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To cite this article: Jo Augustus, Dawn Goodall & Briony Williams (16 Oct 2023): Does the role of personal academic tutor have an impact on staff wellbeing?, Research in Post-Compulsory Education, DOI: [10.1080/13596748.2023.2253656](https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2253656)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2253656>



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Published online: 16 Oct 2023.



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Does the role of personal academic tutor have an impact on staff wellbeing?

Jo Augustus^a, Dawn Goodall^b and Briony Williams^c

^aInstitute of Health, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, UK; ^bDepartment of Health and Wellbeing, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK; ^cDepartment of Paramedic Science and Physician Associates, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experience of acting as a personal academic tutor (PAT) at a medium sized University in the West Midlands. The researchers aimed to establish the robustness of the PAT system, with a focus on wellbeing of both staff and students. This research took place within the context of growing concerns for student and staff wellbeing. A thematic analysis (n) 26 full time employees with at least 1-year PAT experience identified 3 key themes; self, others/ systems and resilience. Subordinate themes within each include; Burden, self as context, mental health, resilience, boundaries, deployment, experience systems and support. The researchers then re-examined the thematic data through the lens of Transactional Analysis. Karpman's (1968, 40-42) drama triangle became evident in the development within the PAT student relationship and its incumbent complexity. The effects on staff wellbeing were discussed and found to have both positive and negative consequences. As part of future PAT training the researchers would suggest using the drama triangle for staff to reflect honestly on current positions in their PAT relationships. This should present possibilities in each relationship of movement towards the winner's triangle and reduce the emotional burden of the PAT while increasing student self-efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Personal academic tutoring;
thematic analysis;
transactional analysis;
wellbeing; resilience

Introduction

There is a growing level of concern regarding the number of students in higher education (HE) who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. One in four HE students reported experiencing mental health difficulties, with three quarters stating they have a common mental health problem, mainly anxiety and depression (YouGov 2016). The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) have acknowledged this trend and Student Services report increasing numbers of clients and severity of

CONTACT Jo Augustus  jo.augustus@cumbria.ac.uk

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problems that trouble them. Universities UK have produced a Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education good practice guide (Universities UK 2015), aimed at facilitating the integration and embedding of student mental wellbeing within HE institutions. The Office for Students launched a funding bid for universities to support mental health projects (The Office for Students 2018). University services are therefore being encouraged to be both proactive and responsive to student mental health needs. However, even when protocols exist Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) may rely on tacit knowledge gained through experience and conversations with colleagues. In this paper mental health is defined ‘as a state of emotional wellbeing in which the individual is able to use his or her own thinking and feeling abilities, live with others and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life’ (Augustus, Bold, and Williams 2019, 171). Interruptions to this state of well-being may mean that thinking, emotions and behaviour affect daily life, although this may not lead to a mental health diagnosis. Within this paper this refers to meeting the diagnostic criteria in reference to ICD11 and DSMV (Augustus, Bold, and Williams 2019, 60–75). The authors note that such criteria often hold differences in the key characteristics present, to reach a diagnosis.

Tutors in HE have many responsibilities, which include supporting student academic development and may also include being a first point of contact if a student is experiencing difficulties whilst at University (Higher Education Academy 2015). At some Universities it is not uncommon for PATs to be involved in discussions with students relating to challenging mental health difficulties, alongside academic issues (McFarlane 2016, 80; Race 2010). Increasingly academics work within an environment which has conflicting demands due to resource constraints and large numbers of students (McFarlane 2016, 85). Given this context there is the potential to experience delivering robust personal academic tutor support as particularly challenging and negatively affecting staff wellbeing and resilience (Kinman and Wray 2013; Owen 2002, 19; Stephen, O’Connell, and Hall 2008, 449). Both staff and student resilience is an important theme throughout this paper. Resilience may be considered as a dynamic approach where the individual can draw on a variety of psychological mechanisms to regulate emotions in order to maintain well-being (Hernandez-Wolfe 2018, 11–12). Luck (2010, 273–287) suggested that dealing with disclosures from students can significantly impact on the wellbeing of academic staff. Meanwhile, academic staff whose resilience could have been weakened by the burden of the role may react inappropriately to student demands (Luck 2010, 273–87). This increased workload, allied with the conflicting ideology of positioning self as either ‘with student’ or ‘with institution’ (Hunter 2004, 265), further impacts on staff wellbeing and mental health (Kinman and Wray 2013; Watts 2011, 215).

Article types

Original research.

Methods

The research took place in a medium sized University in the West Midlands and focused on the experience of the PAT role. Staff were asked about their confidence and competence, wellbeing, resilience and support. By taking a qualitative approach, this research explores the socially constructed nature of participants' accounts of their experiences as PATs (Norman and Lincoln 2013, 2–5). This study aimed to establish how well-equipped PATs were to fulfil their role supporting students. As researchers, we could not escape being shaped by our own experiences as a PAT. Indeed, the fact that we chose to examine the impact of a role we ourselves undertake within Higher Education, illustrates the way that researchers' own constructions of the world are intimately bound with the questions they ask (Norman and Lincoln 2013, 2–5). As biographically situated researchers, we chose an approach that recognises and embraces the shared aspects of our historicity with each other and with the chosen participants (Norman and Lincoln 2013, 2–5).

There is an acknowledgement that this research cannot provide that which positivists might strive for, a mirror reflection of the social world (Miller and Glassner 2004, 130). Instead, as qualitative researchers we were aiming for rich descriptions surrounding the context of the data, which offer the chance of reaching explanations of the phenomenon (Sayer 2011, 23–28; Wendy and Peter 2001, 260–262). With this methodological approach and the use of qualitative data, we had to accept the 'excitement and terror' that it was impossible at the beginning to know where the research would end (Richards 2005, 126). Immersion in the data helped create an account that was rich in the participants' sense making, as they explored their experiences as PATs. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79–82), was undertaken to provide an ideographic examination of the individual narratives. This focused on looking for issues of significance to the participants either ongoing or that were significant at a critical point in their lives (Smith and Eatough 2012, 443). This enabled us to identify shared narratives, including our own identification with the story.

Participants were representative of different disciplines across the institution. To be included, participants needed to be a full-time university lecturer and have been a PAT for at least a year. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow staff the space to access self-reflexivity as they produced accounts of their subjective experiences (Miller and Glassner 2004, 125). The interview schedule (Appendix 1) was designed to follow a progression,

have a reasonable flow, and avoid leading questions. The interviews were recorded and designed to allow the freedom to follow areas of interest as they emerged.

Twenty-six participants were interviewed, which allowed the researchers to gain a breadth and depth of experience. This was more than expected but the researchers wanted to allow all respondents a voice. The initial interview questions gathered data on the numbers of tutees staff were allocated, the number of years' experience they had as a PAT and demographic details (Appendix 2). The remaining questions were qualitative, the recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed and lasted on average 45 minutes. The research team examined the transcripts together for initial identification of themes. Once these were agreed a more detailed analysis was undertaken individually. The team met regularly to interrogate their initial analysis to ensure interrater-reliability.

Findings

The researchers were surprised initially at both the higher than expected number of participants and the institutes represented. On reflection, the researchers realised this was a topic of interest or concern across the University. Reflecting on her work as a researcher in West Yorkshire in the 1990s, Laura Potts creates a strong argument that research should be a medium for people's voices to be heard (Hallowell, Lawton, and Gregory 2004, 1–11). The high number of respondents willing to participate in the research may demonstrate a need for a forum in which PATs can voice concerns. Feelings of their voices being subjugated within the structures means that the researchers have considered this additional agenda as a possible reason for participation in the research.

As the analysis of the data continued, immersion in the conversation of participants revealed patterns that appeared to reflect the roles described by Karpman (1968, 39–40). Karpman's concept of a drama triangle describes how individuals move between the roles of Victim, Rescuer and Persecutor (Karpman 1968, 40–41). The drama triangle can be used as an overarching framework to understand the relationship between the student and PAT. Previously, Gerlock and McBride (2013, 23–24) used the drama triangle to explore student and PAT online interactions. As our research explored the tutor perspective, of the student/PAT relationship, applying the drama triangle helped the researchers understand some of the stressors experienced by staff (Karpman's 1968, 39–40). When encountering inter- and intra-personal conflict, both PAT and the student may unconsciously cycle through Victim, Rescuer and Persecutor (Gerlock and McBride 2013, 23–24).

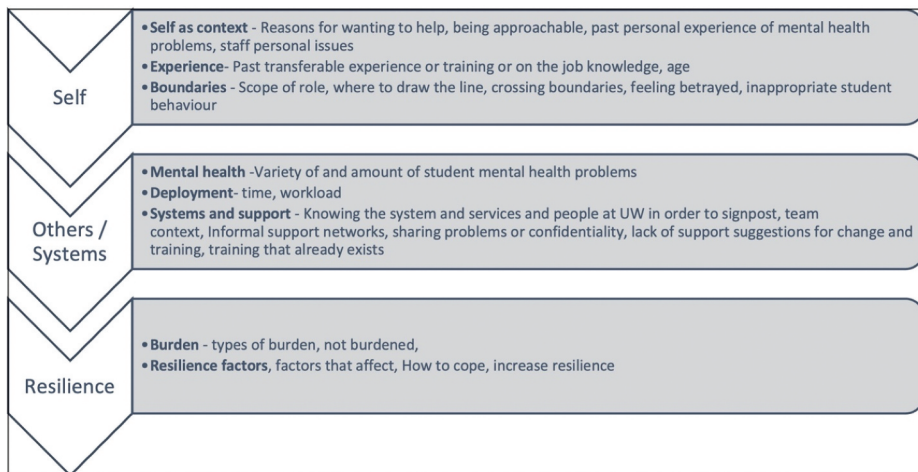


Figure 1. Three overarching themes, identified with eight associated sub-themes.

Three overarching themes were identified with eight associated sub-themes as defined in the figure below (Figure 1).

Theme 1: self

Self as context

Self as context is embedded in psychological theory and concerned with discrete observations that individuals make from their direct past experiences (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999, 183–184; Moran 2010, 345).

‘I suppose if it’s something that starts something off for me if someone struggling with a similar thing to what I struggled with in the past’. (Participant 5)

When playing out the drama triangle each of the roles draw on past experiences rather than the present (Stewart and Joines 1987, 255–258). This could include past personal experiences of difficulty, motivating the PAT to help an individual because they can identify with the issues being discussed. Absence of awareness of the ways in which self could impact an interaction may lead the individual PAT to becoming enmeshed within student’s experiences. This might lead to poor boundaries and unintended consequences. For example, a Rescuer role created by the PAT working out of hours to support students, impacts the PATs wellbeing. This Rescuer role also discounts the student’s ability to move away from the Victim role (Stewart and Joines 1987, 255–258).

‘My personal experience has really helped I probably say too much and that’s what’s different here to when I was a . . . I give too much of myself right; which is why I think

I'm not where I should be as a personal academic tutor maybe I should hold back a bit'. (Participant 14)

'No I've been in some terrible situations, but I always think if I am able to help someone then that means the emotional burden for them and impact on me is lessened'. (Participant 3)

I've always been an emotional person I am quite empathic so I try and put myself in their positions I think it affects you more if you do that it's quite risky the more you've put yourself in their position the more you feel it'. (Participant 5)

However, as well as holding potential for problems, awareness of self as context, remains an essential component of the resilience required to operate effectively within a work context. Resilience was identified as a theme, especially in the context of past adverse experiences leading to a greater sense of self-resilience. Where the PAT recognises the impact of self on the student (Ciarrochi, Bilich, and Godsell 2010, 41–54; Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999, 183–184), psychological flexibility is facilitated. Now the PAT can separate out their own personal experiences, however similar, from the students. This enables the PAT to be fully present with the student's narrative (Brown and Ryan 2003, 823–824; Carmody and Baer 2008, 26–27). This is not to advocate the loss of being human in the PAT's role. Rather, self-awareness empowers PATs to recognise shared human experiences, while not allowing them to adversely impact on day-to-day functioning. In practice, this could enable the acceptance of any difficulty encountered and therefore facilitate appropriate and effective support (Moran 2010, 250).

'needed some emotional support that I was unable to give so I phoned the counselling service while she was in the room with her permission got an appointment for her because she needed some certainty'. (Participant 3)

Here the resilient worker recognises what they can and cannot do effectively and offers permission to no longer play the Rescuer (Stewart and Joines 1987, 255–258). The awareness of self is maintaining boundaries between PAT and tutee, leading to positive outcomes for both. Therefore, the researchers would suggest that developing an awareness of past experiences will help us understand ourselves and how our responses are based on our own personal experiences. The ability to notice this and use our own internal supervisory systems is fundamental in an effective PAT role (Moran 2010, 250–251).

Past transferable experience

The PAT's use of self was evident throughout the responses, in particular their past experience, either prior to joining the university or as a tutor at the University.

'I am an older person or somebody who has a lot of life experience'. (Participant 3)

'I've got lots of experience, I have been doing it a long time'. (Participant 19)

It is evident that having previous experience does impact on tutor confidence and competence. Past experience might include, a professional role external to academia, extensive experience as a PAT or those who have undertaken previous training. Specifically, a recognition that the repetition of the tasks involved in being a PAT lead to it becoming familiar and being done better.

'it's knowing where to find things, knowing what to do makes me feel more competent and confident'. (Participant 2)

'I've gained my skills experience . . . years as an academic by then I've seen such a variety of students in need'. (Participant 1)

'I feel because I'm xxx trained in the emotional welfare and been able to support, very, very confident'. (Participant 16)

While those with experience regard themselves as both confident and competent, compared to those without, Luck (2010, 273–275) argues previous experience, does not necessarily equip staff in their role as a PAT. Therefore, even for the experienced PAT there is a risk of blurring of boundaries between what the role of a PAT should include. These constructs could then impact on the student's expectations of the academic team, especially if there are known disparities between student experiences of PAT support. Here a parallel process could occur where the student and staff hold different expectations of what a PAT should and should not do. Here we see staff and students often unconsciously positioning themselves into a drama triangle. For the student there is a desire to be 'rescued' and if that is not forthcoming, they feel 'persecuted' (Gerlock and McBride 2013, 26–28; Karpman 1968, 40–42).

'real blurring of a professional relationship between students, now email me at all times weekends evenings you know I need to contact you urgently and I don't have to respond but there is an innate pressure'. (Participant 1)

Equally, PATs hold strong opinions of how the PAT role should be done, often suggesting that their way is right and that the approach of others is wrong, with the other doing too much or too little.

'I'm glad that some of them feel that they can message me at midnight when something has happened. In that they trust me and that I can say something that may help them at that moment. I'm sure it's a difficult issue and it may not be expected of us. I don't know what the policies are but as a human being and not thinking about professional boundaries'. (Participant 28)

For those who unconsciously or consciously recognise their PAT role as an untrained or unqualified counsellor, an unintended consequence could be a risk to both parties' well-being (Grayson, Miller, and Clarke 1998, 240–244; Lilienfeld 2007, 53–55).

'I was almost become[ing] counselors mothers fathers aunties, uncles, parents and how comfortable how comfortable we are dealing with that mix. I think the teaching become less significant in one respect, they don't see you as the lecturer'. (Participant 1)

'Dealing with a student with mental health problems took about 4 hours of my afternoon'. (Participant 9)

'I want to do everything I can but I'm conflicted because we've all got so much work to do and I'm not a GP or a counsellor or a marriage counsellor and it might be worrying if people are giving bad advice I think I'm giving good advice but I know?'. (Participant 9)

'Even if I'm crying with a student and giving them a hug it's still a supportive role. Would it be better if I'm not doing that? I'm not sure if that's the wrong thing to be doing'. (Participant 9)

'I know about counselling the thing is I'm conflicted because I use these techniques what do you think you should do a kind of coaching technique but I wonder if I'm doing too much I'm not a counsellor'. (Participant 9)

Those who don't have mental health training, may lack the professional frame of reference to mitigate risk and respond appropriately. This lack of training means that they feel the need to react immediately.

'The waiting time for counselling is about 14 weeks which is not good and really hard to tell students in need'. (Participant 2)

This could reflect a paradigm shift at a societal level, where individuals have a superficial knowledge of mental health, however, lack the appropriate toolkit (Morgan, Ross, and Reavley 2018, 15–17). Staff may need guidance in recognising the difference between a student with mental health difficulty and those experiencing a healthy authentic response, to normal human experience. Whereas earlier we recognised that the student wants to be rescued by PATs, another possibility arose in the data, that PATs want to be Rescuers and risk positioning the student in a Victim role (Karpman 1968, 40–42). A PAT in the Rescuer role may perceive a need to act immediately, when a student is in distress. If they believe there is a disparity between the immediacy of the students' need and the organisational structure's ability to meet that need, this can lead to blurred boundaries.

Boundaries

Research shows when faced with problems the student's preferred point of contact remains the PAT (Kevern and Webb 2004, 297–280; Owen 2002, 7–15). Therefore, it is recognised that PATs can be exposed to the distressing circumstances faced by their students and this can impact on the maintenance of boundaries (McFarlane 2016, 80–85). In addition, some PAT's discussed having their own problems whilst they were a student at university and wanted to fully support their tutees in a way that they believe that they should have been supported. Participant 5 indicated earlier in the interview that someone struggling with similar things that they struggled with in the past, was a trigger. Therefore, challenges to maintaining boundaries within the PAT relationship may develop when academics have different conceptions of the PAT role and responsibilities (Owen 2002, 7–15; Watts 2011, 214–218).

'I think it's really important that you're accessible regularly'. (Participant 1)

'I remember somebody said so if I have a student come to me crying and really upset I'm going to say to them don't come and talk to me go and stand in a queue in first point. Dreadful'. (Participant 3)

'but I've listened to new members of staff coming in trying to solve the problems and because I know about counselling the thing is I'm conflicted because I use these techniques (counselling)'. (Participant 9)

Dealing with 'shocking disclosures from students' can leave academic staff feeling 'suddenly exhausted, paralysed and unable to function' (Luck 2010, 282). Alongside, changes in resource-allocation and wider demands exerted in HE, have compounded emotional exhaustion and a sense of being 'over-extended and drained from one's own emotional resources' (van Emmerik 2002, 252). PAT participants discussed the situation deteriorating with increased student numbers and ratio of students with mental health problems, echoing Ogbonna and Harris' (2004, 1190) recognition that intensification can generate discontent and stress. PATs may not be best equipped or even the most appropriate people to deal with complex mental health issues (Wootton 2006, 118–120). Indeed, unlike professional counsellors, many PATs have not had the appropriate training nor have access to essential support and supervision (Watts 2011, 214–218). This increases the potential for blurring of boundaries as PAT's strive to do their best for students (Watts 2011, 214–218).

PAT's identified mental health difficulties as more challenging to maintaining boundaries than other issues brought by students. PATs expressed concern that focused on beneficence and non-maleficence (Thiroux and Krasemann 2007, 362–390). They wanted to do good but fear that they were doing harm.

'What should I do in terms of mental health I feel quite confident but I suspect I'm not very competent . . . I'm not sure quite in terms of training what to do'. (Participant 13)

'my biggest fear is that I'm gonna tell somebody to do something or I'm gonna give some advice and its entirely wrong and they're gonna go off the rails and then that's fundamentally my problem and my responsibility'. (Participant 11)

'Mental health is a big; there is always a concern that you're going to say something wrong'. (Participant 9)

'there's a little voice at the back of my head saying have I given the correct advice'. (Participant 15)

Given the flexibility of the protocol it is evident that not all PATs will share an understanding of what the boundaries are in the context of the role. There is evidence of cognitive dissonance and intra/inter-boundary conflict, illustrated by differences in reporting practices.

'I'm very clear on boundaries, sometimes I think I'm the counsellor in my family'. (Participant 6)

'I wonder if I'm doing too much I'm not a counsellor'. (Participant 14)

'I had a very difficult challenging situation recently but it's about signposting and not assuming you know everything'. (Participant 6)

'sometimes wonder how much signposting I need to do'. (Participant 15)

'with the mental health side of things . . . I guess I don't know where the boundary is what I can do and what I can't do'. (Participant 1)

'just some kind of acknowledgement that it's a little bit more complicated now than it used to be'. (Participant 10)

Others had an awareness of wanting to be needed by the student and some PAT's regularly communicated and supported students outside working hours.

'real blurring of a professional relationship between students, now email me at all times weekends evenings you know I need to contact you urgently and I don't have to respond but there is an innate pressure'. (Participant 1)

However, as stated earlier for some participants the rationale behind the decisions made were driven by their own personal experiences. The implication is of no choice but to transgress a boundary.

The PATs who are more open to dealing with students with complex difficulties, have a higher emotional burden. The very protocol that is constraining to some, facilitates sufficient inherent flexibility in others.

'I remember somebody said so if I have a student come to me crying and really upset I'm going to say to them don't come and talk to me go and stand in a queue in [student support]. Dreadful'. (Participant 5)

Theme 2: others/systems

There is a recognition that the University community could meet the needs of the student. However, the skills to access this support may not be innate to the student, thus the PAT is required to adopt a ‘Rescuer’ role. This can lead to tension between the institutional expectations of the PAT role parameters such as supporting students through the transition from home and to complexity of academia. That which the university would classify as the personal part of the PAT role, and what is perceived as personal by the PAT, is a contested position. It is important to note that the academic component is not necessarily contested i.e. the expectation to support the student journey through academic work.

Mental health

It has been reported that there is an increased number of students with specific mental health difficulties, when compared to the general population (Sheldon et al. 2021, 282–284). There are various possible reasons for this increase, including a greater awareness of mental health issues. As a result, universities are under pressure to provide appropriate services e.g. signpost to internal sources of support (Sheldon et al. 2021, 282–284). Where services are not available this may lead to the boundaries between PATs and tutees changing, as students are more likely to disclose their difficulties. Thus, the tutee is turning towards the PAT for support and perceiving their PAT as Rescuer.

PATs were asked about the types of issues they encountered. Of the 75% of participants who answered in detail, only 3 PATs did not mention either increasing complexity and or increasing number of issues relating to students’ mental health. PATs reported an increased breadth and prevalence of students with mental health difficulties.

‘Occasionally it’s been that mental health issues. In the sense of them not coping, or they’ve got previous conditions. That they want to discuss relationship issues. Mental health issues; we are increasingly discovering students with very very real problems. Is this increasing? It’s definitely increasing’. (Participant 26)

‘Largely emotional issues, relationship troubles, family breakdowns, domestic abuse, financial problems, problems with the law, being bullied and being the bully’ (Participant 3)

‘Anxiety obviously, miscarriages, bullying, housing situations . . . which I found very difficult to deal with’. (Participant 6)

‘so it is a huge variety, the very lovely and mundane to the very complex’. (Participant 25)

'the most serious . . . self harm really . . . so I was just trying to make sure that she, that she was accessing her GP'. (Participant 4)

'sometimes eating disorders'. (Participant 18)

'mental health issues that are quite serious, such as bipolar disorder'. (Participant 8)

'attempted suicide various times . . . broken bones'. (Participant 20)

Often PATs find themselves in a dichotomous position whereby they are perceiving an increase in students presenting with obvious signs of mental distress. Yet at the same time this increased prevalence may be perceived by the PAT as a label that serves a function.

'There's a culture that depression is the norm and that it's something to be admired or something that fosters attention and we have to be aware of that'. (Participant 26)

Such function could be that the University meets the needs of the student. However, the unintended consequence of this could be the formation of a culture that models 'helplessness; the 'Victim' position of the drama triangle. During analysis, the researchers drawing on practice experience recognise that the risks that this popularist agenda could lead to over-pathologising, rather than accepting this as being part of loss and change, expected in everyday life. An example from practice would be, the inclusion of what might be perceived as normal grief in the diagnostic criteria (Bandini 2015, 350). From a public health perspective, the consequence of this is an increase in the prevalence of diagnosis to legitimise expected symptoms. Normal grief is an individual experience and could be expected to resolve in time depending on the individual. Through diagnosis there may be a risk of reducing the individual's ability to self-manage their symptoms and access 'traditional and cultural methods of grieving' (Bandini 2015, 350). However, there is also a recognition that in order to access appropriate services a diagnosis is necessary. Within the University structures a diagnosis plays an instrumental part in accessing additional support. Thus, the systems themselves are creating the need for diagnosis. The difficulty for PATs is that in a time of transition, such as leaving home for the first time, some of these concerns might be recognised as appropriate responses to change, while others denote the need for further referral.

Deployment and workload

Workload is the entirety of what staff do and deployment is that which is formally recognised (Wilson et al. 2022) There was a perceived dissonance between workload and deployment for many participants.

'Workload, so if I have [a] lot of teaching on and I have students that are require attention in tutorials then I find that quite tricky to deal with'. (Participant 7)

In workload discussion managers plan each staff members workload regarding how much teaching, research and administration time is assigned. Supporting students in the role of PAT may not be part of the workload discussions.

Higher education has expanded the scope of the role of PAT. 'Mass higher education renders the informal relationships between staff and students that were a valued part of elite systems less reliable and potentially inequitable' (Myers 2008, 610). Staff and students now enter into a more personal relationship, replacing the formally defined personal tutor role (Myers 2008, 607–611). The increase in student numbers and diversification of the student body (OfS 2022, 17) increases the demand for student support. Paradoxically it has been suggested it is progressively more difficult to find staff with the commitment and skills to take on the PAT role. An additional workload factor is that students will seek out those tutors they feel able to approach regardless of the official nature of their relationship (Taylor, Jean, and Tom 2002, p.88–98).

'I think people find me more approachable and able to open up to me'. (Participant 8)

'I'm quite approachable and I'm good at the tutor. I have a system of trying to get students to come to me. I've seen students who aren't my tutees because I've got a good rapport with them'. (Participant 15)

'I think that's the difference they know they can always get a good response out of me if they come forward'. (Participant 27)

A system designed to meet the individual needs of all students will have at its core 'a large amount of redundancy' (Taylor, Jean, and Tom 2002, 98). This may require a workload allocation that recognises not all hours will be equally deployed by all PATs. An established relationship with their manager is therefore needed to allocate effectively the responsibility for this aspect of the student experience.

'I wonder is it possible to tailor their academic tutor to the students so those who are in need of support have someone who's more supportive'. (Participant 2)

This could be measured by specific outcomes, such as, the staff students choose to meet with. However, this is a shift away from the traditional metrics, such as attainment, attrition or attendance. This is reflecting a shift from the importance of task-oriented components of deployment, to a better understanding that the role of PAT is the relationships formed between staff and student. This is backed up by participants who thought it was not necessarily an issue of being overworked, rather it is the immediacy of the required response, due to the humanness of the relationship.

*'You cannot divorce the people you are teaching from the life that they live in'.
(Participant 8)*

This aspect of workloads and deployment is problematic for managers to measure. While the role of PAT may not be listed in the academic workload as a separate task, arguably this is something that demands an immediate human response and so becomes difficult to quantify. However, participants were very aware of the impact on workload.

'If someone comes with personal problems it's an hour or an hour and half and I haven't got an hour and a half'. (Participant 13)

'I want to do everything I can but I am conflicted because we all have so much work to do'. (Participant 14)

*'I don't invite tutorials when I am hyper-busy because to me that's just asking for trouble, there is no point inviting them if you don't have time to see them'.
(Participant 4)*

'We are kind of glad that they don't turn up, if all the students I have turned up I would not be able to cope'. (Participant 10)

However, other participants highlighted their enjoyment of the role.

'I enjoy getting to know students individually, building relationships with them spending time with them I really like that part of the job I wouldn't want to not do that job even though the occasional one really gets to you'. (Participant 2)

*'I've given them the correct advice. I wouldn't take it home. I feel quite pleased'.
(Participant 9)*

Positive aspects of the PAT role reflect van Hooff and Westall's (2016, 30–32) suggestions around job satisfaction. For staff to gain work satisfaction they require a well-designed job characterised by; high demands, high levels of control, sufficient task variety and identity, significance and feedback. Therefore, the satisfaction for the PAT could relate to the capacity they are afforded to undertake the relationships, rather than the completion of the tasks. Limited capacity for the unexpected or unplanned student events could be a barrier to providing an immediate response and does not enable supporting those students with acute symptoms. As a result of the lack of time it is more likely that the PAT will have an emotional response to the student and 'Rescue' or 'Persecute' (Karpman 1968, 40–42).

Systems and support

Higher Education systems and support provide the infrastructure for teaching and learning. This includes all students services such as mental health provision. Participant's responses could be compared to

a chequerboard. Some PATs discussed not having any support in the role and not being able to find information while others discussed knowing who to go to; being on first name terms with staff in the student support services.

'I don't feel that there is much support'. (Participant 2).

'It is better now all the services are in one place'. (Participant 9).

Participants mentioned receiving support from informal and formal sources.

'I've got good colleagues'. (Participant 2).

'Talking to colleagues and I have a wonderful line manager'. (Participant 5).

However, other participants were worried about confidentiality and therefore did not discuss students' issues with anyone else in the team.

'Talking to colleagues is tricky. It is a fine line this has been told in confidence'. (Participant 15)

'The confidentiality factor is sometimes difficult'. (Participant 18).

This may decrease the opportunity for supported reflection and could increase the likelihood of entering the drama triangle. When informal supervision and/or guidance from peers is not sought, the burden remains with the PAT.

Theme 3: factors affecting resilience

Burden

Burden can be considered as the weight of having too many things on your mind. There are parallels to Dicé and Zoena's (2017, 1781) study of care giver burden which revealed "painful experiences of anguish and feelings of inadequacy stemming from care-giving, which gravely impact the care-givers' personal wellbeing and family relations". It is important to recognise that burden presents a dual positionality where both home and work can become interchangeably a safe place and a place of burden. Whilst many participants discussed taking home the issues, they were supporting students in, a number also highlighted the impact of their personal problems on their ability to cope with their PAT role.

'when I have my own issues in, my personal life... that can affect resilience'. (Participant 24)

'there are times when I don't feel very resilient . . . we've had some personal difficulties at home. . . work was a bit of a sanctuary but I carried this emotion around with me'. (Participant 27)

It's almost like too many people want a piece of you at once and I think that grinds you down emotionally. (Participant 19).

There is an emotional tax. (Participant 11).

PAT's were relatively consistent in highlighting burgeoning workloads as an important factor that affected their resilience. Tiredness, fatigue and exhaustion were contributing themes, with PAT's expressing themselves through the rhetoric of being busy or too busy to provide appropriate support.

'I have a work ethic that I have recently addressed because I was doing far too much and it was affecting me mentally'. (Participant 3)

'I think making sure you look after your own health and well-being. I certainly had times in the past when I've been very stressed and anxious'. (Participant 18)

'If I feel I'm drowning in work that's what will have a negative impact and that's when I think I can't do all this, I can't manage it'. (Participant 27)

Doing the time calculation required by the role appears to be an important consideration to ease the guilt felt as this allows staff to conclude that the role of a PAT is an impossible task. PATs must also hold the wider university metrics in mind which can create an internal conflict. For example, being judged by the students' feedback.

'I've got 28 tutees that somehow I'm supposed to see four times a year along with a full teaching load. I can't . . . I have actually done the maths . . . I don't have that physically don't have the time in the week to put them anywhere that's unnerving'. (Participant 10)

'If I did 4 tutorials with 30 students that would take almost a week'. (Participant 13)

There are two types of burden, the actual things you have to do and the added meaning attributed by staff to the identified issues. The weight of the burden is added to because the issues are being kept in the PAT's consciousness as an unresolved issue. It will arguably remain an unresolved issue because it is that of the student and not of the PAT. Where this becomes an issue for the PAT is when they replay the conversations in their head with focus on the appropriateness of their comments to the student.

'I feel I let him down. I made that inappropriate comment and I haven't forgive myself for that'. (Participant 11)

'am I damaging student in some way . . . is there something else I could/should be doing to support the student . . . is there someone else they can go?'. (Participant 19)

'concerned you're giving the correct advice, you don't want to give the incorrect advice'. (Participant 20)

'You find yourself thinking about things and whether you've handled it appropriately. . . I've certainly sometimes gone back over conversations and so I'm not sure that I handle that in the best way sometimes'. (Participant 26)

Vicarious burden could be a consequence of empathetic engagement by the PAT with the student's issues (Cunningham 2004, 305–310). While empathic engagement may not always cause burden, where burden occurs this could result from over identification. Such over identification can result from the PATs personal beliefs of self and self-worth based on past experiences. For example, having someone close or yourself who was unsupported at university could affect a PATs perception of their role. As a consequence, they would place high expectations on themselves or colleagues because they hold the knowledge of that pain, described by Evelyn Waugh as 'a blow, expected, repeated, falling upon a bruise' (Waugh 1945, 270).

'I suppose if it's something that starts something off for me if someone struggling with a similar things to what I struggled with in the past'. (Participant 5)

'I ended up in counselling for three days . . . three sessions of counselling because just she basically . . . just blew my head'. (Participant 10)

The emotional burden can be seen through comments reflecting self-justification or doubt, which cross the boundary from work to home life.

'am I doing this student good things . . . am I supporting the student . . . am I damaging student in some way'. (Participant 19)

'I do I soak it up and I worry about it when I go home I do feel it for them I worry about them at home. Yes it does sometimes I can't sleep'. (Participant 5)

'I have felt emotionally burdened in the past. If it's been playing on my mind, I take it home with me. I'm giving to this person here sitting next to me who is feeling suicidal is this actually gonna make it better or is it gonna make it worse . . . and I don't know'. (Participant 8)

The position of burden is not always seen as negative. This experience can be understood in the context of the drama triangle where the PAT may become the rescuer (Stewart and Joines 1987, 255–258). From this position burden can be a dichotomous position where the positive strokes can result in secondary gain for PAT's.

'I do feel they see me as their surrogate mum sometimes'. (Participant 7).

'I'm quite approachable and I'm good at the tutor. I have a system of trying to get students to come to me. I've seen students who aren't my tutees because I've got a good rapport with them'. (Participant 15)

'I mean I'll never turn a student down if they approach me'. (Participant 4)..

On this basis, there would appear to be a conflict between the awareness of one's own competencies, with self-protection and avoiding becoming emotionally involved. This, in turn, may be mediated by fluctuations, over a period of time, in any given academic year.

'I can't take any more on than I can cope with, so I now know my limit . . . if you like'. (Participant 8)

'I had that three days of counselling and I got to get it off my chest and the guy was quite good . . . he just listened to me shout erm but he did actually talk about the fact that it's okay to be angry at people'. (Participant 10)

'I'm not a GP although I do feel like a GP a lot'. (Participant 14)

'It's a matter of self-protection I don't get too emotionally involved with things if they're not directly part of my existence'. (Participant 15)

'There will be times when I don't feel very resilient at all, times when I feel very resilient . . . if I feel I'm drowning in work that's what will have a negative impact and that's when I think I can't do all this, I can't manage it'. (Participant 27)

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to bend without breaking and bounce back from adversity. As Guimaraes (2018, 1146) states those capable of resilience tend towards 'behavioral elasticity or flexible adaptation to impinging challenges'.

PATs discussed factors that both decreased and increased their resilience. Factors such as tiredness and accumulation of experiences had a negative impact on their ability to bounce back in response to adversity. However, it was more common for PATs to discuss their coping strategies. Such coping strategies offered by PATs were consistent, although, inevitably some nuances and idiosyncrasies were provided. For some, age or experience played an important role, as an inevitable 'strategy'.

'yeah I think it maybe is largely age yeah'. (Participant 4).

'Experience, my colleagues, actually as well'. (Participant 7).

'It is because of my practitioner background I have mechanisms in place'. (Participant 9).

Age and experience, alongside an awareness of personal competencies is crucial. This is not to suggest that age automatically provides appropriate experiences, but rather knowledge about the diversity of issues that a PAT has faced, will feed-in to their feelings of competence.

'Building resilience I would say experience a lot of it and making mistakes and reflecting on those mistakes'. (Participant 19)

Several participants focused on the importance of being able to 'draw a line' between their professional and personal life.

'out of sight out of mind . . . it's a matter of self-protection. I don't get too emotionally involved with things if they are not directly involved in my existence'. (Participant 15)

'you do have to draw a little bit of a line . . . I am here as a member of staff'. (Participant 18)

One PAT described having an awareness of the students' needs and actively choosing that this is not the moment to enquire, therefore intentionally reducing the emotional engagement. This could be recognised as a defence mechanism that employs distancing as self-protection. Distancing would seem to offer a two-fold mechanism: offering the opportunity to signpost students, where a PAT feels insufficiently qualified to help directly; and offering the security of not becoming overly burdened at a time of personal fragility.

'I am easily emotionally engaged . . . and I don't think it helps. . . I perhaps block possible sharing by students . . . if I don't ask certain question[s] certain things won't be revealed'. (Participant 20)

This could reflect a move towards the 'winners triangle' and serves as a valuable safety function and this flexibility in the PAT system is welcomed. However, it is important for PATs to reflect on the impact of distancing becoming avoidance and therefore the possibility of a student not being supported. This could derive from the PAT feeling burnt out and lead to the unintended consequence of impacting on the student experience and subsequent metrics.

Sitting in opposition to distancing and avoidance, a coping strategy mentioned by multiple participants was avoiding isolation through accessing work-based support networks.

'talking to other people in the department'. (Participant 5).

'I have plenty of colleagues I can go to'. (Participant 7).

'got a good support network, a good internal kind of clock that kind of rebalances'. (Participant 16)

Informal support networks external to the university, such as family, friends, clubs and societies, social activities were equally important.

'I'll make sure I do some exercise at home. You have to look after your own health and well-being strategies probably just talking really about how your day has been'. (Participant 18)

'Looking after yourself, good life balance is not all work work work, understanding issues that get me down'. (Participant 20)

'I really really enjoy cricket and I go to the gym and run as well not as much as I'd like that that that is a help I am very fortunate and it's worth acknowledging that for family . . . everyone is healthy'. (Participant 21)

Experience and coping strategies would appear, therefore, to be a crucial element, in maintaining resilience. Giving staff the opportunities to share different coping strategies may work towards the sustainability of the PAT role.

Recommendations/Conclusion

There is a strong thread throughout the participants' comments about the desire and need for PAT training and the recognition that there was very little on offer. Although their past experience remains an important factor in being a PAT, there is a need to shift away from a model which relies on 'learning on the job'. Instead we should encourage a move towards an enabling model underpinned by continuous professional development (CPD). CPD for PATs within HE is not routinely offered (McFarlane 2016, 80–85; Owen 2002, 7–10). However, it is also important to note that tutors may not regard it as important to attend training, arguably acting to maintain a deficit model in the provision of effective personal academic tutoring (Owen 2002, 10–15). The university is limited in its capacity to encourage attendance of PAT training. Some responsibility for reducing the emotional burden of the PAT role remains with the individual.

In addition to group CPD, individual supervision could also be another useful tool for mitigating burden and promoting resilience, as supported reflection can create restorative change (Downey 2003, 29–34; Hawkins and Shohet 2012, 30–35). Some may argue that supervision is not needed in the provision for being a PAT, as this is associated with the helping professions (Gardner and Lane 2010, 345–350). However, if the PAT role becomes recognised as carrying emotional burden, this notion needs to be met with challenge. It is important to acknowledge the increased pressures of supporting student mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, the need for resilience led workplace interventions, incorporating both CPD and supervision becomes important (Robertson et al. 2015, 533–534). Whilst current research indicates that workplace resilience training can improve both wellbeing and productivity, surprisingly this remains an under researched area (Bond and Flaxman 2006, 115–121; Broome, Orme-Johnson, and Schmidt-Wilk 2005, 240–242). Such training may act to encourage PATs to become more psychologically flexible in their approach as well as enabling them to be their own supervisor. Arguably this could be embedded in the curriculum design process.

The authors recommend the development of CPD programmes that are underpinned by principles of the drama triangle, recognising the application of the theory to the PAT role. Alongside this there should be supervision for the individual to move through to the ‘Winner’s’ position. By being equipped through training PATs are able to respond differently to the direct student experience and maintain the boundaries within the role of the PAT (Bond and Flaxman 2006, 115–120; Owen 2002, 10–15; Race 2010). Through ‘challenging’ instead of ‘persecuting’ and ‘coaching’ instead of ‘rescuing’, the ‘victim’ is empowered to become a ‘survivor’ (Karpman 1968, 40–42). Such shifts reduce the emotional burden of the PAT while increasing student self-efficacy. The authors propose further research into the effectiveness of the provision of CPD on wellbeing and productivity.

Acknowledgments

In memory of Dr Paul Castle, Senior Lecturer, School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Worcester. Paul provided much inspiration for this research, prior to his death.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Notes on contributors

Jo Augustus is a Principal Lecturer and mental health specialist at the University of Cumbria, in the Centre of Excellence in Paramedic Practice. She specialises in quality, teaching and learning, to enhance student experience. Her research interests focus on attitudes specific to mental health.

Dawn Goodall Is a Sociologist who works across a variety of different courses across the University to support the continued development of Learning. She teaches primarily on Foundation Degrees and encourage students to consider some of the theoretical underpinnings of work practice and written assessments.

Briony Williams is an occupational therapist, her main area of clinical experience has been in community mental health and substance misuse services across the UK. She has been an educator since 1999 and held a number of roles including lead for mental health strategy.

Author contributions

BW contributed to conception and design of the study. JA, DG and BW organised the literature review, participants interviews and data analysis. JA, DG and BW wrote the first draft of the manuscript. JA, DG and BW wrote sections of the manuscript.

All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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APPENDICES

The interview schedule (Appendix 1)

Semi structured Interview schedule

Research interview questions adapted from McFarlane (2016)

Background questions

Demographic data including:

Gender: Male Female

Age: Under 30, 30–40, 40–50, over 50

1. How long have you been a Personal Academic Tutor?
2. What subject area do you teach?
3. How many tutees do you have?

Confidence and competence

4. How confident do you feel as a Personal Academic Tutor (e.g. on a scale of 1–10 with 10 being very confident)?
5. How competent do you feel as a Personal Academic Tutor (e.g. on a scale of 1–10 with 10 being very competent)?
6. Is there a difference in your perceived confidence or competence depending on the issues brought by students?
7. Has your perceived confidence or competence changed over time?
8. What types of personal issues have you dealt with as a tutor?
9. Do you ever feel emotionally burdened by the information you hear?
10. Has the emotional burden ever affected your day to day functioning?
11. How resilient do you consider yourself? (e.g. on a scale of 1–10 with 10 being very resilient)?
12. What factors build your resilience?
13. What factors reduce resilience?
14. What strategies do you have to reduce the emotional burden?

Support

15. What support do you have as a tutor?
16. What additional support might enable you to be feel more confident and competent in your personal academic tutoring role?
17. What might build your resilience?
18. Do you have any other suggestions?

Demographic details (Appendix 2)

| n = 26 | |
|--|---|
| Gender | Female = 19 Male = 7 |
| Age (years) | Under 30 = 0 30–40 = 4 40–50 = 9 over 50 = 13 |
| How long have you been a PAT (number)? | 1–5 years = 11 6–10 years = 7 11–20 years = 6 20 + years = 2 |
| How many tutees do you have (number)? | 10 and under = 4 11–20 = 7 21–30 = 11 Over 30 = 4 |