

# **Understanding the challenges and experiences of tutors in the hybrid teaching and learning context in the Department of Geography, Geoinformatics and Meteorology at the University of Pretoria.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Students who enrol at South African higher education institutions come from various racial, social, cultural and religious backgrounds with a diversity of strengths and limitations. The nature of student and tutor support we provide at higher education institutions should make provision for these differing capacities and skills to ensure equitable learning outcomes. To meet this stated intent, there is a need for a student development model that is culturally sensitive, promotes social justice and which recognises the needs of all sub-groupings of students (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). For Farrow (2017), tutoring is seen as an important tool towards improved learning and engagement because it can play a key role in promoting equal opportunities to learn. Tutoring encounters are also seen as an opportunity to equalise access to educational resources and to create learning opportunities that would foster better social cohesion. A well designed and adequately configured tutor support programme can therefore serve as an important catalyst to successful learning and it can help higher education institutions to tackle complex social problems towards meeting broader social justice imperatives.

The need for diverse and reconfigured tutor support in the higher education landscape was acutely evident at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Higher education institutions in South Africa had to adopt an emergency response online teaching and learning approach, which required a swift and unplanned conversion to online learning platforms. At the University of Pretoria, the COVID-19 pandemic thus re-ignited the importance of UP's 2025 strategic vision towards "a re-imagined and advanced digital transformation strategy in teaching and learning". Despite this strategic vision, the suddenness of the shift to digital platforms was expected to impact sub-groupings of our students differently. Concerns were expressed that this type of unexpected change could exacerbate existing skills and capacity inequalities already evident amongst the diverse UP student profile. The differentiated contexts and the vastly different situational backgrounds of students could thus have resulted in a smooth transition to online learning for some students. On the other hand, less strategically positioned first-generation UP students (who are often based at residences far away from parental support), could end up struggling with this rapid shift in the learning landscape. Impacts brought on by an increasing reliance of digitised learning platforms could thus entrench marginalising tendencies within the learning environment which could compromise commitments towards equal and transformed teaching and learning practices at the University of Pretoria.

## **AIM**

To mitigate the negative impacts of learning within an increasingly hybridised (approaches allowing both digitised and face-to-face) approach, the role of the tutor in assisting and supporting learning activities is crucial. Modules with a practical component, such as the ones presented in the department of Geography, Geoinformatics and Meteorology (**GGM**) within the faculty of NAS at UP were also reliant on tutors to support students both on online platforms and in instances where it was allowed, in face-to-face contexts. The demands placed on tutors during these encounters and their ability to transition from face-to-face, to online, and then later on towards various versions of hybrid learning contexts remains poorly understood. In order to support effective learning within this increasingly digitized and disrupted landscape we should therefore try to understand the roles of tutors within these redefined contexts, we should interrogate the nature of the challenges they experience and evaluate how they are being prepared to fulfil their required roles. With this research project, I was particularly focussing on tutors in the department of GGM. As a project outcome, I was hoping that a better

understanding of the nature of challenges experienced by tutors and their redefined roles within this disrupted learning environment would enable me to make recommendations about improving our approach to tutor training and support within the department. More specifically, my research project aimed the following:

- To evaluate the types of challenges tutors encounter as we shifted to hybrid learning modalities.
- To assess the level of mismatch between the type of support we expect tutors to provide to students versus what they actually end up doing.
- To capture the range of tutor experiences during the 2020-2021 academic years based on their own reflections about changes in their levels of expectation, motivation and commitment.

The envisaged aim of my project was only partially achieved. Responses from the questionnaires and during the focus group discussions provided valuable insights about the nature of tutor experiences and challenges encountered, but the project did not assess the processes linked to the training and appointment of tutors. These processes could not be investigated concretely as different types of training and appointment approaches applied to a varied range of peer support entities. An added complexity was that the nature of support and training provided to tutors, practical assistants and research assistants were more complex and context specific and would require more iterative and prolonged engagement. Due to these reasons the stated aim of the project was therefore not fully achieved. With regard to the change I wanted to make, I was hoping that findings from my project would be considered in future tutor training programmes and that these training sessions would include a more pro-active stance on tutor well-being in the future. This change has not yet been realized, but engagements during my institutional even presentations has created momentum in the right direction as it succeeded in raising awareness about these matters and the deputy dean of Teaching in NAS has expressed an interest in seeing me expand the project and introducing some of my recommendations in the future which will translate into the kind of change I would still like to achieve.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The demands of a mass higher education system and a diverse student body with a wide range of needs has ignited widespread interest in the role of tutors and peer learning support at South African higher education institutions (Jelfs et. al. 2009). In general, tutors are seen as individuals who are able to help other students either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups by continuing classroom discussions, developing study skills, evaluating work, resolving specific problems, and encouraging independent learning. Tutoring are also seen to be mutually beneficial, where tutoring encounters are expected to result in motivation and learning for students, as well as learning and empowerment for the tutors themselves (Barker 2002, Joshi et al., 2018). The nature of expectations, levels of motivation and the attitude of tutors throughout the module is therefore of key importance as a determinant of learning success.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tutorship was carried out on campus, where tutor support took the form of face-to-face interaction. Due to the pandemic, higher education institutions across the world had to adopt blended learning approaches with contact sessions shifting to platforms like Zoom, Google Meet or BlackBoard. The disruption caused by the pandemic has brought about a major change in the learning environment of many academic programs and the traditional role of the tutor in many instances transformed into the role of an e-tutor. This change has also called for an adjustment in the duties and responsibilities of tutors. Within the shifting online landscape, tutors were, at times, required to be continually online not just for administrative purposes but also increasingly to support students. Tutors were therefore required to be up to date with new competencies and skills for technology-supported flexible learning. For McPherson and Nunes (2004) flexible, and online learning contexts require different preconditions and skills from tutors. These preconditions have been linked to specific competencies which include three kinds of knowledge attributes:

(a) content-specific knowledge to support cognitive activities,

(b) pedagogical knowledge to initiate and sustain adequate learning processes on a motivational level, and to adequately cope with difficulties of the learners on a social level (social activities), and  
(c) technical knowledge about the functioning of the Internet, technical skills and knowledge on net-based communication. This kind of knowledge reflects the “e” in the term “e-tutor”.

Furthermore, the e-tutor needs a wide range of tutoring skills in order to assume different roles, such as content facilitator, metacognition facilitator, process facilitator, advisor/counsellor, assessor, technologist, resource provider, etc. Because of this diverse range of different competencies, skills and roles, e-tutors must adequately prepare for their work in facilitating online collaboration.

According to the University of Pretoria’s tutoring system policy (2002), the tutoring system is a major component of the educational practice of the University. It plays an important part in student teaching and learning. These tutors are to be senior pre- and post-graduate students functioning within departments and faculties. They are there to offer subject-specific guidance and support to students. Tutors are there to offer immediate feedback to students and can provide individually-tailored academic support as well by referring students to other appropriate support services (University of Pretoria, 2002). Tutors have to undergo training. These training sessions are conducted throughout the year within the courses to which they are assigned. The training is to equip the tutors with the necessary skills to facilitate student learning. To become a tutor, one has to apply and they are appointed for specific modules. These are paid appointments and the tutors are regarded as being part of the team teaching the course and they work under the supervision of the course coordinator (University of Pretoria, 2002). To ensure that the transfer of knowledge occurs between tutors and students, Ullah et.al., (2020) suggest that training sessions must focus on five key themes. These are: regulation of the peer tutored groups, role exploration, harnessing the peer tutors’ role, sharing responsibility, and building a community of practice.

A number of factors can influence the quality of the relationship between tutors and tutees. Knowledge and information transfer could be impeded by cultural and language barriers. It is therefore important to acknowledge that it is not always easy for tutors to connect with students and the nature of these relations are often complex and fraught with insecurities and challenges. The need for tutors to function optimally within reconfigured learning spaces thus ultimately requires more deliberative engagement.

### **CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL APPROACH**

My research project fits into UP’s commitment towards a transformed curriculum for teaching and learning that seeks to embrace and allow for the integration of a diversity of viewpoints, perspectives and local lived contexts. Tutors represents an important sub-grouping of students whose voices and perspectives should be captured. They also act as a valuable conduit between the students and lecturers that would (in turn) allow them to capture and communicate diverse perspectives and experiences from the students back to lecturers.

To bring about the desired change in the tutoring approach in the Department of GGM where I am based, I adopted Bhasker’s (1979) conceptualisation of tutors as active subjects within the learning encounters. In this regard, tutors are seen to have agency, thus, the ability to act and re-act, to behave in an action-oriented manner, to drive intentional human action and to reconstitute their particular circumstances”. If we accept the definition of social justice in higher education as a process and goal that allow for the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, the role of the active, action-oriented tutor who is a catalyst to student support and learning is multifaceted and crucial. By viewing tutors through an analytic lens where they are seen as actors with agency (Long 2002) their experiences, well-being and reflections about their encounters during a time of transition becomes an iterative process where their reflections and experiences can also feed into future tutor training programmes, thus allowing my research to also adopt aspects an action research approach.

## **METHODS - ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES**

Phase one (objective 1) of the project aimed to evaluate the types of challenges tutors encountered as we shifted to hybrid learning modalities from 2020. With the help of three tutors<sup>1</sup> and two colleagues<sup>2</sup> within the department we developed an online questionnaire to be completed by tutors in the department of GGM. The questionnaire was made available via a link to tutors who were asked to participate on a voluntary basis with their identities and personal information protected at all times. Using a combination of closed and open-ended questions, tutors were encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences. We received 25 responses which were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis and a content analysis approach helped us to make sense of the responses to the open-ended questions. From the analysis conducted, the experiences of tutors who were appointed in the conventional face-to-face teaching setting prior to 2020, versus the ones who were appointed for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in the digitized context differed significantly. Tutors who were appointed before mentioned increasing time demands during the pandemic. Tutors appointed for the first time did not experience an overly problematic infringement on their time. Interestingly, tutors who were appointed before 2020 were found to use framing like “normally”, or “usually” and “in this new normal” to benchmark their explanation of their experiences in the hybridized context. The use of these types of framing thus provided an important indication of the extent of the impacts which tutors had to deal with.

Questionnaire responses were also used to meet the stated intent of the second objective, which tried to capture the range of tutor experiences based on their own reflections about changes in their levels of expectation, motivation and commitment and the variables which caused these changes. Responses provided in the questionnaire in relation to tutors’ reflections about these types of changes revealed interesting trends. Again, two important subgroupings emerged in terms of responses provided; tutors who have been appointed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and those who were appointed for the first time during the pandemic. Responses revealed that the attitude of the lecturers and students towards tutors impacted first time appointed tutors far more significantly than those who have been appointed before. Furthermore, tutors who were appointed before the pandemic, were already fearful/worried about their abilities to cope with scientific knowledge related requirements from student inquiries. This type of fear amongst tutors were reportedly compounded by the need for them to respond to these types of questions in an online mode. Those appointed for the first time during the pandemic were seemingly not as concerned about these matters at the start of the module, but certainly reported changes in their levels of motivation, attitudes and expectations towards the end of the modules, especially due to negative feedback and responses from students.

During semi-structured focus group discussions with a small selection of tutors, the level of mismatch between the type of support we expected tutors to provide to students versus what they actually ended up doing were explored. The distinct shift in terms of the anticipated role of the tutor versus what they actually had to do and their level of engagement with students were unpacked during these discussions. In this regard tutors mentioned the impacts of receiving late night messages from students, the scary responsibility of responding to questions from students who indicated financial or emotional difficulties and the fact that they at times felt their personal boundaries were being compromised.

With regard to outcomes and achievements, the scope of our project inquiry was small and very inward focused in terms of GGM related dynamics. The strength of the project is therefore the fact that the in-depth information/trends can be used to re-assess how we train GGM tutors to prepare them to provide tutor support in the context of disrupted learning environments. As the next step towards project conclusion, we would therefore like to capture the nature of challenges encountered by tutors more coherently and advocate for the incorporation of this improved understanding into future tutor training or initiation processes. The nature of support/training provided to tutors from the institutional, faculty and departmental level should also be added to our initial analysis and it is hoped that the findings from

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Brian Nkala, Mrs Violet Mwendera, Mr Tsholanang Rammopo

<sup>2</sup> Prof Liesl Dyson & Prof Serena Coetzee

this baseline analysis could would contribute to the establishment of support structures (also training) to ensure adequate support for tutors who have to function within these reconfigured hybrid spaces.

In terms of challenges encountered; I would have liked to embark on a final step in the process. I wanted to also compare perspectives of tutors appointed in different departments within the NAS faculty to use as control/reference groups. My thinking was therefore to expand the project to include tutor perspectives also from other departments. A key assumption was that the attitudes, motivation and expectations of tutors would be understood more concretely if I also captured information about the training and processes used for the appointment of tutors in different departments. After some exploratory discussions with colleagues I realized that this objective would be problematic to attain. As already mentioned, I came to realize that a rather complex differentiation was being used to distinguish between students who have been appointed as demonstrators (demi's) versus tutors and the various functions expected from these individuals. The processes for appointment of these subgroupings were also difficult to explore and given my own time constraints for the project I decided to focus my research primarily on the activities of tutors within the department of GGM where the role of the tutor aligns with the appointment criteria and functions as set out in the UP-Tutor policy framework document (2002). Expanding the project to also explore tutor dynamics in other NAS departments are therefore seen as an important next step to this research.

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