

## Formative Tutoring Program

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### Introduction

A new model of university-level tutoring derives from the need to face new types of instruction, education and training in the knowledge society, which was the focus of the *Bologna Process* (1999-2010), later leading to the creation of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA). Among the 'human' elements which are viewed as indispensable in learning resources and student support are tutors, councilors, and other advisers, and *student-centered* learning, involving flexible learning and teaching modes, in order to guide choices of resources and to plan activities. The passage from an *élite* university to an open, massified one has led to the need to favor conditions of true equity among students, not only when they first arrive, but also the possibility - capacities being equal - of reaching the same formative results. Students who face situations such as abandoning their studies, finding difficulty in carrying out certain courses already decided upon, and delays in reaching planned objectives, are all new educational challenges for the 'mass university', which in any case aims at reaching high levels of quality. Difficulties faced by students in organizing their commitments and timings, adapting their study methods and working autonomously, integrating the new context of learning and creating good, significant relations with other students and teachers, are among the main sources of emotional stress and strain, mainly when they first enter their new university environment, which may even lead some students to drop out.

Several Authors have emphasized the crucial situation of integrating new students to the new context of teaching and learning organization, and find that the first year is the most critical in the transition from secondary school to university. In his theory of *student retention* (Tinto, 1988), in

which he treats the ‘conservation’, i.e., the ‘maintenance’ of study courses, he speaks of *persistence*, or the strength and commitment in the face of difficulty, in opposition to failure: this is a key attitude for academic success - an important aspect related to motivation and self-efficacy, which leads students to follow and achieve their aims in spite of obstacles. In Tinto’s theory, but also more generally in the international literature, what makes the difference in the process of integration and favors success is students’ *involvement* and their *engagement* with their decisions: the more students play an active part in the process of transition (in terms of active search for information, integration in the new group of peers, planning their own study courses, adapting their own study methods to those of the new situation, etc.), the more chances they have of success. Their incorporation in the new educational environment is favored by the development of these transversal competences, which are very important during the phases of entry and adaptation.

However, the contrast with drop-outs on one hand, and optimal development of personal potential on the other, requires specific new and flexible supports - unthinkable in the previous university system. These new supports cannot be exported without criticism from one economic-cultural reality to another, from one place to another, from one scientific field to another. Due consideration must be applied to teaching and organizational characteristics, specific learning objectives and actors’ characteristics - first of all, students and their teachers. Actions and strategies must be thought out, planned and ‘tailored’, like clothes which are suited to a certain body and to the circumstances in which they are worn.

By means of an integrated system of actions and actors, orientation (not only on entry, but also *in itinere* and with the prospect of professional choices or further training) and tutoring, as an accompanying educational action, universities are called upon to provide these services throughout their students’ ‘journey’. Orientation and tutoring, applied in the university environment, play an important role in students’ integration. Both aim at preventing drop-outs, slowing of university studies, and helping students make aware choices, supporting them in any critical phases during their studies but also in their personal lives. Tutoring may be understood as a formative space which optimizes all the ‘white spaces’ of academic learning and university teaching. This does not mean that, in the ‘space’ of tutoring, any kind of activity can be chosen; however, during tutoring time, students’ personal, academic and professional needs can be faced, contextualizing and personalizing support activities according to study courses and expected professional outcomes.

### **Main Text**

In the light of many Italian and international experiences, of particular interest is the model called *tutoria formativa de carrera* (Álvarez Pérez, 2002), based on the cognitive-social approach in terms

of self-efficacy, responsibility, and academic commitment, according to preventive and pro-active logic. The model may be briefly defined as the actions carried out by a *teacher tutor* who works on the holistic training of a group of students throughout their university careers: the tutor facilitates students' training and autonomous learning from personal, academic and professional viewpoints. For the Italian university, the *Formative Tutoring Program* (Da Re, 2017) contextualizes the Spanish model, mainly focusing on the first year. Compared to the original model, the work of adaptation, after some years of experimentation, has revealed the need to examine some normative, logistic and organizational differences, different orientation cultures, and the presence and pre-eminence of several tutorial figures besides teachers, i.e., peers and experts. Experience shows the need for careful adaptation to the specific context, its history, culture and traditions. Activities must be thought and achieved in this perspective, and co-constructed within a working group supervised by a program *coordinator*, adapted and carefully monitored to verify pertinence and coherence, and systematically evaluated, not only in terms of process and satisfaction, but also considering the effects on participants' university careers.

The *Formative Tutoring (FT)* involves a series of activities (Da Re, Clerici e Álvarez Pérez, 2016) for first-year degree students: organized into groups, these students meet their teachers every week for tutoring, and 'veteran' students for *peer tutoring*, and they also attend monthly full meetings with the experts of the university for *service tutoring*. This involves the coordinated actions of a team of tutors working on enhancing knowledge and students' insertion in the new educational context, and adaptation to new methods and organization of their studies. The pedagogic model which underlies *FT*, and which is centred on students and their success during training, assumes that both orientation and tutoring are integrated in students' curricular activities to develop transversal competences, and in teachers' didactic work as an expansion of their own professionalism, beyond a university classroom towards tutorial practices. In addition, flanking *teacher tutors*, other students further ahead in their studies accompany the newcomers, introduce them to the academic world, and share with them experiences and strategies which they themselves had found extremely useful.

The *FT* operates at the level of Degree Course - proposed by management (Chairman and Council) - and involves a series of closely related phases. These are:

### *1. Analysis of contexts*

Before starting a new edition of the program, all available information on the new students is collected and analyzed, from administrative sources and *ad hoc* surveys. In particular, it is very useful to have various kinds of information on new students' personal data (gender, place of residence, family's socio-cultural status, etc.), study courses followed before entering university

(type of higher schooling, regularity of career, examination results), results of university entrance exam, and opinions, motivations, expectations and needs about the course now taken.

## 2. *Actors*

- Among teachers - if possible, privileging those who follow teaching activities during the first year - *teacher tutors* are identified (on a voluntary basis).
- Among students enrolled for years after the first year, or from second-level courses with the same study object, peer tutors or *student tutors* are identified (on a voluntary basis or by previous selection).
- Within the cohort of new students, after due information and publication of the initiative, voluntary enrolments in the *FT* are collected and a list of *participants* is compiled.
- The referents of the various university services choose the personnel who will meet students to describe specific activities.
- The composition of the *FT groups* is defined: they have between 15 and 40 students, one or two *student tutors*, and one or two *teacher tutors*. The groups are aggregated by scientific-didactic area to take part in *service tutoring* sessions.

## 3. *Training*

Tutors receive *ex ante* training on their role and on educational relations. Both docents and tutor students participate *in itinere* in periodic meetings with the study course teams, to share training aims and co-construct calendars of activities and proposed activities, starting from available materials in the reference model, but suitably adapting and integrating them according to the specific contexts and competences of the tutoring team.

## 4. *Contents of tutoring groups*

*Tutoring* and *peer tutoring* are carried out in groups, devoted to developing transversal competences (method and ability towards study, participation in university life, capacity for assessment and self-assessment, development of problem-solving strategies, etc.), with the support and coordination of a teacher tutor. Meetings, lasting about one hour, are weekly programmed during teaching hours (excluding holidays and examination times). The proposed activities aim at four training objectives: (i) to facilitate students' adaptation and knowledge of the university institution; (ii) to enhance participation in university life and within the ambit of study courses; (iii) to improve personal knowledge among students and facilitate the learning process; (iv) to develop strategies for academic and professional decision-making.

*Service tutoring* meetings are held monthly and are available to all the tutoring groups of a study course in a scientific field. They are managed by the services staff, who orient and recommend students to exploit the various activities organized by the university: *Right to Study and Tutoring*

*Service, Orientation Service, Secretariat, Language Centre, International Relations, Sports Centre, Libraries, Stage and Career Service, Post lauream.*

In some cases, *tutoring with experts* is provided: i.e., expert training in specific themes of particular importance and/or complexity (e.g., study method when the educational course has particularly critical phases or obstacles which interrupt career regularity).

A *coordinator* supervises this complex mix of actors, activities, calendars and logistics, and he monitors the program through an annual evaluation.

#### 5. *Supporting informatics platform*

By creating spaces devoted to an informatics platform, coordination and updating the various actors in various contexts can be ensured, while materials and instruments for the management and evaluation of activities can be made available.

#### 6. *Monitoring and Assessment*

The assessment design of the *FT* program (Clerici, Da Re, Giraldo, e Meggiolaro, 2019) integrates methods, techniques and quali-quantitative instruments, focusing on the most important aspects for each of the actors. There are four assessment phases:

- The characteristics, opinions, propensions and motivations of both participating and non-participating students can be analyzed, with the final aim of identifying the factors which mostly influence the choice to follow the *FT*. When available, the trends of phenomena of interest that the program organizers wish to modify can be analyzed, too: drop-out rate after the first year and total drop-out rate, percentage of degrees, mean time to take a degree, mean number of ECTS (*European Credit Transfer System*) during course years, and indices of *Student Evaluations of Teaching* (SET).
- *Assessment* of participatory processes (percentage of participants, mean number and type of sessions attended).
- *Evaluation of customer satisfaction* of those involved in the various activities organized by the program. Suitable evaluative techniques and instruments are chosen, e.g., *Pre/post surveys* for students, *Focus groups* for student tutors and teacher tutors, *Delphi panels* for teacher tutors and those dealing with services experts.
- *Evaluation of the effectiveness* of the program on students' careers, with respect to the double aim involved, i.e., reduction of drop-outs and improved academic performance. Once suitable indicators (status of students at the end of the first year of study: regular, delay, change, drop-out, number of ECTS and/or examinations taken during the first year; mean examination marks) for all students in the first year - both participants and non-participants - are created by comparing couples (participants/non-participants). Both are coupled according to their

characteristics by *propensity score matching*. Comparison of the indicators chosen in the two groups yields an estimate of the effectiveness of the program.

#### 7. *Acknowledgement of tutoring role*

*FT* activities are undertaken by docents and student tutors voluntarily and no type of payment is envisaged. However, all those involved will receive certification of the work they have done and the competences they have acquired. Those students, for whom participation is not recognized according to the ECTS, can receive an *open badge* which contributes towards enrichment of their training curricula.

#### 8. *Reporting*

At the end of each year, standardized reports will be compiled by the program *coordinator*, and the results of monitoring and assessments are given to the persons responsible for organizing teaching and learning activities.

#### 9. *Impact of training on FT actors*

The results of experiments in various scientific-didactic contexts shows that the *FT* is an efficient strategy to prevent dispersion and augment good results in university studies: it favors the entry of new students into the university world; helps them to contact their teachers, partly through the precious advice of more ‘expert’ colleagues; accompanies them in the discovery of the enormous range of university services; and, during work in small groups, allows them to enter a reciprocal relational and supportive network among peers and knowing teachers outside teaching setting.

The tutorial experience gained by student tutors develops important transversal capacities - organizational, communicative and relational - including group management and teamwork.

For the docents involved, participation in the *FT* is an occasion to appreciate an orientative-formative role - one in which docents do not only teach students directly, but also aid their holistic development, i.e., personal, social and professional aspects. The *FT* program also enhances the process of the EHEA, in which the docent’s role goes beyond direct action, but sometimes also involves extra-disciplinary action, extending to the development of transversal competences facilitating students’ entry into the university world, aiming at the construction of university careers, with full exploitation of personal and professional capacities, for later positive entry into the world of work. Placing students’ learning at the center is no longer possible without teachers; or rather, it is not possible without the group of teachers (in particular, those engaged in first-year teaching) that should accompany students along the beginning of their academic journey as well as delivering their lectures.

Lastly, university services too, clearly distinct from each other and specialized, must act in three different phases of the development of a university career (entry-orientation, tutoring *in itinere*, exit

and entry into the world of work), as well as those destined for particular types of services (disabilities, counselling, psychological support). For them, *FT* is an opportunity for direct meetings with future users, anticipating and orientating needs, expectations and strategies to resolve the problems which will arise during their university journey.

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