



Training and Support for Tutors: *Sine Qua Non* for effective tutorship in higher education

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Abstract. The role of tutorship in higher education is well established, including its benefits for both students and tutors. Despite tutorship being a vastly researched topic, tutor training appears to be at the periphery of the treatise of tutorship. Given the significant role of tutors, it is in the interest of all stakeholders that tutors are well prepared for their role, thus the significance of training provided to tutors to ensure they are well-prepared for the role. Accordingly, this study explored the perceptions of tutors towards tutor training and support as critical ingredients for effective tutorship in higher education. Activity theory undergirds the study, and a quantitative research approach was employed, underpinned by a positivist worldview. A sample (n=77) was drawn from tutors who attended the tutor training in 2023 and are currently providing tutoring for undergraduate students at the selected institution. SPSS was used for data analysis and performing statistical analysis, including the Independent Samples t-Test (One-sample t-test) and Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the internal consistency of the instrument ($\alpha=0.871$). Findings show that the tutors who participated in the survey perceived the training favourably, in that the topics covered are beneficial in preparing them for the tutorial role. The support provided to tutors also appeared to be positively perceived and regarded as a positive contributor to performance. It is recommended that tutor training should focus on topics that have a positive impact on tutor development and be provided continuously.

Keywords: tutor training; tutor development; tutor perceptions, tutorship, e-tutoring.

1. Introduction

Tutorship in higher education includes various core activities, one of which is training to prepare tutors to deliver effective tutorials to students. Tutorial interventions are part of student support strategies to students, as they are confronted with many challenges which derail their academic progress [17]. As such, tutors should thus receive training in teaching methods to effectively tutor students both online and in a traditional way of teaching. Motaung and Makombe [27] assert that training is vital for the professional development of tutors and that training should be a continuous process since tutors need to keep developing to give students the finest tutorials possible. Since tutors who have received training as part of their development are typically deemed to be more effective in helping assist students in learning [37], training cannot be overemphasised. Through training, tutors can gain confidence in their skills through professional development, which makes them more content with the work they do.

While some tutors obtain deep training, others only receive minimal or no training. A lack of efficient tutor development programs has been linked to certain students not receiving the help they require from tutors [27]. Despite the importance of tutorship in higher education, tutor training and support have not yet received much attention in the context of universities of technology (UoT), to the best knowledge of the au-

thors. Studies attest to a growing need for training and support tutors [9, 25, 27, 50], in light of the advent of online tutoring and how necessary it is to offer tutoring services to students beyond the geographic barriers. Most tutor training programs [49, 48, 40] tend to concentrate on giving peer tutors strategies on how to handle challenging students while executing successful group activities as well as the value of peer-led learning. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to explore the perceptions of tutors towards tutor training as a means for tutor development at a UoT, including the support they receive, using the lenses afforded by activity theory. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the importance of training and support for tutors in higher education and advances the thesis that effective tutorship is underpinned by strong and effective training and support for tutors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background

It is common cause that South African universities are faced with a myriad of challenges related student success. Low academic performance, lack of facilities to fully support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, inadequate student preparation for university, and students' inability to handle the complexity of academic demands [23]. Due to these challenges, it is now more important than ever to give students academic support in the form of tutorship [22]. The goal of the tutorship program is to support students' academic progress through tutorials [37]. Tutorial interventions offer a significant value proposition for both

students and the institution fighting low pass rates and at-risk students [37]. In this regard, the role of the tutor encompasses various aspects of teaching and learning, and each tutor would typically have several responsibilities, which include but are not limited to (i) serving as a link between the lecturer and the student, (ii) helping in assessment activities, (iii) facilitating a learning environment that meets each student's learning needs, (iv) encouraging the development of critical thinking, communication, and leadership skills, (v) providing encouraging and helpful feedback on student's progress, and (iv) providing support for students even outside of tutorials [44]. Given this important role played by tutors, they must be well-developed and trained for the role. The process of assisting tutors in acquiring the skills and knowledge required for their position and for performing their duties is known as tutor development. Common qualities for successful tutor development include communication and administrative skills, the capacity to address issues quickly, monitoring the learning process, understanding the subject, and the ability to support students in need [3]. Therefore, untrained tutors frequently display a lack of understanding of their duties and responsibilities, thus inferring that it is crucial for tutors to undergo training to carry out their duties effectively [25].

2.2 Tutor training and development

The tutor training and development is intended to expose tutors to teaching and learning approaches, help them understand their responsibilities and role in supporting students [14]. This requires good communication skills such as communication skills were found to be signifi-

cantly important for tutors, meaning that tutor training should place a premium on helping tutors learn how to connect with students effectively, including how to explain concepts in a way that students can grasp and simplify things for students to understand better [17]. Previously, tutor training included a stronger emphasis on certain assessment tasks and marking notes, challenging work that would be covered in the tutorial curriculum, or other subject-related topics [5, 6, 28, 10, 41]. However, current trends [9, 5, 38, 18] point that contemporary tutor training emphasises on how tutor should support student learning, how to establish inclusive and student-centred learning spaces, and how to assist students become more confident and capable learners. Furthermore, studies show that students experience meaningful learning when they act on their own initiative rather than when they are given instructions [9, 38]. For instance, during the training, tutors are required to engage in activities that build on their prior knowledge and experiences, provide opportunities for practicing new skills, and model or mimic the types of facilitation or teaching that are expected of them [5, 28]. The purpose is to demonstrate to tutors how learning can become more effective when students participate in conversations during tutorial sessions. By taking part in workshop-style engagements that resemble a desirable tutoring environment, tutors might start learning how to tutor more effectively [9]. As a result, tutors meet their peers and acquire useful resources and knowledge that they may use to enhance their in-tutorial activities [9]. The tutorial facilitator can also seize the chance to demonstrate effective or beneficial instructional practices.

Tutor training further helps to increase tutor confidence and motivation while also improving student outcomes. When students work with a knowledgeable, competent, and experienced tutor, they are more likely to feel confident in their capacity to succeed. Consequently, both students and tutors may exert more motivation and effort, which could lead to improved performance [19]. Additionally, training for tutor growth lessens the strain on lecturers, as lecturers can instruct tutors on how they can support the students and have time to focus on other tasks like planning how to implement the curriculum and evaluation. Beyond the training, tutors benefit through intellectual development, being motivated to learn more so they can support other students effectively, being in control of their learning, and having a greater understanding of the module and attitude toward students [19].

2.3 Training on e-Tutoring

It would be a mockery to examine the future of tutorship without mentioning the 'electronic' and 'online' aspects, which are an essential part of modern university teaching and learning [50]. According to Motaung and Makombe [27], covid-19 expedited and forced the switch to online learning, even for traditional universities [51]. This led higher education institutions to lean towards it. As a result, it was only logical that tutorials, which play a crucial supporting role in both teaching and learning, would also be delivered online [37]. Universities have adopted e-tutoring as a new approach of online teaching and learning that may improve student involvement and consequently, performance [52]. E-tutoring is defined by Unisa [53] as cited by Maré & Mutezo (2021) as

"planned interactions between students and e-tutors during online teaching". Motaung and Makombe [27] attest that most tutors have not learned how to tutor online from observation of other teachers as they themselves were learning. This indicated that tutors also need training on how to conduct e-tutorials as previous literature by Bernath and Rubin [54] demonstrates that the effectiveness of tutor-training program depends on its tutor training methods. To assist students communicate effectively in a virtual setting, e-tutors must be trained on a variety of tools available in an LMS [27, 52, 37]. It is likely that both tutors and tutees will become frustrated if they do not understand how the system operates.

Research further reveals that Motaung and Makombe's [27] findings imply that many students were unable to manoeuvre on the Blackboard platform, which suggests that both tutors and tutees require training on how to use LMS tools. Moreover, these results suggest that training e-tutors prior to their facilitation of online learning is essential [51]. E-tutorials are only useful if they are interactive, and when tutors know how to make the online class dynamic. Salmon [55], quoted by Motaung & Makombe [27], highlighted three categories of knowledge that are essential in online learning platforms: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and strategic knowledge. Declarative knowledge entails technical knowledge of how specific tools work; therefore e-tutors must be familiar with the applicable LMS's interface. Knowledge about the processes a tutor must take to use the system is referred to as procedural knowledge. Lastly, strategic knowledge includes understand-

ing how to employ e-moderating skills. This includes skills to respond to student comments, refocus conversations, and encourage debate. Literature states that a successful tutor-training program should emphasize fostering and strengthening these three types of knowledge among tutors who also serve as e-tutors [27, 52, 55, 56].

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by the activity theory, which Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont'ev, and Sergei Rubinstein are credited with developing [42]. The idea of activity was first introduced by Vygotsky, who described it as "a unit of analysis for understanding human behaviour" [16]. Leont'ev expanded on Vygotsky's ideas, contending that activity is always directed toward an object and that tools and signs serve as mediators. Rubinstein has also contributed to the growth of the activity theory by asserting that every activity is rooted in a sociocultural context [16]. Activity theory is used to describe how people engage in collaborative learning settings, and it contends that people look for context-specific tools to achieve certain tasks. Many different phenomena, including human cognition, learning, and development, have been studied using activity theory. The creation and assessment of educational technology have also employed this theory [16].

4. Contextualising the research

A conceptualisation model that integrates two evaluation models [34] with activity theory is used to build a conceptual framework for the

evaluation study presented in this paper [45]. The Tutor training program (TTDP) is evaluated as a whole system rather than concentrating on individual elements of tutor training development, hence activity theory is chosen as the framework. As a result, each of the two TTDP models [centralised and de-centralised] in this study is viewed as an activity system. Within the context of this study, centralised is the Teaching and Learning Development Centre (TLDC), which is the central custodian of tutorship programme at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and de-centralised is the academic departments at MUT. The tutor training coordination is the subject, while the tools used to operate on the object (tutor training) are the teaching and learning methods and materials. In this case, the community is made up of other tutor-training coordinators, tutors, students, lecturers, and heads of departments (HODs). The rules that encourage or restrict behaviour refer to the policies for governing tutorship. The division of labour, also known as roles, refers to what each community member is accountable for doing when acting on the goal of tutor training development. This study used activity theory as an analytical and descriptive tool to highlight inconsistencies and challenges between different elements of the activity system.

5. Methods

Quantitative research approach was adopted underpinned by a positivist philosophical perspective. Scholars agree that quantitative research typically involves quantities and quantifiable properties [12, 8]. It primarily includes methods for gathering and analysing data that produce or em-

ploy numerical data, which is measured using quantifiable proportion and analysed using statistical procedures to determine whether the prediction generalisations are accurate [12]. The fundamental ideas of positivism can be comprehended from a variety of perspectives, including epistemology, ontology, metatheory, methodology, and axiology; herein only epistemology and ontology are entertained. The positivist epistemic thesis holds that knowledge is derived from empirical evidence, as epistemology is concerned with what is valid knowledge [32]. In the positivist worldview, knowledge is characteristically generated from empirical observations [13], hence it includes making objective observations and testing hypotheses to find evidence that contradicts or supports presumptions. Empirical data is therefore crucial from an epistemological perspective for supporting hypotheses and predictions. As a result of the study's empirical approach, the relationship between the constructs can be explained using empirical data. In terms of its ontology, positivism poses the questions of what reality is and how we can tell when something is real [13]. It then contends that there is only one physical and social reality that is both objective and stable [32,13]. As a result, it may be inferred that the research in this area would aim to observe and quantify reality objectively, which is consistent with the positivist metatheoretical perspective. In the end, the apparent connection between the positivism paradigm and the quantitative research approach [32] validates the use of these two approaches in this empirical study.

5.1 Population and sampling

The population for this study included all 108 tutors who participated in training provided by the TLDC at MUT during the first semester of the academic year 2023. Sampling strives to collect data that is representative of the population while being practical and viable in terms of time, money, and other resources [31]. Typically, sampling is required since studying the population as a whole is either difficult or impossible [36]. Given that the population was relatively small, a sample size of 108 was carefully chosen using the sample size table advocated by [7].

5.2 Data collection and analysis

Quantifiable data was collected through a self-administered survey of tutors who had received training to investigate their perceptions. Participants expressed their opinions of tutor training and support on several dimensions using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire format, with options ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. After attending the training session, tutors (n=108) were emailed a link with the self-administered survey that was created on Microsoft Forms (MS Forms). In all, 77 tutors completed the survey, translating to a 71 per cent response rate [12], a response rate of 70% falls within the range of acceptable response rates for research. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences [SPSS] version 26.0 was used to analyse the data and statistical analysis. Before beginning data analysis, it is required to assess the normality of the distribution and the homogeneity of variance to decide which statistical approaches should be applied [2]. For this reason, all values were inside a normal distribution and skewness-Kurtosis,

a measure of a probability distribution's shape, was employed. The study made use of the Independent Samples t-Test, and Pearson Correlation Coefficient techniques.

5.3 Reliability and Validity

Given the philosophical standpoint guiding the investigation, the challenges of reliability and validity are explored briefly. To make sure the instrument met the criteria for validity, Cronbach's Alpha (α) was used to assess the instrument's internal consistency. An Alpha value of 0.7 or higher is a reliable and consistent indicator. In more detail, the widely acknowledged guiding principles suggest that a of 0.90 and above implies excellent reliability, a of 0.80 to 0.90 implies moderate reliability, and a of 0.70 to 0.80 implies low reliability [33]. Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted for the tutor training instrument which yielded an alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .871$ for the 12 standardised items as shown in Table 1, which is a relatively moderate internal consistency.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.902	.871	12

6. Results

6.1 Biographical data

In terms of descriptive statistics for gender, shown in Table 1, the distribution of gender is almost equal. The depicted data indicates that 50.6% of tutors who participated in the survey were male and 48.1% were female. Per Table 1, there is one missing value, which represents 1.3% of the total participants. The missing value is not included in the cumulative percent column, as it is not known whether the participant is male or female.

Table 2: Demographic data: gender

Gender					
		Frequency	Per- cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Val- id	Male	39	50.6	51.3	51.3
	Fe- male	37	48.1	48.7	100.0
	To- tal	76	98.7	100.0	
Miss- ing	Sys- tem	1	1.3		
Total		77	100.0		

6.2 Results

6.2.1 Training variables

One-sample t-test conducted using SPSS yielded the results depicted in Table 3, which is used to compare a sample mean to a specific value, the mean of a sample with a hypothesised population to determine whether the sample is significant [2]. The objective of the analysis was to determine the perceptions of tutors regarding training themes in areas such as positively to their performance and growth as tutors, understanding the dynamics of teaching and learning, facilitating strategies, managing student dynamics, learning strategies and group personalities, administrative issues, e-learning, and e-tutoring. The results of the one-sample t-test show that the mean scores for all the variables are significantly different from the hypothesised value of 3.

Table 3: One-sample test: training topics

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. [2-tailed]	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Introduction to teaching and Learning	4.548	75	.000	.697	.39	1.00
Facilitation strategies	5.385	75	.000	.737	.46	1.01
Managing student dynamics	5.091	75	.000	.724	.44	1.01
Learning strategies and group personalities	8.397	75	.000	1.013	.77	1.25
Administrative issues	6.698	75	.000	.842	.59	1.09
e-Learning	5.558	75	.000	.776	.50	1.05
e-Tutoring	.450	75	.654	.079	-.27	.43

The results shown in Table 3 indicate that the mean of the sample is significantly different from the hypothesised mean for all the variables except e-tutoring. For the variables introduction to learning and learning, facilitation strategies, managing student dynamics, and learning strategies and group personalities, the p-values are all less than 0.05, indicating that all these variables are statistically significant. In essence, the results imply that tutors who took part in the survey perceived these training topics positively. For the variable administrative Issues, the p-value is also less than 0.05, but the mean of the sample is significantly less than 3, implying that the mean of the sample is significantly lower than 3 for this variable. As such, the tutor's perceptions of the topic can be considered moderately positive. e-Tutoring appears to be an exception, as it shows $p < .654$ ($t = .450$, $df = 75$, $p < .654$) which is greater than 0.05, rendering the variable not statistically significant. Therefore, tutors perceived the e-tutoring topic negatively, which suggests that the topic did not hold much value for tutors who participated in the survey.

6.2.2 Support variables

The study further aimed to investigate the perspectives of tutors concerning the support extended by their respective academic departments and supervisors. The analysis primarily focused on assessing how the provision of support influenced the tutor's performance in executing their tutorial duties.

Table 4: One-sample test: support variables

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. [2-tailed]	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Performs tutorial duties better when the department provides support	5.505	76	.000	.779	.50	1.06
Support provided by the department positively contributes to my performance as a tutor	5.761	76	.000	.792	.52	1.07
Support and guidance provided by my supervisor contribute positively to my performance as a tutor	6.561	76	.000	.896	.62	1.17

Table 3 displays the findings, indicating a noteworthy improvement in the tutor's performance when the department offered support ($t=5.505$, $df=76$, $p<.000$). This improvement surpassed the overall mean score of 3, signifying that the tutors perceived the training as beneficial in enhancing their tutorial performance. Moreover, the item on the department's support, as reported by the tutors, received an average mean score of 5.761 ($t=5.761$, $df=76$, $p<.000$). This score significantly exceeded the overall mean of 3, further confirming its positive influence on the tutor's overall performance.

7. Discussion

This section discusses the findings from the study's synthesis of literature with its philosophical foundation. It is apparent that varied scenarios are used to illustrate the function and importance of tutorship in higher education [35, 26, 15, 1, 52, 55]. In addition to being important, tutoring should also be successful [29, 30]. For tutoring to be successful, it is recommended in the literature that its primary actors, the tutors, be well-educated and ready for the role [37, 14, 27, 50, 39]. Based on the findings, tutors who took part in the study had favourable opinions of the instruction they had received. E-learning was well received, apart from e-tutoring, for training themes like managing student dynamics, comprehending teaching, and learning dynamics, learning techniques, and group personalities. Tutors may feel more empowered for the position as a result of learning about inclusive and student-centred learning environments through these themes [5, 18]. This shows that tutor training, as asserted by [43], can enhance the quality of tutoring services offered to students.

Overall, the findings on training factors appear to be consistent with [9, 27, 50] argument that tutors value training on important topics that will benefit their professional advancement. In this sense, the unfavourable impressions of e-tutoring suggest that the tutors who took part in the study did not think it was crucial to their personal growth. Training is crucial to provide tutors with the appropriate and required knowledge and skills [20, 27], and the findings are generally in line with this claim.

Findings regarding assistance for instructors showed that they believed departmental and supervisor support to be crucial for increased performance [24, 9].

Given the philosophical nature of this study, the findings of the study should be considered within the worldwide lenses of positivism. Thus, considering positivist principles and tenets [32, 13] it was important to establish the validity and reliability of the research tool utilised in the study, for which the reliability analysis produced a result of $\alpha = .871$, an acceptable litmus test in this regard. Thus, ontologically, the views and experiences of the tutors reported in this study can be considered a true reflection of the reality within the context of this study. The same is true metatheoretically, that the tutors' views towards the training can therefore be considered, even from axiology, as "objective and value-free" [13, 25]. The results support training and various aspects, which suggests that knowledge, skills and support acquired from the training can, influence changes in tutors' tutorial approaches and interactions with students as well as having topics that are related to the tutors who will be participating in the training [11]. This knowledge and skill development may also contribute to tutors' personal and professional growth. Tutors can therefore effectively carry out their responsibilities and significantly improve their performance as well as students' performance [20, 43].

8. Conclusion

The purpose herein was to explore the perceptions of tutors towards the training and support they received at a UoT, focusing training topics *viz* introduction to teaching and learning, facilitation strategies, managing student dynamics, learning strategies and group personalities, administrative issues, and e-learning. Findings show that the tutors who participated in the survey perceived all the training favourably, apart from e-tutorship, suggesting that the support provided to tutors also appeared to be positively perceived and regarded as a positive contributor to performance. The quantitative endeavours of the study confirmed the thesis that tutor training and support for tutors have positive effects on tutorship. Through training and support, tutors harness important skills and knowledge in dealing with students and effective tutorial strategies. As such, the conclusion reached herein is that tutor training and support can be seen as the *sine qua non* for effective tutorship, without which the quality of tutorship can be compromised.

However, it is important that such training and support is well designed and cover relevant topics, as the results show that a topic like e-tutorship for instance is not well perceived by those who participated in the study. Therefore, a tutoring program should include tutor training as a key element. Training is indicatively crucial for a tutorial program because it gives tutors the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to be successful in their position as tutors and professional growth. Given the advent of e-learning and its subsequent spillover to tutoring, it is

a concern that tutors who participated in the study viewed the e-tutorship unfavourably. It is thus recommended that future studies may explore the aspects of e-tutorship as a core and relevant part of the training so that e-learning topics are designed to be relevant and practical.

9. References

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