

The Skills of University Students in Educational Settings Assessed by Company Tutors: A Longitudinal Study in Italy

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Abstract

The paper aims at investigating what the fundamental characteristics of a trainee of the Courses of Studies in Education and Training Sciences of the University of Rome La Sapienza are, as identified by the company tutors who evaluate them during the traineeship. The aim is to understand whether trainees are trained to act in educational settings. The analysis of a particular item of the questionnaire addressed to the company tutors, has shown that the trainees in the educational field are well integrated in the institution where they do the traineeship, thanks to the possession of “key skills” that we have deduced from the open responses of the tutors. These skills are also among those most requested ones by the world of work. We conclude that the traineeship is an important formative moment for the professions in the educational field and that it is possible to grasp the necessary link between theory and practice.

Keywords: *Traineeship; University students; Company tutor; Skills, Assessment.*

1. Introduction

The paper aims at providing a brief description of the traineeship path pursued by university students of the Degree Courses in Education and Training Sciences (Bachelor's degree) and in Pedagogy and Education and Training Sciences (Master's degree) of the University of Rome La Sapienza (Italy) and analyze some data relating to the skills that company tutors evaluate in trainees to consider them well integrated in their institution. This is the first study conducted by Sapienza which explores the skills of trainees in the educational field, assessed by company tutors, based on the mixed-methods approach (Morgan, 2007).

Curricular traineeships are reserved for students and undergraduates. The student's study plan includes 12 CFU of traineeship (CFU – Crediti Formativi Universitari – ECTS credits), corresponding to 300 hours for a Bachelor's degree and 6 (CFU) ECTS credits (150 hours) for a Master's degree. Throughout the traineeship, the student is given the opportunity to gain experience in the field, to complete and deepen his theoretical and methodological training and to understand if the educational profession that the trainee wants to undertake is in accordance with their skills and competences (Salerni et al., 2011; Salerni, 2019b). According to the Traineeship Regulations Bachelor students can start a curricular traineeship after reaching 60 ECTS credits, or starting from the second year of the three-year course of studies. The student can undertake traineeship activities in organizations or institutions that have entered into a special Agreement with the University; or the student himself can propose to stipulate an Agreement with an institution that trains and works in professional contexts similar to those to which the course of study is addressed; the Traineeships Commission will then evaluate the proposal. However, students can also request the recognition of a previous traineeship experience, which took place before or during the enrollment in the Course of study and in this case it is obvious the evaluation by the tutors is not required. In curricular traineeships, as required by the relevant legislation, a training project is drawn up for each student relating to the path that the student will have to follow in the work context. The project is formulated thanks to the contribution of the university tutor and the company tutor, or the person who, at the institution, assumes the task of guiding and following the trainee in doing the traineeship. The University covers the insurance costs.

At the end of the traineeship, in order to recognize the activity, the student must obtain a certificate from the institution certifying the duration and type of activities that they have undertaken and receive the Activity Assessment Questionnaire from the company tutor, which is enclosed to the Application for the recognition of the activity; the student then has to write a report on the traineeship activity and also fill in a questionnaire. The entire documentation will be assessed by the Traineeship Commission consisting of some of the teachers of the Degree Course.

2. The assessment of company tutors: the skills of the trainees

Students who undertake the course of studies in Education and Training Sciences (both Bachelor's degree and Master's degree), by means of the traineeship experience in the field, get familiar with the professional figures for which they are trained as well as the different contexts in which educational graduates can operate. By means of the field experience, which must necessarily intertwine with academic training, they discover that the contexts in which they can work are the most disparate: from contexts of care services to educational and training institutions, from health services to cultural ones (Szpunar, 2019). And they learn that the people they can take care of (Mortari, 2015) will be quite diverse: different age groups and life situations: disabled people, immigrants, the elderly, people with addictions, children, prisoners, victims of violence, etc. (Szpunar, 2019). Precisely because of the complexity of the contexts in which the educators operate and the multiplicity of users with which the educators interact, the professional figures trained in the educational sphere have a series of characteristics, the "schematization" of which may seem limited and not very effective (Szpunar, 2019). However, characteristics and skills that seem necessary for those trained to work in socio-educational contexts emerge. Personal qualities such as engagement, motivation and vocation are certainly a prerequisite for these professions (Shulman, 1998). The cognitive, technical, methodological aspects of the socio-educational professions intersect with personal skills that are formed and transformed into a context of "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where the trainee is guided by the company tutor to insert himself in the most appropriate way possible. For this reason, the assessment of the company tutors is presented as an assessment by those who have experience in the field, in a specific professional context, who can guide those who must "be trained in the experience", as "the experience is the purpose and means of education, and education can be considered effective if it manages to generate further experiences of quality, capable of living in the future of the subjects, stimulating growth and progressive existential enrichment" (Salerni, 2019a, p. 12). For this reason, halfway through the traineeship, the university tutor gives the trainee the questionnaire for the company tutor, who can fill it in from that moment until the end of the traineeship and then return it, in a sealed envelope, to the student who will submit it to the university tutor for the final recognition of the activity. In order to collect reliable and non-complacent data, there is no obligation on the tutor to reply, for this reason the number of completed questionnaires does not correspond to the number of students who did the curricular traineeship.

The trainee evaluation questionnaire for the company tutor is composed of 13 questions with the aim of examining the traineeship path taken by the student, the evaluation of the activities, the role of the trainee and satisfaction with the traineeship experience (Salerni et al., 2007).

From 2008 to 2019, 621 questionnaires were completed by company tutors. Figure 1 shows how, over the years, grouped in calendar three-year periods, the tutors who fill in the

questionnaire have definitely increased. As we said, the tutors are not obliged to fill in the questionnaire, but the increase in participation over the years makes us note that there is greater attention in the evaluation of the trainee.

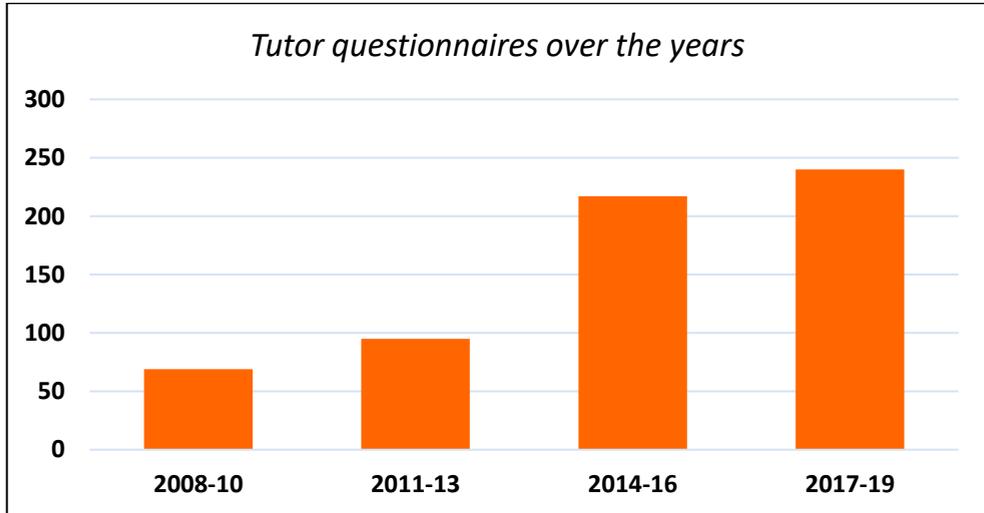


Figure 1. Tutor questionnaires over the years. Source: own elaboration

Among the hypotheses that we have formed about the increase in the number of responses to the questionnaire by tutors there is probably the fact that, over the years, the relationships between the Courses of Study and the organizations where students can do the traineeship have intensified. Consequently, the trust of the institutions in this activity increases and the traineeship is seen not only as a bureaucratic obligation to be fulfilled in order to achieve the academic title. The intensification of relations with companies also allows the development of more targeted training projects with respect to the professional profiles trained and with respect to the work outcomes of the students enrolled in the Courses of Study in the field of educational sciences. This is, moreover, the main objective of the curricular traineeship: to favor the integration between theory and practice (Dewey, 1938).

2.1. Data analysis: Why is the trainee well integrated in the organization?

In these pages we specifically examine Item 3 of the questionnaire in which the tutor is asked: Do you think that the trainee has entered the organization adequately? Why? The first part of the question is a multiple-choice one, with three possible answers: Yes, Partially and No. For 621 questionnaires, 92.6% of the tutors answered Yes; 6.3% answered Partially; the rest answered No, or did not answer. The second part of Item 3 asks the tutors the reasons for this response; or to explain why they believe that the trainee integrated well into the organization. We need to stress that not all the ones who answer the first part of the question add an

explanation. Out of the 621 tutor questionnaires collected over the years, 549 (88%) reported a “positive” reason as to why the trainee was well integrated into their company; so these are the tutors who answered Yes and Partially in the first part of the item. Out of the 549 questionnaires, 5% responded Partially but not all of them provided an explanation. These responses were also analyzed in order to understand the shortcomings highlighted by the tutors. 523 (83%) answered Yes and provided an explanation for the answer. The latter are the main object of our research, from which some dimensions that the tutors consider to be the reason for a good insertion of the trainee in the company have emerged. Figure 2 shows which dimensions emerged from the open responses of the tutors.



Figure 2. Why is the trainee well integrated in the organization?. Source: own elaboration

The analysis of the open responses of the tutors led to the identification of seven “key skills” which according to the tutors explain the good integration into the company. After a first reading of the open answers, we looked for macro-areas that could include a certain type of answers. Once the agreement was reached between us evaluators on the definitions of the macro-areas, we categorized the answers. Each answer can contain multiple explanations or reasons and therefore be classified into different categories. The approach used to codify the textual responses reported by the tutors is the construction of a posteriori categories through the principle of open coding derived from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Trincherro & Robasto, 2019).

The seven skills that emerged by this approach were defined by us as follows:

1. *Understanding context*: ability to understand the company’s mission and to share common objectives, ability to fit into the organization of the institution, adapting to experience, relating correctly to the users. (Examples of answers: *She showed an aptitude to understand*

the different needs of users and to interact accordingly; She showed adaptability and context reading skills; She shared the objectives of the company's activities).

2. *Teamwork*: ability to work in a team and establish excellent relationships with work colleagues. (Examples: *Good relationship with the staff; She collaborate effectively with workers in group activities; She managed to collaborate effectively with the team).*

3. *Engagement*: ability to engage in assigned work and tasks, undertake the proposed activities constantly and show active participation in the activities. (Examples: *She shows a spirit of participation; She actively participated in the activities in which she was engaged; She carried out all the assigned tasks carefully).*

4. *Motivation*: motivation for the work to be done, interest and curiosity developed for the activities. (Examples: *She showed interest in the activities she was involved in; She participated with enthusiasm and curiosity in the proposed activities; He was highly motivated).*

5. *Relational skills*: ability to connect with everyone also showing empathy and relational skills not specific to the context. (Examples: *Good relationships; She showed positive relationship skills; She has established a good relationship with everyone).*

6. *Spirit of initiative*: ability to take the initiative and get involved, also finding original solutions to problems. (Examples: *She participated in daily activities proactively; She showed initiative and a lot of goodwill; She quickly acquired the ability to make a personal contribution).*

7. *Responsibility*: ability to take responsibility for assigned work, also showing autonomy in work and reliability. (Examples: *She performs the assigned tasks responsibly; She has been able to work independently; The trainee was immediately responsible and practical).* In several cases, tutors identify multiple “key competences”, as in the case of examples such as: *Through a very proactive open and predisposed attitude to teaching, she managed to fit both in the team context and in the group of small users* indicating not only *Spirit of initiative*, but also *Teamwork* and *Understanding context*.

Understanding context (50%) is the skill that is most often mentioned by tutors, followed by *Teamwork* (35%) and *Engagement* (19%): we consider this result in line with what can be considered the “vocation” (Shulman, 1998) of the socio-pedagogical educator, since in *Understanding context* we find items that describe the relationship between the trainee and the user as adequate, that is, the trainee was able to understand the context in which they entered, he was able to share the company’s mission and has been able to relate to the users. This also enables us as researchers to reach a definition of a trainee “expert” in this profession. The other dimensions detected are also in line with the requests for skills from the labor market. Excelsior surveys (Unioncamere, 2019, p. 13), on Italy, show that relational

skills will be increasingly required, such as empathy, collaboration, the ability to find original solutions, etc. The dimensions that emerged from the tutors' questionnaires are attributable to the skills listed in the European project ModEs (European Commission, 2014) which emphasizes the need for an adaptation of the educational offer of higher education institutions to requests from the world of work, so that Universities can become engines of change and innovation. From the "voice of the tutors" it would be that there is no danger of a skill mismatch (Unioncamere, 2019), a mismatch between the skills required and those possessed (OECD, 2018).

3. Conclusion

We have seen from the analysis presented above how relevant it is, in the educational sphere, to understand the context in which we intervene and, consequently, to know how to relate adequately to a particular user. A professional in the educational field must know how to connect theoretical knowledge with practice together with the "artistic ability" or that ability to face problems by relying on common sense, one's intuition and trusting one's judgment (Salerni 2019a), without however ever abandoning the scientific method (Dewey, 1929). "The educational situations are unique, unrepeatable, and as such there are no effective and valid procedures for all circumstances as there is no definitive knowledge" (Salerni, 2019b). Faced with such a complex panorama, the task of those who train the "complexity of the experience" in the educational field is certainly to guide the "novice" along a path full of surprises. When we are surprised, something that we do not expect happens and the educator is often faced with surprises precisely because of the multiplicity of contexts and situations in which they work. In order to support and train the trainee in the educational professions, it is important that there is a dialogue between the study experience lived through university exams, also purely theoretical, and the field experience, starting with the traineeship, to help them cross that bridge that connects theory to practice. Analysis of the questionnaire item addressed to company tutors *Why is the trainee well integrated in the organization?* is read precisely from the point of view of the link between theory and practice, to understand if what students learn from theory (formal academic training) is useful and supportive to act in practice (traineeship), considering the point of view of an expert tutor which helps the student to experience in the field.

This research on the skills of the trainees in the educational field will be useful to improve the questionnaire completed by the tutors and to understand if it will be possible to identify a core of skills that characterize those who work in the educational sector and that are shared by the scientific and educational community.

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