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RESEARCH NOTES

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Pupils' Perceptions of the Tutorial Role in Higher Education

Jarauta, Beatriz

Serrat, Núria

University of Barcelona, Spain

Research Background

Adapting university educational models to the challenges presented by the European Higher Education Area requires a serious rethink of the teaching role as well as a substantial shift in educational relationships between pupils and teaching staff (Álvarez et al. 2005). The need to value and foster independent learning by students and the importance that university institutions ensure the development of an essential set of professional abilities, requires creating *assistance and monitoring areas* that truly place the pupil at the centre of education (Gairín et al. 2004; García, Asensio et al. 2005).

Under these requirements, the *tutorial role* becomes an important teaching activity for teaching staff, as well as an efficient learning method aimed at promoting an individualised approach to the teaching, monitoring and evaluation of the student's independent work (Lázaro, 2003; Rué, 2007).

Methodology

Stirred by these concerns, we decided to begin a research project during the 2009-10 academic year that ended up providing significant evidence of the educational needs and perceptions of pupils at the Faculty of Pedagogy (University of Barcelona) with regards to tutorial activity. We were interested in attaining a greater understanding of what was meant by quality tutorial practice in order to design and later implement a new system of tutorial practice in various subjects in the new Pedagogy degree. To do this we used in-depth interviews and focus groups with students in the advanced years of their Pedagogy degree.

Initial Findings

The information obtained in the research led us to believe that personalised work with pupils remains unsystematic in Spanish universities. Often tutorials take the form of a series of unsystematic and unplanned actions spurred by a strong-willed student or lecturer, and which are essentially aimed at tackling aspects related to how a subject is being run or a technical response to doubts or problems posed by pupils individually. Nevertheless, students are now demanding a more direct and personalised relationship with teaching staff. This is an aspect that would be made possible by establishing individual or small-group meetings to work in-depth on concrete and relevant content to benefit learning and progressing in a subject

Furthermore, pupils believe that university education remains based on homogenizing ideas with clear boundaries that do not explicitly allow studying in depth and diversifying as required by pupils' needs. Tutorials thus become ideal spaces to suggest complementary and individualised analytical and reflection exercises that are adapted to the capacities and interests of a particular class. These activities should be formally planned and also should form part of the subject assessment.

At the moment, the research group is in the second stage of the study, involving designing new strategies to develop the tutorial role, centring on one face-to-face and one on-line tutoring modes, as well as individualised and group tutoring. These are based on the needs detected in the first phase, and have allowed designing a comprehensive tutorial system to promote self-learning by the pupil.

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Correspondence author: bjarauta@ub.edu