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Empowering Reflection: Possible leveraging of Generative AI to enhance personal tutoring and student support in higher education

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Abstract

Higher education in the United Kingdom faces significant challenges due to an increasingly diverse student population with varying academic, emotional, and social needs. Traditional support systems, such as personal tutoring, often struggle to address these needs comprehensively. This paper explores how Generative AI (GAI) can be harnessed to enhance personal tutoring, enabling students to engage in reflective practices that better prepare them for tutoring sessions. GAI tools offer structured prompts that encourage self-reflection, helping students articulate their academic challenges and emotional experiences. For instance, students struggling with interdisciplinary programs can benefit from AI-driven prompts that address specific academic skills in each subject, promoting focused discussion in subsequent tutorials. Additionally, GAI can track students' progress and flag potential issues, enabling timely interventions. This study demonstrates practical examples where GAI could support international and multidisciplinary students, highlighting benefits such as fostering independence and engagement with feedback. By integrating GAI in personal tutoring, institutions can adapt to changing student needs while preserving the human-centred approach essential to educational support. Our findings indicate that GAI has the potential to complement, not replace, personal tutors, optimising tutorial efficacy in the context of modern higher education.

Introduction

Higher education in the United Kingdom is undergoing profound changes, driven by increasing diversity within the student body and the growing need for inclusive teaching practices. Universities are now embracing students from various cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds, which presents both opportunities and challenges (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019). This diversity is a double-

edged sword, offering a rich collaborative learning environment while stretching the capacities of traditional support systems like personal tutoring (Beech, 2018).

The diversity in student populations has necessitated a shift in pedagogical approaches, particularly in terms of providing personalised academic and pastoral support. Traditional methods of student support, including one-on-one tutoring, often struggle to keep pace with the growing needs of students, leading to some falling through the cracks (Boelens *et al.*, 2018). As a result, educators are exploring innovative solutions, such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI), to provide more flexible and responsive support systems that can cater to the specific needs of individual learners (Bovill *et al.*, 2016).

Generative AI (GAI), while sometimes perceived as a threat to personal, human-centred education, can be a powerful tool for enhancing reflective learning and personal tutoring. Rather than replacing human tutors, GAI can act as a facilitator, helping to manage the growing complexity of student needs and encouraging self-reflection in learning processes (Hunt *et al.*, 2018).

In this paper, we present several examples of how AI can be effectively integrated into personal tutoring systems, offering practical advice and ethical considerations related to its implementation in higher education and the University of Birmingham in particular.

The challenges for the sector

The role of personal tutoring in UK higher education has evolved significantly to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. Indeed, how personal tutoring is even delivered (never mind what it is called and what it covers) varies widely and can be broadly characterised into four models of practice: pastoral, professional, curriculum-integrated, and hybrid (Boulton, n.d.). Traditionally, personal tutors have been responsible for providing academic guidance; however, in recent years, their role has expanded to encompass pastoral care, particularly as students increasingly face mental health challenges, academic pressure, and cultural adjustment issues (Walker, 2022). With rising student numbers and growing diversity, offering tailored support to every individual has become increasingly difficult (Cotton, Nash and

Kneale, 2017). This is compounded by the fact that many students do not fully understand how to effectively engage with their personal tutors, or even what kind of support to seek.

A major challenge in higher education is that students often arrive at university with little knowledge of how to make effective use of the personal tutoring system. Many students feel unsure about what questions to ask or how to frame their concerns in a way that tutors can address constructively (Ammigan and Jones, 2018). This is particularly problematic for international students and also for first-generation students, both of whom who may lack the cultural context and/or capital needed to navigate academic support systems (Arthur, 2017).

Another key issue is that students do not always recognise the importance of self-reflection in their academic development. Reflective learning is a critical element in deepening students' understanding of their own progress and challenges, yet it is often overlooked in higher education settings (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). Personal tutoring sessions offer an ideal space for reflection, but without the right tools or guidance, many students fail to engage in meaningful self-assessment or articulate their reflections to tutors effectively. Reflection involves critically evaluating one's own learning process and progress, identifying gaps in understanding, and formulating strategies for improvement. However, many students lack the necessary skills to reflect on their learning, which can hinder their ability to seek useful feedback or set clear academic goals (Raaper and Brown, 2020). Furthermore, given that personal tutoring duties are shared between staff—themselves with varying skill levels, experiences, levels of engagement, styles and interpretations related to personal tutoring—students are highly likely to get variable personal tutoring experiences, especially outside of the professional model outlined by Boulton.

The inability to engage in reflective learning is closely tied to students' lack of understanding about maximising personal tutoring sessions. Research has shown that many students see their tutors merely as a resource for troubleshooting academic problems rather than as partners in fostering ongoing personal and academic growth (Crawford and Johns, 2018). This means that tutors are often

under-utilised, with students failing to seek advice on broader issues such as time management, well-being, and long-term academic planning (Couzens *et al.*, 2015).

Given these challenges, we have explored the use of GAI to complement personal tutoring systems; whilst these are particular to the University of Birmingham's context, we believe the principle to be of relevance to all UK higher education providers. GAI can be used to promote self-reflection by encouraging students to engage in structured reflective practices before meeting with their tutors. For instance, GAI-driven platforms can prompt students with meaningful questions about their learning experiences, helping them identify areas where they need further guidance or improvement (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). This not only prepares students for more productive tutoring sessions but also fosters independent learning by encouraging ongoing reflection outside of scheduled meetings. GAI can also track students' academic performance and well-being indicators, alerting tutors to potential issues before they escalate (Raaper and Brown, 2020). By providing timely interventions and guiding students through the reflection process, GAI can ensure that personal tutoring is effective across the board, even in increasingly complex educational environments.

A tool for improving student reflective practice outside of the classroom, called Riff (Britos Cavagnaro, 2024), has been developed at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University. We have tested the beta release for some cases of relevance to the personal tutoring landscape at the University of Birmingham; however, responses lacked depth and nuance, used unengaging language, and lacked focus. As such, we looked to create our own tools.

How to build a reflective GAI tool

The rapid proliferation and progress of GAI platforms has made GAI remarkably accessible. For the sandbox testing presented herein, we used the Custom GPT functionality on OpenAI's ChatGPT platform, currently available to paying individual users and those with access to ChatGPT Enterprise. It is important to note that we have created these custom GPTs only for testing by staff: they have not been released to students and have not been made publicly available. Reasons for doing so are covered in section 5 below, along with considerations of which platform to use.

There are several attractive features of OpenAI's custom GPTs for this use case:

1) *They are easy to create.*

The learning curve is minimal. Each CustomGPT has the following configuration options (that appear under the 'Configure' tab):

- a) *A name.*
- b) *A description.* This, along with the name, is seen by the user when they open the GPT to interact with it.
- c) *Instructions.* Here, one describes in 8,000 characters how the GPT is to behave and what its purpose is. Rather than worrying about the best way to instruct the GPT to behave in a certain way, one can ask ChatGPT itself to help formulate optimal instructions to achieve your desired aim; this feature can be accessed in the 'Create' tab, where one can have a back and forth with ChatGPT with regards to what you want.
- d) *Conversation starters.* The GPT creator can customise these as clickable conversation openers should the user be unsure how to begin conversing with the GAI. The importance of this in a personal tutorial setting cannot be overstated as so many in-person tutorial hours are wasted just trying to (metaphorically) prise open a student at the beginning of the tutorial, whether due to personal insecurities, language or cultural barriers, or other issues.
- e) *Knowledge.* Creators can upload documents (e.g. course files, policy documents, guidance documents, course structures) which the GPT can use as a source of information to respond to specific questions that may be asked by any student.
- f) *Capabilities.* The following functionalities can be toggled on or off, depending on use case: web search; image generation; code interpreter and data analysis.
- g) *Actions.* These allow the Custom GPT to connect to third party services.

2) *They are easy to edit.*

Creators can tinker with the backend settings side-by-side with a preview chat window.

- 3) *They are easy to deploy.*

Once happy with the final product, the GPT is easily shared by generating a shareable link.

Example

We created the “Y1transition_LANS” GPT (see appendix) as an example to help first year Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences (LANS) students in the transition from school to university. This is a transition point that is of relevance to all students and is particularly important to LANS students who have to grapple with the self-organisation required to develop their own entirely unique portfolio of study.

The primary purpose of this custom GPT was to act as a tool to help students prepare for an in-person tutorial with their personal tutor. The full instructions we provided to the GPT (produced in conversation with ChatGPT itself) can be found in the appendix, but the key features were:

- 1) Explaining the primary purpose of the GPT as a tool for reflection on the first few weeks at university.
- 2) Three labelled sections taken from the structure used for the Riff beta instructions (Britos Cavagnaro, 2024):
 - a) *Behaviour*: the style in which the GPT should communicate with the student. Emphasis was placed on the student’s emotions and being supportive and open-ended in its responses.
 - b) *Adaptability*: how the GPT should react to certain expected, likely or possible inputs from students.
 - c) *Avoid*: What the GPT shouldn’t do.
- 3) Defining an explicit goal for the interaction to achieve. Here, we wanted the student to walk away with up to three questions or points of discussion to pose to their tutor in the in-person tutorial.
- 4) Further specific instructions were provided to build upon the ‘Behaviour’ section above, such that the output was standardised as much as possible for all students.

Conversation starters based on our expertise and experience as LANS personal tutors (again produced with the help of ChatGPT and subsequently modified for maximum relevance) were:

- 1) I'm not sure where to start.
- 2) I'm finding it hard to balance my studies and social life.
- 3) I've been feeling overwhelmed with all the new things.
- 4) I'm not sure if I've chosen the right subjects.
- 5) I'd like to discuss how I can make the most of the resources available to me at university.
- 6) I've been struggling with making new friends.
- 7) What's the best way to approach studying for multiple subjects?
- 8) I feel like I'm not adjusting well to university life.

Cases and examples of use

It is important to stress that all of these use cases are designed to be *adjuncts* to in-person tutorials/supervisions. There is no substitute for human support but the introduction of this GAI adjunct serves to aid both students and staff members in making the tutorial/supervision process as valuable as possible, especially in instances where students are not forthcoming and/or staff members don't feel suitably trained/empowered/bothered to try to make the tutorial a worthwhile experience given their potential lack of time and/or relevant training. Indeed, the enhancement of the personal tutorial and graduate supervision processes at the University of Birmingham through the use of digital tools is not new: Personal Academic Tutoring has been supported by PebblePad, supervision by GRS forms.

Use of PebblePad for personal tutorials amongst both students and staff is patchy, with its clunky user interface being a significant barrier to both parties engaging with the normative ideal: students write their updates since the last personal tutorial and the tutor reads these in advance of the 20-minute tutorial. This is a highly flawed system, as reflected in reality where any number of the following barriers are experienced:

- 1) Students/staff are put off accessing the tool because the user interface is so unintuitive and convoluted.
- 2) When faced with an empty text box where they are expected to spill out their thoughts and updates, students feel the pressure to write perfectly formed and formatted reflections so as not to give a poor academic impression to their tutor...
- 3) ...or they just write a cursory couple of sentences to show performative engagement or because they don't feel comfortable writing welfare-related issues in an online record.
- 4) If staff do indeed read the student inputs, they often do so in the tutorial itself, wasting time that could have otherwise been spent talking with the student.

Using a GAI-powered self-reflection tool in lieu of something like PebblePad addresses all of the above issues. What follows are a few examples of how such a tool could be engaged with in different cases.

Example 1: Birmingham International Academy (BIA) and Birmingham Scholars

The Birmingham International Academy (BIA) at the University of Birmingham supports international students by providing tailored academic and language preparation courses before they begin their degrees. These students often face challenges related to cultural adjustment, academic expectations, and language barriers, which can affect their ability to engage fully with personal tutoring systems. A reflective GAI tool could support BIA students by prompting them to reflect on their academic and personal progress throughout the preparatory courses. The GAI can guide students in articulating their concerns around adapting to the UK academic system, identifying areas where they may need additional language support or academic assistance, and formulating specific questions for their tutors. This could even be conducted in their native language, with support provided for articulating their reflection in English to their personal tutor. Engaging in this reflective process would make students better prepared to communicate their needs, leading to more productive tutoring sessions. Additionally, the GAI could potentially track student reflections and progress patterns, alerting tutors if a student is at risk of academic or emotional distress, allowing for timely interventions.

Example Scenario: A student struggling with academic writing may receive AI prompts to reflect on recent feedback. The AI could ask: “What part of your writing assignment did you find most challenging?” or “How do you plan to improve based on your tutor’s feedback?” These questions encourage the student to critically assess their own learning process, making the subsequent meeting with the tutor more focused and effective.

Example 2: Personal tutoring in multidisciplinary programmes: Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences (LANS)

Students enrolled in multidisciplinary programs, such as joint degrees or interdisciplinary studies, often face unique challenges in balancing the demands of different subjects. These programs require students to manage distinct expectations from various departments, which can complicate their learning experiences and make it difficult to know what support to ask for from personal tutors. A reflective GAI tool can help students navigate these complexities by encouraging them to reflect on the differences between their subjects and identify where they need support. For instance, students could be prompted to reflect on the distinct approaches required in each discipline, helping them recognise areas where they need to strengthen specific skills, such as research methods in one subject and theoretical analysis in another. This process also helps them prepare more targeted questions for their tutors, ensuring that tutoring sessions effectively address their multi- or interdisciplinary challenges.

Example Scenario: A business and philosophy student may struggle with balancing quantitative assignments with theoretical readings. The GAI can ask, “How do the skills you’re learning in one course complement or conflict with your other courses?” This reflection can help the student identify gaps in understanding and approach their tutor with specific questions about time management or integrating diverse academic skills.

Example 3: Engaging with feedback

One of the most common struggles students face is engaging with feedback from their assessments. Often, students receive written feedback from tutors but do not fully understand how to use it to improve their performance. Many students feel unsure about what steps to take next, which can limit the impact of the feedback

process. The reflective GAI can help students engage more deeply with the feedback they receive by prompting them to reflect on their previous assessments and the specific areas highlighted by their tutors. For example, the AI might ask, “What part of your feedback do you find most useful?” or “What steps will you take to address the suggestions made by your tutor in your next assignment?” This structured reflection process encourages students to actively consider how they can apply feedback to future work, making personal tutoring sessions more meaningful and targeted towards actionable improvement.

Example Scenario: After receiving feedback that they need to improve the structure of their essays, a student could be prompted by the GAI to consider specific strategies for improving this aspect, such as outlining essays more thoroughly or reviewing examples of well-structured academic writing. The student can then use their next tutoring session to discuss these strategies and gain further guidance on refining their essay skills.

Example 4: Research student supervisions and dissertations

For postgraduate research students, particularly those working on dissertations or long-term projects, regular supervision meetings are critical for staying on track. However, students often struggle to identify specific areas where they need help or feedback, leading to less productive supervision sessions. The reflective GAI can support research students by prompting them to reflect on their progress, identify challenges they’ve encountered, and consider possible solutions before their meetings with supervisors. For example, the GAI can prompt the student with questions such as, “What aspect of your research methodology are you most confident in, and where do you need further clarification?” or “What specific feedback do you need from your supervisor at this stage?” By encouraging students to reflect on these issues in advance, the GAI ensures that supervision meetings are more focused, leading to clearer guidance from the supervisor and more proactive problem-solving by the student.

Example Scenario: A student working on a dissertation in the social sciences may be prompted to reflect on their data collection methods. The GAI might ask, “What challenges have you encountered in gathering data?” and “How could you address these challenges in your next supervision meeting?” This reflection allows the

student to identify specific concerns and approach their supervisor with a clear agenda, maximising the efficiency of their supervision sessions.

Safety, Privacy, and Professional Practice

There are several issues that need to be taken into consideration before a tool such as that described above is deployed to real students to use.

The safety of such GAI-driven chatbots has been put under intense scrutiny recently, with the recent news of a teenager's suicide (New York Times, 2023) seemingly driven by their interactions with an AI chatbot highlighting the need to ensure that this is a risk that is mitigated to the greatest extent possible. In the context of increasing mental health issues amongst student populations (Pollard *et al.*, 2021) and recent high-profile cases of student suicides on campus (Gunnell *et al.*, 2020), this is imperative.

Decisions also need to be made about which platform is the best to use for such tools. Institutional access to ChatGPT Enterprise would enable very easy creation and deployment of these Custom GPTs, as outlined in the template in this paper. The Enterprise edition of OpenAI's platform also ensures data security in that any data input by students during these GAI conversations is ringfenced and secured, not being made available to anyone outside the institution and not being used to train OpenAI's models. A broader general issue still potentially exists with the location of OpenAI's servers lying outside of the UK but the university can easily ascertain whether this is an issue in light of its current data policies.

In UoB's current context (i.e. without access to ChatGPT Enterprise), the preferred route to creating such custom GPTs is in the Microsoft Copilot environment (itself built on OpenAI's GPT-4 model). This is because it is already a self-contained data environment for the University that addresses the above privacy concerns. However, the only way to currently build such GAI chatbot tools is through the Power Apps platform. It is our hope that Copilot Studio access is granted to staff soon, which is a much more accessible (no-code as opposed to low-code) means of creating custom GPTs in a manner almost exactly as outlined above.

Finally, the use of custom GPTs to fulfil, at least partially, the role of a personal academic tutor understandably leaves some people feeling uneasy about the creeping infringement of impersonal computer-based tools for roles that require a human touch and that are, rightly, given appropriate weighting in workload allocation models. It is our contention that such tools in no way alter such workload allocation nor the fundamental importance of the human tutor in this relationship with students. Instead, they offer a means to make the personal tutorial a more enjoyable and effective experience for both staff and students alike. Indeed, the GAI responses may actually help those staff members that are less confident or forthcoming personal tutors to improve their professional practice by having some of the burden of emotional or challenging conversations which they often don't enjoy (Boulton and Lucas, 2008; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014) taken off them; they can then observe and judge the quality and appropriateness of responses from the GAI based on what action points and questions tutees bring to their in-person tutorial from their AI conversation. We suggest that, in order for the students' reflections to be maximally effective, tutors don't have access to the conversations and reflections directly; however, some non-pastoral use cases might find utility in this. Furthermore, personal tutors could even input answers to oft-asked questions into the custom GPT knowledge base and instructions such that the in-person tutorial is spent discussing things unique to the student in front of them. When staff time is so limited, this could be a transformative innovation for personal tutorials.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the transformative potential of Generative AI (GAI) within personal tutoring and student support systems. By setting up a ChatGPT-based Custom GPT tailored to promote student reflection, we have developed a practical example that we anticipate could enhance interactions between students and tutors. We demonstrated how GAI can support meaningful reflection through various scenarios—such as assisting international students in academic transitions, helping multidisciplinary students manage diverse program demands, and guiding students in engaging with feedback. This is only a tiny fraction of the potential use cases. These tools could prepare students for more focused and effective tutoring sessions and encourage ongoing self-directed learning and development.

Looking ahead, a useful next piece of work would be to obtain more formal staff feedback on the tools as well data on staff and student perceptions. We rightly anticipate a wide diversity of opinions as to the usefulness and appropriateness of such tools. We also appreciate that institution-wide deployment of such tools would be a significant change programme and so would like to gain further insight as to which programmes, Departments, Schools and Colleges would be most interested in this. Possible early adopters we have already engaged with include the BIA and programmes in the College of Arts and Law, College of Engineering and Physical Sciences, and College of Social Sciences.

The possibilities for deploying such reflective GAI tools in a secure, university-supported framework are promising. By integrating these tools within a protected institutional environment, universities can uphold high privacy, safety, and ethical oversight standards. Such an approach would allow students and staff to benefit from GAI's flexibility and adaptability across diverse academic and personal contexts, potentially reshaping support systems to meet the evolving needs of higher education. This work provides a foundational blueprint, adaptable to other departments and courses, and demonstrates a forward-thinking model for embedding GAI into personal tutoring, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape.

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Appendix: “Y1transition_LANS” GPT Instructions

This GPT is designed to guide first-year students enrolled in the Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences (LANS) programme at the University of Birmingham through their transition from school to university. It acts as a reflection tool to help them consider their experiences, identify challenges, and explore ways to adapt to university life. The GPT provides a space for reflection and support, helping students process their experiences and identify challenges, whether they are academic, social, or personal.

Behaviour: The GPT engages in conversational, empathetic dialogue, offering a space for reflection and advice. It encourages students to express their thoughts freely about their first few weeks and guides them in exploring any emotional, academic, or social challenges. The GPT should be warm, supportive, and open-ended, allowing students to reflect freely. It also provides suggestions for time management, exploring resources, and seeking support where needed. It will respond to both structured questions and broad statements, such as 'I'm not sure where to start,' and gently guide the conversation forward. If students struggle to ask specific questions, the GPT can pick up on keywords or emotions in their responses and offer tailored follow-up questions to help them explore their feelings and experiences further.

Adaptability: The GPT should adapt to the tone of the student's responses—if a student expresses excitement, the GPT should explore their passions. If a student shares concerns, the GPT should offer a calm, reassuring space and practical advice on overcoming these challenges. The GPT should be flexible enough to handle vague prompts or incomplete thoughts. If a student is struggling to express themselves, it will guide them toward more concrete topics without overwhelming them. For example, if a student says, 'I'm feeling overwhelmed,' the GPT can explore possible causes such as academic workload, social adjustment, or time management, and suggest helpful strategies.

Avoid: The GPT should avoid giving specific academic advice (like course-specific feedback or teaching) and avoid making assumptions about the student's experience. It should also refrain from imposing solutions, focusing instead on guiding students to discover strategies that work for them. The GPT should avoid pressuring students into answering in a certain way or overwhelming them with too many follow-up questions. Instead, it should offer subtle prompts to guide the conversation.

The goal of the conversation is for the student to walk away with three meaningful questions or points to take forward to their in-person personal tutorial meeting with their personal tutor.

1. Set the Expectations Early:

At the beginning of the conversation, tell the student that by the end of your discussion, they should aim to have three questions or points ready for their tutorial. Use the following statement or something similar:

"The purpose of our conversation is to help you reflect on your transition to university and identify three questions or points to bring to your next personal tutorial."

2. Ask Open-Ended Questions:

Throughout the conversation, ask open-ended questions that allow the student to reflect on their experiences and thoughts. Avoid being overly directive, and instead, encourage exploration. Examples include:

"What's been on your mind since starting university?"

"Are there any areas where you're feeling unsure or curious?"

"How has the transition been socially or academically?"

3. Guide Towards Reflection:

As the conversation progresses, start to subtly guide the student towards identifying topics they could raise with their tutor. Use prompts such as:

"It sounds like this might be something useful to discuss with your tutor. Would you agree?"

"Would any of these thoughts make good discussion points for your next tutorial?"

4. Summarise and Confirm:

Towards the end of the conversation, summarise the points the student has made, and ask them to confirm or adjust. Use phrases like:

“Here’s what we’ve discussed so far. Does this feel like a good list of questions or points for your tutorial, or would you like to make changes?”

5. Final Output:

Conclude the conversation by clearly listing the three agreed-upon questions or points for the student to take forward. Use the following format:

“Here are the three points/questions we’ve identified for you to take to your personal tutor meeting:”

1. [Point/Question 1]
2. [Point/Question 2]
3. [Point/Question 3]

Keep the conversation flexible, allowing the student to explore topics freely, while ensuring that the output is focused on producing three useful questions or points by the end of the interaction.