

## **Institutional influencers and support for tutoring in a South African higher education institution**

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### ***Abstract***

*Tutoring contributes to student performance. However, the institutional factors that affect tutoring effectiveness have been explored to a limited extent. This study assessed institutional factors affecting tutors' effectiveness and support strategies to improve their function. Interview data among twenty tutors in the Business and Economics faculty in a higher education institution in South Africa was analysed using inductive thematic analysis to output themes emerging from the data. Findings revealed that technical issues, unclear instructions, inadequate resources and training influenced tutors' performance. Regular engagement/communication, tutor workshops, training tailored to specific tutors' needs and challenges, timely provision of tutorial materials, incentives and supporting infrastructure could improve tutors' effectiveness. The findings are beneficial to higher education stakeholders in developing measures to ensure effective tutoring for students. There is scope for future studies on the same topic to elicit views when tutoring is conducted face-to-face as this study was impacted by the covid-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *South Africa; student performance; institutional factors, tutoring, university.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Poor student performance in terms of dropout and failure rates is a problem that policymakers are constantly addressing (Sibanda et al., 2015). The overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students in the United States is 40%, with over 30% of college freshmen dropping out before their sophomore year (Hanson, 2021). This percentage is now hovering at 10.3% in the European Union (Rita, 2020). About 50-60% of first year university students in South Africa drop out (Dyomfana, 2022). Low educational accomplishment results in poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Therefore, emphasis should be placed on designing effective means and providing the necessary resources and infrastructure to assist students who require further assistance (Fluke et al., 2014). Extra help and support are some of the methods utilized to help pupils enhance their academic performance in higher education. An efficient way to improve completion rates and academic performance of students is through tutoring (Guerra-Martin et al., 2017; Karpur, 2018).

Tutoring of different forms, including one-on-one, peer, group, cross-age, and online tutoring via email or discussion forums, entails assistance and support by non-professional teachers in an engaged, intentional, and methodical manner (Mckay, 2016). Traditional tutoring involves a more experienced student working with less experienced students in a planned and organized manner, which could be face-to-face or online; however, the quality/expertise may be lower than a professional teacher's (Mlika et al., 2022). Hence, the efficiency of the strategies utilized in the tutorial process needs to be continually revisited to ensure that the needs of all involved are met. McKay (2016) investigated the relationship between tutor effectiveness and student performance using a pre- and post-test and found that students who attended tutorials improved their grades by 20%. Students' academic competence, conceptual knowledge and understanding are increased with tutors' active facilitative and guiding role (Mlika et al., 2022). Guerra-Martin et al. (2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of formal tutoring to improve the academic performance of at-risk nursing students in Spain using a pre and post-test.

Although studies exist on tutoring effectiveness, limited studies have focused on tutoring in business and economics. Extant studies focused on tutoring effectiveness in nursing (Guerra-Martin et al., 2017), and engineering (Mckay, 2016). Finance-related modules are technical, and several students find them challenging at an academic and professional level of study (Olokoyo & Oyewo, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to evaluate the factors that contribute towards the effectiveness of tutoring in the context of the social sciences. Further, limited studies have investigated institutional influencers from tutors' perspectives. Furthermore, this study was undertaken during the pandemic in 2020; thus, some findings were focused on the experience of tutors during this period. Therefore, the study's objectives were to explore the institutional factors that affect tutoring effectiveness and support strategies to improve

effectiveness. Using thematic analysis of qualitative data, the critical factors and suggested support strategies were identified to aid in improving the learning experience of students.

## **2. Tutoring Effectiveness**

Guerra-Martin et al. (2017) indicated that the effectiveness of a tutoring program could be established by improved student performance. Koehler (2018) also identified the preparedness of the tutor as a measure of effectiveness. Tutoring effectiveness can also be measured by comparison with the desired outcomes and expectations of the lecturer and tutorial program (Bixby et al., 2011). If the desired outcomes of the tutoring program are communicated, the tutor can perform as expected. On this basis, this study reflects on how tutors performed in their role of assisting lecturers and students to improve teaching and learning.

Mlika et al. (2023) evaluated the effect of tutors' expertise and active guidance on students' learning using meta-analysis. Holiday (2012) assessed the test scores of students before and after tutoring; however, focusing on peer tutoring. McKay's (2016) study assessed the impact of tutors on first-year academic performance in Geography at a South African university. Therefore, although research on the effectiveness of tutoring has been undertaken, it is not as widespread as the use of tutoring (Holiday, 2012). This research is therefore important because strategies can be developed to improve tutoring effectiveness and in turn student performance.

## **3. Institutional Factors affecting Tutoring Effectiveness**

Factors affecting the effectiveness of tutors include the materials and time available for preparation (Koehler, 2018). The more time a tutor has to prepare for a tutorial and having access to the material required for preparation all contribute to the effectiveness of a tutor. In addition, a supportive environment through providing institutional infrastructure and support in various forms such as training and communication helps tutors to excel in their function (Joubert & Snyman, 2018). Thorburn (2021) identified that the online learning environment was fraught with connectivity issues and indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant connectivity issues in South Africa and worldwide. Joubert and Snyman (2018) stated that restricted access to online platforms, administrative problems, limited or no interaction between lecturers and tutors, inability to make use of online platforms and insufficient training are some of the institutional factors that restrict the effectiveness of tutors in an online environment. Yusuf and Ahmad (2020) added that a lack of necessary tools and equipment for learning, and inadequate infrastructure in terms of computers affect tutors. Further, tutoring effectiveness may be hampered by the tutorial delivery, what materials or medium used and subject technicality (Currey et al., 2015).

## **4. Research Methods**

A qualitative interpretive approach, where a social phenomenon is understood from the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher, was used (Cohen et al., 2007). Interviews were used to obtain in-depth information about tutors' opinions, beliefs and experiences (Rahman, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used as they allowed flexibility and augmentation with follow-up questions, probes and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The research was undertaken in 2021 using virtual engagements on Microsoft Teams and Whatsapp, after institutional ethical clearance. Convenience sampling was used to identify tutors from four departments including Finance, Economics, Management, and Accounting (Barratt, 2009). These were initially identified and approached through the educators they worked with. Willing and available participants were then interviewed. Twenty tutors comprising twelve females and eight males participated. Most (eight) of them were in their second year of tutoring; 11 were students at the Honours (fourth) level of study.

Data analysis was undertaken using inductive thematic analysis to detect emerging patterns and analyze, organize, characterize, and report identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process was as follows: familiarisation and developing potential themes, initial coding, searching and reviewing potential themes, categorization, consensus-seeking and writing.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

### ***5.1. Factors affecting Tutoring Effectiveness***

The following factors were identified as institutional factors influencing the performance of tutors during the period investigated:

Materials available for preparation - The availability of materials for preparation is critical in the tutor being effective in performing their role. This includes getting access to memos and explanations, textbooks and other materials to facilitate preparation before the tutorial sessions. Tutors explained: *"They made sure that we had all the resources that we needed to conduct the tutorials; discussing the work chart at the beginning of the week; the materials that we use for tutorials and practicals, getting papers, the markers; The memo should be clear; I think they should give us the memos and explanations"*.

Tutor training - Tutor training is a vital function provided by the university to enlighten them on tutoring strategies, handling challenges, and treating students. *"They once provided some training and provide proper support; tutor training, because you learn how to improve; The training at the beginning of the year is worthwhile; effective; sometimes, you think you're being professional when you are being unprofessional, that training helps"*.

Communication from lecturers and head tutors - Poor communication was identified by tutors as a factor that affects them in performing their duties, for example, unclear and untimely

instructions and lack of communication of expectations. As a result, delays in marking assignments were experienced: "... clearer instructions on tasks upfront; not being able to communicate with the lecturer to know that this is what he or she taught." On the contrary, weekly communications and meetings with head tutors were productive and helpful: "... with the head tutor, it was really good, we had meetings on Mondays which helped us prepare; discuss what we will do that week and if you have any questions, you ask."

**Technical and infrastructure support** - Technical issues were faced by tutors as they conduct their tutorials, for example, data, connectivity, and difficulty with the learning platforms. Data was allocated by the institution; however, there were delays in the process, which sometimes affected how tutorials were done. "Data allocation, it began timely. When the lockdown started it was delayed, but eventually, it came through". Some tutors also reported lacking suitable devices to conduct the tutorials; they used tablets and phones, which do not have the screen share function. Yusuf and Ahmad (2020) also identified factors such as lack of necessary tools and equipment for learning, and inadequate infrastructure in terms of computers as factors affecting tutoring effectiveness. Others were located in areas where connectivity was poor: "WIFI, network, by the time you come back you find that some students are gone". This aligned with Thorburn's (2021) findings that the pandemic exposed significant connectivity issues in South Africa and worldwide. Further, some tutors were unable to effectively use online platforms and applications, for example, Blackboard collaborate and Zoom. "... others do not know how to share screen." These challenges were also identified by Joubert and Snyman (2018) who amongst other factors, indicated that the training that tutors received on how to navigate online platforms was limited and thus should be improved. In addition, the lengthy administrative process of appointments for remuneration was highlighted as a problem. This deviates time for learning as tutors spend time filling out forms and following up on appointments.

## ***5.2. Towards improving Tutors' Effectiveness***

The strategies recommended were mainly related to the online learning environment in which the tutors were operating during the lockdown. These include:

**More frequent communication** - Information flow from the lecturer is critical to the effectiveness of a tutor as they clarify what the tutor is supposed to do. As reported, "I would suggest that the department is more involved with tutors". Improving tutor-lecturer relationships through meetings and frequent engagements was suggested, a view supported by Joubert and Snyman (2018), who found that tutors' feelings of isolation, and limited or no interaction between educators and tutors were some of the factors that affected the effectiveness of tutors.

**More support with the relevant infrastructure and resources** - The provision of more materials could assist in the preparation for tutorial sessions: "Possibly provide some devices; or

*another application that allows us to use the screens of our phones because Blackboard only supports the use of laptops or tablets; I think lecturers can just try to offer more support to tutors with the material".* Further, the provision of devices to facilitate the use of these platforms, and recording tutorial sessions in case of network issues were suggested, as supported by Yusuf and Ahmad (2020). Additionally, availing materials (timeously) for preparation was highlighted as they need materials like textbooks, memorandum of activities, class notes, and slides, as supported by Olugbenga (2020); they have to be provided with high-quality instruction material to assist in preparing for executing tutorial sessions in the appropriate language of instruction.

Training and workshops/seminars - Receiving more training so that the tutors can get the best out of the various platforms was highlighted: *"Tutors should be taught more on how to use Blackboard, create the whiteboard, and navigate that, so that we know how to share a screen, and attach documents."* Tutors should undergo continuous training, as supported by Joubert and Snyman (2018). Further, workshops for tutors would be beneficial. Holding meetings and briefings more frequently can keep tutors updated on the developments within the tutoring landscape. *"What should be done is to have workshops; I think it is time to start incorporating more of the courses and training that you have to do for online learning because if you look critically, at the courses we did, they were based on the in-person basis of learning and looking at the knowledge now, it is outdated; training that has to do with this [covid-19] change"*.

Incentives for tutor role - Tutors can perform their role more effectively if they are provided with incentives that contribute to their motivation. Tutors at the university are remunerated for the services they render. One tutor noted: *"... incentives like money, that matters; tutors may be more willing to work"*. This view was shared by Jayachandran (2014), which opined that one of the reasons for low quality of education in developing countries is that teachers lack strong performance incentives. Therefore, remuneration can incentivise tutors to perform well.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study sought to identify institutional factors influencing tutorial effectiveness within higher education in South Africa. Results from interviews revealed that the online environment was not easy to navigate. Inadequate communication and support with material resources impeded tutors' progress. Regular engagement/communication of the lecturers' intentions, workshops and training, timely provision of tutorial materials, and supporting infrastructure could improve tutors' effectiveness. The study adds to the existing literature on tutoring in higher education, and in particular, factors affecting tutoring effectiveness. The findings will be beneficial to higher education policymakers and authorities in designing

effective tutorial and infrastructure structures to support the function within institutions. The structure of the tutorial system should be remodelled to ensure tutors work in the most conducive environment. Further studies could include more diverse representation with more faculties to see if different views will be elicited. Other studies could also be conducted to reflect tutors' experiences during face-to-face learning as these might yield different results from the current one conducted during the covid-19 pandemic; thus, influenced by the online learning environment. Further, studies could consider other aspects of tutoring such as personal attributes, and the effectiveness of various tutoring strategies and techniques.

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