Fostering Students' Personal Development through Designing a Personal Tutorship Programme in e-Learning Environments

Morteza Rezaei-Zadeh, Brendan Cleary, John O'Reilly, Eamonn Murphy, Michael Hogan, and Mahboubeh Arefi

***Abstract*—This paper addresses the importance of Personal Development of students in virtual learning environments and designs a specific approach for fostering their personal capabilities facilitated by a Personal Tutorship Programme in e-learning platforms. This programme tries to extend students' learning beyond the disciplinary focus and engage them in acquiring some essential competencies they will need in their professional and personal life. To do so, one storyboard has been drawn based on the current literature as well as experiences of some experts including students, entrepreneurs and academics represented through some focus groups. This storyboard designs a structured on-line framework for supporting students' personal development via an interactive and bilateral personal tutorship facility. Our primary focus is on allocating some technical capabilities in an e-learning platform based on the personal pedagogical experiences of participants, enabling students to use them for their personal development planning. Before drawing the storyboard four descriptive components named Functional Specifications (FS) have been written based on the participants' experiences, trying for defining different aspects of the storyboard. Descriptions and examples are given of some different approaches that are being used to support this facility. While the paper is written from an e-learning perspective, the issues and processes raised are applicable to any higher education system that seeks to value and reward personal development via designing an academic advisory system for their students.**

***Index Terms*—Personal development, e-learning, storyboard, personal tutorship.**

I. Introduction

There are a great variety of definitions of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and implementation within the higher education sector. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK defines PDP as: "a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process, open to all learners, in all he provision settings, and at all levels" [1].

Manuscript received October 20, 2012; revised December 14, 2012.

Morteza Rezaei-Zadeh, John O'Reilly, and Eamonn Murphy are with University of Limerick, Ireland (email: Morteza.RezaeiZadeh@ul.ie, John.OReilly@ul.ie, Eamonn.Murphy@ul.ie)

Brendan Cleary is with University of Victoria, Canada (email: bcleary@uvic.ca)

Michael Hogan is with National University of Ireland (NUIG), Galway, Ireland (email: michael.hogan@nuigalway.ie)

Mahboubeh Arefi is with University of Shahid Beheshti, Tehran, Iran (email: M-Arefi@sbu.ac.ir)

A major concern of this paper is how higher education generally and e-learning settings specially can be set up, preparing students not only for their specific academic fields rather for the complex world have surrounded them [2]-[3]. Barnett claims that higher education is faced with preparing students for a super-complex world and individuals have to take responsibility for continually reconstituting themselves throughout their lifespan, which requires a range of attributes such as flexibility, adaptability and self-reliance. Accordingly, Monks et al. (2006) mention that PDP process can result in increasing employability with the identification of explicit transferable skills. However, institutions vary considerably in the extent to which career development is included in the PDP process [4].

Assuming the accuracy of the above benefits of PDP for university's members, sometimes there is still a doubt whether planning for personal development is a duty of universities. Many scholars such as Day (1994) mentioned that Personal and Professional Developments are two complementary strands [5]. It means that focusing on students' personal developments can directly and indirectly affect their professional developments as well via providing a supported, structured framework which had created conditions for a powerful form of tutor as well as student development. Vaiteka and Fernandez (2009) found in their empirical study that students are willing to emphasise on their personal development importance as a part of their general education. They mentioned that they need Personal development plans to be educated as citizens, develop a systematic notion of knowledge, develop their capabilities, abilities and competencies and contribute to human and intellectual formation [6].

"Personal Tutorship" as a means of developing students' personal development via reducing student attrition [7] has a long tradition in universities. A Personal Tutor (PT) system using academic staff has been used in the university to give students a point of contact other than their academic tutors [8] in different administrative, teaching, and counselling functions [7].Gidman (2001) categorised these functions of PTs in three roles: Clinical, Pastoral and Academic Role [9].

It seems that the quality elevation of personal tutorship will have a higher demand of study-support service [10]. To do so, Sosabowski *et al.* (2003) suggest that its focus now must be on enhancing staff dedication to the provision of a quality service, training support to staff in the skills of PT, instituting a minimum number of PT sessions-per-academic year and broadening student knowledge of the multi-dimensional role of the personal tutor [11].

While the empirical experiment of Rekkedal(1985) shows a positive effect such as higher completion rate for distance students who use the personal tutoring system [7], Le Cornu *et al.* (2006) mention that implementing PT systemshould be problematic in a distance learning context, as contact by e-mail or telephone was difficult if the tutor was not regularly in the office [8]. It was also duplicating effort, as for most queries the personal tutor had to contact the admin team for advice and then relay the response back to the student. So, the question of this study is: How to assure that an e-learning system provides sufficient support for students' personal development through a Personal Tutorship Programme?This paper provides insights into some of the issues surrounding PT in e-learning environments by describing the design of a schematic storyboard.

II. Methodology

As a qualitative research methodology, 3 separate focus groups with the active participation of 5 academics, 8 master students and 6 entrepreneurs as the experts and end-users of our aimed e-learning platform were conducted in University of Limerick, Ireland. Participants in each focus group were required to generate some solutions only based on their personal experiences with regard to this question: How to assure that an e-learning system provides sufficient support for students' personal development through a Personal Tutorship Programme? Each participant raised a solution based on his/her experience in his/her educational life and described the different dimensions of that solution. This was an open discussion and other members of the focus group participated in the discussion and expressed their ideas regardless of rightness or wrongness of the answer. All of these generated solutions were gathered, classified and used to construct Functional Specification (FS) and finally schematic storyboard. FS includes: Educating (How we can promote and implement PT in our e-learning platform?), Motivating (How users should be encouraged to use PT?), Monitoring (How users' actions related to PT should be monitored?) and Assessing (How users' actions in PT should be assessed?).

In addition, a literature review was conducted in terms of the following keywords: "Personal Tutorship", "e-learning", "University". Some online databases e.g. Google Scholarship, Sage, Springer and Willey have been used in this process. Accordingly, for drawing each of the final storyboards the below process has been followed:

Stage	Solution Generating	**Functional Specification (FS) Generating**				Prior Evidence Finding	Schematic Storyboard Drawing
		Educating	Motivating	Monitoring	Assessing		
Resource	Focus Group	Focus Group				Literature Review	Functional Specifications

Fig. 1. Different stages and process of this study

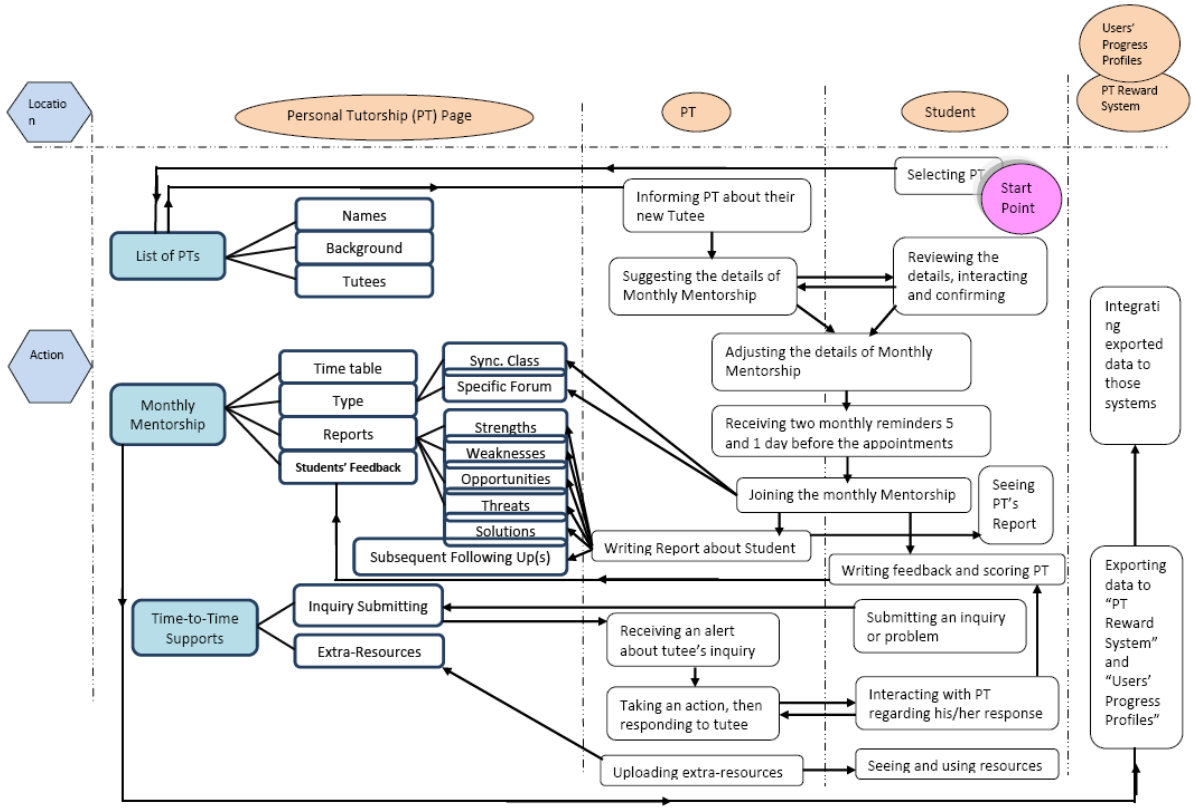

Fig. 2. Schematic Storyboard: Students' Personal Tutorship

As it can be seen in Fig. 1, this process has been followed from the left to right. Firstly, following the three focus groups, the solutions for well implementing PT in an e-learning setting were generated. Then, using the recorded discussions of members of the groups, FS were written and then supports from the empirical studies were identified. The FS tries to transfer the generated solution from the theoretical to practical domain. Finally, using the functional specification, Schematic Storyboard has been drawn in Fig . 2.

III. Findings

Four components of FS related to the PT were written here byreviewing participants' experiences have been generated usedto draw a storyboard (shown in Fig. 2) for the well implementing of PT in e-learning settings of higher education.

As the Educating of users, this programme aims to provide pastoral support for students through a personalized point of contact with the college. A "personal tutor" (PT) is a faculty member of the college who accepts some responsibility for a student's academic progress. By virtue of their focus and regular contacts with tutees, PTs will be aware of the students' academic achievements in the different modules. Therefore, they should identify in which areas/modules students need help and support. The main area of the PT's concern is primarily academic. However, a PT may also address questions relating to the personal development of the student or personal difficulties that are impacting the students' studies. So, the role of the PT is essentially twofold: academic and personal development. Two major time-tables exist for meetings between PTs and Tutees. The first approach includes the fixed monthly mentorships which will be held in the specific and fixed time during each month. The second approach is allocated to the sudden occasions, when students need to some immediate supports by their PTs. All these meetings will be held in the platform's synchronous video class or in a specific forum within the e-learning platform. After holding each meeting and writing PT's report, a list of subsequent following-up(s) which have to be done by Tutee and PT will be written. This report will be reviewed by both PT and tutee in the next meeting. The capability of technology which exists in such an e-learning platform helps for a more qualified structure in this PT system. Also, PTs can upload some extra resources which are related to their tutees' personal development in this page. Students can download and use them at their preferred time.

In consideration of the motivating users in this function, this is addressed by focusing on both extrinsic and intrinsic approaches. With regard to extrinsic motivation, all students are required to attend their monthly mentorships. It is expected that users' intrinsic motivations will be enhanced by persuading them that a successful PT programme can result inthe maintaining regular contact of students with their PTs, andnotifying their PTs if they experience any difficulties which may affect their educational tasks and activities.As another motivational factor, students themselves select their PTs. This self-selection helps them to choose their PTs based on their own preferences and interests.

PTs are responsible for monitoring their students' commitment to this programme and will inform the course leaders in the case of any difficulty. Furthermore, all of the interactions between each PT and student will be recorded and archived in the platform via some fixed formats and frameworks. Since all of interactions and information given to PTs are confidential, there is no any access to the PT page unless PT and his/her Tutee. On the other hand, students are required to monitor their PTs' interaction and activities regarding their duties and commitments in this programme.

With regard to the assessment, students can write some feedbacks and also score their PT's interaction and activities. This getting feedback and scoring would be done after each fixed monthly or occasional meeting. These scores will be exported to their Tutor's Reward System, affecting his/her final reward score. More importantly, PTs write and submit a comprehensive report after each meeting with his/her tutee. This report which follows the instructions of formative assessment has 5 sections including: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, solutions and finally consequent following-up(s).According to the formative assessment principles there is no any scoring required to students' assessment scheme here.This report is available only for PT and his/her Tutee; however, since all of the processes in this function are bilateral and interactive, students can submit their own comments at the end of reports of their PTs after each meeting.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

The storyboard has been suggested in the above for enabling e-learning students to foster their Personal Development through a Personal Tutorship Programme has been supported by some scholars in this area.Personal development planning is being introduced as a support mechanism within a personal tutor system for all students. In this scheme students monitor and reflect on their academic and personal development and produce simple records that form the basis of conversations with their personal tutors [12]. Some successful examples of these Personal Tutorship (PT) programmes can be seen in different universities e.g. University of Nottingham, University of Middlesex, etc.

Given that the importance of addressing personal development issues by universities in general, e-learning environment are an important part of the solution. Moreover, there is some evidence confirming the special role of Information Technology (IT) in promoting people's personal development by allowing individual, organization, nation and society the processing of a growing volume of data in an increasingly lower time and in an open space [13]. More specifically, Kuh& Hu (2001) confirmed that computers and IT use is positively related to college student learning and personal development [14].

There already are some efforts to embed particular e-tools in educational settings for promoting students' personal development. While these e-tools have had some benefits, they raise some concerns as well about the effectiveness of these tools. For example, Peacock *et al.*, (2010) tried to

provide further evidence about challenges of using electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) and their positive impacts on students' personal development from the tutor perspective. They point out that tutors' lack of understanding about personal development and reflection, and their role in the academic environment, initiative fatigue and lack of access to information technology as some drawbacks universities face in the effective use of technology in the personal development process [15]. Walz and Bleuer (1986) explored some other obstacles of using technology in counselling as one of the aspects of personal development. They mentioned that misusing computer applications, overdependence on computer technology, and the restriction of the counselling process to the cognitive component alone are some challenges facing technology usage in this area [16]. Also, Jelfs and Kelly (2007) mentioned that "there are real worries about eLearning imposing extra workload burdens on 'time poor' adults struggling to fit study into busy and demanding lives" [17].

Regarding the challenges of implementing PT programme in an e-learning environment, there are some published literatures as well. Data analysed by Braine and Parnell (2011) revealed both positive and negative experiences with PT system in e-learning settings; most rated their advice and support good with many positive aspects to their personal tutoring expressed however many felt the need for more contact time, more support academically and whilst on clinical placements, and more structured support with their personal development planning [18]. The importance of having a more structured approach, one less dependent on the work schedule or goodwill of individual members of staff has been also indicated by Owen (2002) [19]. In another study, Cottrell *et al.* (1994) point out that satisfaction in students in a personal tutoring system was linked with regularity, but not frequency, of meetings, being 'chased' by tutors, and engaging in social as well as educational activities [20].

On the other hand, Peacock *et al.*, (2010) pointed out that these challenges could be overcome, especially with long-term institutional commitment, significant staff development and the creation of tutor support networks. Longman *et al.* (2009) suggested that implementing formative assessment instead of summative assessment and integrating PDP to the heart of programme design would be some other solutions for effectiveness of PDP in e-learning platforms [21]. In the other case, Dagley and Berrington (2005) after implementing an e-portfolio in PDP for a group of GPs (practitioners) concluded that workshop introductions on reflective learning and IT applications should be provided, as well as some sustained onsite support [22].

Comparing these published challenges and the generated storyboard in this study regarding the PT programme in our e-learning platform, it can be concluded that those mentioned obstacles have been mostly addressed by this generated storyboard. Some features of this storyboard against the barriers above are as following: embedding formative assessment instead of summative assessment in the system; providing a highly structured system for PT consulting in the e-learning platform; providing a bilateral and interactive communication between PT and Tutee; considering a regular system of monthly Personal Tutoring;embedding an "Info" section to enhance understanding about personal development and reflection through PT programme; designing a straight forward system for minimising the time required by both PTs and Tutees in this programme; providing the possibility of chasing students up by their PTs by embedding a section as "Subsequent Following-Up(s)" in the system; providing a sustained on-line support for both students and PTs through embedding a forum in the platform.

This schematic storyboard(see appendix 1) has been drawn based on the experiences of the experts participated in our focus groups and supported by findings of prior researchers have been mentioned in the current literature. As it has been mentioned in the description of Functional Specification of the storyboard, it has been tried to take the above considerations into account for a better and more effective design. However, the effectiveness of this storyboard needs to be examined in a real environment. This can be done in the future studies.

REFERENCES

[1] Safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education. (17th August 2012). [Online]. Available: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ ,

[2] R. Barnett, "Super-complexity and the curriculum," *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 255–265.

[3] R. Barnett, *Realizing the university in an age of super-complexity*, Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press.

[4] Monks, K. Conway, E. N. Dhuigneain, and Muireann, "Integrating personal development and career planning: The outcomes for first year undergraduate learning," *Active Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 7, pp. 73–86, 2006.

[5] D. Christopher, "Personal Development Planning: a different kind of competency," *British Journal of In-Service Education*, 1994, vol. 20, no. 3, pp.287-302.

[6] V. Sandra and F. Carmen, "Curriculum And Teaching Ideas Of Pre-Service Chemistry Teachers In A Context Of Educational Reform in Brazil," *M.F. Taşar& G. Çakmakcı(Eds.), Contemporary science education research: teaching*, Ankara, Turkey: PegemAkademi, 2009, pp. 13-20.

[7] R. Torstein, *Introducing the Personal Tutor/Counsellor in the System of Distance Education*, Project Report 2: Final Report. NKI, Norway, 1985.

[8] A. Le Cornu, H. Cameron, E. Catling, T. Cosgrove, and E. Langford, "Managing Distance Learning in a Face-to-Face Culture," *Brookes e-Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 2006, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 1-8.

[9] J. Gidman, "The role of the personaltutor: a literature review," *Nurse Education Today*, 2001, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 359–365.

[10] L.-H. Hao, Y. Nai-zhi, and Z. Ai-wu, "Relationship among Personal Tutorship, Students' Self-study and Study-support Service in Open Education," Journal of Tianjin R&TV, 2001.

[11] M. H. Sosabowski *et al.*, "Enhancing Quality in the M.Pharm Degree Programme: Optimisation of the Personal Tutor System," *Pharmacy Education*, 2003, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 103-109.

[12] N. Jackson and R. Ward, "A fresh perspective on progress files—a way of representing complex learning and achievement in higher education," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2004, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 423-449.

[13] M. M. Daniel and M. Valerica, "IT&C And The Personal Development. Annals of the University of Oradea," *Economic Science Series*, 2011, pp. 807-813.

[14] G. D. Kuh and S. Hu, "The Relationships Between Computer and Information Technology Use, Selected Learning and Personal Development Outcomes, and Other College Experiences," *Journal of College Student Development*, 2001, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 217-232.

[15] S. Peacock, L. Gordon, S. Murray, K. Morss, and G. Dunlop, "Tutor Response to Implementing an e-Portfolio to Support Learning and Personal Development in Further and Higher Education Institutions in Scotland." *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 2010, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 827-851.

[16] G. R. Walz and J. C. Bleuer, *The Growth Edge: Creative Use of Computers for Facilitating Learning and Enhancing Personal Development*, Papers from the Workshop, June 27-30, 1986.

[17] A.. Jelfs and P. Kelly, "Evaluating electronic resources: Personal Development Planning resources at the Open University, a case study," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2007, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 515-526.

[18] M. E. Braine and J. Parnell, "Exploring student's perceptions and experience of personal tutors," *Nurse Education Today*, 2011, vol. 31, no. 8, pp. 904-910.

[19] M. Owen, "Sometimes You Feel You're in Niche Time' : The Personal Tutor System, a Case Study," *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 2002, vol. 3, no. 7, pp. 7-23.

[20] S. Cottrell, "Skills for success: the personal development planning handbook," *Palgrave Macmillan*, China, 2003

[21] D. Longman, L. Jones, B. Kurzik, and K. Green, "Developing teachers of tomorrow: Embedding knowledge audits in personal development planning," *Newport CELT Journal*, 2009, vol. 2, pp. 63-68.

[22] V. Dagley and B. Berrington, "Learning from an evaluation of an electronic portfolio to support general practitioners' personal development planning, appraisal and revalidation," *Education for Primary Care*, 2005, vol. 16, pp. 567–574.

Morteza Rezaei-Zadeh is presently a PhD researcher in University of Limerick, Ireland in the field of e-learning. He has an ongoing interest in research and praxis in developing e-learning systems and has previously published and given papers on various aspects of e-learning, on pedagogical and technical dimensions. Currently, he tries to develop a specific e-learning platform based on the cultivating students' life-long learning and entrepreneurial competencies through designing a hidden curriculum and embedding some new technical capabilities in Moodle as one of the famous open-source e-learning platforms.