

The role of tutoring in higher education: improving the student's academic success and professional goals

Nuria Ruiz Morillas, Manel Fandos Garrido

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

nuria.ruizm@urv.cat, manuel.fandos@urv.cat

Abstract: Tutoring is a part of the university teaching-learning process and is a basic strategy for improving the student's academic success and professional goals. It is also in line with the policies of the European Union for improving the integration of lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. This article reviews the process of implementing tutorial action plans in Catalan universities, with particular emphasis on the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. The training and functions of tutors, the recognition of the tutoring task and the tools available to tutors at the URV are described.

Keywords: Tutor, tutorial action plan, academic success, professional goals, lifelong learning.

Resumen: La tutoría es una parte del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la universidad y una estrategia básica para mejorar el éxito académico de los estudiantes, así como sus metas profesionales. Además, la acción tutorial está de acuerdo con las políticas de la Unión Europea para mejorar la integración de la orientación permanente en las estrategias de aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida. En este artículo se revisa el desarrollo de los planes de acción tutorial en las universidades catalanas y, especialmente, se profundiza en la Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV). Se describen y analizan las acciones realizadas para la formación de tutores, las funciones que éstos realizan, el reconocimiento de la tarea de tutoría y las herramientas disponibles para la tutoría en la URV.

Palabras clave: Tutor, plan de acción tutorial, éxito académico, metas profesionales, aprendizaje permanente.

1. Introduction

Ever since Spain became part of the European Higher Education Area, tutorial action plans have been developed by most universities. Tutoring is an important part of the university teaching-learning process designed to improve student success rates and to enable students to achieve their professional goals. It is regarded as a basic strategy for any model of student learning, student guidance, individualization and monitoring. And university lecturers regard it as a professional competence and use it as a teaching strategy (Jiménez, 2010).

Several reports emphasize the importance of a lifelong guidance process. The Council Resolution of 28 May 2004 on strengthening policies, systems and practices in the field of lifelong guidance sets out the key objectives of a policy for all European Union citizens (European Council, 2004). Also, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA), and the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya (AQU) regard student guidance as a quality indicator for implementing new degrees in the European frame (Gisbert *et alii*, 2010).

The Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies (European Council, 2008) confirms “the definition of guidance as referring to a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills”.

In this framework, the guidance and tutoring are a major issue in Higher Education. Innovations in tutoring are numerous and have been promoted at universities so that their guidance and tutoring systems can incorporate new technologies and scientific developments that respond to identified needs (Lobato *et alii*, 2013). High quality tutoring enhances retention and facilitates advancement throughout the higher education pipeline, positively impacting undergraduates, graduate students and even junior faculty. Tutoring is especially important for students who are at risk of dropping out and for gender equality and the integration of minorities (Girves *et alii*, 2005; Burrell, 2013).

The Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) has been using a competences framework since the academic year 2003-2004. This model is structured on the basis of specific, transverse and nuclear competences. One of the nuclear competences related to orientation processes is "C6: [Students must] Be able to define and develop their academic and professional project." In this context, the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) implemented a Tutorial Action Plan (TAP) as a permanent support process that responds to the problems and needs of a student's life at university, particularly at those moments when they have to take decisions (URV Governing Council, 2007).

2. Tutorial action plans at universities: the case of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV)

The Tutorial Action Plan (TAP) defines the actions that the University might undertake to ensure that students receive monitoring and guidance. This is especially useful in three transition periods of a student's life (Sobrado, 2008):

- ♦ *University entrance*: assessment of the abilities and competencies required for successful academic results.
- ♦ *During the course*: introduction of the concepts relating to professional development, supervision of internships in companies, facilitation of employment and exploration of the labour market.
- ♦ *Transition from the university to work*: development of job search strategies, design of a career plan.

The areas it focuses on are the following: academic guidance, careers advice, continuous evaluation, academic decisions and conflict resolution.

By implementing the TAP, the URV hopes that every student will be able to define and develop their own academic and professional profile (URV core competence C6). This competence is defined as having the following learning outcomes:

- ♦ Each student can develop their own interest/motivation in the academic and professional field.
- ♦ Each student can identify and respond to their training needs.
- ♦ Each student can define and develop their academic path considering their formative needs, interests, and academic and professional motivations.
- ♦ Each student can develop resources and strategies that facilitate the transition to work.

The strategies designed to help students acquire this competence are the use of tutors and mentors and seminars and activities for training and informative purposes.

Three URV administrative units have participated in the implementation and development of the Tutorial Action Plan:

- Educational Resources Service (SRE): manages and directs methodological and technological design, integration and monitoring in the URV's faculties and schools.
- Institute of Education Sciences (ICE): manages teacher training.
- Rector's Technical Bureau (GTR): defines the Internal System of Quality Assurance and prepares the assessment report.

The URV provides two basic resources for monitoring students: the Tutoring Virtual Space (TVS) and the electronic portfolio.

The TVS is a technological tool designed to facilitate the management and implementation of academic tutoring (Montserrat *et alii*, 2006). Through a range of planning, communication, monitoring, evaluation and management tools, the TVS provides:

- A longitudinal vision of a student's learning process from the beginning of his/her degree course to the end.
- Access to information.
- Communication and monitoring tools.
- Automatic mechanisms for arranging tutorials (both face-to-face and on-line).
- Combined work spaces for student and tutor, or student and student.

The TVS was designed with the same features as a Moodle course, but with a block called tutorials specifically designed to facilitate the mentoring activity (Castaño, 2004).

The e-Portfolio is implemented in the Moodle Virtual Campus supported by open source software and is in the design phase. The e-portfolio is intended to be aligned with the URV's Strategic Plan for Teaching and the TAP. The e-portfolio is a powerful tool for capturing student progress. Students learn to apply reflective thinking to their experiences. The e-portfolio makes explicit the lifelong learning path and professional career trajectory of each individual (Castaño, 2004).

In order for the TAP to be implemented correctly, URV faculties and schools are responsible for organizing a series of activities annually. For this reason, every faculty and school is assigned a TAP coordinator and a specialist to support the quality of teaching. The activities are grouped into three periods of the academic year:

- ✦ At the beginning: coordination with tutors, and training for tutors including the use of e-tools for tutoring (EVT and e-portfolio).
- ✦ In the middle: coordination with tutors, e-reports on tutoring.
- ✦ At the end: coordination with tutors, e-reports on tutoring, inquiries by students and tutors, TAP evaluation report.

At the end of the academic year 2011-12, a progress report on teaching quality was drawn up by the URV (URV Quality Commission, 2013). The report collects data from the last three academic years. Some of the data are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Data on the implementation of TAP

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Number of degrees that have implemented the TAP.	32	40	43
Number of tutored students	2275	4948	6883
Number of tutors	223	317	473
Student-tutor ratio	11	16	15
Training sessions for tutors	10	9	13
Participants in the training sessions for tutors	139	72	134

As seen in table 1, both the number of degrees that have implemented the TAP and the number of tutored students and tutors have increased in three consecutive academic years. The student-tutor ratio has stabilized in the last year. However, the ratio in some degrees is higher than in others and, in some cases, the number of tutees per tutor is higher than 20, which is the maximum agreed to in the Tutorial Action Plan Regulations for new degrees (URV, Governing Council, 2011). A total of 42 training sessions were offered to lecturers and 345 took part.

The report also says that there were more individual tutoring activities than group activities and face-to-face was the most common interaction (table 2). Motivation, personal interests, evaluation, planning and college tuition were the priority issues for the students. However, it is noteworthy that only 29% of students took the initiative to ask for tutoring. All the others were called to tutoring meetings by their tutors. Even so, students greatly appreciate tutoring and highlight the good relationship with the tutor.

Table 2. Tutoring actions (nd: not determined)

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Number of tracking reports by the tutor	1285	2910	3791
Percentage of student participation in tutoring actions	52	55	42
Number of individual sessions	<i>nd</i>	2311	2669
Number of group sessions	<i>nd</i>	529	556
Face-to-face sessions	<i>nd</i>	2427	2676
Virtual sessions	<i>nd</i>	268	550

2.1 The tutor: assignation and functions

Tutors can be full-time URV lecturers who express an interest in becoming involved in tutoring. They have to have social and communication skills and have taught on the degree their tutees are studying. Tutors can also be students in the final years of the undergraduate degree, master's degree or doctorate (peer mentoring) who have enough time and the appropriate social and communicative skills. These peer mentoring initiatives have become widely adopted across European universities as a way of integrating students into the higher education system (Risque, 2011).

Tutors are assigned jointly by the faculty or school, and the department. Each tutor should be responsible for 20 students maximum (URV Governing Council, 2011).

The functions of a tutor are set by the university's guidance service (Sobrado, 2008). At the URV the general functions of a tutor (Gisbert, 2010) are to:

- Facilitate the integration of students into university.
- Assist the students in their academic work.
- Help students solve problems related to academic and university life.
- Facilitate the student's personal and professional progress.
- Help the student in his/her transition to the professional world.

Tutors must call students to at least three individual tutorial sessions and have documentary evidence of the tutoring. They must also take part in tutor training, in follow-up meetings and in evaluating mentoring.

Establishing a good rapport between students and tutors is the most important factor in the success of tutoring. For this to occur, tutors should first make contact with students and actively seek them out for follow-up meetings (Malik, 2000). A recent study by the Interuniversity Group for Teacher Education about the skills

required by academic staff shows that interpersonal skill is especially important in tutoring actions. This group defines the interpersonal skill as “promoting critical spirit, motivation and confidence, recognizing cultural diversity and individual needs, and creating a climate of empathy and ethical commitment” (Torra *et alii*, 2010).

Meetings between tutors and students can take any of the following forms:

- Seminars (for all students who wish to participate, to provide information or training).
- Group tutoring (training, discussion and student participation).
- Individual tutoring (personal guidance).

All degrees at the URV plan for 25 hours of guidance with the tutor and include other agents in the process when necessary. For example, the degree in Chemistry has planned the following sequence of activities for students (table 3):

Table 3. Sequence of tutoring activities for the degree in Chemistry

<i>Period</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Who?</i>	<i>No. of sessions</i>	<i>When?</i>	<i>Proposed time (in hours)</i>	<i>Real time (in hours)</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>1st year</i>	Welcome session	Decanal Team	1	First week	2		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Preregistration	2		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	After welcome session (first month)			
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Early first semester			
	Group session	Tutor	1	Mid-year	1		
<i>2n year</i>	Individual session	Tutor	1	Before registration	2		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Early first semester			
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Early second semester			
	Group session	Tutor	2	Mid-year	2		

3rd year	Mobility information session	Mobility coordinator	1	1Q	1		
	Information session on final degree project (FDP) and Practicum (Pt)	FDP and Pt coordinators	1	2Q	1		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Before registration	2		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Midfirst semester			
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Early/mid -second semester			
	Group session	Tutor	1	Mid-year	1		

4th year	Official master's degree information session	Dean and master's degree coordinators	1	2Q	1		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Before registration	2		
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Mid-first semester			
	Individual session	Tutor	1	Early/mid -second semester			
	Group session	Tutor	1	Mid-year	1		

Others	Initiation to university sessions	Dean's team / URV units	2	Early September	3.5 + 3.5 1 or 2 sessions		
	Activities recommended by the tutor or student consultations	Tutor	Throughout university studies	Throughout university studies	7		
			Total hours:			Minimum 25	

2.2 Training plan for tutors

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has developed the Training Plan for Teaching and Research, which includes courses designed to improve teaching and research, and the application of new teaching methodologies and the integration of IT in the teaching and learning processes.

This training program includes three levels of action:

- The General Plan targets all URV lecturers. The course topics are related to training, teaching methodology and learning, practice in the use of new technologies and the university as an educational institution.
- The Specific Plan targets the departments of each specific training group.
- Training Plan for Integration of Degrees in the European Higher Education Area, which is part of key skills training for skills assessment and tutorial action.

During the last three academic years, the Educational Resources Service (SER) in collaboration with the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has conducted training sessions specifically for tutors. Three types of training were organized based on the demands of the faculties and schools:

- Use of the e-tutoring space.
- The TAP-URV, TAP-center (objectives, contents, functions of tutors) and the use of the e- tutoring space.
- Program Training and Competency Evaluation (PTCE), the relation between the TAP and PTCE (objectives, content, functions of tutors, sequence of activities, content of tutoring sessions and the use of the Personal Development Plan as a strategy for student orientation) and the use of the e-tutoring space.

2.3 The recognition of tutoring

The Office of the Vice-rector for Teaching and Research Staff is responsible, among other things, for the working conditions of the university's lecturers and researchers: in particular, management, evaluation, training and working hours. The agreement on working hours for teaching and research staff, reached during the 2003-04 academic year, enables the work that has to be done to be done efficiently and the collective objectives of departments to be satisfactorily achieved (URV Governing Council, 2008). The activities carried out by each lecturer and researcher are parameterized by standard measuring units defined by the URV, so the working hours' agreement is linked to productivity and becomes a system for evaluating performance. Tutoring activities are included in the working hours' agreement, so the Tutorial Action Plan has finally been linked to policies for managing human resources as a motivating tool.

3. Concluding remarks

As a result of the Strategic Plan for Teaching, all the URV faculties and schools have implemented an academic tutorial process that responds to students' need for guidance. Tutoring plays a major role in university teaching-learning and is a strategy for improving the process. Furthermore, tutorial action is in accordance with the policies of the European Union for integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. Since the 2007-08 academic year, it's a priority for all the centres to have a TAP, with a tutor assigned to each student, public information on the website, and recorded evidence of the tutorial process.

The TAP provided was implemented through a virtual tutorial space. This space, which is part of the virtual education environment (Moodle), aims to facilitate the management and undertaking of tutorials and, at the same time, ensure that tutors and students can undertake academic tutorial work by means of information and communication technologies. Meanwhile, a space in which technical support staff can give virtual tutorials to teaching staff is currently being designed. This will facilitate quality assurance.

Likewise, in the degrees adapted to the parameters of the European Higher Education Area, student monitoring and guidance is a quality parameter with which the courses must comply. The commitment to specify and implement the TAP has been included in the verification reports. Working sessions with the tutors of the new courses, which have begun to use the virtual tutorial space, have also taken place satisfactorily.

However, the implementation is very different in each faculty/school and has been going at different speeds. For this reason, some improvements still need to be made:

- ✦ Digital tools (TVS and e-portfolio) are not fully integrated into the work of all the tutors because the levels of training required vary considerably depending on the faculty or school. Specific training programs are necessary.
- ✦ Considering that tutors need to invest a considerable number of hours if they are to fulfil their duties, the amount of time recognised by the working hours' agreement is low.
- ✦ The student-tutor ratio in some degrees exceeds the maximum agreed in Tutorial action plan regulations for new degrees.
- ✦ Although students value tutoring positively, they only call a meeting on their own initiative in a very low percentage of cases.

- ✦ Tutors need to be trained in both the methodology and the technology. They should also be trained in interpersonal skills in order to improve their empathy with the students.

All faculties and schools are making great efforts to implement and evaluate the TAP. In particular, they are focusing on new students to facilitate their integration into the university and students who are trying to plan their professional career. The new web-based institutional questionnaire of student satisfaction has provided important data. Actions are required to motivate students, who should inform of how helpful tutorials are to them. Students and tutors appreciate e-tutoring because it promotes individual tracking and makes group sessions more individual. However, most students and tutors prefer face-to-face tutoring. The topics covered in tutoring are usually general guidance, motivation and interest, evaluation, planning and registration.

Peer mentoring is being included in some the URV's faculties and school. This method is regarded as being very positive in terms of overall student training.

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