# Reconceptualization of Tutoring at the University of the Free State: Report of a Workshop

## Introduction

As part of helping to ensure student success, the University of the Free State (UFS) has been offering tutorials to students in several academic programmes. Various models and approaches have been adopted in different faculties, while the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has made available the Academic Student Teaching and Excellence Programme (A\_STEP) to all Faculties in the hope of bettering student learning and throughput in potential ‘at-risk’ modules on the UFS campus. Although the objectives of tutorials depend on the requirements within individual programmes and faculties, use of tutorials has benefits for academics, tutors, and students alike. Statistics of learning performance at UFS confirm the benefits to students, with those students participating in tutorials typically outperforming their peers who have not attended any tutorials – and participation in five or more tutorial sessions has been demonstrated to improve performance even further. Equally, though, for tutors, participation is a valuable academic experience, helping to reinforce key disciplinary knowledge and develop lifelong learning skills as they taken on the role of educators and learn to manage the dynamics of diverse tutorial groups.

Given these benefits, CTL decided to arrange a Tutorial Reconceptualization Workshop, which took place on 19th April, 2016, with participants including representatives of CTL, Faculty Teaching and Learning Managers, and, importantly, tutors themselves (see Appendix B for a list of participants). The workshop had the following objectives (see Appendix A for a detailed agenda):

1. Share emerging good practices in the use of tutorials at the UFS;
2. Discuss most effective range of educational uses for tutorials at the UFS, taking account of potential for different needs across different academic disciplines and types of programmes;
3. Explore implications of new language policy for tutorials at UFS;
4. Agree on common parameters to govern use of tutorials at UFS and appropriate policy/ regulatory/strategic instruments to codify these uses;
5. Agree on next steps to follow in establishing institutional consensus on use of tutorials for teaching and learning at UFS.

The workshop was opened by Dr Francois Strydom, Director of CTL, after which Dr Lis Lange, Vice Rector: Academic, placed the discussion within a wider educational context. She also noted the importance of tutorials within the context of the newly approved UFS language policy. Following this, participants were provided detailed insight into current tutorial practices, with presentations from Evodia Motsokobi (A\_Step Programme), Jackie Storer (AFS Humanities), and Corlia Janse Van Vuuren (EMS). This provided a platform for detailed group discussion on tutorials at UFS and how they might most effectively be used as part of the overall teaching and learning strategy of the institution.

What follows below is a summary of the key arising issues from the workshop presentations and discussions. The report does not seek to summarize all of the workshop proceedings, but rather presents a discussion document on the future role of tutorials at the UFS. Workshop participants agreed unanimously that there will ultimately be a requirement for a policy on tutoring at the UFS, so issues are presented below and questions posed with a view to working towards ultimately establishing a Tutoring Policy for the university.

## Reconceptualizing Tutorials at the UFS

### The Experience of Tutorials at UFS

Tutorials play an important role in enhancing the educational experience of students at the UFS, both for those who are tutors and those who are tutored. In addition, they provide clear support to academics in those programmes where they are used. Benefits identified include the following:

* For academics, tutorials:
  + Are a cost-effective way of providing student support to all students in a module/programme;
  + Enable establishment of smaller class sessions;
  + Provide reliable feedback on student progress and problems while the module is being taught;
  + Where structured activities are created for tutorials, limit discrepancies and provide all students with an equal opportunity to gain knowledge and skills.
* For tutors, tutorials:
  + Provide a form of employment;
  + Deepen disciplinary knowledge by requiring tutors to teach material they learned in their undergraduate programmes;
  + Support acquisition of important generic skills that are useful in the workplace, as tutors learn how to teach others, how to communicate more effectively, and how to manage group dynamics (especially amongst diverse groups).
  + Offer possible career development opportunities, especially for those considering a future career in higher education.
* For students, tutorials:
  + Bridge the gap between lecturers and themselves;
  + Deepen understanding of course material;
  + Offer opportunities to tackling learning challenges in a safe, small group environment, while allowing students who are shy to engage with other students in small academically focused groups;
  + Provide access to communities of learning, with both their peers and their tutors, thereby helping to build social cohesion on UFS campuses;
  + Offer exposure to new ideas and different ways of thinking about issues raised in modules;
  + Increase retention and the self-esteem;
  + Provide exposure to a diverse groups of students and a potentially multi-lingual environment, with – in some cases – opportunities for students to receive at least some tutoring in their home language and thereby contextualize content both in their mother tongue and again in English;
  + Lead to demonstrable improvements in learning performance, as measured in learning achievement gains experienced by students participating in tutorials at UFS;
  + Can be used to give those who are differently abled a sense of belonging and allow them a safe space to build their social skills.

Of course, challenges have been experienced in the use of tutorials. These include the following:

* Sometimes tutorials are perceived as an ‘add-on’, rather than as a key part of the teaching and learning experience.
* In a few instances, academics may become over-reliant on tutorials and tutors to provide student support, thereby abdicating some of their responsibilities for teaching and learning on their modules.
* Where effort is put into creating structured activities for tutors for each week, this is time-consuming and tutors do not always follow the structured activities.
* There is a challenge for tutors in balancing the demands of tutoring and those of postgraduate study (although the decision to set an upper limit on time that can be spent tutoring has helped to alleviate this).
* There have been challenges experienced in finding enough suitable venues for tutorials, as well as the necessary ICT infrastructure (Internet, etc) in those venues.
* Scheduling of tutorials has sometimes led to timetabling clashes for students.
* Given that tutors are drawn from postgraduate students, turnover is high and there is thus an ongoing need for orientation and professional development.
* Linked to the above, there is a risk that tutors replicate teaching and learning problems that they have encountered themselves as students (‘we teach how we were taught’).

There have also been efforts to introduce online tutorials, which have the advantage that they can accommodate larger numbers of students and help tutors to develop additional useful skills, particularly in the area of electronic communication (a skill that is increasingly important in the world or work) and for students, who are also required to develop their own computer literacy and electronic communication skills. However, the experience of online tutorials indicates that they provide fewer opportunities for student interaction with tutors and reduce the developmental benefits for tutors (as they receive reduced tutor development opportunities). This suggests that online tutorials are most likely beneficial only for specific types of module/content and student support.

### Requirements for Successful Implementation of Tutorials in Future

To build on the successes achieved to date with use of tutorials and to tackle identified challenges, the following are key requirements:

1. Tutoring should be governed by a clear institutional policy on tutoring. This policy should be integrated with the institution’s wider teaching and learning strategy, as well as faculty-level teaching and learning policies. It should set out clearly the expectations of academics, teaching and learning managers, tutors, and students. However, the policy should provide for a range of tutoring practices between different faculties and modules, rather than attempting to enforce a one-size-fits-all or a compulsory model of tutoring. The policy should define clearly the educational limits of tutoring, while seeking to ensure that tutorials do not come to be seen as a replacement for formal educational activities in modules and programmes.
2. Once a policy is developed, everybody – academics, tutors, and students – should be regularly informed about its contents.
3. Tutorials should also be seen as helping to give practical expression to the university’s language policy, though strong caution was expressed about the limits of this and an attendant risk of placing too great a weight of expectation on tutorials and the roles they can fulfil. Any policy should describe clearly the limits of tutorials and the roles they can play in both student support and linguistic diversity on UFS campuses. Tutorials should promote multilingualism within the tutorial space, in a way in which home languages are not necessarily viewed as a medium of instruction, but rather as resources that aids students’ transition to a uniform medium of instruction.
4. Strong emphasis should be placed on the academic benefits of tutoring to tutors themselves (within the context of tutorials having strong potential to create communities of learning), with consideration given to how best, on a faculty-by-faculty and programme-by-programme basis, to make this an integral part of the overall experience of postgraduate students at UFS.
5. Tutoring practices should move away from lecture-type sessions and rather focus on interaction and group discussion, thereby supplementing formal lectures. Tutors should be taught a range of different teaching and learning methods that they might use in tutorials, including techniques such as peer teaching, code switching, mother-tongue mirroring, sandwich techniques, and back-chaining, as well as strategies to support and include students with different learning preferences and needs.
6. An important role for tutorials is to integrate life skills and academic literacy skills with academic content so that students become independent learners. Consequently, tutors should be taught how to avoid creating environments of ‘learned helplessness’, and students should be helped to understand that tutorials do not replace their personal responsibilities for completing the necessary independent studies to succeed in their academic careers.
7. Ideally, tutorial sessions should be scaffolded, which suggests a requirement, in most cases, for careful design of the purpose and structure of tutorial sessions, within the broader framework of the overall module. Likewise, students should be actively encouraged to come to tutorials well prepared so that sessions focus on areas where they are struggling.
8. Given the above, a structured programme of ongoing professional development is required for tutors, which takes account of the reality that there is ongoing, relatively rapid turnover of tutors from year to year. To compensate for lack of continuity in tutors due to use of postgraduate students as tutors, a core of permanently employed staff is required that can support new tutors.
9. Given the respective merits of face-to-face and online tutoring, there may be value in combining both forms of tutoring in tutoring activities. Online tutoring can also be a useful supplement for students who struggle to attend all face-to-face tutorials either due to scheduling conflicts or transport problems. Guidelines are thus needed to outline the university’s overall approach to online tutoring.
10. Clear criteria should be defined to help to make decisions about which modules will benefit most from use of tutorials. Linked to this should be clear processes to identify what students need and want from tutorials on a module-by-module basis.

### What Are the Key Arising Issues?

Drawing from the above is a set of arising issues, which will require careful consideration as a tutoring policy is drafted and consultation undertaken before its final approval. The list below is by no means comprehensive, but provides a basis for further discussion and development:

1. Should a tutoring policy form part of a wider academic support policy? If so, what else does it need to cover?
2. What should the links be between tutoring and the UFS mentoring programme?
3. Can tutorials play a role in promoting inter-disciplinary understanding? If so, what should it be?
4. What can be done to make scheduling of tutorials easier and to reduce timetabling conflicts (taking into account that evening and weekend tutorials can be problematic for many students to attend)?
5. What can be done to make tutorial venues more student-friendly and accessible to differently abled students?
6. Are selection criteria for tutors necessary (taking into account the potential educational benefits of postgraduate students functioning for at least some time as tutors)?
7. Understanding the limits of tutorials, what role can they play in supporting linguistic diversity and helping students to use their home language to learn, while also supporting them to make the transition, where required, to using English as the medium of instruction?
8. What needs to be done to ensure that all key stakeholders (senior management, academics, teaching and learning managers, students, etc) participate in and support tutorials and how should this be reflected in a policy?
9. What specific policy provisions are required to accommodate students who are differently abled in tutorial sessions?
10. What is a suitable blend of face-to-face and online tutoring for different faculties and what needs to be in place to support a blended approach to tutoring where it can be useful? What computer literacy training will be needed for students to participate in online tutoring?
11. What financial and other resources will be necessary to implement an institutional tutoring policy?
12. What is the approach of other universities, both within and beyond South Africa, to tutorials and tutoring policies, and how best can UFS learn from these experiences as it formulates its own policy?

# Appendix A: Workshop Participants’ List

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
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# Appendix B: Workshop Agenda

## Workshop Objectives

1. Share emerging good practices in the use of tutorials at the UFS
2. Discuss most effective range of educational uses for tutorials at the UFS, taking account of potential for different needs across different academic disciplines and types of programmes
3. Explore implications of new language policy for tutorials at UFS
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5. Agree on next steps to follow in establishing institutional consensus on use of tutorials for teaching and learning at UFS

| **Session** | **Time** | **Focus** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Session 1 | 09:00 – 09:30 | *Welcome and Introductions*   * Workshop opening (Dr Francois Strydom, Director of CTL) * Setting the Scene: The Role of Tutorials in Driving the UFS Vision for Teaching and Learning (Prof. Lis Lange, Vice Rector: Academic) * Overview of workshop: Neil Butcher, facilitator |
| Session 2 | 09:30 – 10:45 | *Possible Roles for Tutorials*   * Plenary presentations on cases of best practice in use of tutorials at UFS:   + Evodia Motsokobi (AStep Programme)   + Jackie Storrar (AFS Humanities)   + Corlie van Vuuren (EMS) * Plenary Q&A and introductory brainstorming on issues associated with use of tutorial at UFS |
|  | 10:45 – 11:00 | Break for Refreshments |
| Session 3 | 11:00 – 13:00 | *Defining an approach to use of tutorials at UFS*   * Small group discussions, focused on the following key questions:   + What should the role/s of tutorials at UFS be moving forward?   + What methodologies should be adopted within tutorials for them to be most educationally effective?   + How can we ensure that use of tutorials does not inadvertently create inequitable access to learning opportunities for students?   + What are the requirements (including resource and training requirements) to adopt identified approaches to tutorial use?   + What are risks inherent in implementing different use for tutorials? How can these risks be most effectively managed? |
|  | 13:00 – 13:45 | Break for Lunch |
| Session 4 | 13:45 – 16:00 | *Developing an institutional approach*   * Groups report back on results of group discussions * Plenary discussion session on common issues arising from group discussions, to provide a basis for achieving institutional consensus * What additional consultations are needed with academics and students? * Agree on suitable instruments/s (policy, guidelines, framework, strategy?) to ensure most effective use of tutorials at UFS? * What processes of change management are needed to effect these changes? |
| Session 6 | 16:15 – 16:30 | *Workshop Closure*   * What are the immediate next steps? * Who is responsible for different tasks? |