

TUTORS' VOICE: FUTURE DIRECTIONS?

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Little did I guess when I started tutoring at the University of Waikato in 2012 and later when I was given the role of Tutor Support person at TDU last July, that there was no institutionally required formal training for those who choose to work as tutors, sessional assistants, lab demonstrators or similar titles. I was coming from a strong teaching and research background as I previously held the position of senior lecturer at several international and public universities overseas, which meant I had the skills, knowledge and experience required to tutor when I was given a tutoring role. Later, in the course of speaking to tutors and listening to their voices across several meetings and workshops in the past months as part of my teaching developer position at TDU, I came to realise that tutors vary immensely not only in their perceptions of a 'tutor's role', but also in the level of teaching experience and communication skills they are required to have to take up the job. Their positions also differ in terms of the support provided for them by course conveners and departments across the University. In the past months, I have also explored the tutor-convenor relationship and working protocol in terms of support and advice tutors would need and are actually offered, and was not surprised to arrive at a similar degree of variation in what is happening across programmes and faculties at the University of Waikato. What follows is based on my observation in the last few years and also conversations with various individuals across the University in the past months.

A simple fact is that unlike many other tertiary institutions, taking up a tutoring position at the University of Waikato does not require compulsory undertaking of any particular formal trainings once appointed. It is good to know that some form of training is required by some departments or programmes. There are also usually one or two department-based sessions or workshops for new tutors to attend at the beginning of the educational year or each semester. Another concern is the absence of a formal application process across the University to hire tutors through a systematic selection process where interviews and evaluation of teaching capabilities and skills are involved. Do we need to think about formalising the training as well as selection process for tutors rather than trying to justify this situation by saying that 'there is always advice available for tutors if they need it'? Another challenge raised by some departments is the difficulty of finding appropriate tutors.

In many cases, becoming a tutor is relatively simple as there is no systematic process involved in many departments. A person may demonstrate interest in tutoring to the programme coordinator or course convenor, or be invited to tutor on the basis of good academic grades. In other cases, Masters or doctoral students are chosen as tutors and/or sessional assistants. The potential tutors may be invited to submit a CV to the programme administrator. Tutors may be confirmed before the start of a paper or even once a paper has started because of unexpected number of students enrolled on the paper.

It is not surprising to find out that the training and workshops the Teaching Development Unit offer for tutors is not a requirement in order to be a tutor at the University of Waikato. In some cases, departments require or offer their tutors introductory workshops on tutoring which is always quite minimal. The departmental office may advise their tutors to go for the Tutors' Day (held usually once or twice a year before the beginning of the semester), or a tutor may choose to participate out of curiosity, passion, or perhaps fright (which is a natural feeling in such circumstances) once they have been allocated a tutorial. A tutor is expected to come out at the end of the Tutor's Day feeling like a tutor! Other supportive training services for tutors offered by the TDU have a very low uptake. They are always there if someone feels the need to go to them. However, given the little experience in tutoring or thinking pedagogically, tutors may not recognise the usefulness or value of such support and the ways such services can effectually be used for the benefit of students.

There are indubitably tutors who feel competent in carrying out their tutoring role and responsibilities but there are also many others who tutor for one semester and decide not to continue, because it is a demanding workload given the meagre pay. Or else they just basically tutor the ways they have been tutored, with a variation, of course, in terms of content knowledge, passion, enthusiasm, experience, and interpersonal and communication skills and capabilities.

Our students do not know to what extent tutors can facilitate their learning, and our tutors may not be aware of the effectiveness of their tutoring practice and the impact they can have on students' learning experience. It seems evident that in the neoliberal educational system, where research and PBRF are the buzzwords, tutors may sometimes be seen as time machines who can free up time to be used by academics to carry out what they may perceive as important work for the education of future generations.

As we contemplate the current situation and existing drawbacks, where we do not have formal tutoring recruitment procedures as well as any required compulsory training to be taken up by tutors (both new and existing ones), it is imperative to be cognisant of core principles about teaching, learning and assessment that we have learned over the years. Tutors provide a fundamental and supportive link between lecturers and students. Tutors play an integral role in facilitating student learning, in providing a safe learning environment where an atmosphere of creativity and joy can contribute to a self-directed learning process. We need to be mindful of students whose lives and future we influence in many visible and invisible ways. It is hoped that the arrival of the new VC at the University and consequently the new appointment of the PVC for Tertiary Teaching and Learning, can facilitate change in the tutoring space for the benefit of both tutors and students in keeping with the University of Waikato's stated mission: 'the future is calling and we've answered that call'.