Title of section: **What does a Personal Tutor do?**

The duties of a Personal Tutor can be broken down into five main areas:

1. **Guidance and information about higher education processes, procedures and expectations**
   - Some of your students will be new to Higher Education and might have no family experience of it. Your role is to guide your tutees through any difficulties they might encounter and to explain and help them to adjust to the academic expectations of HE study (such as working independently, managing their time, balancing work-life-study demands).
   - Personal Tutors help students to reflect on their skills and experience and to formulate action plans for their academic study.

2. **Academic feedback and development**
   - Familiarise yourself with your relevant programme regulations, assessments, etc. so you are able to give guidance on how to deal with issues such as exam failure, mitigating circumstances, etc.
   - Research shows that one of the biggest barriers to students progressing in their first year is their inability to adequately develop independent learning skills. Personal Tutors can play a vital role in helping students to develop higher-level academic skills.
   - Personal Tutors can play a role in a student’s professional development and career planning by helping them to put together personal development plans.
   - Personal Tutors should make students aware of internal opportunities available such as peer mentoring, business mentoring, etc. These opportunities could help to develop employability skills.

3. **Personal welfare support**
   A lot of students are wary of seeking help, and they see a lot of the support on offer as somewhat remote. An essential part of the personal tutor’s role is to provide a reliable and empathetic bridge between the student and Birkbeck as an institution. Active listening skills are very important in this role, as well as providing encouragement and support.
   By creating an on-going positive relationship with your tutees, it becomes possible to detect problems earlier and to deal with them before it is too late. It is therefore important that personal tutors can be regarded as reliable, responsive, and trustworthy by their tutees. The establishment of this type of relationship helps students to develop a sense of belonging within the Birkbeck community.

4. **Referral to further information and support**
   Various support services are available within the College, and you do not need to tackle every problem yourself: see Section 4 for general information, and familiarise yourself with the services offered at Birkbeck. Personal Tutors should always be aware that they do not need to deal with all issues themselves (see section on boundaries).
5. Reference writing

Personal Tutors are often asked to provide references for current and past students in response to requests from prospective employers and from other universities. When writing references it is helpful to bear in mind the following points:

Use hard evidence (e.g. examination results, etc.) whenever possible.
Try to make only positive points, hinting at negatives only when essential to do so.
If a pro-forma is provided, do not try to comment on aspects which you are not in a position to assess.
Be aware of legal considerations, for example, Data Protection.

In some cases, it can be very difficult to write a positive reference for students – indeed some may feel that no reference at all is better than a poor reference. It is also extremely difficult to write a reference for a tutee who has not attended any scheduled Personal Tutorial meetings. Tutors can refuse to write references for students, it might be that in certain cases a colleague who taught the student is in a better position to write a reference.

Section 2

Title of section: Advice on running tutorials

In most BEI departments, academic staff are allocated a large number of personal tutees; this can make it difficult to operate a more proactive form of personal tutoring, and relies on students approaching their personal tutors to arrange a meeting. This system tends to disadvantage those students who are most in need of guidance and are perhaps reluctant to seek help: these are the very students we need to reach.

In order to give more attention to personal tutees without using an unreasonable amount of staff time, it is recommended that staff adopt a mixture of group and individual personal tutor sessions.

This is meant to set a minimum number of contacts with tutees; personal tutors will also need to respond to ad hoc meeting requests and emails from students outside of these sessions.

1. First group meeting

In order to have the most impact, this needs to take place either during the induction week or in the first few weeks of term. This group session gives the personal tutor a chance to introduce him/herself to the group and to explain their role and the support they can offer. Group meetings also help students to build and develop their own support network outside of their normal academic work and classes.

Some possible activities / discussion points:

- a post-it note discussion of students’ hopes and fears as they embark on their first year of study
- lists / discussions around what they are most looking forward to and what they are most concerned about
- identify support around each of the concerns listed above
- academic skills / referencing / plagiarism
- a discussion of the boundaries of the personal tutor role: what you can and can’t help with
- accessing School and College support
2. One-to-one meeting

The crunch time for student dropout is around the end of term 1, when students have received their first assessment marks and are wondering about whether to return after the Christmas break. It is therefore important that students are given the opportunity around this time for a one-to-one meeting with their personal tutor. In order to make it easier for students, who might be reluctant to seek help, personal tutors should offer all their tutees a time slot (this can be done online, possibly via Moodle). Not all students will use this time, but you are more likely to reach vulnerable students if they don’t have to initiate the meeting.

Some possible issues to cover:

- coursework submission and assessment – help interpreting feedback and developing ideas to improve
- social support – discussion of how they are settling in and making connections / networks with other students
- discussion around time management
- careers advice – helping to develop skills required by employers related to your academic area

3. Second group meeting

This is best held during term 2 (or the beginning of Term 3 for programmes with three-term teaching), and can be used to look forward to Year 2 and to evaluate Year 1.

Some possible issues to cover:

- identification of strengths and weaknesses
- finding support for weaknesses
- offering support to others in areas of strength (developing support networks)
- planning for Year 2 – hopes and fears again
- planning for the change of learning style in Year 2
- advice on the programme structure and choosing modules

For subsequent years of the programme, the same format can be used and the themes for discussion can be adapted to students’ priorities as they progress. For example, they might want more help with careers advice, module choices, and with skills specific to their project/dissertation.

Section 3

Title of section: Boundaries

It is important to set boundaries early on in your relationship with your tutees. Establishing the limits of your role as personal tutor, and setting out what you can and can’t be expected to do can help to reduce the likelihood of problems arising further down the line.

It is often difficult, even for experienced tutors, to know when to handle a problem yourself and when to refer your tutee on to a central service. Students can sometimes be reluctant to seek help from central services, as they can see them as somewhat remote and impersonal. Tutees can sometimes become reliant on you as their main and perhaps only source of support at Birkbeck. It is
therefore important to explain early on that there are limits to what you can personally do for your tutees.

Those limits are mainly centred around three main points:

1. **Your available time:**
   There is a danger that students can feel that you are ‘brushing them aside’ if you refer them to a central service to deal with their issue. It is therefore important to explain how other people are better experienced and trained at dealing with this particular issue, and that consulting them will help their issue to be dealt with more efficiently and quickly. It is important, however, that you try to make time to follow this up with your tutee, to make sure that the issue has been resolved and to show that you are still interested in helping them to find a solution.

2. **Personal involvement:**
   Keeping a professional distance from your tutees’ problems and issues is a difficult balancing act. It is vital that you are seen as someone reliable and interested, but your task becomes harder if you feel that you need to solve every problem yourself. However, what you regard as professional objectivity could be interpreted by your tutee a feeling that you are too detached from their problems and that you don’t care. It is therefore important to explain that you are much more help to your tutees if you can remain somewhat objective, as this puts you in a better position to be able to evaluate and respond to their needs appropriately and effectively. Personal tutors should be friendly and sympathetic, but they do not need to be their tutees’ friend, or (as Birkbeck’s student profile gets younger) to act in a parental role.

3. **Your skills and knowledge:**
   It is important to be aware of the limits of your knowledge and skills in dealing with non-routine issues that might arise. Academic staff are unlikely to be appropriately trained to deal with more complex problems involving services such as counselling, physical and mental health, and specific advice on rapidly-changing areas such as funding and financial assistance. The School and College have a wide range of good-quality services on offer, and it should be stressed to students that referring them on will be the most helpful thing to do, and is not a way of avoiding the issue. If you are unclear about where the boundary between Personal Tutor and central services is drawn, staff working in central services will be happy to discuss it with you.

**Case study: boundaries**
*(taken from Neville, Lindsay ‘The Personal Tutor’s Handbook’ pp 66-67)*

A tutor, Janet, had significant experience of tutoring and had just become the department’s senior tutor. She enjoyed the role, and wanted to set a good example for all the other tutors in her department. For some months she had been seeing a tutee, Max, on a fairly regular basis. He often called in to see her, and she was enjoying the feeling of being able to help him stay the course. His health difficulties had been affecting his academic work and Janet had negotiated extensions to academic deadlines; he was managing to get his work in. However, his marks still didn’t reflect what she and Max considered to be his real potential. Max had also often seemed rather low, but Janet put this down to his physical health. She told him that he could come to see her whenever he was feeling down.

Late on Friday afternoon, just as Janet was about to leave to pick up her son from the nursery, Max appeared in her office looking much more distressed than ever before. He had heard yesterday that he had failed a course assessment, and hadn’t slept since as he was so worried about it. He told her that he once took an overdose in the past and was frightened that he might do it again. Janet briefly
tried to reassure him, but said that she couldn’t stay to talk to him as she was in a hurry. She suggested that he go back to his university room to get some rest, and perhaps find a friend to be with him. She said that she would phone him later and checked his mobile number. It was now after 5 pm, but on her way to pick up her child, she phoned student services in a panic to ask them to try to ensure that the student was alright as she was going away for the weekend. Fortunately, there was still someone experienced in the office.

What worked well?

- the tutor demonstrated her interest in the student, and made him feel comfortable and able to seek her help.

- the tutor negotiated appropriate extended coursework deadlines for the student, and this helped him to complete his academic work despite his ill health.

Could the tutor have responded differently?

- the tutor almost certainly ‘held on’ to the student too long. Had she encouraged him to seek additional advice and support from the student services, his underlying depression might have been picked up sooner, his crisis might have been averted, or he would at least have been known to student services staff, who would have been in a better position to help when the crisis came.

- the student services staff member who responded to her call was placed in an extremely difficult position. He was being asked by Janet to respond in a very sensitive situation to a student he did not know, and about whom he had no substantive background information.

- the student might have benefitted early on from contact with a number of different student services. These could have included the counselling service, the mental health service, and perhaps even the academic learning service, where he might have been helped to find more effective ways of prioritising his work and planning his time.

Section 4

Section title: Common issues and referral

As a Personal Tutor, you will find that some issues arise more regularly than others.

The referral guide below gives the contact details for the College’s central services, which should cover most issues that you will be required to deal with. See the earlier section on boundaries for advice on the scope of your role and tips on when to refer a tutee to specialist services.

A good number of issues you will deal with might arise from the student’s lack of knowledge of general learning and study skills. Personal tutors can guide students on how to track down the information they need for your department’s specific academic area, but academic staff often do not have the time to cover any missing basic and fundamental skills. The School has two Learning Coordinators: Richard Carabine covers writing and organisational skills, and Eva Szatmari covers maths. Their details can be found on their web page: http://www.bbk.ac.uk/business/current-students/learning-co-ordinators
For more information about each service go to the My Birkbeck website and enter the name of the service in the search box.

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<th>Service</th>
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| Accommodation                                                           | Information from the University of London Housing Services               | 020 7862 8880
www.housing.london.ac.uk                                               |
| Alumni and Development Team                                             | Information on support available from alumni                            | 020 7380 3134
alumni@bbk.ac.uk                                                         |
| Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD)                 | Advice and workshops on a wide range of academic skills                  | 020 3073 8042
studyskills@bbk.ac.uk                                                    |
|                                                                         |                                                                          | Stratford: 020 8223 4389
clpdstratford@bbk.ac.uk                                                  |
| Counselling Service                                                     | Help with issues of a personal and emotional nature                       | 020 3073 8073 (contact phone for staff. Students should use contact form on My Birkbeck website)
                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                                                         |                                                                          | counselling-services@bbk.ac.uk                                                                                                     |
| Disability and dyslexia support                                         | Advice related to supporting disabled or dyslexic students               | 020 7631 6316
disability@bbk.ac.uk                                                    |
| Health Services: Gower Street Practice                                  | The College’s affiliated health centre                                   | 020 7636 7628
20 Gower Street                                                         |
| International Office                                                    | Advice on student visas and support for international students           | 020 3073 8065
isa@bbk.ac.uk                                                            |
| IT Services                                                              | Information about IT facilities, support and training                     | 020 7631 6543
its@bbk.ac.uk                                                            |
| School Learning Support Officers / academic support                     | Academic support (BEI)                                                   | Eva Szatmari (Maths support) 020 7631 6254
e.szatmari@bbk.ac.uk
Richard Carabine (academic skills) 020 7631 6464
r.carabine@bbk.ac.uk                                                    |
| Nursery                                                                 | Term-time only, evening childcare provision at Bloomsbury campus         | nursery@bbk.ac.uk 020 7679 4634                                                                                                     |
| Student finance                                                         | Advice and information relating to student funding                       | fundingadvice@bbk.ac.uk 020 7631 6316                                                                                               |
| Student Helpdesk                                                        | General information about services at Birkbeck                           | 020 7631 6316
www.bbk.ac.uk/ask                                                       |
| Students’ Union advice centre                                           | Advocacy for students and advice related to money management             | 020 7631 6655
advice@birkbeckunion.org                                                |
| Students’ Union clubs, groups, and societies                            | For a wide range of interest groups, eg related to faith, cultural or sexual identity or parenting | www.bbk.ac.uk/su/societies
clubsandsocs@birkbeckunion.org                                          |
| Helplines                                                               |                                                                          | 08457 909090
0800 917 8282
0800 776600                                                               |
<p>| Samaritans                                                              | 24-hour helpline for people in crisis                                    | 08457 909090                                                                                                                          |
| Drinkline                                                               | National alcohol helpline                                                | 0800 917 8282                                                                                                                          |
| National Drugs Helpline                                                 |                                                                          | 0800 776600                                                                                                                          |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Support and advice services, run by students for students</th>
<th>020 7631 0101</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sane</td>
<td>Emotional support for anyone suffering from mental illness</td>
<td>0845 767 8000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gamcare Support</td>
<td>Support for anyone with gambling problems</td>
<td>0808 8020 133</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Debtline</td>
<td>Independent advice on how to deal with debt problems</td>
<td>0808 808 4000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Support</td>
<td>For victims of crime</td>
<td>0845 3030900</td>
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**Mental Health crisis support**

If a student presents as suicidal or with a severe mental health problem, contact the Counselling Service in the first instance. If the student is acutely suicidal, contact their GP who can arrange for a local mental health crisis team to look after the student. Alternatively, call an ambulance. Counselling Service: 020 3073 8073.