Transcript of interview between Tansy Jessop, Kelly Moule and Gemma Ford on personal tutoring

Tansy 00:01
Good Morning Kelly and Gemma, great to have you with us today. And we're talking about personal tutoring and I just wondered, Kelly, whether you could introduce yourself.

Kelly 00:12
Hi, I'm Kelly Moule. I'm the University Education Director for Academic Support. And that gives me responsibility for personal tutoring across the institution. I'm a biochemist. I've been a biochemist at the University of Bristol for donkey's years. So I've got lots and lots of experience of teaching on the biochemistry programme but also actually some of the professional programmes, medicine, dentistry and veterinary science as well.

Tansy 00:40
Brilliant, brilliant. Gemma, do you want to introduce yourself?

Gemma 00:43
Hi, so my name is Gemma and I'm a lecturer in the Bristol Medical School and that's within the Faculty of Health Sciences. And I lead on the MSC course in reproduction development. So, I started my PhD here in Bristol and that was neuroendocrinology. So, my subject is sort of hormones and how they are sort of affecting reproduction. And but also I spent a few years as a researcher in Galway, Ireland and then two years as a lecturer there. So then I came back here Bristol. And so on the personal tutoring, I've had about nine years experience here at Bristol as a personal tutor. And for the last couple of years I've also taken on the role as the senior tutor here at Bristol medical school. And I have an overview for all of the postgraduate taught courses and also the intercalating students that study with us in Bristol medical school.

Tansy 01:35
Wow, brilliant, gee! So and the catch is in the name in terms of online teaching, how do you see personal tutoring being at all personal in an online environment? Any examples or ideas of how you how you see it being personal tutoring, when it's digital.

Kelly 02.01
Well, I think I think we're going to have to work really, really hard at this, putting the personal interpersonal tutoring. I think that it's really important that we somehow try and establish a relationship with our tutees. And that is going to be challenging in a digital environment. But I think that relationship will help them establish themselves at the University. I'm particularly thinking about new students here. I think returning students, we've got a slightly easier job because they know us already, they know some of their peers. So I think that's, that's reasonably straightforward, if you can say that. But I think it's these new students that we're really going to have to work hard at to make them feel part of their academic programme, to make them feel that they're part of a school in which they're studying, to make them feel part of a community of learners and also to feel part of the University of Bristol. So that's really difficult, I think, and I think anything we do to try and reach out to students, whether it's on Skype or Zoom or Collaborate, I think that they will really appreciate the efforts that we put in to making those connections.

Tansy 03:13

Brilliant. Gemma, I mean, your role involves PGTs who are here for a short period of time as well. So how do you, how are you going to think about putting the 'personal' in personal tutoring in a digital environment?

Gemma 03:30

So, I suppose I'm kind of fortunate that my course is blended in its design originally. So we have students that are only here for a short period of intensive workshops and then they go and study for 15 weeks of the year at a distance. We've always found that the physical distance isn't actually usually a predictor of academic success, it's the psychological distance. We need to, you know, that is the challenge, the idea of students becoming a bit isolated, or not feeling part of the social, socially connected with the, with their course or the university. And the idea of disengagement is something we see quite often in our courses, sometimes.

I think we just need to work to make the students feel connected, and that they feel that there's a, they perceive the availability and connectedness of us, the teachers, their peers, the students and the institution as a whole. So I think it's, I know there's structural issues in terms of large ratios for tutors and tutees, the individual factors. But I think if we can work on sort of embedding, or enabling those relationships really beyond so there's a real balance of academic and personal support from the get go. And that they, you know, to really think about icebreaker activities, pair work, group work with the students with us when we're doing tutorials. And to talk about our expectations of them when they study with us, but also to find out what their expectations are.

Tansy 05:14

Sounds like a host of really useful tactics there. I mean, I'm from the arts and humanities side of the house, as you know, and I'm intrigued to understand a bit better and get some ideas from you about how you do personal tutorials in STEM .You're both from STEM disciplines. And I think, from chatting to Kelly before, I think sometimes your personal tutorials and the activities you do look a bit different. Could you just explore that a bit, perhaps starting with Kelly?

Kelly 05:45

Yeah, sure. Um, I think I think you're right, we tend to historically do things a little bit different in STEM to in the Arts and Social Sciences. But there's still a huge amount of variability in STEM subjects. I mean, talking from my neck of the woods, in biochemistry, we tend to have quite regular, reasonably structured tutorials. And I think those work really well. So what we do is we meet fairly often with our tutees. I mean, obviously in the pre COVID-19 situation that would be face to face. But what we intend to do going forward is have regular meetings online with our tutees. And I think those regular catch ups are really important in establishing the relationship that we have with our tutees.

And we would, I think, very frequently have group tutorials. So relatively small groups, maybe four or five students that make up your tutorial group. And we would have them together and we would go through quite often mini activities, so maybe get them to give a short oral presentation or, or maybe sort of think about an experiment they might design to solve a scientific problem. So some sort of activity that gets them thinking about the discipline, thinking about being a biochemist. And I would hope that those sorts of activities enable them to develop skills. And those, those activities actually add value to the interactions that we have. So that tutees feel that there's a point in turning up to tutorials and it's not just an 'is everything okay? How are you doing' sort of quick catch up, it's actually

more meaningful. It's about the skills development that we want to go through as biochemists. So that's kind of our approach anyway.

Tansy 07:37
Very interesting. Yeah, I think we could take a leaf out of your book, really fab. Gemma anything to add to that?

Gemma 07:45
So, I suppose with the postgraduate taught students is a little bit different in that quite frequently students are met individually and or they're met in very small groups because our community in Bristol Medical School, our communities are relatively small as a course, they wouldn't be as big as undergraduate courses. But one of the things that I think is important is the idea that when we do have our tutorials is to sort of help students find out what they need in terms of to help them with their academic progress. But we do a lot of talking about careers, what they're going to do next when they leave Bristol, because obviously they're only studying with us for a year. So the themes that come up over the year with our tutees.

And also thinking about the postgraduate community we have more sort of sometimes more diverse and complex or challenging issues to discuss in a sort of [inaudible] way because they may have caring responsibilities, many are international, and they may have more older parents that they have to consider. And they could be working at the same time. These kinds of factors. So there's quite a lot of, of that sort of pastoral and personal support in PGT.

Tansy 9:03
Hmm, brilliant. Well, I think that's a fascinating window into your world. And I just want to thank you very much for sharing it with us today. I think it's really helpful for the digital design course. So thanks for that.