



## Exploring how tutors in higher education perceive their work and what direction they think it should take in the future: A case study

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### Abstract

University tutoring is a complex area of study involving various factors and agents whose actions are context-dependent. This qualitative study aims to analyse and interpret the experiences of tutors in the course of their work. The participants were 68 tutors, each from one of the seven centres belonging to the University of Alicante (Spain). We carried out conventional and summative content analyses using AQUAD 7 software. The results show that tutors' feelings are generally positive, though they become disillusioned if students decide to drop tutoring. Nevertheless, the few students that persevere are enough to encourage tutors to reflect on possible improvements to the tutoring programme. Their suggestions reveal their own tutoring style and the need to promote whichever tutoring model best suits the context and the students that construct the tutorial relationship.

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## Introduction

In a complex, changing, interconnected and volatile world, university systems are facing new challenges and find themselves at an unprecedented crossroads. The classical education model – academic and transactional, in which the teacher is the main protagonist and knowledge is transferred unidirectionally to the students – is no longer sustainable (Alexander & Manolchev, 2020). The upheaval caused by the recent public health crisis can be added to political pressures and constant changes, which together have given rise to serious political disaffection, impacting citizens' mental and emotional health. This is also reflected in the university context, where mental health problems are rife especially among students (Campbell, 2022; Defeyter et al., 2021). Criticism and resistance revolve around the university's role in society and the decline of the disciplines (Frederick, 2021). The university has to ride out the multiple pressures in order to advance in its triple role – teaching/learning, research activities and knowledge transfer – while trying to improve its primordial function (education) through scientific and socio-economic missions (Taliento, 2022). Teachers, meanwhile, are under constant psychological pressure given the many varied activities they have to carry out (Lewis et al., 2015; Whitehead et al., 2016). University education is under great strain, which only increases with new student needs and the demands of individualized support in a complex and uncertain world (Calabrese et al., 2022; Hart-Baldrige, 2020; Wakelin, 2021).

Given this scenario, tutoring may become a key element with which to respond to social demands (Powell & Prowse, 2022; Prowse et al., 2021). The university should educate citizens to participate in the construction of a more inclusive, equitable, fair, sustainable and resilient world. This would have to follow a competency-based approach abiding by the same principles, with students acquiring the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will enable them to fit successfully into the social fabric, continue learning throughout their lives and be agents of change (Vargas, 2021). However, this idea has yet to receive the attention it deserves in practice (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Stuart et al., 2021), despite the fact that there is a fair amount of agreement on a theoretical level that tutoring could be a contributing factor in reaching these goals, which are reflected in UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Research into the area of tutoring uncovers problems similar to those found in teaching (Ghenghesh, 2017). These stem mainly from the institutional organization of the tutoring (Martínez et al., 2014), the existence of overworked tutors (Grey & Lochtie, 2016; McIntosh & Grey, 2017; Stuart et al., 2021; Wakelin, 2021), their lack of confidence when providing support to students from different backgrounds (McFarlane, 2016), the increasing number of students uninterested in or poorly informed about the role of tutors and the benefits of participating in such programmes (Ghenghesh, 2017; Yale, 2019), and the economic policy followed by higher education institutions, which seek to implement effective tutoring for little financial outlay (Frederick, 2021). There is also the vagueness of the theoretical framework and the frequent mismatch between the tutors' view of their role and the students' needs and objectives (Wakelin, 2021; Yale, 2019). It is therefore important to identify the conceptual perspectives designed to support educational tutoring (Walker, 2020b) and analyse the specific practices – along with the vision and proposals for improvements – of the agents involved, with the aim of achieving a suitable mix of theory and practice with which to meet whatever challenges are faced by each university.

This qualitative study, which is contextualized in nature, aims to find out how the tutors that form part of the University of Alicante's (Spain) Tutorial Action Plan characterize their experience of tutoring so that we can infer from their discourses the perspective from which they carry out their actions. In addition, their suggested proposals for improvements will be analysed, enabling us to indirectly identify the challenges that have to be faced in order for us to progress in defining a tutoring model whereby universities can design practical policy measures aimed at strengthening an area that continues to receive little attention (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Stuart et al., 2021; Walker, 2020a).

The Tutorial Action Plan (TAP) mentioned above was set up as one of the levels of the integrated tutoring model – described by McIntosh (2018) following Earwaker (1992) – introduced at the University of Alicante (see the Context subsection in Methodology, and Figure 2). This is an institutional programme to be found in all the university's faculties, the tutors being teachers who are selected annually by open call. Its purpose is to provide students with guidance in academic, personal and professional matters throughout their studies using group and individual seminars. It complements peer tutoring and specialist guidance and tutoring services. As far as its functions are concerned, these would be comparable to *personal tutoring* in the UK or *academic advising* in the US. In this text we refer to the function simply as tutoring.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Tutoring Challenges That Affect the Experience of its Agents**

The first obstacle we come up against is conceptual in character and involves the term's lack of definition (Mynott, 2016; Walker, 2018). Like with all the other concepts pertaining to the social sciences, there is no universally agreed definition of tutoring. Instead there are many different definitions with different connotations (Livingston & Naishmith, 2018; Walker, 2018). On an international level, for example, different terms – such as personal tutoring and academic advising – are used *a priori* to refer to things that are considered to be generally comparable to what we call 'tutoring', but without the purposes, functions and structures necessarily being exact equivalents (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Walker, 2020a). The term also tends to be confused with other functions like mentoring and coaching (Holland et al., 2018) when, despite the fact that some of the aspects and principles typical of these functions may apply to the field of tutoring, they are not the same (Lochtie et al., 2019). Thus the first challenge is to unify the sector's terms so as to be more consistent when introducing practical policy measures (Walker, 2020). This suggests that more attention should be paid at a research level to a question that is basically invisible despite its importance (Binnie, 2016; Grey & Osborne, 2020; Stuart et al., 2021).

The fact is that defining tutoring, its purpose and its meaning, is difficult not only because it can be associated with other terms or because we have no consistent conceptual framework at an international level, but also because the dimensions and models involved in its development are influenced by the institution, its culture or idea of university (Hagenaurer & Volet, 2014). For example, tutoring can focus mainly on just one dimension of human development (personal, academic or professional) or on all three, depending on the values and educational models of each institution (López-Gómez et al., 2020). This would mean adopting different tutoring models, each of which conditions the profile of its tutors and their

functions. If we look at Earwaker's (1992) model upon which other proposals have been based (Thomas 2006; McIntosh, 2018), we can distinguish between the *pastoral* (focusing on providing academic and personal guidance), the *professional* (which trains professionals to provide academic advising as their only role) and the *curriculum integrated model*, which embeds structured group tutoring sessions into the formal curriculum. It is clear, therefore, that tutoring is a complex, living process conditioned by its environment and influenced by its agents. The second challenge is therefore contextual, given that universities have to adopt whichever tutoring model best fits their contextual peculiarities. The problem is that the dismantling of theoretical models contributes to the development of decontextualized practices, which may sometimes be misguided and lacking in theoretical foundation (Walker, 2020a). Indeed, the melting pot of tutoring models – the conceptualization of which leads to the development of practice – creates confusion as to the role and boundaries of the tutor. This may have a negative effect on how their professional identity develops, on recognizing what might be expected of the tutees, and most especially on what the tutees themselves think they might expect from their tutor (Grey & Lochtie, 2016).

The lack of attention, support and development at practitioner level becomes another question that conditions the tutoring experience (McClelland, 2016; McFarlane, 2016; Walker, 2020a) and leads to another challenge that connects to the previous one. If the tutoring and the tutors do not receive the attention they deserve from the institutions, the function might be perceived as low-priority compared to others such as teaching and research (Calcagno et al., 2017). There has been much debate about the need to professionalize this function and about whether standards should be established which could play a fundamental role in the development of policies to support tutors, to make them more visible, to encourage good practices, to clarify their functions and to set limits to their actions (Walker, 2020b). McClelland (2016) points out that when tutors are appreciated and rewarded, their results improve. However, their work is generally unacknowledged (Hart-Baldrige, 2020; Walker, 2020a), and this can be added to the heavy workload and ineffectual staff development (Luck, 2010). It is therefore essential to give tutors support so they can cope with the pressure and carry out their work effectively (Hughes et al., 2018), and also to guarantee continuous training to enable them to keep up-to-date and deal with all the demands that arise (McGuill et al., 2020).

Addressing student needs, including emotional ones, calls for training that tutors are not usually given (McFarlane, 2016; Walker, 2018). Lochtie et al. (2019) report that in most cases there is no professional training, and where it does exist it tends to be informational and transactional rather than developmental. As a result, according to López-Gómez (2017), the challenge involves designing a global strategy to combine tutor training with greater commitment from the university community and appropriate recognition of the tutoring function. This can be done by creating a regulatory and organizational framework for the practice of tutoring and providing the necessary resources for researching and improving tutorial action.

Despite and because of these challenges, the positive impact of tutoring makes this function an area worth studying (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Lochtie et al., 2019; Stuart et al., 2021). Various authors have highlighted its positive effects on student retention rates, emotional well-being and academic and professional success (Stuart et al., 2021). The study by Cashmore et al. (2012) showed that students who had a teacher with whom they could discuss subjects – not necessarily academic ones – developed a greater sense of belonging to the community

and had higher expectations and better attitudes. This brings a number of benefits: greater motivation, increased levels of self-concept and self-esteem, higher levels of well-being and progress in the development of interpersonal competencies (Lee et al., 2017; McIntosh, 2017; Thomas & Jones, 2017). As regards tutors, it has been shown to favour their professional development, increase commitment and help them think about their own teaching (Irby et al., 2017; Lammert et al., 2020). It also makes it easier for them to deal with common challenges and experiences (Mittlermeier et al., 2018; Richmond et al., 2017) because the tutoring system creates positive co-dependency networks that help tutors grow professionally. The institution, meanwhile, becomes more sensitive to the problems students have and may therefore make access, presence, participation and learning easier for all students, especially those groups at risk of social exclusion.

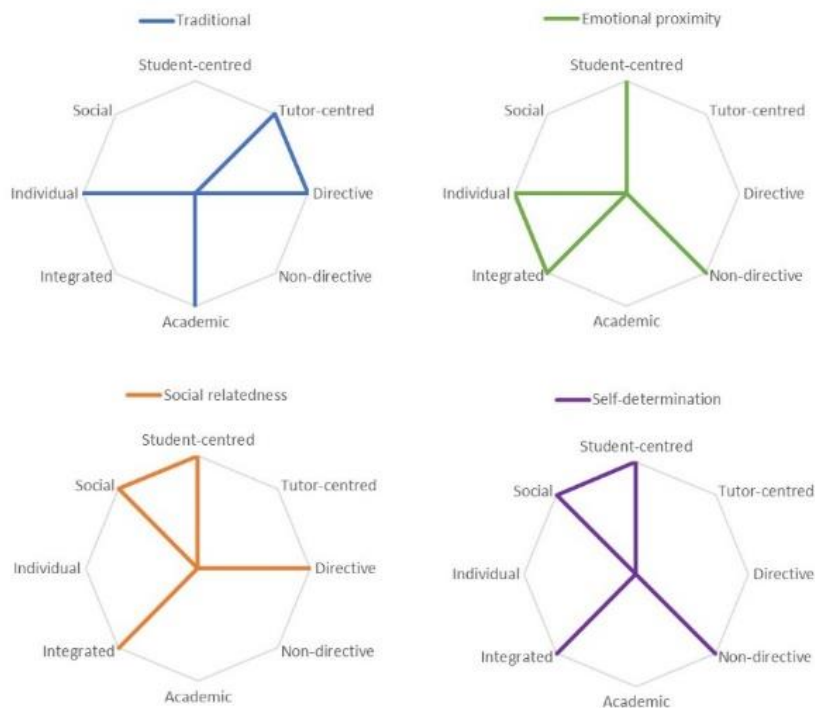
Tutoring is more necessary than ever today in order to meet the challenges identified above. This means taking measures at policy level, research level and practical level. However, it is necessary not as a complement but as a principal element of the teaching-learning processes (Lochtie et al., 2019; Stork & Walker, 2015). The figure of the tutor becomes essential not only for students who are experiencing conflicts of any type at university, but also for those who are enjoying a relatively straightforward passage through higher education (Owen, 2002). We need to identify the basic model we want and use policy to regulate professional practice in order to avoid the haste and disappointment highlighted in some cases by students, which generally arise due to the overwhelming schedule that their tutors have to follow (Grey & Lochtie, 2016; Owen, 2002).

### **Perspectives to Help Understand the Tutoring Experience**

For experiences to develop that are contextualized and laden with theoretical meaning, it is important to get closer to those conceptual perspectives in which the notions of tutoring of those involved coincide. If it is not consistent, tutoring is ineffective and may lead to students not participating or leaving the programme and to tutors becoming frustrated and disillusioned. Setting out these perspectives may be useful for identifying practices and reflecting on and understanding them, and that in turn could be effective when developing training and assessment programmes for tutors. The perspectives can be complementary and not necessarily exclusive, because the classification is purely didactic in origin. Our first step is therefore to reflect on the aim of tutoring, on the purpose of the relationship between tutor and tutee, and on the existing models and whether they are consistent with student expectations and success. Focusing on these models, our starting points range from the diagram proposed by Clutterbuck in 1985 and later perfected by Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) to Earwaker's (1992) triad of pastoral, professional and curriculum-integrated models, the Jones and Brown (2011) model and the integrated model designed by McIntosh (2018). Ultimately, they all direct attention towards the four perspectives that basically determine tutorial action: student-centred/tutor-centred, directive/non-directive, academic-integrated and individual-social. By combining these approaches, we can set out four general ways of seeing how the tutorial function develops:

**Figure 1**

*Perspectives for developing tutorial action*



### **Traditional Perspective**

Like traditional teaching methods, the most traditional forms of tutoring are based on maintaining power differences, i.e. constructing a vertical relationship in which interaction follows strict patterns and decisions are based on the tutor's criteria (Allen & Eby, 2011). Tutors adopt this stance through fear of losing control of the situation and possibly because they feel unprepared to deal with the process (McFarlane, 2016; Wakelin, 2021). The focus is on providing academic, administrative and regulatory information, which means the tutorial action is biased as it clearly ignores the socio-emotional dimension. In Earwaker's (1992) models it would be a pastoral role in its early stages, in which this model is considered to be aimed at offering support beyond academic issues (Lochtie et al., 2019). It could also be considered guiding-stretching (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002) or traditional (Jones & Brown, 2011). It sees the tutor in a directive, guiding role from a top-down perspective, so students may feel manipulated or that their overall needs are not covered. Thus the cost of attending tutorials on the part of the student might not be worth it and lead to a lack of commitment and participation.

### **Emotional Proximity**

It has been shown that the tutorial relationship should develop in a climate free of tension, fear and pressure (Bell, 2022). Many tutors have moved away from the directive model, believing that tutoring should focus on student needs, interests and problems, with quality being measured in terms of empathy rather than control (friendly v. hostile). Fries-Britt and Snider (2015) and Claessens et al. (2017) note that variables like trust, authenticity, transparency and vulnerability require less rigid, more student-centred tutoring. They suggest constructing

an atmosphere of trust to achieve authentic rather than by-the-book relationships. This links back to Jones and Brown's (2011) reciprocal model and Klasen and Clutterbuck's (2002) listener, sounding board or counsellor and their protector/guardian. Emotional support is not enough if it cannot empower the student. It should be noted, nevertheless, that emotions and affection in the tutorial relationship are not really appropriate if protection is prioritized above autonomy and compassion above self-determination. Not all students seek protection and care. Empathy is not enough for some of them. Some appreciate self-determination and autonomy (Brodeur et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2013). A protective model of emotional proximity could therefore lead those who seek these values to lose interest in tutoring and those who need to feel protected to stay connected.

### **Social Relatedness**

While the two perspectives analysed above (the directive and the emotional) focus on the individual character of tutoring, the benefits of participating should also be considered. There are few authors among education researchers who ignore the social aspect in the construction of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The complexity of this aspect makes us lean towards perspectives in which learning emerges from social practices and not from the teacher as the sole source of knowledge. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) report that studies in neurology find strong relationships between learning and socio-emotional experience. Socialization creates a neuronal network that interrelates the socio-emotional function, cognition, learning and motivation in dynamic interdependence. Thus tutoring should tend towards a more collaborative, interactive function located in less formal spaces (Claessens et al., 2017). The construction of skills and abilities should take place in spaces of dialogue that can combine various viewpoints outside the restrictions of overcrowded classrooms (Myers, 2011). Indeed, it has been shown that group tutoring enables students to create networks of friends and find support in them, which increases their sense of identity and belonging (Braine & Parnell, 2011). This leads us to consider other peer-tutoring formats, in which the tutor role is no longer the teacher's but the students'. The main question here is whether or not the tutor should create a group culture when the students may not all be willing to participate in these dynamics.

### **Self-Determination**

Finally, of those theories that aim to change dispositions and behaviours, self-determination theory is a widely-studied area (Haerens, et al., 2018; Reeve, 2016, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2018, 2019). It identifies three basic needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. A teacher or tutor can often motivate students at first, but if they lack determination this can gradually diminish. Initial needs and motivations need to become stable competences and this requires appropriate strategies. Autonomy, for example, is a need, but if it is not worked on or exercised it becomes rusty and then, given that its use in contexts and situations may be difficult, some students could opt for dependence. Other interrelated needs can also be considered, such as self-esteem, adaptation and control, which are also determining factors. Autonomous effort has been strongly associated with benefits and incentives that evidently match the student's needs and interests. However, since obtaining the benefits involves hard effort, motivation must be determined by consciously assessing the task, and that involves mental action. Such tutoring challenges the traditional model and focuses on enabling students to make decisions and act responsibly (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016; McIntosh, 2017).

In short, the tutoring perspective will always match the tutor's/institution's educational objective. If education is seen merely as cultural transmission, the tutorial role will be directive. If it is seen as a function of help and care, the tutorial role will also be helping, supporting and affective. But if it is ultimately seen as contributing to the development of participating democratic citizens who know how to live in society and pursue common objectives, then tutoring will be a means of socializing and group commitment. If we add to this the fact that learning makes us more independent and autonomous, the tutorial perspective will be designed to strengthen the student's self-determination, i.e. the capacity to make their own committed decisions and be able to judge the consequences. All these perspectives lead us to set the following research questions:

1. How do the tutors perceive their tutoring experiences?
2. How can these experiences be related to the theoretical models described?
3. To what extent do these experiences drive tutors to suggest improvements that become challenges for tutoring?

## **Context**

Although at primary and pre-university education levels in Spain there is a long tradition of tutorial action, in the context of higher education the legislative path of this function is much shorter. In the stages prior to university, the law clearly defines the functions attributed to the tutor's role. Coordination with the rest of the teaching staff and the students' families is essential for dealing with the personal, academic and pre-professional development of their class group of students. The tutoring takes place under the supervision of the head of studies and with the assessment of the advisory teams. It revolves around tutorial action plans, and tutor selection is carried out following criteria that are also regulated at policy level.

In the university context the setting is completely different. Tutoring was introduced for the first time under the General Education Act of 1970 (Spanish Govt., 1970). The subsequent University Reform Act (Spanish Govt., 1983) did not further develop the area of tutoring, although in the university it found the means for social progress and change through the cultivation of the values of freedom and equality, and through the relationship between the teaching staff and the student body, which indirectly connected teaching with the task of tutoring. Organic Law 6/2001 (LOU) (Spanish Govt., 2001) included the students' right to assessment and assistance from teachers and tutors. Nevertheless, according to Quintanal and Miraflores (2013) the idea that the relationship between teaching staff and student body could improve the teaching-learning process is a legacy of the Bologna Process, which gave a considerable boost to tutoring in Spain. However, attempts to incorporate tutoring into the teaching-learning process under the LOU did not materialize in practice until Organic Law 4/2007 (Spanish Govt., 2007), which modified it. In this case, for the first time the legal text specified that teachers would be able to carry out the task of tutoring. From that point onwards universities have included the tutoring as part of the teaching framework in their statutes. Today, Organic Law 2/2023 (LOSU) – which governs the university education system in Spain – in line with the supranational framework (European Commission, 2013), determines that the university should not restrict itself simply to the transfer of knowledge but should look to generate opinion, prove its commitment to social progress and set an example for those around it. In other words, the university does not only provide students with the means to develop academically and intellectually, but also has a hand in their social, personal and



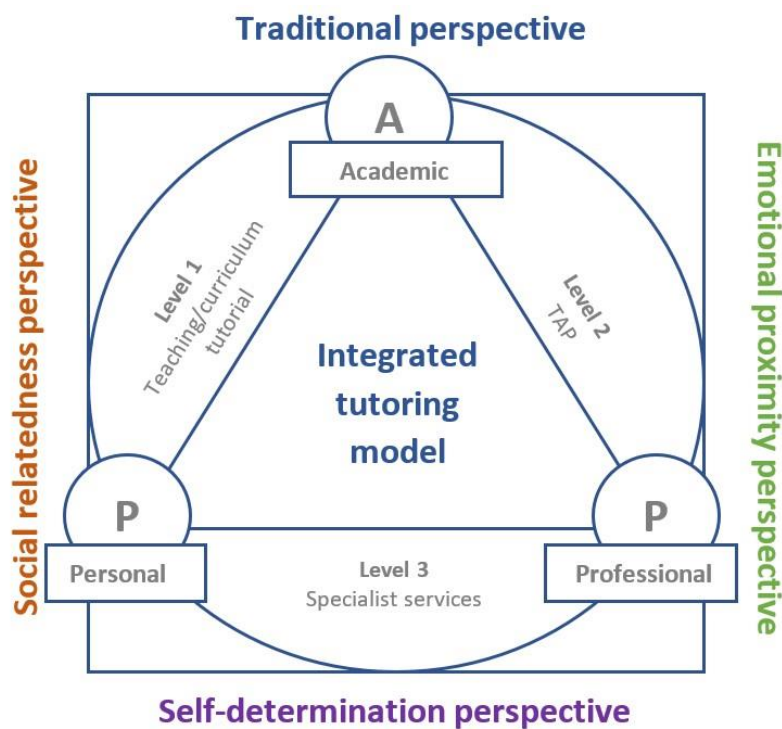
affective development (Gustems et al., 2018; Lochtie et al., 2019). This idea is found in Section 2 on the rights and obligations of students in the statute of the University of Alicante (Valencian Govt., 2012).

Tutorial action is understood as, and thus appears in the regulations as, a task inherent to teaching (Duran, 2017; López-Gómez, 2016). On the basis of this, different universities have adopted different models of tutorial action which cover their relationship with course tutoring programmes (TAP), the specialist guidance and tutoring services, tutoring content, the figure of the tutor, the time dedicated to this task and the agents involved.

The model that governs this function in the University of Alicante is integrated in character and based on McInthos's (2018) idea, given that it suggests the proactive integration of the three models identified by Earwaker (1992). As Figure 2 shows, tutoring considers three dimensions of human development and looks to personal, academic and professional guidance to help in forming the person as a whole.

**Figure 2**

*The UA's integrated tutoring model*



Working these three dimensions calls for coordination between various agents and services (López-Gómez, 2017), which make up the levels identified in Figure 2. At these levels, tutoring can be carried out from any of the perspectives identified in the theoretical framework, or through a combination of two or three of them.

The first level corresponds to the tutoring that all teachers have to carry out in the classroom. This is Earwaker's (1992) curricular tutoring. From this point of view, and with the influence of the European Higher Education Area – which places the students at the centre of the teaching-learning process – we see the idea that the teacher should not be restricted to simply providing

knowledge, but should also guide the students' learning. This means going beyond dealing with isolated queries about the subject matter. Tutoring is integrated into the curriculum.

This level goes hand-in-hand with the course tutoring that takes place in the framework of the Tutorial Action Plan (second level) that was introduced in the University of Alicante during the 2005/06 academic year. This programme has now been in place for almost two decades and is run by the Institute of Education Sciences under the Vice-Rectorate for Digital Transformation. It aims to provide students with guidance and support in their personal, academic and professional development and help them adapt to university life. Until the academic year 2019/2020, participation in the programme was voluntary. Since then all students enrolled on degree courses in any of the UA's seven centres are assigned a tutor, although they are under no obligation to participate in the activities proposed. Tutor-tutee assignment and planning is carried out according to the subject groups of their respective courses, but the number of students per tutor varies depending on the faculty and course in question. The programme runs throughout the academic year, which means that students change tutor every year.

Once the tutors have been assigned their groups, the procedure is as follows. At the beginning of the year the tutors tell the students the hours they are available and email them an invitation to attend the presentation meeting. Small group meetings are then organized – face-to-face or online – throughout the year to meet student needs. Large group activities are proposed to deal with common interests, and individual meetings can also be arranged should students request them. These may be related to any of the dimensions highlighted, although previous studies have shown that they tend to be academic-professional in nature. It is very rare for them to involve personal issues. Tutoring with a more personal and humanist slant (typical in other contexts such as the UK and the US) does not seem to enjoy a great deal of practice or recognition in the Spanish context (Casado et al., 2014; Gastón & Rekalde, 2016; Martínez et al., 2019). In fact it seems to have become a merely informative meeting or a space in which to solve administrative problems or conflicts (Esteban & Gustems, 2018). It is paradoxical that the most frequent type of tutoring is academic, while it is personal-emotional tutoring that has the biggest impact on student satisfaction (Pérez et al., 2017). This reality is not only due to the fact that students are unaware that they can receive this kind of help from the programme, but also because the tutors often feel they are not qualified to provide it and are reluctant to do so (Hernández-Amorós et al., 2017).

As mentioned earlier, tutors are selected annually by open call, which provides a general description of the ideal teacher-tutor profile and outlines their functions and tasks. Each academic year they receive a payment and certification of the work carried out. Also considered is the figure of the peer tutor, whose selection depends on the criteria and procedures established by each university. Like the teacher-tutor, a positive assessment on the programme entitles them to a certificate of participation. This peer tutor is assigned to a particular tutor and works closely with them over the course of the year. One of the potentialities of this figure is that they can overcome the barriers that normally exist between teachers and students.

To this end, the Institute of Education Sciences provides training courses for both teacher-tutors and peer tutors. As a pre-requisite for applying to successive open calls, at least one course must be taken each academic year. Other requirements include participating in the

intermediate assessment that has to be carried out in both cases (teacher-tutor and peer tutor), submitting an end-of-year report and obtaining a positive evaluation for teaching in the year immediately preceding the open call.

Although the number of students involved has increased considerably in recent years given that enrolment on any course implies enrolment on the programme, the number of tutors has changed little, totalling around 140-150, of which roughly 10-20 are peer tutors. The question is, how many students actively participate in the programme each academic year? This is a difficult figure to calculate because participation in the various activities is voluntary and generally open to all. In other words, first-year students are usually told about some of the TAP activities that are organized at other levels and are free to take part. Certainly since the academic year 2023-24, teacher-tutors and peer tutors have been asked to provide figures for student participation in the different activities in order to progress towards making decisions for improvements. Despite all the measures that have been put forward, it seems there is agreement that students do not take full advantage of the activities included as part of the TAP, and this is associated with a lack of knowledge about how it works and how useful it is for academic progress and success (Klug-Peralta, 2019; Martinez-Clares, 2022).

The last level of the UA's tutoring model comprises specialist guidance and tutoring services. Sometimes, given the lack of resources to attend to requests from students or because the request exceeds their competencies, the TAP tutor coordinates with these services so that the student can receive more specific attention. However, this does not mean that the tutor no longer has any involvement with the case.

## **Method**

This study falls within the framework of the naturalistic research paradigm insofar as it focuses on exploring tutors' experiences in order to assess how they perceive tutoring and, on the basis of this, to infer the perspective from which they develop their action, and also to calculate the degree to which these experiences lead them to propose solutions to the problems identified in their natural work settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involves a thorough examination of the tutor's thoughts and practices while taking into account the contextual value of their discourses, since considering them outside this context would be meaningless (Cho & Lee, 2014). We therefore adopt a symbolic-interpretive critical position with the aim of visibilizing an area – tutoring – which, although it has been covered in the past, it would be a good idea to analyse in greater detail. This we do from the point of view of practice – listening to and interpreting the voices of the tutors – because we believe that this way it will be possible to create living theory, with meaning and applicable to the improvement of the reality under study. Reflecting on the voices of the tutors in a particular context also serves to stimulate reflection on tutorial action in other settings.

The methodology chosen is the case study, since this is thought to be particularly effective for carrying out an in-depth study of a contemporary phenomenon in the day-to-day reality of a particular context (De Vries, 2020). In this case it involves the tutors' perceptions of their tutoring experiences and the solutions they propose to solve the problems identified in these experiences. This methodology means we gain a full and in-depth understanding of the perceptions of a group of tutors and can then explore them in a particular setting. The research comprises a single case study (Yin, 2014), an intrinsic case study, to be specific, given that

the aim is to obtain a better and more holistic understanding of how the tutors perceive their experiences, taking into account the data for all participants as a whole (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2014). The case study is carried out from a relativist point of view from the moment we pursue a constructivist approach in designing and conducting it, the aim being to capture the various participants' perspectives and focus on how their different meanings throw light on our object of study (Leppäaho et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Using a case study format means we can detect not only areas that are common to tutors' experiences in other universities in Spain and abroad, but also what is peculiar to this case alone, and on the basis of this we can formulate our conclusions (Ebneyamini & Reza, 2018).

## **Participants**

The sample comprised 68 of the 140 tutors in the team when the research was carried out (around 49% of the total), 56% of whom were women. Half the sample was aged between 33 and 42, and virtually the whole sample (92%) had 0-9 years' teaching experience. Teachers from all the UA's centres took part, but the highest participation was in those centres with the biggest tutor teams, except for the Faculty of Law. The centre with the highest level was Economics and Business Studies (28%), followed by the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Letters and the Polytechnic School (both 16%). It can be deduced that the data come from the tutors most involved in the programme.

Non-probability convenience sampling was used to select participants, bearing in mind that the researchers reached out to the entire tutor population and those that responded did so voluntarily (Creswell, 2014).

## ***Instrument and Data Collection***

We designed an *ad hoc* questionnaire using *Google Forms*. This comprised four open questions preceded by others requesting sociodemographic details. Of the four questions, three were selected for the basis of this study: (1) How have you enjoyed the experience of tutoring? (2) Would you make any changes in your work with the tutorial group for next year? How? Why? (3) What would you highlight about your relationship with the tutorial group? Would you change any aspect of it? Why? All three are related to the research questions given that they refer to experiences, and from these we can infer the perspective from which participants carry out their task and consider their suggestions for improvements. We used open questions to find out more about the tutors' subjective theories, thus reconstructing their history regarding their perceptions and experiences in this area. The instrument was validated by three experts in educational research unconnected to the study, who basically assessed the coherence between the research questions and those asked in the questionnaire. Following their suggestions we modified the phrasing of one question to make it clearer.

The questionnaire was emailed to the entire tutoring team by the action plan coordinator. Recipients were told that participation was voluntary and that no penalty would be applied if they declined or withdrew. They were also told the reason for the study and had to sign a consent form before returning the questionnaire. It was made clear that confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. We collected the study data and stored them securely, accessible only to the research team.

We performed the study following Declaration of Helsinki guidelines and the regulations of the UA's Research Ethics Committee, the body that approved the research.

### ***Data Analysis***

After repeated readings of the participants' narratives to interpret their responses, we began a reflective process linking the emerging information to the research questions and the following three sources that enabled us to carry out an investigator and theory triangulation (Patton, 2015; De Vries, 2020): (1) the theoretical framework regarding the tutoring challenges (at a conceptual, contextual, policy and practical level) and the framework of perspectives for carrying out the tutorial action (traditional, emotional proximity, social relatedness and self-determination); (2) the vision of the researchers, who played an integral part throughout the investigation process (Bryman, 2016). Two of them can be considered "insiders" (Braun & Clarke, 2013), given that they share attributes with the participants and have for some time been involved in the UA's tutorial action plan. They have therefore accumulated a great deal of knowledge not only of the programme but also of the integrated tutoring model it advocates, and were able to interpret the information obtained with an awareness of the reality being studied. And (3) the vision of the three experts in educational research, who had already validated the questionnaire. In this way we gradually designed an effective procedure for both analysis and coding.

The data analysis used a deductive-inductive process, which was useful in adapting the analytical tool to interpretation. The inductive process, related to the tutors' experiences and proposals, included open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The deductive process, related to perspectives for carrying out the tutorial action as set out in the theoretical framework, formed the categorization matrix development, whereby the data on experiences were reviewed for content and coded for correspondence with the relevant theory. The encoding instrument was analysed and validated by the same three experts that had reviewed the questionnaire until a final configuration was obtained. The first draft was also amended because the intensity and possible variants emerging from the narratives demanded a deeper understanding of the object of study.

In this recursive process between the participants' information and the research questions, the coding system was continuously being adapted. Six codes emerged in connection with the tutors' experiences and proposals. These were classified into two categories (tutors' experiences with tutoring and tutors' suggestions for improvements and changes) and then broken down into subcodes according to the meanings interpreted from the narratives. In the case of the first category, the information was grouped according to whether or not the nature of the experiences was positive or negative. The second basically involved distinguishing between the types of changes proposed, mainly those that involved improvements to the tutors' work and others directed towards the programme, although there were also references to no changes being made to the programme and to leaving it. And finally, in order to cross the data from the first category referring to experiences with the perspectives from which to carry out the tutorial action as set out in the theoretical framework, and for the purposes of assessing from which actions their tutoring experiences arose, we recovered the four perspectives established in the theoretical framework.

Finally, the data processing was carried out. This involved directed, conventional and summative content analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using Aquad 7 (Huber & Grtler, 2013). This software, and this version in particular, was chosen because it helps enormously with the organization, synthesis and categorization of information. Its internal logic is a perfect fit for the mechanisms that the researcher needs to carry out a rigorous analysis of the qualitative data and to interpret and set out the results. By this means a conventional analysis was performed, from which the two categories of the study emerged (experiences and suggestions). Later, with the encoding of the first category, we carried out a new coding with the directed content analysis because we used as references the perspectives set out in the theoretical framework, whereas the summative analysis enables us to calculate absolute frequencies percentages so that these descriptive data complement the inferential data by identifying those aspects that appear most frequently.

## **Results**

Here we show our findings from the narratives for both categories (tutor experiences and improvements and changes suggested by tutors) together with descriptive data for absolute frequency (AF) with percentages. The AF refers to the number of times participants mention a particular unit of meaning. The percentage comes from the following formula:  $AF \times 100 / \text{Total AF}$ . We also show information relating to the crossing of codes from the first category with the perspectives from which the tutoring can be carried out. This matrix enables us to identify the model from which the participants tend to carry out their action.

The narratives are presented with the Anonymous Participant code and a number that was assigned as each questionnaire arrived (AP\_X).

### **Category 1 Results: Tutor Experiences**

**Table 1**

Descriptive data for Category 1: tutors' experiences with tutoring

<b>C Codes and subcodes</b>	<b>AF</b>	<b>AF (%)</b>
1.1 Positive experiences	115	72
1.1.1 Very special (enjoyable/challenging)	22	13.8
1.1.2 Rewarding (helping/closeness)	59	36.9
1.1.3 Good group connection	19	11.9
1.1.4 Fine	15	9.4
1. 1.2 Negative experiences	45	28
1.2.1 From rewarding to disappointing	45	28
<b>T TOTAL</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

In this dimension we interpret the tutors' experiences of their time in the programme. We see a clear emergence of codes for both positive and negative experiences, and Table 1 shows that the former are more frequent than the latter. This leads us to believe that tutoring tends to be a satisfying experience. Indeed, participants stress that it provides opportunities for

professional development, especially as regards communication skills and connecting with students. The negative side mainly involves the disappointment they feel due to low student attendance and participation.

### **Code 1.1 Positive Experiences**

This covers four ways of identifying positive experiences. Subcode 1.1.1 *Learning* includes those narratives where participants describe their participation in the programme as a way of learning and professional development, seen as enjoyable and challenging. They stress how enriching the work can be and the various things that can be learned during the process. They say they like tutoring because of the positive impact it could have on the students, on their coursework, and also on their personal and professional growth:

*Intense, enjoyable and gratifying! It's a very pleasant experience, partly because of being able to hold the tutorials and partly because of being on top of all the questions dealt with in them. (AP\_51)*

*A constructive learning experience. I now know more about the University and the students. (AP\_49)*

*Positive and enriching. Takes me much closer personally and professionally to the reality of degree students. (AP\_60)*

*I like being a tutor. I think the figure of the tutor contributes a lot to a course. (AP\_46)*

*The relationship benefits not only the student but the teacher as well, because it enables them to find out first-hand what students are interested in. (AP\_59)*

The idea that tutors should adapt themselves to the students crops up frequently, which means they need to find out more about their needs and interests and feel what it is like to be in their shoes. This is shown in the following excerpts:

*I've experienced tutoring very positively. It involves a wide variety of everyday situations that affect the students. (AP\_68)*

*Every year I've learned to adapt to the group's specific needs as regards organizing individual and group tutorials, preparing topics when they're requested, etc. (AP\_22)*

*As I've been allocated some teaching over the final years of the degree, my students are more interested in subjects such as professional opportunities and continuing with their studies. I should also mention that they are mature students, so dealing with them has been pleasant and informal bearing in mind they'll soon be ordinary professionals just like me. (AP\_55).*

Subcode 1.1.2 *Rewarding* covers narratives whose common denominator is helping students. We see the altruistic side tutors attribute to the tutorial relationship, which they approach from a perspective of closeness and even protection. Present at all times is how pleased they are to accompany and help their students:

*Being close to the students helps you understand what worries and interests them so you can better support them in their academic and personal development. (AP\_06)*

*I'm finding it a very gratifying experience because I feel I can help students not only academically but in other aspects too. (AP\_09)*

*On a personal level it's also very rewarding to see that someone comes to you if they have a problem or if they don't know what to do in a particular situation. (AP\_12)*

Participants often mention how important it is to create a climate of trust so the students can feel comfortable, which means the relationship has to be horizontal. They say that achieving this kind of relationship whereby the guidance becomes integrated (personal, academic and professional dimension), they need to be prepared and aware of the responsibility involved:

*I think it's a very rewarding experience because you manage to create a connection through communication and trust which makes the students feel more comfortable when asking questions they wouldn't ask in any other context. (AP\_20)*

*I'd highlight the closeness established between tutor and students. It's a relationship unlike any other. (AP\_31)*

*The relationship's very close and the most important thing about it is that you have the confidence to raise any subject, whether academic or personal. (AP\_15)*

*From a professional point of view, it involves and demands responsibility and a certain amount of preparation, especially as regards certain social skills. (AP\_43)*

Contributions under subcode 1.1.3 *Good group connection* stress the team's value as a catalyst enabling more sources of support. Participants believe this type of tutoring is added value. The network created between group members can even promote individual commitment to the programme:

*When it starts to come together it's wonderful. Everyone helps each other. There's a great synergy. (AP\_32)*

*I'd highlight the good communication we've had and the value of group tutorials. (AP\_44)*

*I've loved being able to work with them, especially because we've been a team. We've held face-to-face joint tutorials with the possibility of extending the timetable. Also, the information provided has been compiled by the whole team, which has drawn us closer together and provided greater security. (AP\_13)*

An interesting nuance can be identified within this subcode. Some tutors mention how satisfied they are using the virtual tutorial along with digital resources and the social network support. These tools help them connect and mean more time can be made available to students. They also make it easier for students to attend the meetings:

*I'd maintain the same use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and social media that facilitated the relationship. (AP\_65)*



The fourth subcode (1.1.4 *Acceptable*) covers narratives that lack extra information, which means we can identify them as valuing tutoring positively because they always use adjectives like “good”, “satisfactory”, “positive”, etc., without allowing us to make a more precise interpretation of their position and experiences. The participants describe no specific positive experiences using phrases such as these:

*Fine. Nothing particular stands out. (AP\_37)*

*In general, very good. (AP\_14)*

*Generally speaking, the experience has been very satisfactory. (AP\_27)*

### **Code 1.2 Negative Experiences**

This code has only one subcode. The common denominator in all the narratives for this subcode is the negative way the tutors describe their experience. This is generally because they have been unable to connect with their students or perceive that they are participating very little in the programme. Such a situation makes them frustrated and feel as if they have failed. This is shown by the following narratives:

*Disappointing, I was lost, I didn't connect, I felt useless. (AP\_10)*

*There was zero participation from the tutorial programme students, which made me feel like a failure. (AP\_02)*

*With a lack of interest on the part of the students. I thought they were going to make better use of this resource. (AP\_50)*

Many of the voices also describe the evolution from initial satisfaction to disillusionment due to this lack of student participation. It can be deduced that their experiences involved a number of ups-and-downs, which points to a certain imbalance in their action and would explain why they experienced these emotions. The fragments below are proof of this:

*Up and down. It was gratifying to work with motivated students, but it was frustrating that I didn't manage to get the whole group involved. (AP\_61)*

*There wasn't much of a relationship with the group. Participation fell to two or three of the most interested students. (AP\_53)*

*It's an interesting experience, but sometimes frustrating when you can't help the faculty students as much as you'd like. (AP\_51)*

*Enthusiastically at the beginning, disappointedly at the end of the stage. (AP\_34)*

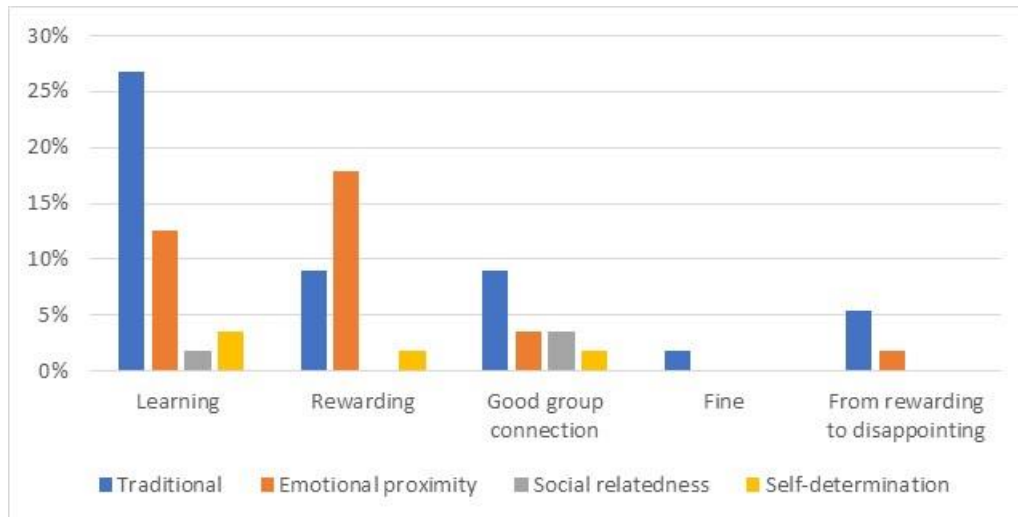
### **The connection Between Tutors' Experiences and Perspectives Within Which They Can be Framed**

This section presents the information resulting from the axial combination of two key aspects of the investigation: the tutors' experiences and theoretical tutoring perspectives. Figure 3

shows the absolute frequency percentage for the various associations established between the two aspects:

**Figure 3**

*Encoding of axial experiences and perspectives of tutoring*



In this case we only considered those narratives encoded according to the first of these categories from which it was possible to deduce the original perspective. The narratives were often too short or revealed nothing about the tutoring model, and so a selection was made. It can be seen from the table that most of the participating tutors followed a traditional tutoring approach which basically provided them with learning experiences, especially in connection with having knowledge of information – usually academic-professional in nature – they use in response to student demands. This learning also means better understanding of the students’ interests or of the organization of the institution itself, but from the viewpoint of a vertical and individualist relationship, centred on the tutor, who acts directly. For example:

*In my case it's a very pleasant experience, not only being able to carry out these tutorials but also knowing about all the related issues covered in them. (Tut\_13)*

*It's been a learning process that has enabled me to find out more about the topics that interest my students. (Tut\_37)*

Some of the terms that lead us to identify the underlying model in the narratives for this subcode (1.1.1 Learning) include “career opportunity”, “continuing studies”, “information”, “knowledge”, etc. In addition, both the narratives and the frequencies coincide in demonstrating that there is also a tendency to carry out action from a perspective based on emotional proximity. In this respect it appears that this model enables the tutors to assess their experiences as ways of learning, but especially as being rewarding for the help they feel they are giving their students:

*Getting closer to the students and their “problems” and the chance of accompanying them and looking for solutions is also very rewarding. (Tut\_01)*

*The tutoring experience has been very rewarding. I've seen it as an opportunity to use my experience to help a number of students who find themselves in situations very like those I've been through in the past. (AP\_06)*

*As a new experience in getting closer to "the real person", with the vocation to give students in the faculty a hand. (AP\_63)*

In this case the most recurring terms that enable us to understand the connection between the emotional proximity model and the 1.1.2 Rewarding code are "help", "people", "nearness", "trust", "listen", "good relationship", "support", etc. All these place the tutors in a position that involves providing personal care and attention to the student in an atmosphere where the relationship is free of hierarchies and based on trust. However, it can also be inferred from their discourses that compassion predominates over self-determination, which is not exactly positive as far as the student's personal progress is concerned.

The very limited presence in their discourses of aspects related to tutoring perspectives based on social-relatedness and self-determination shows that there is plenty of room for improvement as far as the TAP is concerned.

### **Category 2 results: Improvements and changes suggested by tutors**

This category covers the tutors' suggestions for changes and improvements. These include those they can carry out themselves, which require a certain level of commitment, and those involving the programme itself, which fall outside their remit. Ultimately there is evidence of two conflicting stances: participants that believe the programme works well and therefore suggest no changes and participants that are so discouraged they decide to leave the programme. The descriptive data show that most narratives concern changes that affect the participants' actions. The absolute frequencies in Table 2 indicate they would most like to improve communication and adapt both the subject matter and organizational aspects to student needs. The tutors therefore appear to be well disposed towards the job of tutoring.

**Table 2**

*Category 2: Tutors' Suggestions for Improvements and Changes*

<b>Codes and subcodes</b>	<b>AF</b>	<b>AF (%)</b>
<b>2.1 Changes to tutors' actions</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>58.6</b>
2.1.1 Better communication and publicity	18	16.5
2.1.2 Adapting to student needs	17	6.4
2.1.3 Greater emotional closeness	8	7.3
2.1.4 Increased social relatedness	18	15.6
2.1.5 More individual tutoring	7	7.3
2.1.6 Integrated tutoring (autonomy, etc.)	6	5.5
<b>2.2 Changes to the programme</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11.9</b>
2.2.1 Structure	9	8.3
2.2.2 On student request	2	1.8
2.2.3 Tutor networks	2	1.8
<b>2.3 Absence of changes</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>23.9</b>
<b>2.4 Withdrawal</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5.5</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100</b>

## **Code 2.1 Changes to Tutors' Actions**

Participants insist that communication with students should be improved, using ICTs when necessary, and the programme given a higher profile. This could be a way of tackling the low participation highlighted in code 1.2 as a negative aspect of their experiences. It can be deduced from the comments that the students' low involvement or participation is often because they are unaware of the programme rather than uncommitted, hence the proposals to publicize it:

*I'd like to establish more points of contact, such as a group on Facebook or other social platforms, and find the most accessible way of contacting students. (AP\_15)*

*The basic aim for next year is to encourage the participation and involvement of students enrolled in the programme, showing them the importance of individual tutorials. In short, urge them to make more and better use of the service. To this end we should increase publicity and visibility regarding both the programme and the activities proposed. (AP\_66)*

Another frequent subcode involves the need to adapt to student interests:

*I hope to set up a timetable of both individual and group meetings indicating the subjects to be covered, trying to ensure these are related to the students' interests. (AP\_40)*

*Because of the needs expressed by students, the tutoring so far has been both group and individual. [...] These improvements should help to satisfy the interest in exploring other ways of increasing knowledge among students. (AP\_58)*

Similarly, participants believe that greater closeness should be encouraged in tutorial relationships, which would bring them closer to the emotional proximity perspective and further away from the traditional perspective:

*It's true that the programme could gradually be made more personal-emotional because at present the students tend to see it as a purely academic-informational tool. (AP\_14)*

*I'd like to carry out some activity that leads to a closer relationship with them so they can acquire the trust needed to use the programme freely. Last year we held a meeting in the cafeteria and the change of setting helped them express themselves more confidently. (AP\_21)*

Some participants say that they still need to work on the group tutorial aspect (social relatedness perspective) and hope to introduce functional improvements, while others say the number of individual meetings should be increased to make tutoring more personalized:

*Things can always be improved. I don't think I've dedicated enough time to tutoring work, especially not at group level. (AP\_09)*

*I'd set aside more time for personal tutorials because that's where they bring up more personal concerns and problems. (AP\_08)*

Finally, and with a low absolute frequency, some believe more attention should be given to integrated tutoring. This would be in line with the self-determination perspective, aiming to provide students with the necessary tools to make their own decisions, use sound judgement and be consistent:

*I'd try and focus more on their personal development, i.e. aspects that could help them grow and bring out the best in themselves. (AP\_13)*

### **Code 2.2 Changes to the programme**

This covers the suggestions tutors make that would affect the tutoring action plan design. Subcode 2.2.1 *Structure*, for example, covers tutor-tutee allocation for the year. Many suggest they should tutor students from their own subject areas because they have closer connections, thus showing how difficult it is to separate tutorial and teaching functions:

*I'd like my tutees to be those I teach. (AP\_27)*

*It's different if you get a group of students you give classes to and you "hijack" them in the class, but if that's not the case and they don't know who you are, it's harder to get them to give up their free time, their lunchtime, the gym, the private classes, etc... to attend something when they're not sure what it is or what it's for. (AP\_68)*

This subcode also suggests that the administration and services staff should deal with administrative information and that tutors should be able to specialize by subject:

*Quite honestly it's frustrating being just an extension of faculty administration, with tutoring being reduced to sorting out admin problems. (AP\_32)*

*General information could be dealt with in big group sessions with admin and services staff acting as tutors (or advisory figures) to clear up these types of query. (AP\_61)*

Similarly, but under subcode 2.2.2 *On student request*, the proposal is for tutoring to be personal by appointment only so as to avoid students dropping group tutorials:

*I wouldn't hold compulsory sessions that they only attend on the first day. I'd hold sessions on request. (AP\_41)*

*There are also narratives suggesting a permanent network of tutors where they can share their experiences (subcode 2.2.3):*

It's been gratifying to share with my colleagues all the concerns and problems that have cropped up in the tutoring programme. It'd be good to continue with the networking. (AP\_05)

*It'd be a good idea to create tutor groups for each year so they can concentrate on those years, then every year they can incorporate aspects they've learned in previous years. (AP\_07)*

### **Code 2.3 Absence of changes**

These are narratives that express no desire for change, mainly because the participants feel satisfied with their work. As the first narrative shows, the tutorial they give varies depending on what the students need, and therefore from this point of view the variations in practices arise from differences in student needs.

*The relationship is very close and the most important thing is being able to deal with any subject whether academic or personal. In principle I wouldn't change anything because any changes I make vary depending on what's needed. (AP\_58)*

*I wouldn't change it because I like it as it is. (AP\_36)*

### **Code 2.4 Withdrawal**

Finally, there is a small group that say they are giving up tutoring the following year. In the narratives we can distinguish between those that give up without giving a reason and those that admit they are overwhelmed with all the tasks they have to do, which causes them to spend less than enough time on tutoring:

*I won't be a tutor next year. (AP\_29)*

*This year I've been substituting as a TAP teacher for a colleague on maternity leave. I won't be doing it again next year. (AP\_50)*

*I'm not going to continue as a tutor. I've got too much going on. Someone else would do it better. (AP\_26)*

*Yes, this year's been difficult for personal reasons and I haven't been able to spend as much time on tutoring. (AP\_17)*

## **Discussion**

This section is divided into two main sections in which we answer the research questions (regarding tutors' experiences and suggestions) and, going one step further, question the context of higher education and tutoring itself.

### **Overall Results**

The results show that the tutors' experiences are mainly rewarding, revolving around learning and professional development and how stimulating it is for them to be close to and have the opportunity to help the tutees. This is concomitant with the literature, which stresses the many benefits of tutoring for tutors, who have the chance to increase their commitment with the students and consider their own professional practice (Irby et al., 2017; Lammert, 2020; Lochtie et al., 2019). The support they find in their colleagues is also highlighted as a positive aspect for their growth in this respect (Mittlermeier et al., 2018; Ritchmond et al., 2017). Negative experiences mainly involve disappointment at poor student participation in the relationship, which may be due to other factors such as lack of information and awareness of the programme, as participants mention (Ghenghesh, 2017; Yale, 2019). They also point out that their busy schedules sometimes prevent them from dedicating sufficient time to tutoring (Grey & Lochtie, 2016; Luck, 2010; McIntosh & Grey, 2017; Stuart et al., 2019; Wakelin, 2021). Maybe the lack of recognition of the work they do means that, when organizing tasks, this

particular job is penalized rather than others, as Calcagno et al. (2017) report. This aspect highlights the need to pay attention to the tutors, acknowledge their work and offer them support mainly in the shape of continuous training programmes (Hughes et al., 2018; McGill et al., 2020).

It can be deduced that there is general agreement on improving communication channels and publicity, for example. This is positive because it means they have learned from and reflected on their interventions (Irby et al., 2017; Lammert, 2020). It has been shown that this type of attitude along with better training can determine the success of tutorial relationships (Calabrese, 2022). The tutor has to be a subject of reflection and cultivate this habit (Lochtie et al., 2019; Lochtie et al., 2022). It is essential to develop reflective practice, which involves looking back on experiences, learning from them and making improvements (Stork & Walkler, 2015). Ultimately, and in line with the data, the success of most of the proposals depends on the commitment of the tutors and not other agents. Thus, despite the disappointment felt by some tutors due to low student attendance or lack of interaction, they remain upbeat and committed to improving the area of tutoring. They also understand that if they do not adapt to the tutees and their interests they will not attract students (Claessens et al., 2017; Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015; Wakelin, 2021) and that they need to develop attitudes of proximity and warmth. This again leads us to mention the need to improve continuous training programmes for tutors (McGuill et al., 2020) by offering tutoring that is as personalized as possible and able to meet the challenges facing universities today (Lochtie et al., 2019; Lochtie et al., 2022).

In short, the tutors are basically positioned in the traditional perspective and perceive that improvements are needed and that such a traditional perspective and the pyramid structure of administration and services do not involve the tutees (Venegas-Ramos & Gairín, 2018) and are therefore ineffective. The narratives reveal that a fair number of participants can be found in the emotional proximity perspective and rate it highly judging by their proposals. Nevertheless, it would be a good idea to review its impact on the development of autonomy and other competencies that students need to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, since this emotional proximity is more to do with compassion and a need for the tutor's help than with the ability to transmit confidence and generate a climate in which to encourage the student's self-determination. Indeed, perspectives focusing on social relatedness in the tutorial group are perceived by only a minority, who suggest group tutoring should be improved. Finally, the need to set up integrated, liberating, competence-based tutoring has little presence in the narratives, and the perspective focusing on the tutees' autonomy and self-determination is virtually absent. Research should be carried out to discover whether the absence of tutoring directed towards self-determination is due to a lack of interest in becoming autonomous on the part of the students, or a preference for a less challenging form of tutoring, or whether it is something that stems from the students' 'attitude or from the lack of strategies in the programme that is affecting this area. We may therefore have to widen our focus and continue to reflect on tutoring for some time (Wakelin, 2021).

### **The Context of Higher Education and the Area of Tutoring**

The function of tutoring is not to compensate for university shortcomings. On the contrary, it should form part of any critical examination of higher education. If we consider the weaknesses of the academic, curricular, structural and existential context in which tutoring takes place, we can advance with greater clarity and precision. Today's performance accountability structure

makes teaching staff feel they lack recognition and influence in a habitat that is increasingly competitive and aggressive in its rules (Lewis et al., 2015; Whitehead, et al., 2016). As shown by the data from this investigation, all this causes worry and uncertainty combined with feelings of frustration and failure among less resilient tutors.

Tutoring that, in the predominant perspective inferred from participants' experiences, i.e. the traditional perspective, revolves around the tutor's authority can make tutees feel intimidated and vulnerable, and therefore the relationship does not work because it is not based on trust (Bell, 2022), and hence perhaps the lack of participation shown in the experiences described as negative. This can arise through context and policy measures rather than a tutor's resistance to establishing a more democratic and participative relationship, because the attitude they show in most cases is positive. Moreover, in the university space, if there is no good incentive or leadership that recognizes the value of tutoring, it does not occupy its rightful position and does not attract the attention it deserves from the tutors, which led some participants to admit they were going to leave the programme. Teachers, as we have seen from some of the narratives, are overworked and have too many duties (Lewis et al., 2015; Whitehead et al., 2016). The pressure to research and publish, the endless race for accreditation and promotion, managing and teaching overcrowded classes and the never-ending accountability and bureaucracy of quality undermine a teacher's identity and thus their accessibility and closeness to the students (Stephen et al., 2008).

Many suggestions regarding how tutors can construct a framework for tutorials or choose strategies have emerged from our investigation, but it is important to remember that learning is in itself reflective and involves critical thinking. Burge (2007) suggests teachers should reflect on expert experience to avoid becoming patriarchal and authoritarian: listen to students, arouse passions, deliberate, tolerate ambiguity and mistakes, cope with the chaos by creating communities of distributed learning and, most especially, reward persistence and effort. Virtual worlds can be wonderful learning tools as long as they make use of the warmth of social collaboration and of belonging to a critical reflective space anchored in reality. A tutor should be and act like someone close, someone to be trusted, someone experienced who can accompany the tutee, becoming involved in a sustainable relationship aimed at developing the student's self-determination, because this is what is shown in their narratives. Despite the fact that they continue to be positioned mainly in the traditional or emotional proximity perspectives, the suggestions they put forward include working towards achieving a closer, more personal form of tutoring capable of leading to personal promotion and self-determination. They are not satisfied with tutoring that focuses only on solving bureaucratic and administrative problems. This is a relationship of responsibility that needs a clear conceptual framework to enable the tutor to both construct the relationship and develop the necessary skills and abilities. The success of tutoring largely depends on this. We can argue about whether focusing on self-determination means getting closer to more integrated tutoring by pursuing autonomy, social interaction and academic ability for the tutee, or whether learning means participating, reflecting and making decisions in a social setting. We can consider other conceptual perspectives too, but such discussions must always take place within the framework of the mission of higher education.

## **Conclusions**



Following, we highlight some of the conclusions we have drawn from the study. Tutoring experiences tend to be described by the tutors mainly on the basis of the enrichment involved at all levels when carrying out this work. They generally feel it is rewarding because they are helping their students. The experiences generally develop from the traditional or emotional proximity perspectives and less so from stances that are more social and focus more on student self-determination. It would therefore be a good idea to promote a different kind of tutoring, which would involve training programmes, but also support and recognition of the work the tutor does in this regard. The support that tutors would need to receive might encourage them to take on an even greater commitment in their work and to develop a tutoring style that would increase student participation in the programme. However, this would call for commitment from the institution in order to visibilize tutoring and make students aware of what exactly they could expect from the tutorial relationship, in our particular case at each level of the UA's integrated model. The tutor would also have to know exactly where the boundaries of the work lay. Improving the tutorial action plan would have to involve taking into account the proposals put forward by its agents, given that these are the people who know more than anyone the advantages and limitations of the programme. On an institutional level, measures would have to be taken in which tutoring would take centre stage, and this would involve agreements regarding the basic theoretical model and the introduction of measures contextualized in practice.

Although this study involves a very particular area, which means that the conclusions apply directly only to the object of study, its scope goes further insofar as it might encourage others to reflect on similar or divergent settings and lead them to introduce measures at all levels. On an international level, the voices of the tutors from the University of Alicante can be recognized as their own according to their demands and suggestions. Although the contexts may be different, tutoring generally continues to be an essential element for personalizing learning and for meeting the challenges faced by the university today.

Finally, the fact that we have only taken into account the tutors' views should be seen as a limitation. Gathering information on students' experiences would enable us to see how far the tutors' actions match their expectations. It would also be interesting to triangulate both views with the opinions of those in charge of these programmes. It should be taken into account that those who responded to the questionnaire were those teachers most willing to take part in the tutoring programme and therefore the most likely to look for ways to improve their work. All this leads us to consider a future line of research with more agents and contexts to enable continued reflection on how to improve the tutoring process without leaving it in the hands of contextual fate and the good will of its agents.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. This research was supported by the Project Networks-I3CE of the Deputy Vice-Chancellors Office of Quality and Educational Innovation of the University of Alicante, under Grant 4538 – An opportunity for the design and development of a TAP (Tutorial Action Plan) with a humanistic character. Hernández-Amorós belongs to the Qualitative Research Group on Education, Teaching and Learning (GICEDA) of the University of Alicante.

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