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An Integrated Approach to University Tutoring

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An Integrated Approach to University Tutoring

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Abstract The main objective of this paper is to present an integrated model of university tutoring. The article is divided into two main sections: the first discusses a series of prior issues necessary to a full understanding of the current context of university tutoring (tutoring as a factor of quality in education, the strengths and weaknesses of the current tutoring model, the teaching function contrasted with that of tutoring); and in the second, the integrated model of tutoring is presented, exploring the rationale behind it, the characteristics defining it, its various objectives and dimensions, its intervention strategies and the organizational model best suited to its implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

Tutoring is a basic, essential feature of the education process and a core element in university teaching. It should be understood as a continuous and systematic process facilitating learning and decision-making, embracing diversity and inclusion, boosting personal growth and offering students advice and counselling on their educational and professional paths. The work of counselling and tutoring should serve to integrate the different aspects of students' maturation and education, paying special attention to their integrated development. Tutoring is an area where students can develop in an integrated way in all aspects, and has also become an important marker of quality in education. Thus we should approach it as a cooperative initiative, taken on by different educational actors and requiring coordinated work among both the people and the institutions involved in university education. For this reason we should move towards a new, more comprehensive and integrated approach to tutoring. Thus in this paper we discuss what such an integrated model of university tutoring represents.

1. THE TUTORING CONTEXT

A series of contextual factors should be taken into account prior to implementing an integrated model of tutoring. Below we discuss some of these factors:

a) *Can tutoring be seen as a component of quality in education?*

The various writers and organisations we consulted (Delors, 1996; European Commission, 2000; Braslavsky, 2004; Gergiannis & Fitsilis, 2010; Rodríguez

Espinar, 2013, 2018; UNESCO, 2014, 2015; Martínez Clares, et al., 2020) concur that quality has to do with the effectiveness of institutions in achieving their particular goals. An educational institution of quality should offer its users what they need: it should *do well what it has to do*.

Quality in education has become a priority issue in our setting (the European Union). The conclusions of various European summits (Lisbon 2000, Barcelona 2002, and more recently Brussels 2015 and Bratislava 2016) have stressed the essential role that education and training play in an increasingly demanding and competitive world. The education systems of member states need to improve their efficiency and efficacy constantly if they are to address the problems that most concern us, such as school dropout, demotivation, absenteeism, antisocial behaviour, unemployment, transition processes, etc. Quality in education cannot solely be identified with better intellectual training for students (learning to do and learning to know), but should also concern itself with competences in the personal, socio-emotional and professional spheres (learning to be and learning to live with others) and strive to develop these through educational provision (Rodríguez Espinar, 2013; Álvarez González, 2017).

An education system has quality or excellence to the extent to which it can (a) stimulate *participation* within and between education centres and their social environments (communication); (b) foster the *training and motivation* of the different educational actors; (c) strive to *address the issue of dropout in a comprehensive way* and provide students with the competences they need for learning to learn; (d) become familiar with the *use of new technologies* facilitating interaction and the exchange of ideas and materials between teachers and students and among students themselves (cooperative learning); (e) promote the *ability to innovate* and constantly adapt to new situations (being an agent of change); (f) take on a firm commitment to *assessment* in order to improve whatever may be necessary; (g) encourage greater *self-knowledge and knowledge of the environment*, thus facilitating decision-making throughout life; (h) facilitate support and counselling through *guided intervention and tutoring* for all educational actors (Álvarez González, 2017).

Unfortunately the economic downturn that many countries have suffered has not made it easy to introduce measures promoting satisfactory implementation of counselling and tutoring as one of the factors of quality in university education. Thus some

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initiatives have been set in place, such as university student counselling services, but this has been insufficient, since the educational community, particularly teachers, have not been effectively engaged. Despite the current context, we should not forget that counselling and tutoring are extremely important means of prevention in enhancing educational quality; for a complete, comprehensive form of education, their help and support are needed.

b) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current tutoring model?

In recent decades some advances have been made in implementing counselling and tutoring in

universities, but they have not been sufficient, since they have not yielded the expected outcomes. To analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the current tutoring model we have used the analytical dimensions developed by Montserrat Pera (2011) in her excellent study of tutoring (Table 1).

Table 1: Strengths and Weaknesses of the current tutoring model

Dimension	Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Institutional context</i>	Institutional policies favouring change and development in teaching. Recognition of the tutor. Tutoring action plan (TAP) in the centre.	Lack of planning and design of tutoring action plans (TAPs) in some centres. Lack of tradition in process of student counselling and support.
<i>TAP Planning</i>	Adaptation of the TAP to the centre where it is applied. Support for carrying out the TAP. Strategy for organising and integrating tutoring.	Lack of organisation for putting tutoring into operation. Insufficient coordination of tutoring. Low importance given to subject tutoring. Lack of time and space for tutoring.
<i>Support for tutoring</i>	Initial goodwill. Impact on being carried out. A minimum level of cooperation from teachers. Efficacy and consistency in tutoring actions.	Lack of response and presence of tutors. Little teacher engagement in tutoring actions. Insufficient coordination of tutors.
<i>Tutor training</i>	Tutor attendance at training courses. Teachers provided with necessary skills. Training plan to address tutorial demand.	Lack of initial and in-service training adapted to the characteristics of tutors. Teaching staff lack knowledge and training in counselling and tutoring processes.
<i>Communication to students</i>	Face-to-face and virtual communication to students. Information via internet and e-mail.	Some students do not know about the TAP. Students' expectations are not met by the TAP.
<i>Delivery of tutoring actions</i>	Integrated education of the student. Engagement and interest on the tutor's part. Communication with students. Greater knowledge of their needs, interests and problems.	Low frequency of communication and participation. Teachers do not take on the tutor's role. Lack of flexibility in tutoring timetables.
<i>Virtual tutoring tools</i>	Ease and efficacy in use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in tutoring. Greater flexibility, more exchanges of information, communication and resources. More personalised student guidance.	Little use of ICTs by tutors. Teachers lack time. Small percentage of students using virtual media.

To summarise, we would highlight a series of characteristics defining the current model of counselling and tutoring in universities (Álvarez González & Álvarez Justel (2015): (a) tutoring has not been fully integrated into students' education; (b) it has on occasion lacked specific objectives and contents; (c) space to take part in tutoring is not made readily available in teachers' and students' timetables; (d) in some cases tutoring is turned into a bureaucratic process (social services,

grants, etc.); (e) at times academic guidance is confused with a place for emotional release; (f) on many occasions there is lack of in-service, specific skills training for tutors; and (g) frequently students lack interest and teachers lack time for tutoring.

There is, therefore, a need to *reorient* the tutoring model by means of a thoroughgoing recasting of the teaching and tutoring functions of university educators.

c) *What relationship should the teaching and tutoring functions have?*

Teaching itself should take on both counselling and tutoring functions, as they are the basic ingredients in the type of teaching practice which integrated, personalised education should provide. It needs to be made clear that tutoring is an intrinsic part of teaching and the curriculum: every teacher is involved in tutoring, whether s/he is assigned as tutor to a group of students or not. To this end we should move beyond the traditional view of the teacher as lecturer in favour of essential educating functions. However, *it is not a question of turning university teachers into counsellors*, but of making the function that each teacher spontaneously carries out, as facilitator of the student's integrated development, more explicit. For this task of counselling and tutoring the tutor should be able to rely on the aid both of the educational community, particularly of *counselling specialists* (internal and external to the centre), and of students in their final years (*peer tutoring*), especially in university education (Álvarez González, 2017).

Thus we can structure tutoring and counselling actions into three levels of intervention: (1) tutoring and counselling carried out by teaching staff (*subject tutors*) and by tutors (*academic or support tutors*); (2) consulting, training and technical back-up for tutoring (*centre counselling department or services*); (3) collaboration on specific aspects of counselling (*external community counselling services*).

In the light of the above, we can define tutoring as *the educational action of counselling, support and mediation that the teacher-tutor and the rest of the teaching staff carries out with students on an individual and group level in the personal, school, professional and social spheres, at the same time as they carry out their teaching functions. This educational action should also be addressed to, and have the collaboration of, all other educational actors, particularly families* (Sanz, 2010; Álvarez González & Bisquerra, 2018). Tutoring is a task for the whole educational community, in which the tutor has a predominant role as the person responsible for coordinating, promoting and carrying out the tutoring function of her/his group with the help and collaboration of all other actors: teachers, counsellors, families and institutions.

In order to develop the different areas or contents of tutoring we need to base ourselves on theoretical models that can serve as a guide to action and give a principled grounding to our endeavours. The tutor can base her/his interventions on one or several approaches ranging from rational models to cognitive and developmental models, and including non-directive models. Particularly in the sphere of university education, we can identify the models as: *academic, personal growth, professional development* and *systemic*

(Rodríguez Espinar et al, 2004). These models will enable us to build our own theory of or approach to tutoring intervention.

II. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED TUTORING MODEL

The various modalities of tutoring adopted to date (subject tutoring, academic tutoring or support, personal counselling, peer tutoring) have been seen as mutually exclusive, with limited efficacy and very little in the way of relationships between them. Thus they have had a limited influence on students' integrated development and, yet more worryingly, the tutorial function has been to a certain extent uncoupled from the teaching function, as studies of tutoring actions in universities have shown (Cabrera & la Nasa, 2005; Velázquez & Cuevas, 2014, amongst others).

Tutoring and guidance actions should therefore be framed by an integrated model encompassing different levels of tutoring intervention, beginning from subject tutoring (in this new model all teachers are tutors), and continuing with academic tutoring or support and personal counselling, supported by peer tutoring. All of this should form part of the university's institutional tutoring plan, carried out through the tutoring action plans of each department, each with its own particularities. This new model should be comprehensively integrated into the student's educational process. We cannot emphasise too much the idea that students' integrated education requires an integrated tutoring model. Tutoring thereby becomes a real strategy for integrated education.

In the light of the above, it is important to advance towards an integrated model of tutoring and counselling which embraces the *different facets* making up students' integrated development (personal, academic, professional, social, emotional) in its *different tutoring modalities* (subject tutoring, academic tutoring or support and personal counselling, in addition to peer tutoring and practicum tutoring), with the engagement of *the whole educational community* (students, teaching staff, families, counsellors) and *at all levels in the university* (both first and post-graduate degrees).

Tutoring actions should help, guide and support students from their entrance in the university onwards, providing them with the maturity and integrated education necessary for them to deal successfully with all life situations. Also, in addition to this need for a form of integrated education preparing students for life, we should implement a type of integrated tutoring consistent with this new way of seeing education. There is a series of *rationales* behind the need for such integrated tutoring (Álvarez González & Álvarez Justel, 2014, 2015):

- 1) The current tutoring model has not yielded the expected results, as since its beginnings it has been

seen as disconnected from the teaching function and from students' academic and curricular growth.

- 2) The approach used for its development and delivery has been inappropriate, since its strategies and methods have not been motivating and have not engaged the relevant actors.
- 3) It has only focused on certain facets of the academic sphere (answering questions and reviewing academic assignments, amongst others).
- 4) The teacher is still an essential actor in students' learning. The educator plays a crucial role in individualising, overseeing and assessing students' work outside of class.
- 5) There is a need to create spaces where teaching and tutoring can work together if we wish to develop a functioning and efficient tutoring process.
- 6) We should support students in their education process so that they can acquire an education that
- 7) Tutoring is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, involving all educational actors in collaboration.
- 8) There has been a lack of specific objectives and contents. On most occasions tutoring has relied on the individual tutor's drive, and has lacked specificity.
- 9) There is a need for educational institutions and the different educational actors (teachers, students, families, etc.) to change their attitudes. The teaching and tutoring functions of staff should be redefined with the support of the institution.

Once the need for an integrated model of tutoring is acknowledged, we can ask: *What are its defining features?* (Álvarez González & Álvarez Justel, 2014; Álvarez González, 2017) (Table 2):

Table 2: Defining features of the integrated tutoring model.

Defining features of the integrated tutoring model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It should stimulate students' integrated development on the personal, academic, social and professional levels. Students themselves are calling for participation in a tutoring process which can favour their integrated growth. • It should become an integrated model of support for students on an institution plane, recognised by all actors. • Tutoring should be seen as intrinsic to education and be integrated in the curriculum, if we wish to make it one of the components of quality in education. • We should facilitate the acquisition and development of personal and professional competences for building a life project. • We should see counselling and tutoring as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary action to provide support processes helping students plan their life projects and fostering success. • It should enable improvements to be made in student support. • Both teaching staff and students need shared time and space in order to carry out tutoring. • The educational institution is responsible for identifying the changes needed to create an integrated education for all students (spaces for teaching and tutoring to work together). • Institutional policies should be set in place in order to regulate and manage tutoring as a task which is integrated into the institution's educational model. • This should be a model that is adapted to the needs of students and the institution itself. • This requires a training plan for all teaching staff and the other actors involved. For this purpose, they should first be informed of their new tasks, and subsequently be motivated, engaged and trained.

Table 3: Goals of the integrated tutoring model

a) *Goals of the integrated tutoring model.*

These objectives should be consistent with the features defining the integrated tutoring model (Table 3).

Goals of the integrated tutoring model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To foster students' integrated growth throughout their education. • To promote students' integration and adaptation to their new academic course. • To support students in their learning process (approaches, styles, strategies, methods, learning difficulties, dropout, etc.) • To foster personal and social growth (knowledge of the self and others, autonomy, self-esteem, emotional awareness and control, social competences, life skills, social skills, etc.). • To stimulate professional development (decision-making, career projection). • To embrace diversity and inclusion in the classroom and educational centre (curricular and methodological adaptations, flexible groupings, multilevel planning, social and academic inclusion). • To ease academic and professional transitions (from secondary to higher education, from higher education to the labour market). • To encourage appropriate relationships and interaction between the various members of the educational community (teachers, students, families and social environment). • To forge links with other support services for students and for tutoring (counselling services, social services, health services, employment services, etc.).

b) *The dimensions of integrated tutoring*

In the table below (Table 4) we outline the different areas or dimensions of integrated tutoring actions. To develop this framework we have drawn on the work of Arbizu, Lobato & del Castillo, 2005; De la

Cruz, García & Abreu, 2006; Stevenson, 2006; Álvarez González & Forner, 2008; Álvarez Pérez & González, 2009; García Pérez, 2010; Hill, 2012 and González Palacios & Avelino Rubio, 2016, amongst others.

Table 4: The dimensions of integrated tutoring arranged according to stages of education.

University Education
<p><i>Welcoming students and easing their adaptation to the university:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition process from secondary to higher education • Adapting to higher education <p><i>Development of personal and professional identity:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' academic and professional experiences • Their ideas about the institution and their chosen degree courses • Their skills and competences (learning and evaluating styles, emotional intelligence, creativity, etc.) • Their plans for their future careers <p><i>Interpersonal development:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication skills • Skills for understanding others • Teamwork skills <p><i>Development of learning processes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Personal dynamic:</i> motivation and values for studying, positive self-image • <i>Behavioural skills:</i> time planning and management, attention and concentration • <i>Cognitive skills:</i> information processing, memorization and recall • <i>Contextual skills:</i> the educational institution, teachers, families, etc. • <i>Working methods</i> in the different subjects • <i>Products of assessment</i> • <i>Research training</i> <p><i>Guidance for different educational pathways:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on educational pathway options • Decision-making <p><i>Social and professional integration:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paths to employability • Information workshops • Work on the internet • Professional contacts (professional colleges, associations, NGOs)

c) *Organizational Model*

Álvarez González (2012) has identified a series of indispensable organizational factors for implementing and assessing the integrated tutoring model. These are:

- Coordinating and managing the different actors involved in counselling and tutoring properly.
- Establishing a schedule for action (the necessary times and places).
- Selecting, assigning and training teacher-tutors and peer tutors.
- Coordinating support services and programmes.
- Institutional recognition for counselling and tutoring actions on bachelors' and post-graduate degrees.
- Open-access information centres for students.

When carrying out the tutoring action plan it is also important to take account of factors such as: (a) the actors involved in the tutoring process; (b) requirements for the implementation process; (c) the most suitable approach to intervention; and (d) the educational and counselling services also involved in the process.

A good plan should be backed up by suitable organization for our intervention to be successful (Álvarez González & Álvarez Justel, 2015, Álvarez González, 2017). The organizational model should take into account: (1) the setting of the action (classroom, centre, sector); (2) the levels of the intervention (tutoring actions; counselling/guidance units, departments and services); and (3) the type of unit (direct or indirect) (Table 5).

Table 5: The organizational and functional structure of tutoring in higher education.

Areas	Levels of intervention	Type of unit
Classroom (class, small group)	Tutoring actions (subject tutoring, support tutoring and personal counselling)	Direct action unit
Degree/faculty	Coordination of tutoring	Basic organisational unit of the degree course and faculty (indirect action)
University	Services of information, training and guidance for support of tutoring	University organisational unit (indirect action)

III. BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

We should move towards an integrated tutoring model in universities, addressing students' integrated growth in all its aspects (personal, socio-emotional, academic and professional). Tutoring should become a factor in educational quality and thus produce a real synergic effect in students. To this purpose, the tutoring function should be strengthened, as an intrinsic and fundamental part of the teaching function: *all teachers are tutors*. This requires coordinated action on the part of all the people and institutions involved in the educational process: programming for tutoring, adapted to the needs of its users; motivation, engagement and training of teachers; and help and technical support from counselling specialists in universities and the range of services offered by the community. We need to create *spaces for teaching and tutoring to work together*, uniting the academic and counselling services of universities; academic coordination; the coordination of tutoring; subject tutoring; academic/career tutoring or support; personal counselling; and practicum and peer tutoring. In short, all the sectors of the university should give support to teachers to help them carry out their tutoring roles. Specifically, the various departments should foster teamwork amongst teachers and strengthen the tutoring role in their teaching.

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