CHAPTER 16

'TUTORING IS FUN'

A STUDY INVESTIGATING TUTOR MOTIVATION

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Introduction

In the global higher education context, diminishing resources, growing student numbers, larger class sizes and a pressure on academic staff time, are cited as some of the reasons for the increase in use of tutors in undergraduate education (Park, 2002). The reality of reduced resources often requires departments to fulfil the dual requirement of improving the quality of teaching, while 'doing more with less' (Topping, 1996:321). In response to this challenge, tutorial programmes have, in many instances, become a vital part of the academic support structure of undergraduate modules (Barrington, 1999).

The tutors who work on these tutorial programmes are usually young graduate students who are enthusiastic, yet have no formal teaching experience (Brailsford, Bartlett-Trafford, Bates & Mead, 2008). Contract university tutors have been characterised as 'departmental donkeys' (Park & Ramos, 2002), are often seen to be over-worked and undervalued and often bear the brunt of the undergraduate teaching load (Brailsford *et al.*, 2008).

While the range of educational advantages for students participating in tutorial programmes is well researched, the benefits of tutoring, as experienced by the tutors themselves, should not be underestimated. Peer tutoring requires tutors to, for example, re-acquaint themselves with knowledge of their discipline they have already acquired, which may have a positive impact on their own studies (Topping, 1996). Peer tutoring, often promoted by the mantra 'teach once, learn twice', is characterised by 'specific role-taking as tutor or tutee, with high focus on curriculum content and usually also on clear procedures for interaction, in which participants receive generic and/or specific training' (Topping, 2005:632).

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The pedagogical advantages of peer tutoring for the tutee include the following: ‘more active, interactive and participative learning, immediate feedback, swift prompting, lowered anxiety with correspondingly higher self-disclosure, and greater student ownership of the learning process’ (Topping, 1996:325). In tutorials where the model of peer tutoring is employed, students have the opportunity to make errors and to be corrected by their peers or their tutor. Since students tend to see the tutor as one of their peers, they usually feel more confident approaching their tutor with their academic concerns than discussing these with their lecturers (McClure, 2007).

‘Good tutors are worth their weight in gold’ (Brailsford *et al.*, 2008:7) and sourcing good, motivated students from the pool of potential tutors is a challenge, since it is not always apparent what factors motivate students to become involved as tutors in tutorial programmes. This study therefore investigates the factors that motivate students to become tutors in the Economics Department at Stellenbosch University (SU).

Theoretical perspectives

In order to understand the factors motivating tutors to participate in tutorial programmes and how their effective involvement and level of motivation affect the success of these programmes, it is necessary to explore principles of motivation and to highlight variables that can impact on the motivation of tutors.

Principles of motivation in the tutor context

According to Greenberg and Baron (1993:114) motivation can be described as ‘the set of processes that arouse, direct, and maintain human behaviour toward attaining a goal’. Although a person’s motivation cannot be observed and measured directly, motivation is reflected in human behaviour (Holden, 1990).

In social psychology, motivation is often divided into two categories: either being ‘extrinsic’ or ‘intrinsic’ in nature (Bateman & Crant, n.d.; Fresko, 2001; Holden, 1990). According to Holden (1990), extrinsic motivation is influenced by factors such as the environment people work in and financial reward. Extrinsically motivated tasks are performed for the purpose of receiving some form of reward, such as monetary remuneration or acknowledgment for completing a specific task. Intrinsically motivated tasks, on the other hand, are not performed for the purpose of receiving an external reward. Instead, these tasks are performed because they are rewarding experiences in themselves (Bateman & Crant, n.d.).

In the tutoring context, intrinsic and extrinsic motives may explain why students decide to become tutors, but not all motives apply to each tutor equally. A study conducted by Dickinson (1999:223) lists the following possible reasons for volunteering to become a tutor:

- ▣ I thought it would increase my chances of getting a job.
- ▣ I wanted to do something to help the community.
- ▣ I wanted experience of teaching as I am considering it as a career.
- ▣ My friends were doing it and they said it was good fun.

- ▣ I wanted to improve my interpersonal skills.
- ▣ I thought it would help me get to grips with my own subject.

The key benefits of gaining teaching and work experience and improving interpersonal skills are echoed by Sheehan *et al.* (cited in Park, 2004) who suggest that successful tutors have, or can develop, a diverse array of pertinent skills. These include being familiar with what is expected of undergraduate (especially first-year) students, having the ability to present material in a creative, but relevant manner and being able to encourage productive class discussion. Skills that can become useful once they enter the formal labour market include gaining teaching experience, becoming more confident in public speaking, conducting small-group discussions and learning to work as a team (Park, 2002). This is particularly important because small businesses are not always able to train graduates after employment – they therefore require graduates who have already developed the necessary skills for employment (Powell-Williams, Pierce & Fry, n.d.).

Variables impacting on the motivation of tutors

A number of factors affect the motivational levels of tutors in their tutoring task. Limited work autonomy, the extent of departmental support, financial remuneration and the impact of tutoring on the tutors' own studies are aspects that will be explored next to determine to what extent they influence the behaviour of tutors.

Limited work autonomy

Drawing on earlier work, Beyth-Marom, Hapraz-Gorodeisky, Bar-haim and Godder (2006:2) speak of 'relationships between core job characteristics, critical psychological states and their impact on several affective, motivational and performance outcomes'. This work suggests that jobs where employees are able to exercise various skills and abilities, to complete identifiable tasks, to understand the significance of the job, to be creative and autonomous and who receive feedback, leads to favourable results in terms of satisfaction, work motivation and work performance (Beyth-Marom *et al.*, 2006).

Beyth-Marom *et al.* (2006) suggest that since tutors do not have much input into course material, assignments, assessments and sometimes also tutorial question sets, they have very little work autonomy. This could potentially lower tutors' work motivation which could have a negative impact on tutors' enthusiasm and the quality of their teaching (Park, 2002). Park and Ramos (2002), however, argue that although some tutors complain about having little work autonomy, being given limited responsibilities prevents tutors from becoming over-burdened with their tasks and ensures that academic quality is maintained.

The extent of departmental support

Luft, Kurdziel, Roehrig and Turner (2004) acknowledge that while tutors play a vital role in higher education, they are unlikely to achieve their potential without adequate instructional support. According to Azevado (1990) the departmental support structure that is offered on tutorial programmes consists of various elements, including

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training workshops and feedback on teaching by peers and faculty. Some academic departments, however, do not provide sufficient support to tutors. In such cases, no feedback is provided on tutors' teaching skills and they do not receive an opportunity to have their tutorials evaluated by academic staff (Park & Ramos, 2002). This often leads to tutors feeling neglected and not considered a valued part of the department by whom they are employed (Whitecross & Mills, 2003). Luft *et al.* (2004) suggest that tutors should be evaluated on their teaching skills on a regular basis by both their fellow tutors and the department in which they are involved. Furthermore, tutors who are not effectively equipped to engage in teaching activities may have 'an overblown confidence' in their abilities, and departments need to help tutors develop these essential teaching skills, abilities and knowledge (Luft *et al.*, 2004:214).

The Centre for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois (2005:3) states that tutors are more likely to be effective when they receive comprehensive training and ongoing support. In addition, in order to ensure that first-year students receive adequate support, it is crucial to appoint tutors who have a sound academic knowledge, are motivated to help students and have proficient presentation and communication skills. However, having sound knowledge of a discipline is not sufficient to provide tutors with confidence to fulfil their roles as tutors (McClure, 2007). It is therefore important to include an effective training course to prepare tutors for the challenges involved in their teaching¹ tasks.

Financial remuneration

While tutoring provides work experience to tutors, financial remuneration is another benefit of participating in programmes of this nature (Park, 2002:53). Concerns are raised about the rate of pay, given the workload involved as well as different payment structures used between departments (Park, 2002).

However, Park and Ramos (2002) claim that although some tutors are anxious about the transitory nature of their contract, their willingness to help students may overshadow these concerns. When tutors' decisions to become involved in a tutorial programme are driven by intrinsically motivated factors, they are generally willing to spend more hours on the tutorial programme than they are remunerated for:

... [i]t remains the case that many [graduate teaching assistants] are happy with their lot, because to them 'the bigger picture' (gaining useful teaching experience and transferable skills, contact with bright students, closer academic relationships with course leaders and so on) is more important than just workload payment and status. (Park & Ramos, 2002:53)

The impact of tutoring on the tutors' own studies

Tutoring tasks usually involve both contact time with students and non-contact time – time that is spent on preparing for tutorials, attending meetings and training sessions with other tutors and communicating with students after tutorials, for example. In

¹ 'Teaching' in the context of the tutorial programme refers to the facilitating role of tutors in explaining concepts and working through question sets with students.

research conducted by Park (2002), tutors expressed concern that the amount of time they spend on non-contact time exceeds the time spent on teaching the students (Park, 2002:57). This issue becomes particularly problematic when tutors believe that being involved in tutoring has a negative impact on their own studies and reduces the time available for research (Park & Ramos, 2002; Whitecross & Mills, 2003).

It is clear then that the aspects impacting on a student's motivation to become a tutor are numerous and range from intrinsic and extrinsic goals, work autonomy, the extent of departmental support offered, financial remuneration and the impact of tutoring on the tutors' own studies.

Why the focus on tutor motivation?

In the Economics Department at SU, the size of first-year lecture classes typically exceeds 200 students per class. It is therefore challenging for lecturers to provide sufficient individual support to under-performing students to help them make a success of their studies. This is especially problematic for first-year Economics students, who generally perceive the discipline to be difficult and abstract (Caropreso & Haggerty, 2000, cited in Van der Merwe, 2006). Students who are less confident in mathematics generally struggle with the subject matter (Langerlöf, 2008), which places them at a distinct disadvantage. A further challenge that is experienced by the Economics lecturers at the SU, is that students have difficulty in adopting effective study techniques in the discipline.

In response to these problems, the Department implemented a more structured tutorial programme for first-year students in 2005. Tutorial classes, in the context of the Economics Department, comprise about 30 students each. The tutorial programme targets under-performing students (those who do not pass an early assessment test) and the classes create the opportunity for students to receive individualised attention to address specific academic problem areas. Tutorial classes meet once a week to work through question sets that are of a similar standard to tests and examinations. The lecturers involved in the tutorial programme are solely responsible for setting up the tutorial question sets and the tutors assist students in understanding and applying the content of the module by working through these sets.

The programme served approximately 1,700 first-year students during the first semester of 2008 and employed 23 tutors. Table 16.1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the Economics tutors of 2008.

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Table 16.1 Summary of 2008 Economics tutor characteristics

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	13	57%
Female	10	43%
Previous tutoring experience	Number	Percentage
None	15	65%
Prior tutoring experience before being an Economics tutor	8	35%
Academic status	Number	Percentage
Postgraduate	19	83%
Undergraduate	4	17%
Average age	23.5 years	

The Department uses the ‘cross-year small-group tutoring’ model (Topping, 1996:327), in which final-year undergraduate or postgraduate students are employed as tutors to facilitate and strengthen the acquisition of knowledge in the students’ learning processes. Tutor positions are advertised to second-year and third-year undergraduate and postgraduate Economics students during the fourth quarter of the academic year, for the subsequent year. Successful applicants receive a list of responsibilities, upon which they sign a contract with the department for one year. The main rationale for employing tutors who have recently successfully progressed through their undergraduate studies is that they are in a better position to grasp and respond to the challenges experienced by first-year students. In general, these tutors are able to identify with some of the concerns of the first-year students and may be able to explain concepts in a more relevant way (Park, 2002).

The Department acknowledges that although these tutors have acquired an extensive knowledge of Economics, the art of teaching this to first-year students requires considerable determination on the part of the tutor, as well as sustained departmental support. Consequently, the Economics Department has developed an extensive support structure for tutors. Lecturing staff involved in the tutorial programme have an open-door policy and tutors are encouraged to share any issues that arise from their tutorial classes. Tutor training is arranged before the commencement of the tutorial programme and tutors are compelled to attend these workshops. The generic training is presented by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and covers the following aspects: the roles and responsibilities of tutors; how students learn; small group facilitation skills; and diversity and classroom management. The tutors are also expected to participate in a micro-teaching session prior to commencing with their tutoring duties. During this session each tutor has the opportunity to present a first-year Economics topic to their peers, the lecturers involved, as well as a representative of the CTL. Feedback is then given in terms of possible areas of improvement.

Workshops to address specific problems arising from tutorial classes during the course of the academic year are also arranged as required. As part of the tutors' weekly preparation, they are expected to attend weekly meetings with the first-year lecturing staff, where each tutorial question set is discussed. The involvement of lecturing staff in this manner is crucial to ensure that the tutorial programme forms an integrated part of the first-year course.

Research design

Before this study was undertaken, permission was obtained from the Economics Department to administer questionnaires during the course of 2008. Two questionnaires were administered during the data collection process. In addition to the tutor questionnaire, a student questionnaire rated students' opinion of their tutor. The questionnaire completed by the tutors focused primarily on their motivating reasons for becoming tutors and evaluated their tutoring experience. This questionnaire was administered electronically using an electronic survey tool called 'SUsurveys'. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed on the data. Table 16.2 contains an extract of some of the questions included in the questionnaire.

The tutors were required to indicate their responses on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents 'strongly disagree' and 5 represents 'strongly agree'. In addition to these items, there were also two open-ended questions asking for suggestions on how to improve the tutorial programme, as well as any other additional comments. Tutors were given the option to remain anonymous.

Whilst analysing the data obtained from the questionnaire, the authors became aware of limitations pertaining to certain questions posed. In particular, more detailed questions are required in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons why tutors enjoy helping students. Furthermore, two of the authors were directly involved with the tutorial programme, which created an opportunity, subsequent to completing the statistical analysis of the research, to become aware of interpretation errors made by some tutors in specific questions of the questionnaire.

The authors acknowledge that the transitory nature of the tutors' employment, which implies having a new group of tutors every year, as well as the study being context-specific to the Economics Department, is not conducive to making generalisations and drawing causal links.

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Table 16.2 Excerpts from the tutor questionnaire

Factors affecting tutor motivation	
What motivated you to become a tutor?	Financial remuneration
	Work experience
	Interpersonal skills
	Improve knowledge of Economics
	Helping students
	Previous tutoring experience
	Explain the subject of Economics
An Investigation into Tutors' Experience on the Economics Tutorial Programme	
Being an Economics tutor ...	... makes me feel good about helping students
	... helps me in my studies
	... provides me with work experience that will improve my chances of getting a job
	... takes too much time
	... prevents me from focusing on my own studies
	... does not pay well
Work autonomy	Do you think it is the sole responsibility of the department to set up the tutorial questions?
Departmental support	What is your impression of the level of support (assistance with class preparation, collegial support, etc.) you have received from the Economics department thus far?
Which part of your role as tutor do you enjoy the most/least?	The teaching: explaining concepts and calculations.
	The preparation: preparing for the tutorial classes.
	The collegial part: meeting other tutors, engaging with lecturers and tutor programme coordinators, etc.
	The administration: class attendance lists, answering e-mail queries, etc.
	The students: Interacting with the students (encouraging participation).

Findings and discussion

The analysis generated a number of themes that were found to resonate with the literature and are reported in this section chronologically, as presented in the questionnaire. This section firstly analyses the factors that motivated students to become tutors, and secondly, investigates tutors' experience on the tutorial programme. This section is based on the responses from 23 tutors.

Factors affecting tutor motivation

The tutor questionnaire listed several factors that could provide motivating reasons for becoming an Economics tutor. Figure 16.1 presents the responses to these factors.

Figure 16.1 Factors influencing the motivation to become an Economics tutor

The results indicate that five factors dominated as motivating reasons for becoming a tutor: helping students; explaining the subject; improving knowledge of Economics; gaining interpersonal skills and gaining work experience. This decision was driven by intrinsically motivating reasons, including helping students and explaining the subject, which corresponds with Park and Ramos' (2002) findings. Tutors also listed 'improving knowledge of Economics' as an important reason for becoming a tutor. This shows that tutors acknowledge that tutoring offers them the opportunity to revise basic concepts of the Economics discipline, which could have a positive impact on their own studies (Topping, 1996).

Work experience, including gaining interpersonal skills, proved to be another important motivating reason for becoming a tutor. It seems as though tutors recognised that tutoring offers a good opportunity to build confidence in public speaking and to acquire group facilitation and presentation skills.

Financial reward seems to have played a less significant role in motivating students to become tutors. One possible explanation for this finding is that not all of the tutors in this study financed their own studies, with 16 tutors indicating that they were financed by bursaries and their parents. The compensation received from the tutorial programme may therefore be perceived to be complementary to their allowances.

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Regarding prior tutoring experience, 15 tutors indicated that they had not tutored before. Seven of these tutors did not respond to this question, as would have been expected, since the question did not apply to them. Five tutors disagreed (i.e. chose 1 on the scale), which implies that they felt that the question was not relevant. This explains why the mode shows that tutors did not consider prior tutoring experience as one of the dominant motivating reasons for becoming a tutor. A more in-depth analysis, however, revealed that of those tutors who have tutored before, most of them had indicated that their prior tutoring experience was an important motivating reason.

Tutors' experience on the Economics Tutorial Programme

The data reflects that 13 tutors strongly agreed that being an Economics tutor made them feel good about helping students. Furthermore, on the question of which aspect of their role as tutor they enjoyed the most (see Table 16.2), 12 tutors indicated that the teaching aspect, which includes explaining the subject matter, was the most enjoyable.

An investigation into the relevance of gaining work experience was also found to be important. A total of 15 tutors agreed that being an Economics tutor provides them with work experience. It is interesting to note that this result is more pronounced for male tutors, as ten of the 13 male tutors agreed that being an Economics tutor provides them with work experience, as opposed to five of the ten female tutors. The importance of work experience is also reflected in the finding on 'gaining interpersonal skills', as developing presentation and communication skills are invaluable in most working environments. Students are not always exposed to situations that allow them to practice these skills, so the act of tutoring can indeed hone these abilities.

On the question of whether the tutorial programme takes up too much of their time and has a negative impact on their own studies, the findings are not conclusive. Nine tutors indicated that the tutorial programme did not take up too much time and prevented them from focusing on their own studies. Eight tutors were undecided on this question. Some tutors, however, felt that the administration and tutorial staff meetings were too time consuming.

On the topic of financial remuneration, nine tutors indicated that the compensation for their time was too little and six of the remaining tutors were undecided on this issue. One could argue that this dissatisfaction with the compensation could be related to either the hourly rate or dissatisfaction with the amount of hours spent on preparation. The open comments reveal that some tutors were dissatisfied with the hourly rate, 'it would be nice if there was a minor increase in the hourly rate' (Economics tutor 3) and 'you could also increase the remuneration rate, a happy tutor is a good tutor' (Economics tutor 12). The time spent on preparation differs from tutor to tutor, as revealed by the comment, 'regardless of the memo that we get I still spend much time in preparation. However, I don't know if this is true for all tutors' (Economics tutor 10). It therefore seems that tutors may have underestimated the time and effort they will spend on the tutorial programme. The Economics Department remunerates its tutors at an hourly rate and the rate is determined after

considering the compensation paid by other departments at SU that also offer tutorial programmes.

Another important issue is the extent of tutors' work autonomy in the tutorial programme. Tutors who work more independently from the departmental structures are generally required to spend more time on preparation and administration. One of the questions in the questionnaire asked tutors whether they think it is the sole responsibility of the lecturers to set up the tutorial question sets. Fourteen tutors agreed, while the rest were of the opinion that the lecturers should not be solely responsible for this task. Of those who disagreed, five tutors indicated they would be prepared to be involved in setting up the questions. This was an unexpected finding as it was anticipated that the majority of the tutors would prefer more autonomy and creative license with the tutorial question sets.

In response to the question, 'which part of your role as tutor do you enjoy the least?' (see Table 16.2), five tutors indicated that they enjoyed the administrative tasks the least, and mentioned the regular meetings with fellow tutors and engaging with lecturing staff during these meetings. Although this is an unexpected finding, an open question asking for additional comments on how the tutorial programme can be improved, shed light on this issue. 'The tutors must take responsibility for themselves. In the meetings we are spoon-fed – I have never found the meetings helpful. If I have a problem, I sort it out myself' (Economics tutor 13). Although some tutors preferred to meet less frequently, others noted that the support from and engagement with lecturing staff were invaluable, 'the sessions with [lecturers] helped a lot and is a good idea because it helps with preparation and to ensure that concepts are correctly explained to students' (Economics tutor 21 – translated). The tutors' responses to their administrative tasks were contrary to the Department's expectations, since the Department takes almost full responsibility for the administrative tasks of the tutorial programme and tutors were only expected to submit weekly attendance lists and responded to e-mail enquiries. Other tutorial programmes, especially those in which tutors have more autonomy, place a greater administrative burden on tutors. This could be another reason why the tutors prefer to have less autonomy. Concerning the issue of administration, Park and Ramos (2002) and Whitecross and Mills (2003) maintain that tutors may see administrative tasks (including preparation, assessment, dealing with students and attending meetings), as a burden.

The questionnaire included a question on departmental support, asking tutors 'what is your impression of the level of support (assistance with class preparation, collegial support, etc.) you have received from the Economics department thus far?' The results indicate that the majority of the tutors were impressed with the extent of departmental support. 'I am especially grateful to the support that the department has given us' (Economics tutor 10).

Summary comments

This study found that extrinsically motivating reasons, such as financial reward, seemed not to have dominated the students' decisions to become Economics tutors.

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Tutors indicated that they enjoyed helping students and explaining the subject to them. Furthermore, tutors (more so male tutors) found the tutorial programme to provide good work experience, including building confidence in public speaking and acquiring presentation skills. Tutors spoke highly of the Economics Department's extensive support structure for the tutorial programme and indicated that they enjoyed being part of it. Their experience in this regard is captured by the following comments: 'Tutoring has been an incredibly rewarding experience for myself and I have enjoyed it thoroughly' (Economics tutor 10); 'It's an awesome programme that should be also extended to second and third years' (Economics tutor 12) and 'It is fun – a good experience' (Economics tutor 17).

Conclusion

In order for tutorial programmes to be sustainable and successful, it is essential that, apart from securing sufficient funding, they should maintain a high morale amongst tutors to ensure their effective involvement. Understanding the factors motivating tutors and their overall tutoring experiences, optimises the potential benefit that exists within the tutor/student relationship. An optimally functioning tutorial programme can lead to the improvement of the first-year experience in general.

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