consult.

4. Survey returns reveal that generally the role of the Personal Tutor involves six key aspects of support for students as outlined in paragraphs 6 - 11.

5. Paragraphs 6 - 11 also outline a number of common problems / queries that students might approach their Personal Tutor about and how the Personal Tutor might deal with them. These correlate with many of the issues covered by the one day workshop on 'Becoming a Personal Tutor' which is run by the Centre for the Educational Development. It is compulsory for all probationary non-clinical lecturers to attend this workshop.

The Role of the Personal Tutor, Common Student Problems and Sources of Help

6. **Academic Development:** The level of involvement a Personal Tutor has in their tutee’s academic development varies across departments and from student to student. In the School of Medicine, for example, the role of the Personal Tutor relates more to the pastoral care of undergraduate students. Personal Tutors might reasonably be expected to assist with the following:
**Study skills:** Advise students on drawing up study plans, learning strategies, time management, note taking in lectures, how to research a topic and write a report / essay. Information on study skills is issued in the ‘Learning to Learn’ booklet which each student receives early in their first year of study. Advice on both the practical and creative aspects of writing skills is also available from the Writer in Residence.

**Exam preparations:** Advise students on preparing for assessment and examination. Students might also need tips on how to cope with exam stress. Some might benefit from attending one of the Exam Stress Workshops held at the Health Centre. These are usually a few weeks before Christmas and Easter breaks respectively and advertised in advance in Felix and various College notice boards.

**Examiners’ meeting:** Personal Tutors may be asked to comment on their tutee’s performance, particularly if there are any special circumstances that need to be considered, at departmental examiners’ meetings. Some Personal Tutors also inform students of their end of year results.

**Academic progress:** Assist students to develop responsibility for their own academic progress. Monitor and review student academic progress and provide reports on this to Senior Tutor and departmental files.

**Supervise work:** In early years Personal Tutors might supervise work on small projects and set problem sheets and give feedback to students. In some departments this role is undertaken by other support groups such as Academic Tutors, Study Supervisors and Study Groups rather than the Personal Tutor.

7. **Professional Development:** This in part overlaps with and builds on aspects of the Personal Tutor’s role in student academic development.

**References:** Students usually name their Personal Tutor as a referee on job applications and / or applications for further study, and this can continue long after a student has graduated. When writing references Personal Tutors should make sure they are factually correct and any opinion expressed in them could be justified on reasonable grounds if ever questioned. Referees should also bear in mind that even if a reference is written ‘in confidence’ the data subject may still have the right to see the reference. Guidance on writing references is available on Spectrum in the College Data Protection Policy guidelines at [https://www.imperial.ac.uk/spectrum/secretariat/publications/dp/guide7.htm](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/spectrum/secretariat/publications/dp/guide7.htm).

**Personal development plans:** Students should be encouraged to draw up Personal Development Plans (PDPs) as it helps them take charge of their own educational, personal and career development by reflecting on what and how they are learning. The College has
launched a web based tool at [www.imperial.ac.uk/ice/](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/ice/) to facilitate students in drawing up their PDPs: some students may wish to discuss it with their Personal Tutor.

**Career planning:** Students might ask their Personal Tutor for advice about selecting option courses and on choosing a career direction. Students can be referred to the Careers Advisory Service for information about the various employment sectors, employers and general career development advice. Students intending to work in industry might also find it useful to contact the College’s Industrial Liaison Tutor who is responsible for building links between departments and industry.

**Vacation work:** Some students might ask for advice on suitable vacation work for both the Easter and Summer vacations.

**Curriculum Vitae:** Some students might ask for advice on preparing a CV.

8. **Pastoral Care:** Students should be able to discuss with their Personal Tutor any problems they might have, including personal problems. Generally students are more likely to approach their Personal Tutor for advice / help if they establish a rapport early on. It is advisable therefore that Personal Tutors should meet their tutees as early as possible in the first term of their first year of study.

Student personal problems can range from depression, loneliness, relationship break-ups, parental divorce, anxiety about parental health, emotional insecurities arising from adapting from a school to university environment, to practical matters such as money and accommodation. Bullying and harassment is another problem that some students might encounter. In all cases Personal Tutors should give students compassionate assistance and if appropriate give advice, but they are not expected to be a counsellor and should as necessary refer students for professional care / advice.

**Emotional problems:** The Student Counselling Service is always willing to see students in difficulty, and will take emergencies seriously. If psychiatric help is necessary, it may be obvious that the student should be advised to go directly to the Health Centre. The Student Counselling Service is a useful guide if there is any doubt.

**Bullying and harassment:** Any complaints about bullying and harassment should be investigated in an objective way and handled confidentially with respect for the rights of both the complainant and the alleged harasser. Some forms of harassment are stopped by simply approaching the person, explaining the nature of the complaint and stating that the behaviour is unacceptable. However some cases have
to be dealt with through College’s disciplinary procedures and therefore it is advisable for Personal Tutors to refer problems about bullying and harassment to the Senior Tutor as early as possible with the student’s consent.

**Coping with a disability:** Students who need help to cope with a disability, should in the first instance be referred to the Senior Tutor. The College Disabilities Officer is also available to discuss in confidence matters concerning access and accommodation or any worries a student may have and is happy to visit students in either their area of work or hall of residence at any of the College campuses. The Disabilities Officer can also advise students about the Disabled Students Allowance.

**Money problems:** Administrative problems such as late payment of grants should be referred to Student Finance in the Registry. Departmental staff should not liaise direct with LEAs, as Registry staff have expertise in doing this. The Senior Tutor can also assist students with appeals to Access funds (home students) and Hardship funds (home and overseas students).

**Accommodation:** The Private Housing Office is able to assist students looking for accommodation in the private sector. Legal quarrels with landlords should be referred to the Private Housing Office or the Union Adviser.

9. **Social Development:** Personal Tutors can help establish a good social relationship between students and academic staff by encouraging their tutees to socialise and attend departmental events / functions. This is an important way of helping students settle into College life. They can also help students cope with any cultural difficulties encountered.

**Cultural shock:** International students especially may be feeling isolated and homesick and finding it difficult to adjust to social customs here and to cope with language barriers. It often helps if they can talk to somebody who is approachable and friendly who will help them understand more about the locality and social customs. It is useful if Personal Tutors can help introduce them to their fellow students who are already settled into life in London and Imperial. Students might also find it useful to contact the International Students Society.

10. **Identify ‘At Risk’ Students:** Personal Tutors are often the best placed to pick up on early indicators that a student might be having academic or personal difficulties that could put their progress on the course at risk. Absenteeism from tutorials, failing to hand in course work, achieving low grades in course work and exams; these can all be important indicators that help to identify ‘at risk’ students. Personal Tutors are normally involved therefore in monitoring indicators such as student absenteeism
and, in accordance with departmental procedures, recording and reporting it to the Senior Tutor. Personal Tutors should be aware of College policy on absence as follows:

**Absence due to illness:** Students absent from lectures due to illness for more than one week should submit a medical certificate. Illness can only be taken into account in assessing the significance of poor attendance, work or examination results if the illness is reported at the time it happened and a medical certificate is submitted.

**Other absences:** If it is necessary for a student to be absent from College for any reason other than illness, the Senior Tutor must be informed.

11. **Communications:** Personal Tutors are often contacted by external parties for information about students. It is College policy however not to divulge student information and all such enquiries should be referred to the Senior Tutor or Registry.

**Requests from parents:** If asked by parents for information about a student, Personal Tutors should tell them they cannot divulge student information even if it is about their son / daughter, without the students consent. If they persist to ask, Personal Tutors should refer them immediately to the Senior Tutor.

**Requests from the police:** Personal Tutors should refer requests from the police immediately to the Senior Tutor / Registry. The police have to request information on a Data Protection form.

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