

The Personal Tutor System in School of Biological Sciences (SBS): Guide for students

1. Summary

What is the personal tutor system?

- Each student has a personal tutor allocated to them. Your tutor will be one of 41 academic members of staff.
- Each tutor group usually consists of about 9 students, often from different disciplines and from various stages (Levels 1—4+) within SBS.
- Your tutor will arrange to meet you at least twice a year (individually or in a group): the [main schedule for meetings, and suggested discussion topics](#). However, you/your tutor may want to focus on other topics.
- You can ask for a meeting at other times as well as/instead of the main meetings. You can also contact your tutor whenever you want (see below).
- Engagement with your tutor is important, and this can involve e-mail as well as meetings.

Your personal tutor can be your first point of call when you have a query or want advice



2. What your personal tutor can do for you

- Help you settle in to the University of Aberdeen (or become re-settled after an upset).
- Be a human interface, to help you understand the complexities of university life.
- Get to know you, so that they can provide a reference for you when you apply for internships, voluntary placements, employment, or a higher degree.
- Encourage you to consider ways in which to develop your graduate attributes, and to be a confident and effective student.
- Give you advice on preparing for assessments (e.g. exams) and reflecting on feedback.
- Provide contact information to help with your academic programme, including:
 - Contact with those who can help with curriculum choices
 - Contact with your degree programme coordinator or your course coordinator
 - Contact with admin staff, to help you to resolve any difficulties involving attendance or poor performance
 - Contact with those who organise 'Go Aboard'
- Provide contact information to help with co-curriculum opportunities, including:
 - Internships, mentoring, voluntary placements, expeditions
 - Clubs, societies, sports, AUSA
 - Recognition of achievements (e.g. STAR awards)
- Provide contact information for a range of support services, including:
 - InfoHub
 - Student Advice and Support Office

- Students4Students
- Disabilities advice and advocacy
- Study support
- Careers
- [Further details about these services.](#)
- Note that to be able to help you, your tutor will need to meet you or at least communicate effectively with you. If your personal tutor does not respond to your enquiries within 3 working days:
 - Send a polite follow-up message (your tutor may be busy, but they should let you know if this is the case)
 - If there is still no reply, please contact the Senior Personal Tutor and/or the admin team (details below)

3. What you can do for yourself

- Respond to invitations to meetings with your personal tutor
- Maintain effective communications with your personal tutor
- Make the most of your time at university. Exploit opportunities, both within the curriculum and beyond it
- If you are experiencing any difficulties with the personal tutoring system in SBS, please let us know (see contacts below)! The tutoring system exists for your benefit, so we want you to use it in a way that works for you.

4. What we are planning for personal tutoring the future, in SBS

Within the School of Biological Sciences, we recognise the value of the personal tutoring system. Within the next two years, we are planning some changes. These will affect new students, and some may affect you if you are currently in Levels 1—3:

- Increased allocation of students to tutors who are in the same discipline. This should make it easier for tutors to give advice on professional networks and employability. Our main discipline areas are:
 - Biology
 - Conservation and Ecology
 - Plant, Soil, Environment and Forestry
 - Marine Biology
 - Zoology and Behavioural Biology
- SBS staff (including personal tutors) will be more active in alerting students to co-curriculum opportunities

5. Contact information on personal tutoring, School of Biological Sciences

Senior Personal Tutor	Dr Martin Barker	m.barker@abdn.ac.uk
Personal Tutor Admin	Mrs Amie Connolly	sbsteaching@abdn.ac.uk
Head of School	Prof Graeme Paton	g.i.paton@abdn.ac.uk
Director of Teaching	Prof Michelle Pinard	m.a.pinard@abdn.ac.uk

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The Personal Tutor System in the School of Biological Sciences (SBS): A guide for personal tutors and other staff

This guide is intended to summarise the personal tutoring system in SBS, in terms of both where it is now and how we see it evolving.

0. Summary

1. We recognise the actual and potential value of the personal tutoring system (PTS) within the School of Biological Sciences (SBS) and understand the ultimate aim is to enhance student experience.
2. We have found the most effective use of the tutoring, by both students and tutors, involves a flexible approach that recognises the range of needs and demands of students; we believe further increases in the flexibility of provision would be beneficial.
3. We emphasise the principle that the PTS is student-led. This means that whatever service we provide, it should be in response to student needs and student demand.
4. We would like to see the PT system rolled out to PGT students, where PGT programme coordinators have their allocation of UG tutees adjusted to accommodate the PGT students.
5. The involvement of the SBS administration team has been crucial to the organisation, optimisation and monitoring of our tutoring.
6. Increasingly, PTs are organising meetings in response to student demand rather than simply following a prescribed programme.
7. We have identified a series of immediate and longer-term priorities for improvement.
8. We welcome the discipline-based allocation of students to tutors, where possible.
9. We will continue to collect and disseminate insights gained from PTs to share and celebrate good practice.

6. Current status of personal tutoring within SBS

- 6.1. We believe that the personal tutoring system (PTS) has an important role to play in the lives of students in the School of Biological Sciences (SBS). This role is not always recognised or understood by students or even some tutors.
- 6.2. We have a diverse range of disciplines in both students and tutors (see [Appendices A, B](#)) which can be a challenge but also can provide numerous useful insights, which we can use to enhance our provision.
- 6.3. We recognise that students often find their own solutions to problems (e.g. from peers, informal contact with staff, Support Services).
- 6.4. We sometimes organise meetings (within some courses and tutor groups) for students across years, so that more junior students can gain valuable insights from more experienced students.
- 6.5. Aspects of tutoring that seem to have worked well in SBS include:
 - proactive contact with students
 - resolving issues quickly
 - being flexible in the way that we offer meetings (e.g. grouping students, timing, duration, location, content).
 - strong input from secretariat including, for the September/January meetings, issuing Outlook invitations to tutors and running a Help Desk.
 - organising temporary 'cover' for absent tutors, for the September/January meetings so that students (returning and, especially, new) do not feel 'neglected'.

- admin staff making a record of meetings to allow tracking.
 - providing ideas/resources/informal training/briefing sessions for tutors, especially those who might lack confidence in their role (e.g. [Appendix C](#)).
 - regular reports on personal tutoring provided by the SPT via staff meetings, teaching committees, and via e-mail bulletins.
- 6.6. We regularly remind our tutors that meetings are only part of their role; we encourage tutors to value a role involving other forms of communication with, and support for, students in their personal tutor group.
- 6.7. PTs in SBS are generally adept at either answering tutee questions directly or passing it on to colleagues (e.g. SPT, DoT, and secretariat). We believe that most issues are resolved quickly and satisfactorily, but we don't use a system for tracking them.
- 6.8. We recognise that some PTs would prefer to be allocated tutees with a similar/same discipline. This is to provide curriculum advice and to help students recognise academic affinity with their tutor, and to benefit from tutor's professional networks and awareness of employability.
- 6.9. As a school, we value the autonomy that we have been given. We seek to expand this (next section) while remaining faithful to the ethos of the PTS.

7. Proposed changes to personal tutoring within SBS

All of the proposed changes are intended to promote staff-student engagement and a sense of purpose and belonging. For those students who feel marginalised, neglected or ignored, the personal tutoring system can create important connections. Under the right conditions, the PT involvement could increase the likelihood of students being retained.

- 7.1. We will use an informal **consultation process among our PTs** (which has already begun) to **gather insights about good practise and also where there are unused opportunities**.
- 7.2. Adopt a **more focussed approach to organising September/January meetings**. The preferred model is:
- New students, by year (i.e. Level 1 and direct entrants): Meeting slots previously 'held' by Outlook Calendar invitations. September meetings linked with induction events. September meetings mostly held in central location, where generic support for PTs is available for curriculum issues, etc.
 - Returning students: PTs given the responsibility to set up own meetings (individual or group). These meetings monitored by SBS admin/SPT.
- 7.3. Meeting students in **groups**, but always with the option of meeting students individually, as require. Each has advantages:

Individual meetings	Group meetings
Privacy, especially for sensitive issues	Tutors are less likely to have down time
Works better for students who are awkward/intimidated in groups	Total time for meetings is shorter for tutors
More flexible in scheduling	Discussion dynamic may be easier if students meet in a group
Opportunity to discuss more specific issues, which might be irrelevant to others	Opportunity for more senior students to help their peers

Students who want a group meeting can request a that instead/ as well	Students who want an individual meeting can request a that instead/ as well
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7.4. Other immediate priorities for PTS in SBS are as follows:

	What needs to be done	How we propose to do it
1	Raising the profile of the tutoring system in SBS. Increasing attendance at meetings, e-mail engagement, and inter-staff communication	Promoting positive experiences of PTS in SSLCs, Teaching Committees, and via SBS Facebook groups.
2	More proactive role for PT, especially with: a. students who are struggling or b. who are given positive recognition (e.g. prizes)	a. PTs alerted (e.g. via student monitoring and Retention Centre) when their tutees encounter a difficulty (e.g. C6, C7, course failure). Possible role in attending meetings related to this, if student requests this. b. PT congratulate students on achievements
3	Develop a more consistent method for recording engagement of tutees (e.g. attendance, communication); currently, this is rather haphazard	SPT/SBS secretaries to continue to encourage tutees to record meeting attendance (and e-mail contact) via admin team
4	Explore the feasibility of using a more consistent method for tracking issues raised by tutees	If used, SPT/SBS secretaries would maintain a record of issues raised by students and their resolution.
5	Increase awareness in, and uptake of, co-curricular opportunities (e.g. STAR, internships) among SBS tutees	Regularly remind tutors in SBS that students should actively consider involvement co-curriculum. Promote information sharing.
6	Increase awareness in, and uptake of, skills workshops among SBS tutees	Regularly remind tutors in SBS that students should actively consider ways to enhance skills. Promote information sharing.
7	Recognise the potential role of PTs with PGT students. Look for more continuity between UG/PGT experience	Explore the possibility of having some PTs to be given a PGT allocation (and reducing their UG allocation). SPT has raised the issue in central committees.
8	Promote PDP in one-to-one meetings, for those tutees who are receptive	While seeking to avoid imposing 1-on-1 meetings on unreceptive students, promote the opportunities for such meetings.
9	Promote employability awareness among SBS tutees	Seek ways to further embed work-centered learning within courses. Raise profile of existing events (e.g. careers evenings, workshops).
10	Prepare/disseminate an annual verbal report on our PTS performance	SPT, with admin and DoT, to prepare a summary of our PTS activity for the Student Experience Committee

7.5. Aspirations for the longer-term future include:

	What needs to be done	How we propose to do it
1	Promote the use of virtual meetings, if needed (e.g. using Blackboard Collaborate or Skype). This could allow meetings to occur when tutors are off campus	Admin can provide assistance/training for those tutors who want to use video conferencing, if necessary
2	Ask non-SBS students if they want to transfer to another PT in their own school (from 2016--2017)	SPT to consult students individually
3	For all new intake, try to allocate primarily to PTs with same/similar discipline within SBS	SPT and DoT/HoS to consider how to match ratios of students : staff disciplines, while ensuring that all PTs (1 FTE) have similar sized groups

8. Contact information

Senior Personal Tutor	Dr Martin Barker	m.barker@abdn.ac.uk
Personal Tutor Admin	Mrs Amie Connolly	sbsteaching@abdn.ac.uk
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APPENDICES**A. Students with personal tutors in SBS**

- Currently, we have **461** undergraduates with PTs in SBS; 96.5% are SBS students.
- Currently we have 12 degrees, dispersed among 5 disciplines: 1) biology, 2) conservation and ecology, 3) plant, soil, environment and forest management, 4) marine, 5) zoology and behavioural biology.
- The distribution of SBS (+non-SBS) students within SBS tutor groups is currently:
 - Level 1: 118 (+1)
 - Level 2: 96 (+7)
 - Level 3: 138 (+1)
 - Level 4: 91 (+6)
 - Level 5: 2 (+1)
 - TOTAL: **445** (+16)
- All SBS students have PTs in SBS

B. Personal tutors in SBS

- Currently, we have 41 personal tutors based within SBS.
- 85.4% of our PTs are on 1 FTE contracts. The mean size of their tutor groups is 8.9 students

C. Personal tutor meeting themes

In personal tutor meetings, we suggest that each student be allowed to 'set the agenda', depending on their priorities; the whole personal tutoring scheme is intended to be student-led. University suggestions for [meeting themes](#).

However, if more ideas are needed you could use the information in two ways:

- Personal tutor: follow the links
- Student: tutor could demonstrate links, or e-mail links to student

Below are just some suggestions. Please feel free to send further ideas to m.barker@abdn.ac.uk to add to this list for the next update.

Possible themes	Some options for the themes
Initial welcome	‘Welcome’ resources
	Level 1 (+Level 2 direct entry): welcome to university. Everything OK? How personal tutoring works Level 1: Welcome session for all SBS students to be announced Aberdeen orientation:
	Levels 2—4 (5): Welcome back. Vacation? Plans for this year. Any concerns?
General discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student’s aspirations and concerns for the coming term ○ Any unfinished business from last term ○ Possible/probable date of next tutor group meeting ○ Reminder that you can be contacted between meetings
Introduce/remind students about Graduate Attributes	Could discuss which of the 19 graduate attributes the student is particularly keen to develop. See also Graduate Attributes resource
Could discuss the co-curricular opportunities	University is now using Enhanced Transcripts , so approved activities can be made more visible to future employers. Note that SBS students often do not engage with the co-curriculum: Class reps Climate Change Project AberGreen AUSA sports AUSA societies Student media: Gaudie Student media: radio STAR Award S4S mentoring
Volunteering	University of Aberdeen internships AUSA volunteering University Careers Service work experience Volunteering in Cruickshank Gardens Volunteering in local wildlife groups Volunteering in museums Aberdeen charities
Overseas expeditions	Look out for announcements in SBS Facebook and on noticeboards
Pastoral advice	Student Advice Centre
Semester / Year abroad	‘Go Aboard’ Contact: Cath Dennis

Communications	SBS Facebook accounts for each year group: contact Martin Barker
Disability support	Cassie Scott Martin Barker + http://www.abdn.ac.uk/disability/students/index.shtml

Curriculum questions

General questions about curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Michelle Pinard ○ Teaching Support Team (Zoology G32) ○ InfoHub infohub@abdn.ac.uk
Course specific questions	Course coordinators are given in the course catalogue: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/registry/courses/undergraduate
List of undergraduate degrees	http://www.abdn.ac.uk/study/courses/undergraduate/?as
Study support	UoA: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/infohub/support/study-support.php AUSA: https://www.ausa.org.uk/ausaadvice/

Programme specific questions

Programme	Programme coordinator (or those who should be able help)
BSc Animal Behaviour	Lesley Lancaster
BSc Behavioural Biology	Lesley Lancaster
BSc Biological Sciences	John Baird & Sam Martin
BSc Biology	John Baird
BSc Conservation Biology	Clare Trinder
BSc Ecology	Clare Trinder
BSc Environmental Science	Gareth Norton
BSc Environmental and Forest Management	Louise Page (withdrawn in 2018-19)
BSc Marine Biology	Paul Fernandes
BSc Plant and Soil Sciences	Martin Barker
BSc Zoology	Alan Bowman
Master in Science in Biological Sciences	John Baird & Sam Martin

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