Extension of the Personal Tutor System to Postgraduate Students
M Rovatsos/P Jackson, Informatics Teaching Committee, 22nd May 2013

1. Background
The University is currently extending the Personal Tutoring System from all undergraduate students to also include all taught postgraduate (PGT) students. This is mandatory for all Schools, and has to be implemented by September 2013. The move to the PT system is a high-profile University project to enhance student support that has been broadly advertised among students. While in the case of undergraduate students it can be partially seen as an incremental improvement on the previous Director of Studies system, we expect that it will create significantly raised expectations among MSc students in terms of one-to-one support.

2. Role description
A PT assists students with many aspects of their university life. A PT’s responsibilities include reviewing past performance and engagement, providing advice on course and programme choices, performing online course registration via EUCLID, interpreting University rules and regulations, providing references, providing general pastoral care, notifying Boards of Examiners of special circumstances, discussing personal development of graduate attributes, and exploring career options. PTs meet individually with their assigned UG students at least two times a year, and their assigned PGT students at least three times per year (to reflect the 12-month nature of PGT study). Students are also expected to have small group meetings facilitated by PTs at least once every year.

The School’s Personal Tutoring statement at http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/student-services/teaching-organisation/for-taught-students/personal-tutoring-statement describes how Personal Tutoring has been organised over the past academic year. This does not yet contain a commitment on the format of group meetings for 2013/14, which is still to be decided. Further information on the Personal Tutoring System is provided at https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/PESS/Home.

3. Implementation
Currently, 28 of our teaching staff act as UG PTs, each with around 20-30 tutees on average. To provide a similar service to PGT students we would require around 6-8 additional PTs. At the same time, the PGT PT role obviates the need for MSc Specialist Area Advisors and MSc Directors of Studies. Out of the 10 staff who currently perform such duties, 5 are already UG PTs.

In response to the requirement to provide PT support to all PGT students, we are extending the PT role as a default role to all Informatics teaching staff (except colleagues who have negotiated reduced teaching and/or admin roles with Head of School) from 2013/14 onwards. This role will be additional to any other to any other admin and teaching roles assigned to a staff member, and will be considered part of the normal teaching load. To minimise the need for PTs to be experts in both UG and PG teaching matters, PTs will either only be assigned UG or PGT students.

This approach has the following advantages:
- In view of increased expectations toward PTs, it will help us to keep the workload reasonable, at under 20 students per PT in 2013/14.
- Given that the University expects us to steadily increase our student numbers by 5% annually over the next five years, spreading the effort across all staff will help avoid an unreasonable load for specific individuals.
- It will support the development of a more student-oriented culture through direct personal contact among all staff members and the student body, rather than training only a limited number of “student specialists”.
- The resulting flexibility will help reduce load balancing and re-allocation problems when individual staff become unavailable for extended periods of time (sabbaticals, etc).
4. Impact
This change will have a significant impact on the day-to-day work of a considerable number of staff members, and will inevitably lead to a higher workload. We expect that the main pressure points will be at the start of each semester, in particular at the start of the academic year. It is essential for PTs to make themselves available during Induction Week and weeks 1 and 2 to meet with all their tutees and perform course registrations on EUCLID, and for PT training provided by the School. It is advisable to contact future or current tutees by e-mail over the summer to direct them toward information so that course selection meetings can be more effective. With PGT students, it will be hard for the ITO to allocate students to their PTs before the start of the year, and past experience has shown that these students switch courses rather often during the first weeks of term. We expect that this will result in increased communication with tutees during the first few weeks of Semester 1.

We also expect that the PGT PT system will bring significant benefits the quality of our flagship MSc programmes. Our MSc cohort is the largest throughout the University, and provides a major source of fee income for the School. With large numbers and an immense diversity among students both in terms of academic and cultural background, we expect that PT support will significantly improve their learning experience. It will allow us to provide personalised academic advice and pastoral guidance, and to detect problem cases early in the year. This is particularly important for MSc programmes as they involve a very intense one-year curriculum.

As a final remark, we now charge overseas fee rates that are among the highest at the University, and the highest within Science and Engineering. It would seem reasonable for a student of such a high-profile programme to expect to have personal interactions with a member of staff from the outset, as well as a designated academic contact throughout the year.