UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

PASTORAL REVIEW TFG - UPDATE

1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This Paper is to update the committee on the work of the pastoral review TFG

2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Board/Committee</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Considered by</td>
<td>SSEC</td>
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<td>Further consideration by</td>
<td>UEC</td>
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3. RECOMMENDED ACTION

The committee is invited to note the progress of the pastoral review TFG.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 The Pastoral Review Task and Finish Group (the TFG) was established in 2021 as a response to the outcome of the University’s Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR), published in 2019, which recommended that the institutions should review the pastoral support provided for PGT students and the UG Personal Tutor system. The ELIR One Year on Report approved at Senate on 5 February 2020 refers to the need for pastoral support for PGT and online students.

4.2 An initial report produced by the TFG, presented a set of recommendations which were considered by Senate on 21 September 2022 as SEN22:03. Some positive comment was received from Senate, particularly regarding proposals for supporting PGT students. Significant concern was expressed, however, at the additional workload which would be needed to deliver the recommendations, especially in terms of extending the personal tutoring system to PGT and online students.

4.3 Building on the feedback from Senate and information collated by the TFG consultation with colleagues, the TFG developed a further set of recommendations discussed at UEC (October 2023) which included:

- Review the UG personal tutor online resources and training to make clear the scope of the role and the place of the personal tutor alongside other support which is available across the University.
- Not to establish a formal PGT personal tutor role, however to work with Schools to ensure that pastoral support and guidance is available for PGT and online students.
- Explore the Digital Strategy Committee ways of developing MyAberdeen/Student Records System to make the UG personal tutor system more manageable, supportive and user friendly for staff and students.
- Discuss with the Digital Strategy Committee ways of enhancing PGT/PGR feedback through the University’s participation in PTES, a Postgraduate Student Survey and PRES, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. This work was taken forward and the surveys were introduced in 2023.
4.4 QAA Scotland’s follow-up to the ELIR, the Quality Enhancement Standards Review, was conducted in February 2023 and their report recognised the work conducted to date on reviewing the personal tutoring system and recognised that this work is still ongoing. The report acknowledged that the current personal tutor arrangements for undergraduate students are well established, postgraduate taught arrangements appear to be more bespoke and vary depending on subject area. The QESR team recommended that the University completes the review of its personal tutoring arrangements, and ensure equity of experience for all students, particularly postgraduate taught students.

5. **UPDATE ON CURRENT TFG ACTIVITIES**

5.1 Pastoral Support and Guidance Remit

The pastoral support and guidance webpages states that “all students will be provided with pastoral support and guidance throughout their studies. Pastoral support and guidance is provided by our wide network of support services as well as by staff in the student’s School, who will help students settle into life at the University of Aberdeen, reflect on their progress and take advantage of the opportunities available during their studies. They can also direct students to appropriate services when it’s needed.” Therefore, delivery of pastoral support is not reliant on one individual but involves a number of services and individuals from across the academic community. The role of the personal tutor/pastoral lead is therefore not expected to be able to solve every problem a student may have, but to be able to direct them to the appropriate service that is best able to provide this support. So, for example, it is not the role of the personal tutor to support mental health issues but to ensure that students are directed to the appropriate services who have the relevant expertise to provide support.

Undergraduate Support. At School level pastoral support and guidance is largely provided by members of the administration teams, course coordinators, lecturers, but must notably from their personal tutor (or Regent for students on healthcare programmes). All undergraduate students are allocated a Personal Tutor who is a key contact within their School (wherever possible). The personal tutor is a member of academic staff who is there to help and guide students, supporting them with any problems that are affecting their experience at university. Their primary role is to be a key named contact that the student can approach for advice and who will signpost them to relevant support as required. Whilst students can contact their personal tutors at any point in the year, personal tutors are asked to meet with UG students at least twice a year at the start of terms 1 and 2. Meetings may be held either singly or in groups, online or in-person. Attendance is not compulsory, but strongly encouraged, especially for students in Level 1 and 2. Staff have an organisational page on MyAberdeen which facilitates communication with their personal tutees or they can contact via email.

PGT Support. PGT School-level pastoral support and guidance is similarly provided by members of the administration teams, course coordinators and lecturers. In addition, many schools identify the programme leads as the named contact who will provide pastoral support and guidance, although two schools, Psychology and LLMVC (pilot), have adopted a personal tutor system similar to undergraduate students. However, the role of the pastoral lead, and the information provided to students about how pastoral support is provided, varies across Schools. Meetings with the Schools have indicated that they would welcome a more consistent institutional approach to delivering pastoral support to ensure equity of experience for students and these meetings have helped articulate what all Schools should provide for their students, along with a number of examples of good practice that Schools may wish to adopt which are described below. The need to provide a more consistent approach is reinforced by both the ELIR and QESR reports.

5.2 Review of PGT pastoral support.

There is no consistent approach in PGT pastoral support provision across the institution however the ELIR and QESR reports have requested that appropriate support is in place for all students. The majority of Schools identify the Programme lead as the person who provides pastoral support, but implementation varies across Schools. Whichever approach a School adopts, pastoral support and guidance must still be delivered to ensure that PGT students are provided with appropriate support throughout their studies. The Dean for Student Support met with School
PGT pastoral leads to articulate what the support should look like, and this is described below, along with examples of good practice.

PGT pastoral support is described on the pastoral support webpages as, “pastoral support and guidance is provided to taught postgraduate students both by our network of support services as well as by staff in your School. In your programme there will be staff members assigned as your Pastoral Support Lead. Their role is to be a point of contact and someone who can help you with advice and guidance on matters affecting your experience at university. They will be able to direct you to the appropriate services provided by the university to ensure you receive the guidance and advice you need to succeed at university.”

Schools requirements include:

- **PGT pastoral support team** – Schools acknowledged that pastoral support is currently delivered by various members of the school, but this should be fully acknowledged and clearly explained to students, so they know who to contact with their various enquiries. This team should as, a minimum, consist of the named contacts below. Providing pastoral support can impact on staff workload and so these roles should be fully acknowledged in workloads so that, for example, programme leads have reduced / no UG personal tutees. This decision is devolved to Schools who determine for example, personal tutor loads.

- **Named contacts** – Schools should ensure that students are provided with at least three named contacts clearly signposted at Induction, on course pages, in course guides etc which should include:
  - a general School Support email alias monitored by the School’s administration team who can triage various enquiries.
  - the Programme Lead or Coordinator for academic-related queries.
  - a Senior Pastoral Lead (similar to the UG SPT) for students to approach as an alternative to the programme lead if needed. Most Schools already have someone acting in this capacity, for example it may be the PGT director or the UG SPT who has oversight of all pastoral support in the School. This role is described in more detail below.
  - Office hours – Clear signposting to the school office hours so students can speak to a member of staff in person if needed.
  - Additional staff may be included in this team by the School if required. For example, some Schools devolve some academic enquiries to course coordinators or include deputy support alongside programme leads.

- **PGT Senior Pastoral Lead** – Schools should ensure that there is a staff member who has oversight over PGT pastoral support provision. They will be responsible for the planning, coordination and delivery of pastoral support within the School including the activities outlined below. They will be an additional contact for students who do not wish to contact programme leads. The senior pastoral lead (or nominee) will be a member of the Senior Pastoral Support and Guidance Forum which allow discussion on pastoral support matters, sharing of good practice.

- **Clear and visible signposting to pastoral support.** Schools should ensure that induction materials, course handbooks, course pages, and regular communication clearly identifies named contacts (who to approach and why); sign-posting to the wide network of student support services; visible guidance on common issues, such as how to apply for extensions.

- **Plans for late arrivals.** Schools should have a clear plan to ensure that late PGT arrivals understand who to approach with their questions. Some Schools have a scheduled repeated induction class in week 3 and others provide administrative support at registration to direct late arrivals to appropriate support. Whatever the approach, Schools should ensure that they have a procedure in place that works for them to fully support students in this situation.

- **Communication plan directing students to support services.** Schools should have a communication plan overseen by the Senior Pastoral Lead which explains to students how pastoral support is provided in their school and proactively directs students to where they can find support at key points throughout the academic year (e.g. middle of term, exam periods, prior to assessments etc) which advises students on where to go for help in various circumstances (e.g. how to register with disability services to ensure provisions are in place, how to apply for extensions, who to speak to if struggling with studies etc.).
• **Consistency and equity of experience.** Schools should ensure that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that there is consistency and equity in the pastoral support and guidance student experience. Student experience may be evaluated via:
  o Survey data which can help Schools gauge the effectiveness of pastoral support include both ASES and PTES which both contain questions related to pastoral support.
  o Informal feedback given to staff, as well as from colleagues within the School.
  o Pastoral support should be a standing item at SSLC meetings.
  o Pastoral support should be a standing item at School Education meetings and issues fed back to the Student Support and Experience Committee.

**Good Practice** – these are areas of good practice that Schools may consider adopting, if they are not currently included in their practice.

**Study skills courses.** Some Schools have introduced study skills courses that are delivered either over one or two terms and cover a range of topics commonly raised in pastoral meetings, including, academic writing skills, library/research skills; academic integrity; mental health support; careers advice, language support etc., and may include social elements to promote community building. Schools report that these have had a positive impact and helped signpost students to appropriate sources of support or help establish appropriate academic expectations. Negative experiences have been that attendance can be variable. Given the value int the topics covered schools may consider making attendance compulsory and subject to monitoring procedures. However, it is recognised that some topics may not be relevant for home students.

**Student support committee.** Some Schools have a student support committee which brings together the UG SPT, monitoring leads, and admin and are being extended to include PGT leads to ensure a coordinated and coherent approach to school pastoral support activities. This group provides feedback to School Education and Student Support and Experience Committees.

**Social space.** Some Schools have provided social spaces for PGT on-campus students to promote community building.

**Additional pastoral support work**

5.3 **Review and restructuring of public-facing pastoral UG and PGT support webpages.**

The pastoral support webpages are currently hosted over several pages, which includes separate student and staff pages containing largely similar information. This includes detailed descriptions of School UG provision and some staff resources; a separate password protected staff resource page; several student and staff FAQs; limited information on PGT pastoral provision. Staff report that navigating through these pages is confusing and difficult to locate relevant information. Whilst there are a lot of useful resources, some colleagues have reported concern about the scope of the PT role extending beyond its original role into providing mental health support due to the inclusion of mental health resources whilst others report that it is valuable to have this information included.

Members of the TFG have reviewed the webpages pages and plans discussed with the Senior Pastoral Support and Guidance Forum. Changes which have been made include:

- Only having one public facing pastoral support webpage replacing the current student and staff pages. This page will link to UG, PGT, Qatar and online pastoral support links which will provide an overview of the support available including the wider network of student support services.
- Detailed School specific information on UG personal tutor provision removed.
- Password-protected staff resource page containing support materials restructured into categories to make it easier to find information (e.g. meeting preparation, training resources, administration etc.).

The revised webpage is currently hidden from public view but can we viewed by colleagues here. Please direct any comments/feedback to the Dean for Student Support. The revised webpage will be made public at the start of Welcome Week (w/b 11th September).
5.4 Introduction of in-person staff training for pastoral support and guidance role.

Currently there is no in-person training for personal tutoring/pastoral support nor is it included at new staff induction events. Staff who are new to personal tutoring are currently trained in Schools by SPTs and further supported with online resources available on the staff resource pages. It was felt that there should be more central support for staff training new to personal tutoring and pastoral support. As such, staff induction events will include information on the universities support services and there will be in-person training on personal tutoring and pastoral support delivered by the Dean for Student Support and Senior Personal Tutors available for all staff. 2023/24 training dates have been scheduled on November 8th and March 27th and will be advertised to staff when booking is opened.

5.5 Introduction of an annual pastoral support and guidance staff/student information event as part of the BeWell / Mental Health Awareness week in October.

As part of the university’s on-going work to promote health and wellbeing, we will promote and celebrate the network of student support services currently available to students at key events such as BeWell/Mental Health Awareness weeks to enhance the visibility of these services.

6. Academic Workload Engagement Exercise

The Academic Workload Engagement Exercise (May 2023) identified a number of key factors where pastoral and academic support needs increased workload pressures facing Academic staff. The table below lists the concerns raised in the AWEE and how the proposals outlined in this paper will help mitigate these concerns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment in AWEE</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The amount of Academic staff time required by the role (e.g. it was reported</td>
<td>Personal tutors can meet students in groups to help reduce workload</td>
<td>Students are now advised on the pastoral webpage that staff will not</td>
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<td>that in some Schools the role and frequency of out-of-hours contact from</td>
<td>demands. Staff are not expected to reply to student emails out with</td>
<td>reply during out of office time (emergency contact information is</td>
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<td>students is not fully reflected in workload models);</td>
<td>office hours.</td>
<td>provided). School induction material should reiterate this point.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The pressures and stress placed upon Academic staff in dealing with some</td>
<td>Personal tutors are not expected to provide mental health support for</td>
<td>Staff resources have been updated to clarify the limits of the</td>
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<td>issues raised by students for which they are not comfortable (or fully trained)</td>
<td>students. They should direct students to Student Support / Counselling</td>
<td>personal tutor role and training resources will further address</td>
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<td>to deal with;</td>
<td>as appropriate.</td>
<td>this issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The frustrations encountered by Personal Tutors in seeking responses to</td>
<td>Personal tutors are not expected to be able to answer all questions,</td>
<td>Web resources have been updated to clearly list help/advice contacts</td>
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<td>questions for which they are unclear about the answer (or where to direct</td>
<td>however should be able to direct students to the appropriate person/service</td>
<td>to support personal tutors.</td>
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<td>the student for support);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students approaching both their Personal Tutor and Lecturer in parallel for</td>
<td>This is a frustrating problem and can lead to confusion and delays in</td>
<td>Students are advised on the pastoral webpage not to do this. School</td>
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<td>assistance on the same matter</td>
<td>resolving the issue.</td>
<td>induction</td>
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Student Support Needs - Academic Support

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<tr>
<th>Several respondents highlighted that peak workload pressure points occurred during the academic year at defined periods e.g. marking assessments and exam periods.</th>
<th>Pressure points during the academic year tend to be around assessment deadlines/exams which can be planned for in advance and schools can proactively send regular communication reminding students of support available.</th>
<th>It is recommended in this paper that Schools develop a communication strategy to address these issues. Communication in advance reminding students of the support available, how to apply for extensions, report absences, university support for exam stress etc.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Some respondents articulated a concern that the amount of time required all-year round to provide students with supervision/academic skills and welfare support was increasing. In particular, resilience and independent study skills were cited as areas in which some students would benefit from more training/development activities at an early stage of their studies.</td>
<td>Personal tutor/pastoral lead role is to signpost students to the appropriate services.</td>
<td>Regular communication directing students to support services. PGT study skills courses can address a range of academic and pastoral issues and promote independent study skills.</td>
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7. Next Steps

- The committee is asked to note the current direction of travel on the actions outlined in this paper.
- It is recommended that the TFG is disbanded and that continuing work monitoring pastoral support issues are monitoring by the Senior Pastoral Support and Guidance Forum.
- It is recommended that the Senior Pastoral Support and Guidance Form (SPS&GF) is established as a formal group, which reports to the Student Support and Experience Committee.
- It is recommended that PGT pastoral support provisions are reviewed at the end AY2023 by the SPS&GF reporting to SSEC.

8. Further Information

- Further information is available from Jason Bohan, Dean for Student Support and Experience, Jason.Bohan@abdn.ac.uk