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Qualitative Study of College Tutoring Through the Expert Panel Method

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Abstract: The implementation of a quality Tutorial Action Plan (TAP), in which the integral formation of students is the main objective, is a topical issue in the Spanish university environment. This paper aims to identify the actions contemplated in the TAPs of different Spanish universities and catalog the different types of activities performed by the teachers-tutors in the context of tutorial action. To achieve this, the authors conducted a qualitative analysis based on expert panels. As a result, three main vectors were extracted: Standard elements in a college TAP, critical aspects from tutors and managers of tutorial actions, and tutorial actions with a seal of quality. From the analysis it was concluded that quality tutorial action is the basis for academic excellence. Its achievement requires to clarify and recognize the role of the tutor, adjust appropriately the ratio of students allocated per tutor, and promote the development of transversal skills in students. For this, the authors propose a cross-coordination among teachers, as well as counseling and support; tutor training and professionalism; and the application of working methods that allow proper guidance and monitoring of students.

Keywords: College tutoring, qualitative methodology, pedagogic innovation, expert panel, tutorial action plan

Introduction

Student involvement with an academic and professional project of their own marks the boundary between adult learning, committed and autonomous, child learning, unable to perceive the ultimate meaning of their own actions and efforts (Paricio, 2005). This conviction is born out of the experience that comes with the close coexistence with college students claiming, not only the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but also skills that enable them to face a profession. Therefore, the statement "the student at the center and comprehensive training" (Universidad Europea de Madrid, 2011) is the first pillar of the Tutorial Action Plan or TAP (*Plan de Acción*

Tutorial or PAT, by its initials in Spanish) of the Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM). This foundation is fullfilled by working the following competency areas: 1) intellectual work skills; 2) attitudes toward work (responsibility for the work done, motivation, and initiative); and 3) attitudes toward cooperating and working with others (UEM, 2006).

This new form of exercise of the tutorial action is complex in that it is "a formative activity, which affects the overall development of college students in their intellectual, academic, professional, and personal dimension" (Ferrer, 2003 [translated]). This action commits equally students (who receive from the tutor information and guidance for personal decision making), faculty (who participate in the students' decision making), and the very university (which detects needs and shortcomings, both globally and in students in their personal and professional development).

The difficulties encountered are many and differ from those born from the ambition of the project and those from outside it (García Nieto, 1996), as cited in the work of García Nieto, Asensio Muñoz, Carballo Santaolalla, García García, Guard & González (2005). Among the former are:

- Unifying the educational process, avoiding its fragmentation, in order to achieve a truly *comprehensive education*;
- Ensuring the students' adequate academic training;
- Values education; and
- Sensitize the faculty. According to García Nieto et at. (2005), this is a must for teachers to adapt to the new way of actual university context requirement.

Among the latter:

- Student diversity, creating a variegated set of different skills and interests;
- The institutional interests and availability of resources; and
- Resistance to change.

Since the involvement of the authors of this work in tutorial action, it seemed appropriate to ask whether the tutors were offering what students need and require in order to develop their skills and to successfully guide their training in college. In this line of inquiry, the objectives of this research are:

- Identify actions under tutorial action plans of different Spanish universities.
- Cataloging the different types of activities undertaken by class teachers in the context of the tutorial.

Methodology

As part of a mixed design investigation of educational innovation (qualitative and quantitative), launched in 2010, this study is the final phase of the project *La tutoría personalizada como motor de desarrollo de competencias en los alumnos de nuevo ingreso en la Universidad Europea de Madrid* (*FASE II: Prórroga proyecto 2010-2011*) [Personalized tutoring as motor for competence development in freshmen students in the Universidad Europea de Madrid - PHASE II: Extension project 2010-2011]. Using an interpretive approach, and therefore framed in a qualitative design, the authors used a panel of experts as a strategy for gathering information.

The Panel of Experts: A Consensus Method

In the context of qualitative research, the interest is on the participants' dialogue. The framework is language, semantics or meanings, seeking to determine the meanings of the analyzed social phenomena. Consensus techniques or methods, such as the Delphi Method, brainstorming, and nominal group or panel of experts seek to obtain "the degree of consensus or agreement of the specialists on the problem posed, using the results of previous research, rather than leaving the decision to a single professional" (Pérez, 2000, p. 320 [translated]).

According to Perez (2000), the difference between the Delphi Method and the expert panel is that, in the first group, members never meet and are do not know each other, and in the second they meet in a workgroup and therefore interact.

Given the variability between the different methods called *consensus*, and the conceptualizations of panels, the authors of this study understand the panel of experts to be a group of specialists, independent from the research team, that through their active and group intervention emit a collective opinion on the topic at hand (López, 2013).

In this study, the researchers chose a panel of experts of the informal type, and the participants' contributions analysis was made from recording their opinions, perceptions, and information about their respective academic environments.

Two panels were organized, one with six external participants (one and a half hours long) and one with six internal faculty, which were UEM tutors (one hour long). The panel of outside experts found connection with the focus group, which "constitutes a special technique within the broader category of group interview, whose hallmark is the explicit use of interaction to produce data that would be less accessible without the interaction group" (Morgan, 1988, as paraphrased by García Calvente & Mateo Rodríguez, 2000, p. 181 [translated]). The panel of internal experts, according to sources consulted, would correspond to the concept of group discussion. García and Mateo (2000, p. 181) argued, based on the works of Alonso (1994) and Canales (1994), that this "is designed to investigate the commonplaces of a group of people that, placed in a discursive situation (conversation), tend to represent dialogues more or less *topical* of the social groups to which they belong" [translated].

Profile of Participants

Consensus techniques do not require a strict sample design, neither in the number of participants nor in terms of their selection (Perez, 2000). The sample selection was performed using theoretical sampling, thus intentional, through key informants related to the field of university tutorial action.

The criteria that guided the selection, in the case of the external panel, were based on the representativeness in the group, from different universities, whether public or private, with experience in tutorial action projects within the Spanish context. And, in the case of the internal panel, the choice of teachers-tutors with several years of experience in the practice of tutoring students, from different faculties within the UEM.

Profile for members of the external experts panel. Academic managers of tutorial action/counseling services from the following universities: University of Extremadura, University of Cádiz, University of Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid), Polytechnic University of Barcelona, and UEM.

Profile for members of the internal experts panel. Teachers-tutors from the following academic areas within the UEM: Health Sciences, Biomedical Sciences, Polytechnic School, and Athletics and Exercise.

Working Procedure in Expert Panels

Participants were presented with a synopsis of the overall objectives of the study and preliminary results. Prior to, and at the time of the proposal to participate in the panel, the researchers explained the purpose of the meeting and the topic on which they would be asked their opinion. The approach of the meeting was opened, and based on two questions:

- What actions are being considered from the TAP to develop transferable competences in freshmen?; and
- What actions should /could tutors make to influence or promote the development of transversal competences in students tutored?

Each panel or group was moderated by a member of the research team with expertise in conducting focus groups, while another researcher assumed the role of observer.

Analysis Procedure

The group dialogue was recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Reading and initial processing of the speech was made individually by several researchers in the team, with the aim of identifying fragments of meaning, which were granted a preliminary code. In a second reading (advanced analysis), initial codes were refined and were reunited in advanced codes. The final stage of analysis entailed a third analysis, in which expert researchers agreed on the grouping of advanced codes into different categories, from which finally emerged vectors or transverse domains.

Results and Discussion

After a thorough analysis of the transcripts from the internal and external panels, the advanced codes obtained were grouped into five major categories (Table 1).

Table 1. *Advanced Categories and Associated Codes Consensus After an Advanced Qualitative Analysis*

Categories	Advanced Codes
Contemplated actions within Tutorial Action Plans	– Tutor definition, functions, and tasks – Ways to assign tutees – Tutor's training – Student progress tracking according to course and needs – Different forms of tutoring – Evaluation: quantitative methods – Mandatory/voluntary tutoring
Dissemination of tutorials	– Forum use, online, in class
Usefulness of tutorials	– Solve first-year adaptation problems – Accompaniment – Problem recognition – Conflict resolution – Time management – Personal /moral support – Self-assessment

Tutor concerns regarding the tutorial action practice	– Tutee ratio – Matching tutors with first year faculty – Recognizing tutoring as teaching – Tutor training and professionalization – Student motivation towards tutoring – Mandatory/voluntary tutoring
Good practices in tutoring	– Student analysis as starting point – Tutor presence – Amount of tutees (minimum/maximum) – Adequate assignment criteria – Tutee's academic and personal development – Development of transversal competences through tutoring – Tutoring with contents – Cross-faculty coordination – Adequate tutor training – Counseling and support services for tutors and students

In addition, from the final phase of the expert panel qualitative analysis, and as a result of the reorganization of categories and advanced codes, three vectors or domains emerged (Table 2). These broad areas encompass actions contemplated in the tutorial action plans of different Spanish universities, as well as activities carried out by teachers-tutors in several knowledge areas within the UEM.

Table 2. *Vectors and Categories Defined After the Advanced Analysis*

Vectors	Categories	Advanced codes
Common elements in a university tutorial action plan	– Actions contemplated in Tutorial Action Plans – Dissemination of tutorials	– Ways to assign tutees – Tutor definition, functions, and tasks – Tutor training – Different forms of tutoring – Ways to convene – Student progress tracking according to course and needs – Evaluation: quantitative methods
Critical aspects identified by tutors and tutorial action managers	– Tutor concerns regarding the tutorial action practice – Good tutoring practices	– High tutee ratio – Career tutor or academic year tutor? – Recognizing tutoring as teaching – Tutor training and professionalization – Student motivation towards tutoring – Mandatory/voluntary tutoring
Tutorial actions with a "seal of quality"	– Good tutoring practices – Usefulness of tutoring	– Development of transversal competences through tutoring – Counseling and support services for tutors and students – Cross-faculty coordination – Normalize the student-tutor ratio – Student needs analysis as starting point – Follow-up/accompaniment – Method in tutoring: Analysis-Goals-Action-Tracking

Common Elements in a University Tutorial Action Plan (TAP)

Common elements in a college Tutorial Action Plan (TAP) are understood as all aspects described in the tutorial action documents that organize and structure a tutoring program, so that they are the framework and guidance for the development of the faculty's tutorial action. There is an overlap between elements associated with the TAP that emerge from discussions gathered in both panels of experts and those reported by other authors (Gairín, Feixas, Franch, Guillamón, & Quinquer, 2003).

Participants expressed a difference of opinion when assigning tutors depending on the university or subject area. For instance, one participant said "*Tutoring is very difficult if I cannot see the tutees. It seems to me we need to work on who assigns, how to assign... Also the student must be able to choose with whom they better identify. Perhaps allow a percentage of second year students to choose, as long as we all have a minimum*" (external panel; translated). Furthermore, participants in both panels stressed the importance of defining the tutor and specify his/her functions, as well as the tasks to be carried out to develop effective and good quality tutoring. This issue has arisen in previous studies related to the tutor's work in the UEM (Martín López et al., 2008). As another participant indicated, "*It is very important for students to be clear about what is the tutor's purpose*" (inner panel; translated).

Studying the ways and resources made available for the training of university faculty as tutors is considered equally important. Universities consider different tutoring modalities (face-to-face/online, individual/group, competence development...) that may be required by students or by the teaching modality, as well as the possible means made available to teacher-tutors to establish calls or invitations (through forums, online, in class...) in order to make contact with students (UEM, 2011). In the words of one of the participants, "*What the protocol establishes... is to communicate with students, summon them via email or in classroom or through the tutor's forum or the hallways*" (inner panel; translated). In this sense, there is some consensus in that the functions of the tutor must be disseminated to the students tutored as an essential element in the framework of the implementation of the university's TAP.

Finally, another codified point highlighted by members of the panels was the type of student follow-up that should be performed, taking into account both individual and group needs and characteristics. In this sense, this study shows that the needs of students vary widely depending on the course and the ability of individual adaptation. Therefore, the requirements are different among students and should be considered in addressing tutorial action. It is necessary as well to establish a suitable quantitative evaluation method to estimate objectively which are the benefits of tutoring.

Critical Aspects from Tutors and Tutorial Action Managers

The critical areas identified by the tutors and TAP managers were defined as a series of concerns that arise during the tutorial action practice, which could compromise the quality, the use of best practices in tutoring, and even the viability of meeting the objectives proposed (Table 3).

Table 3. *Quotes on Critical Issues in Tutorial Action*

Critical aspect	Quotes from external (ext. panel) and internal panels (int. panel)
High tutee ratio	*We cannot have forty. I cannot manage forty students* (int. panel).
Career tutor or academic year tutor?	*It would be nice if the professor accompanied the student throughout the entire career training* (int. panel).

	Notice that I posed myself not to assign a tutor to a student who was taking a course with him, I tried for them to be unrelated so that the student felt freer, I might have as well been mistaken but that's how I did it (ext. panel).
Recognizing tutoring as teaching	*In the beginning they did have a teaching role (tutors), then it was eliminated when the cutbacks started, the first thing that was eliminated was the teaching function in tutoring* (ext. panel).
Tutor training and professionalization	*We have sixty hours in training but they do not teach us conflict management* (int. panel). *They offer training courses for teachers-tutors and sometimes they are not completed, the reality is faculty are not too much in favor of "wasting time"* (ext. panel).
Student motivation towards tutoring	*Pack tutoring sessions with content is important so that students attend and develop competences* (int. panel). *When they are interested the thing works, the problem arises when you don't offer them something which is why we thought about providing content* (ext. panel).
Mandatory/voluntary tutoring	*The student must come because the three are mandatory but the performance of that tutoring was low, generally they were in groups because the professor could not "deliver enough" individual tutoring* (ext. panel). *If tutoring was mandatory it would lose importance* (int. panel).

Tutoring Actions with a "Seal of Quality"

Participants, especially from the external panel, felt that tutoring should be a space for the development of transferable skills in students, among which stand out problem identification, time management, and conflict resolution. This requires analyzing the individual needs of students as a starting point. Counseling and support services can be an excellent resource to advise the tutors, as well as to respond to the difficulties encountered in teaching students. However, the cross-coordination among faculty plays a key role in detecting situations and providing well-articulated counseling.

For this, the student/tutor ratio should allow for time to be dedicated to students, resulting in the recognition of this teaching activity by the faculty. All these elements would allow for regular and effective tracking and monitoring in order to reanalyze the initial proposed objectives, to evaluate the goals achieved, and continuously rethink new goals and actions up to the integral formation of students, both academically and in values.

Also a very positive experience in our university, common for freshmen students in the Cáceres and the Badajoz campuses, an exclusive training workshop in specific transversal skills. (External panel)

The counseling service is the benchmark when I detect a student has problems, they are the ones who have helped in the development of skills and abilities, (...) they have a wonderful session and youngsters leave delighted. (External panel)

Conclusions

Tutorial action is a necessary reality, highly valued and recognized by both students and faculty. It is considered the basis of academic excellence and it becomes essential in order to give university students a complete and comprehensive training.

There is a consensus among tutoring experts and college faculty regarding the need to clarify the tutor/mentor role, the need to recognize such work, and the adjustment in the amount of tutees per teacher. Student must know in advance the relationship between them and the tutors, as well as their functions.

Quality tutoring involves the development of transversal skills, focusing on the identification of problems, time management, and conflict resolution. For this, an analysis of student needs is required as the starting point of tutoring, as well as the application of a method of personalized approach to tutoring that allows establishing goals and tracking actions taken by students.

It also seems necessary to have a counseling service for both faculty and students. Finally, the cross-faculty coordination has a positive impact on the development of good practices in tutoring.

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