# The STEPS course: Support through Tutoring, Employability and Professional Skills

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## Abstract

Though personal tutoring is an essential part of higher education (HE) and though the need for it increases year on year, the time available for it has decreased. (Grant, 2006; NUS, 2015; Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001). Many students need a varied range of support (HEFCE, 2003, 2007; OFS, 2018; Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006) and there is growing pressure to include 'soft skills' within HE (NCIHE, 1997; Skillset, 2011). These requirements often fall to personal tutors. A small working group in the department of Creative Professions and Digital Arts at the University of Greenwich developed a solution that could help our diverse student body find some of the support and skills it needs. This project became '**STEPS**', *'Support through Tutoring, Employability and Professional Skills',* the combination of a) a series of events and activities and b) personal tutoring supported by means of – the most common method – action research (Yale, 2017). Staff and students co-designed **STEPS**, which included a consistent feedback loop through the Unitu online student voice platform (here, students can raise, discuss and resolve important issues). Though the core structure of STEPS could be implemented across any institution, its specific content would need adaptation if it were to provide the best fit for student cohorts elsewhere.

**Keywords: personal tutor, academic tutors, student support, retention, social life.**

## Context

Students leave their university programmes for many reasons. The move to a skills-focused education tied to the economic well-being of the country (NCIHE, 1997) has had wide-reaching effects. With eerie prescience, Fromm (1978) foresaw our present time – a period during which the process of becoming someone with a range of knowledge is valued less than the acquisition of 'skills' for industry. The pressure to amass skills has placed considerably more stress on students and has led to a change in student expectations of what universities will provide (Kreig, 2013).

That many undergraduates are not prepared for university life (Brinkworth *et al*., 2009)  is a prime reason for their choosing to leave it (Laing, Chao and Robison, 2005; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998). These students also significantly underestimate the amount of academic work – often self-study – that they need to do; they consequently become "*concerned about the lack of availability of staff*" (Walsh, Larsen and Parry, 2009, p.407). Key to retaining them – and therefore a vital element of the personal tutor's role – is helping them to settle in, as well as changing their perception of higher education (HE) (Bryson and Hand, 2007; Thomas, 2006).

Personal tutors are able to help new undergraduates to transition, letting them know that anxiety and even fear are common, that they are supported and that they can ask for help (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Often these undergraduates find for themselves various sources of support – from parents to fellow students (Tao *et al.*, 2000), but they should also be able to access whatever support a university has to offer (Cooke *et al.*,2006). In their study, Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) found sign-posting to other university support services to be one of the most important things a personal tutor can do. Although there are great benefits for both the university and the student (FitzGerald, 2014), not all lecturers see personal tutoring or retention as their concern (Johnston, 1997). In addition, asking students to come to things that will not be assessed presents its own difficulties.

Tinto's interactional model (1993) describes student retention as the natural consequence of a student's developing relationship with her/his university. This is not a unique finding, for Perry's (1999) research at Harvard showed that the students felt supported and integrated through a sense of community. Thomas (2002) argued that students feel that they are integrated members of their university when they develop a relationship through *five* different modes. The first two – economic and academic – may be obvious enough, but Thomas found – perhaps surprisingly – that three others are also essential components of the process: social, pastoral and democratic. The benefits of the social dimension do, on reflection, seem clear: Mackie (1998) avers that if undergraduates are not able to integrate socially, they will leave their degree early on.

Creative Professions and Digital Arts (CPDA) was a new department created by means of the bundling together of many of the creative programmes that had previously been homed in a variety of faculties. The new head of department (HOD) set up a small working group to look at pastoral provision. Each programme arrived with its own traditions and expectations of what a pastoral tutorial should be. As a new department, however, it was at liberty to develop new ideas. This small working group noted, as much of the literature discusses, that, because of increasing staff-student ratios, tutors had less time to do the variety of pastoral work falling under the tutor role (Grant, 2006; Hartwell and Farbrother, 2006). However, we realised that not everything had to be delivered on an individual basis.

Through quantitative questionnaires and a series of one-to-one discussions with members of the department, we discovered workload and content inequalities between the programmes as they stood. For example, personal tutors on programmes with large student numbers tended to have far more (and certainly too many) tutees than others, while the amount of information shared at pastoral level was also inconsistent. In common with a number of other higher education institutions (HEIs) and their research findings, we discovered that it was often the case that students met with their personal tutor no more than once a year (Sosabowski *et al.*, 2003). It became apparent that the future extent of our engagement with the early experiences of our cohorts was up to us noting that these early student experiences would have a direct relationship with cohort engagement going forward (Tinto, 2002).

HEIs have various strategies addressing the perceived need for an increase in pastoral support and employability skills when available academic time is short (Aynsley-Smith and Marr, 2006). Some HEIs have opted for a centralised approach, but CPDA colleagues overwhelmingly supported retention of delivery by our creative department with its specific focus on the needs of our particular cohorts, rather than acceptance of a more general and

less targeted faculty - or university-wide provision. In order to prevent any preconceptions about what this solution might be like, we chose not to adapt an existing model, but to develop something new: personal tutoring would be a departmental responsibility and it would not be delivered by programmes or modules. This transformed our thinking about what we might achieve. **STEPS**, in its first manifestation, was the result.

## Case study

**STEPS** consists of department-wide sessions for all CPDA students in year groups as well as allocated personal tutors.

- **STEPS 1** is for first years, transitioning students to HE and introducing them to all the support and procedures at Greenwich.
- **STEPS 2** is for second years. It asks them to think about their final-year research projects in the context of their own interests and the arc of their own learning.
- **STEPS 3** readies our third-year students for the world outside, providing practical guidance focused on either the world of work or further research, in all its forms.

**STEPS** follows an iterative action-research process. Data and emergent themes are collected throughout the year by means of the Unitu platform and student interviews. At the end of the year, the data are analysed and the results reported back to the department. A new working group is put together to select the following year's focus (on the basis of emerging themes brought up in student feedback) and to identify any new issues. The next iteration of **STEPS** is based on this reflective practice.

## STEPS 2016-2017 implementation

- Induction week for year 1 with, in order to ensure consistency of the message across all programmes, a carefully-coordinated integration of HOD welcome, university orientation, library inductions and programme explanation
- 'Meet Your Tutor' social event allowing students to meet their personal tutor in an informal setting with a DJ and drinks to share contact details and tutor availability days'
- Six-week intensive course on Monday evenings for year 1 students, detailing additional learning support, access to Moodle, extenuating circumstances etc.
- Afternoon conference for year 2
- CV writing workshop for year 2
- Interview and recruitment workshop for year 2
- Afternoon conference for year 3
- Pre-Christmas social hosted by the HOD

We spread the numbers of tutees across the department, randomly allocating students to lecturers in order to manage numbers. We developed a tutor checklist, containing up-to-date contacts for every support body at the University, and provided the whole department with a year planner with key dates identified. Tutors had to contact tutees – to ask if they wanted a tutorial – during specified weeks (particularly, for year 1 students, teaching weeks four and six).

We asked various lecturers from across all the programmes to deliver fifteen-minute presentations to first years on such specific topics as group work or available dyslexia provision. As integrating students within the institution is key (Thomas, 2006), we placed particular emphasis on the **STEPS** year 1 induction week, which did run very smoothly. Unitu allowed for instant feedback about it.

> *"Thanks to all the tutors and staff who made this [induction week] an easy and understandable week."* Year 1 Unitu student feedback, 23 September 2016

However, we found that attendance by year 1 students at the **STEPS** evening sessions started to drop off and that few students went to see their personal tutors. We responded to the lack of student attendance by organising forums with the HOD and gathered feedback from the students on a number of issues.

The afternoon conferences and workshops for years 2 and 3 had a good response; at these, a variety of presenters included specialists from industry, tax, and recruitment, alumni and our librarian.

> *"I've been to both of the lectures/seminars for the **STEPS** programme and I just want to say how amazing and beneficial they have been. I have learnt so much in both sessions about how to improve my CV and how to handle myself in an interview."* Year 2 Unitu student feedback, 07 December 2016

We collected formal data from colleagues at the end of the year. Only 63% of students attended up to 25% of the pastoral tutorial sessions, significantly down on previous years, when programme teams had tutored their own students. 90% of the staff supported the departmental presentations and conferences and 74% of them made use of the tutorial checklist. 79% expressed a wish for departmental delivery on dealing with stress, on mental health and on managing deadlines. Whilst the quantitative data presented a fairly convincing argument that we should rethink aspects of **STEPS,** the qualitative feedback showed conflicting views on the best way forward.

At this point, a larger working group was set up to co-design the course for the following year, so as to accommodate the conflicting opinions about how to address the issues found and to deliver a set of recommendations. This group – comprising twelve people from across our programmes, together with myself as chair – was as representative as possible: three male and three female staff – half of whom were fractional – and three male and three female students. The integration of the student voice into the design of the first iteration of **STEPS** sets it apart from many approaches (Yale, 2017) by other HEIs. The findings of this larger working group were: students wanted more information; **STEPS** would clearly not be an effective use of time if delivered by individual tutors.

> *"I realise it might sound silly, but maybe even have lectures on it?* [Issues with procrastination and workload].*"* Year 2 student within working group

Taking into account not only the quantitative data from colleagues but also qualitative feedback from student interviews, we changed the tutee allocation back to programmes tutors for one-to-one support, aiming for a staff-student ratio of 1:30 pro rata, using lecturers teaching on the tutees programme.

*"I used to see all of my tutees when they were in one of my courses."* Lecturer within working group

## STEPS 2017-2018 implementation

- Fuller **STEPS** Induction week for year 1, including activities from the first round of **STEPS** together with the recommended small informative presentations by specialist staff.
- Meet Your Tutor social
- **STEPS** afternoon for year 1 to explain to them all the great things they can access at the University
- **STEPS** afternoon for year 1 discussing mental, physical and emotional health (We invited the Student Union to take a more involved role concerning loneliness and social clubs.)
- Afternoon Immerse conference for year 2
- CV writing workshop for year 2
- Interview and recruitment workshop for year 2
- Afternoon Launch conference for year 3
- Pre-Christmas social hosted by the HOD

To address the observed fall in student numbers in 2016-2017, we developed two *afternoon* sessions for year 1. However, some first-year students complained on Unitu that the afternoon sessions seemed to them to be simply a repeat of induction week and, though they were not, this insight into the way they were perceived would inform our actions for **STEPS** 2018-2019.

Years 2 and 3 students who attended the conferences, like those in 2016-2017, took a lot from them.

> *"I would just like to say thank you for the amazing STEPS Immerse Conference that happened on Wednesday, it was incredibly informative and entertaining. It gave me a good idea of where to start my pursuit of internships and placements."* Year 2 Unitu student feedback, 23 November 2017

Issues with the timetabling system meant that the **STEPS** activities were not allocated to individual student timetables. We noticed that, across all the years, if the events didn't appear on timetables, student attendance numbers would be low, no matter how much the events were publicised. Additionally, we were still not reaching our third years well enough in their particular areas of concern – anxiety and stress:

> *"Everyone's really anxious and stressed in their final year and it is easier to just not come in, there are very few of us that haven't considered quitting"* Interview with Year 3 student at end of academic year 2017-2018

## STEPS 2018-2019 implementation

Taking into account all the feedback from Unitu and interviews with students, we have now developed and timetabled the **STEPS** course for, at the time of writing, this current year. We have put a lot more energy into resolving through timetabling the student numbers and

engagement issue, so that activities will show on individual student timetables and will be linked to specific modules. The new timetabled slots will be up for discussion with a new student working group. In common with the study by Bennett *et al.* (2007), the students interviewed still did not seem to grasp the full purpose of personal tutors and how the departmental provision adds to that. Acting on this, we have included a fuller preparatory session for **STEPS** in induction week.

- In keeping with the feedback, there will be a much more intensive induction for year 1, including the 2017-2018 afternoon sessions
- Full-day induction for both years 2 and 3
- More Student Union involvement
- Fuller explanation of **STEPS** and personal tutoring
- Meet Your Tutor social
- Some drop-in sessions (Other feedback indicated that more detailed Moodle and Creative Cloud information would be appreciated.)
- Afternoon Immerse conference for year 2
- CV writing workshop for year 2
- Interview and recruitment workshop for year 2
- Afternoon Launch conference for year 3
- Mindfulness and mental health session for year 3
- Pre-Christmas social hosted by the HOD

For 2018-2019, we planned more activities for years 2 and 3 during induction week (previously a 'non-week' for these cohorts), with the intention of helping them to transition into the year (by means of sessions on academic skills, managing stress and project planning) and of providing an opportunity for them to define their personal goals for the year to come, with the help of a year leader from each programme.

## Conclusion

Whilst there has not been extensive research into personal tutoring (Braine and Parnell, 2011; Watts, 2011) and what little research has mainly been conducted by the medical sciences and healthcare (Ghenghesh, 2018), there is a clear need to research and develop better tools and systems to deal with the increasing expectations of both HEIs and students regarding the provision of personal tutoring. Additionally, in the Arts, there is a gap in knowledge about personal tutoring.

The social aspect of student engagement and retention runs through all of our **STEPS** development. Some events are more obviously social, such as 'Meet the Tutor' and the pre-Christmas social; others have an alumni social networking element, such as the third-year conference. We have found that we are starting to achieve a sense of community through central delivery – a possibility if such delivery includes lots of opportunities for social interaction. Feedback about subjects as diverse as mental health, group-working and CV preparation is definitely more consistent now and tutors don't have to deliver – alongside all the other demands of their job – a complicated and time-consuming curriculum.

**STEPS** is far from perfect and 2018-2019 will be another year of action research, but, with this co-design approach and data analysis, we can develop a better system that could benefit us all. What *is* clear is that the content cannot simply be transposed from one school

or faculty to another, as students have very different interests and concerns. To them, it's important that the *personal* aspect remains *personal* and that the transferable skills are also clearly targeted. Whilst the specific content and speakers cannot be lifted wholesale and used elsewhere, the **STEPS** concept can be. From the outset, **STEPS** was never expected to be an immediately perfect and polished solution, but an evolving project, improving year on year – thanks to research (to enhance both delivery and content) and to co-design with students. It seems only fair to give them the last word:

> *"We don't always admit it, but I believe every single student does have at least one thing that could be solved during them* [STEPS events].*"* Interview with year 3 student at end of academic year 2017-2018

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