

REVIEW ARTICLE

Support and Pedagogical Accompaniment for Teaching Performance in Higher Education: An Experience of Innovation

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that every higher education institution aims to offer quality teaching, and the teaching function and role are key to this. However, a large number of university lecturers enter the teaching profession without prior pedagogical and didactic training. In order to address this situation and as a complementary resource, a programme of support for this function was developed and implemented in one of the faculties of the University of Zaragoza. A total of 114 university teachers participated in the programme.

In order to assess the process and results of this experience, a quantitative descriptive study was carried out, in which 51 teachers participated. Among the results, it is worth noting that a large proportion of the teachers, 76.1%, indicated that their pedagogical training had been acquired mainly through experience, not initial training. It is also worth highlighting the clear need for support in this function, essentially in the first years of teaching and in contexts in which the teaching staff is not stable, as indicated by 90.2% of the participants. The bureaucratisation of teaching tasks is present, with teachers indicating the need for more support and assistance in administrative procedures and institutional regulations. The teachers point to the need to generate a greater culture of collaboration among teaching staff and to promote synergies, showing a deficit in this respect. All these data show, among other issues, the need for support programmes as well as the need to rethink the teaching function in the higher education institution and the importance of prior preparation for training and access to it. With regard to the programme implemented, the experience of innovation and the usefulness of the programme were highly valued, generating a first step in the design of university teaching accompaniment actions.

Introduction

Universities and Higher Education Institutions are facing increasingly globalized societies, interconnected through new information technologies and with an increasingly complex, changing and culturally diverse environment that demands new training responses [1], new alternatives with respect to the teaching-learning process [2] and that requires teachers who are adequately prepared for the new times. In this context, teaching performance is a factor that is directly associated with the quality of education and, consequently, is an essential element to consider [3-5].

University lecturers, defined as teaching and research staff, must perform three functions that are representative of this profession: teaching, research and management. In addition to fulfilling these functions, they must adapt to the demands of this changing society. A society that demands new roles and tasks, and which demands increasingly higher criteria of excellence, efficiency and

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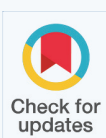
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effectiveness [6,7]. This idea only emphasizes the importance of updating the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, known as competences [8], of higher education teaching staff [9] in order to adequately develop their professional functions.

If we focus on the teaching function, understood as professional performance, there is no doubt that we need teachers who are able to meet the needs and challenges they face, promoting student-centred education [10], thus responding to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and considering educational innovation as a central element of the improvement process [11]. This performance should be characterised, among other issues, by:

The deep mastery -with relevance and pertinence- of the system of updated contents on the discipline to be taught. The necessary and up-to-date preparation they must possess, based on in-depth knowledge in the field of educational sciences, especially pedagogy, psychology, didactics, as well as educational research methodology. The appropriate development of professional competences in the field of communication, the systematic use of ICT, among other issues [12].

Absence of prior training requirements for teaching in higher education institutions

At all educational levels, expert and, at the same time, committed and competent professionals are needed to provoke relevant student learning [13]. In the university context, the lecturer is a highly qualified teaching professional and an expert in his/her area of knowledge. This professionalisation is acquired on the basis of the knowledge and skills attained in a study centre focused on their field of knowledge [14] and in ongoing or self-taught training which, it is assumed, allows them to develop certain competences for the rest of their functions. But the reality is that the majority of those who teach in the university environment have not undergone training with a specific pedagogical and/or didactic basis, nor has the institution required training in this aspect prior to the development of this teaching function. And if we add to this consideration that in this area, on many occasions, teaching is or has been relegated to the background and is of lesser value than research [15] in terms of professional recognition, we must seek and promote mechanisms that guarantee quality teaching.

In this sense, we cannot ignore the fact that there are many attempts from different angles to consider the presence of pedagogical knowledge as a fundamental element for improving teaching quality. The Institutes of Education Sciences have established specific training programmes and have produced publications on the subject. Universities also organise university conferences devoted exclusively to didactics in this context, thus making clear the idea of the uniqueness of teaching at the highest level of education. The challenge will undoubtedly be to set up a

network of actions that will enable university teaching staff to be optimally trained in pedagogy.

Competences for the exercise of the teaching function at university level

In order to improve the teaching function and enhance professional performance, it is essential to first define the competences required by university lecturers to carry out their functions and roles [16], adjusting training plans to meet these competences.

Teaching competences have been extensively studied. If we delve deeper into the numerous existing models, we find various proposals, such as the one made by [3], who describes a series of competences that are essential for the quality development of the university teaching function, which are specified as follows: designing the teaching guide in accordance with the needs, context and professional profile in coordination with other professionals, developing the teaching-learning process by providing opportunities for individual and group learning, tutoring the student's learning process by encouraging actions that allow them greater autonomy, evaluating the teaching-learning process, actively contributing to the improvement of teaching and participating in the academic organisational dynamics of the institution (University, Faculty, Department, etc.).

Another author who emphasises the necessary teaching competences is [17]. He presents a proposal for competences, the fruit of in-depth pedagogical reflection, supported by contemporary educational research, and which is consistent "with the new role of teachers, the evolution of in-service training, the reforms of initial training and the ambitions of education policies" [17], and which stimulates the teacher to develop his or her competences in a way that is coherent "with the new role of teachers, the evolution of in-service training, the reforms of initial training and the ambitions of education policies" [17], and which stimulates the reader to discern the consequences of incorporating them or not, within the new scenario of professional development that we are demanding, building an active focus of debate on our profession, modernizing and democratizing the education system. And it proposes ten areas of competences considered to be priorities in teacher training: organizing and animating learning situations; managing the progression of learning; developing and developing differentiation devices; involving students in their learning and work; working in teams; participating in school management; informing and involving parents; using new technologies; facing the duties and ethical dilemmas of the profession; and organizing their own continuous training.

For her part [18] shows that the teacher is no longer the only and primary source of information, and thus, according to this author, the new role of the teacher is directed towards an idea of the teacher: specialist in diagnosis and prescription of learning; specialist in learning resources,

facilitator of learning in the community, specialist in the interdisciplinary convergence of knowledge, classifier of values, promoter of human relations and, professional and leisure counsellor. This characterization profiles the teacher as a mediator between knowledge, students and between the elements of teaching practice and society. In short, teaching requires professional qualities and competences that are more complex and different than those traditionally required, in order to be able to tackle an activity that is as rich as it is difficult: provoking, accompanying, questioning, guiding and stimulating student learning [13].

Accompaniment and pedagogical support

Pedagogical accompaniment is a process of guidance, support and assistance to the teaching work based on a relationship of trust and open communication. This consists of facilitating the processes of improvement of educational practices, to stimulate their institutionalization and promote committed, self-critical and responsible situations of self-revision of professional action, of analysis of the consequences of the same on their students and on their personal and social development, and of consideration of the didactic, ethical and ideological principles that underpin their practices.

The purpose of pedagogical accompaniment is to generate and strengthen a culture of revision and innovation of pedagogical practice in the educational institution, aimed at improving the quality of the educational service [19] as well as to strengthen teachers as leaders of change and innovation. In itself, accompaniment constitutes an opportunity to support and improve teaching performance [20-23] and can even be considered as a basic ingredient for teachers' professional development.

In short, it is a planned, systematic, continuous, interactive, contextualised and contextualised assessment or support for teachers according to their training needs [24].

Moreover, mentoring programmes have a high potential in higher education [25] as demonstrated by various research studies [26,27]. This methodology facilitates the acquisition of teaching competences, especially for new teachers, who are responsible for acquiring knowledge and skills that enable them to cope with the difficulties of teaching [28,29].

Program of support for the teaching function

As a result of the ideas set out above and underlining the crucial value of quality university teaching, a strategic project of accompaniment for the teaching function arises during the 2018-2019 academic year. The proposal aims to complement the training offered to teaching staff from other institutions and to be an alternative to other actions carried out by the degree coordination that have not had the expected impact. The experience has been carried out in

the Faculty of Humanities and Education of the University of Zaragoza, a centre with a staff of 114 teachers and a high number of non-permanent or part-time teaching staff.

The aim of this project is to support, accompany and advise institutionally from the coordination of the Degree in the teaching function. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To guide and provide resources for the development and improvement of the teaching function.
- To improve the channels of communication favoring good coordination and collaboration.
- To establish a virtual space to share teaching materials and resources.
- Facilitate access to basic and essential information for the correct development of the teaching function.

Going deeper into the project, some of the activities proposed for the teaching team have been, firstly, seminars and workshops whose subject matter revolved around evaluation instruments and their importance within the teaching-learning process. On the other hand, seminars and workshops focused on teaching innovation and creativity. Similarly, planned and continuous assessment was carried out throughout the academic year, using a virtual tool (in this case, Moodle). A course was designed containing six sections structured according to the [3] competence model: teaching planning processes, teaching-learning processes, assessment, tutoring, training-innovation and teaching participation, a place to share resources and teaching material, and another space for teaching coordination. All this under the prism of collaborative work and promoting work with technology, exploiting its didactic potential and telematic communication.

From this context and the need that has arisen, this study was born, with the aim of going deeper into the perceptions of the participants of this program of accompaniment in the teaching function, in order to be able to strengthen those aspects that have been useful for the teaching staff and to introduce the relevant improvements. It also aims to assess the impact that this program may have had on the development of the teaching function from the users' point of view.

Method

In order to assess the achievement of the initially set objectives, and in the interests of inquiry and knowledge construction, a non-experimental, quantitative descriptive study was designed using the cross-sectional survey technique, which materialized in the use of an ad hoc questionnaire for data collection. The aim, therefore, was to capture certain phenomena at the exact moment of their realization [30]. In general terms, descriptive studies aim to specify the relevant traits and profiles of a set of people,

community groups or phenomena that are the object of analysis [31].

Participants

The target population, to whom this experience was addressed, was made up of the total teaching staff of the Faculty, and the sample was finally made up of a total of 51 teachers, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Characterization of the sample.

Professional Category	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Associate lecturer (a part time instructor who keeps a parallel job)	28	54.9%
Research assistant	2	3.92%
Assistant lecturer	9	17.64%
Lecturer	3	5.88%
Senior lecturer	9	17.64%
TOTAL	51	44.7% of all teaching staff

Looking at the percentage distribution of the sample of participants, it can be seen that the majority of the sample is made up of Part-time Associate Lecturers (54.9%), a fact that faithfully reflects the lack of stability in the teaching staff. The teaching profile of tenured and assistant lecturers is considerably lower than that of associate lecturers (17.64%). Finally, less than 10 % of the total percentages of teaching staff are Doctoral Contracted Lecturers and Pre-doctoral Research Staff in Training.

In addition, we considered the possibility of analyzing the years of experience in university teaching of the participating teaching staff. In relation to this aspect, 47% of the sample indicated that they had been teaching for less than five years and could therefore be considered to be new lecturers. Among them, it is worth mentioning that 7.8% were in their first year as university teachers.

Instrument

For data collection, an ad hoc questionnaire was developed to assess users' general perceptions of the project, the activities and actions carried out and their usefulness. The instrument collected information on the following categories: a) perception of the university teaching function, b) need for support in the university environment, c) aspects in which more support is needed, d) use of resources, e) usefulness of resources, f) usability of resources, g) reasons why materials and resources are not shared publicly, h) social relations between teachers and, i) suggestions and evaluations. The questionnaire was made up of closed questions, but a final, more qualitative question was also included. In addition, in order to assess the appearance of possible biases affecting the validity or reliability of the instrument, an expert judgement was carried out in which

the congruence and relevance of the items were analyzed [32]. Five university professors acted as participating judges, and their suggestions and proposals for modification were considered. On the other hand, the internal consistency index based on Cronbach's Alpha was also used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The analysis, performed with the statistical software package SPSS, reflected a value of 0.889, which according to authors such as [33] results in an acceptable internal consistency.

Procedure

The data collection process began once all the university teaching staff of all the departments of the Faculty participating in the project had been contacted: the Department of Educational Sciences, the Department of Psychology and Sociology, the Department of Mathematics, the Department of Experimental Sciences, the Department of Musical, Plastic and Corporal Expression, among others. At all times, they were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation in the research and the anonymity of their responses was guaranteed. The questionnaire was distributed via the institutional e-mail address available to each teacher. In addition to a brief description of the study, a web link to the online platform supporting the questionnaire was attached. Once the questionnaire had been completed, participants were given the opportunity to make any comments or ask any questions they might have. The information collected was checked for normal distribution of the data ($p > 0.05$) using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with the statistical software package SPSS, which showed that the data were normalized. The data collected were processed using the statistical software package SPSS and analyzed in terms of descriptive statistics. On the other hand, a content analysis of the discourse of the qualitative information was carried out in accordance with the indications set out by [34,35]. The information was reduced and the principle of saturation was applied until new concepts and ideas about the analyzed issue ceased to emerge.

Results

As a whole, and with regard to the perceptions of the teaching staff participating in this study about the teaching role, a significant majority (90.2%) consider it necessary or very necessary to have support in the teaching role, as they consider it to be a resource of substantial importance, especially in the first years of the teaching career. More specifically, this support includes the need, highlighted by these teaching staff, to receive continuous guidance and guidance in various areas (Table 2). These needs, in descending order of priority, include the following support and assistance actions: administrative procedures, existing university teaching training resources, assessment regulations/tutoring and assessment of Final Degree Projects, faculty documents and those related to planning and coordination processes, assessment processes/

Table 2: Areas in need of support in the teaching task.

Areas in Need	Frequency
Evaluation policy	34%
Evaluation processes	29.8%
School documents	29.8%
Participation in the Faculty	25.5%
Teaching-learning methodologies	27.7%
Internship tutoring	21.3%
TFG Management	34%
Administrative Procedures	40.4%
Existing university teaching training resources	36.2%
Use of institutional teaching platforms	27.7%
Organisation of teaching by departments	23.4%
In planning and coordination processes	29.8%
Conducting tutorials	4.3%

teaching-learning methodologies/Moodle platform use, participation in the Faculty/ICT, organization of teaching by the departments and, finally, tutoring of internships. As can be seen, the area in which the lecturers have requested the least support refers to tutorials.

A noteworthy fact that deserves consideration is that 76.1% state that the teaching skills required for professional performance have been acquired through experience and lifelong learning.

With regard to the evaluation of the usefulness of the program as a resource for accompaniment, 76.1% considered the information and resources provided to be highly useful. What is most significant is that no one considers this resource to be useless. The varied perceptions regarding the use of the resource provided on the Moodle platform reflect the different interpretations and needs that each teacher, as an individual entity with certain characteristics, reports in this particular context in which the experience is framed. In line with this, 42.9% of teachers have used it frequently, compared to 53.1% who say that they have used it occasionally and infrequently. Only 4% of those surveyed did not use this resource. Those teachers who have not recorded any entries argue that this is due to lack of time. Even so, they consider it to be a very useful support. Linked to this question, the evaluation of the usefulness of the resource is highlighted in descending order according to different areas (Table 3): the space for materials and resources to share, the protocol for welcoming new teachers, the information on teaching-learning processes/information on tutoring/information on the institutional program, the information on innovation and training and, lastly, the information on the management team. The least interesting aspect is the use of forums.

As far as usability is concerned, the information or resource available that has been used the most is that relating to guidance on tutoring placements - 42.4% indicate this

Table 3: Assessment of the usefulness of the resource by area.

Areas of Need	Frequency
Information on the management team	18.6%
Protocol for welcoming new teaching staff	39.5%
Information and resources on teaching planning processes	30.2%
Information and resources on teaching-learning processes	34.9%
Information and resources on tutoring	37.2%
Information and resources on training-innovation	25.6%
Space for materials and resources to share	39.5%
Information on institutional programmes	37.2%
Forums	7%

- and on teaching and learning processes - especially that relating to assessment.

During the development of the accompaniment program, the participating teaching staff minimally shared materials and resources. In this sense, according to these teachers, the reason for the lack of initiative to share resources with other teaching staff was due to three main causes: firstly, the non-existence of culture and dynamic, among teachers, of sharing material publicly (39.1% of teachers); secondly, the fact that, when materials or resources are shared, this is mostly done privately (30.4% of teachers); and, thirdly and lastly, because the willingness to collaborate is, in general terms, certainly low (21.7% of teachers). Therefore, the data that emerges regarding the social relations established among the teaching staff of the Faculty is relevant. Thus, there is little personal knowledge of some teaching staff towards others, which implies that personal relations are limited. In fact, 18.4% of the teaching staff indicate that they know few teachers in the faculty, a fact that could condition, to a certain extent, the coordination and integration processes in the center.

On the other hand, following the collection of qualitative information through the last open-ended question, a series of relevant conclusions have emerged that complement the results presented so far.

The overall assessment of the usefulness of the program is considerably positive.

Teacher 1: The documentation of the processes is very useful, thanks to the people who make it possible.

Teacher 2: I consider this resource to be very positive, at least in my case, where I often miss information and communication. I think that other teachers don't see the need for this information because they already have it or they are not interested in it. [...]. I encourage you to continue with this resource by making it more visible [...].

Teacher 3: It is an interesting support for teaching. Thank you for this support.

By way of example, some of the arguments supporting these benefits are specified. Among them, particular emphasis is placed on the acquisition of ideas and techniques for assessment, the provision of information on different processes linked to teaching, and guidance for new teachers:

Teacher 4: The seminars have given me a number of ideas for evaluation, especially instruments.

It has also highlighted the need for support, especially for new teachers or those who have recently joined the teaching staff.

Teacher 5: I think that new teachers should be guided a little more and shown Moodle so that they have everything they need.

Teacher 6: The incorporation into the teaching profession is extremely complicated and orphaned for new teachers. There is a lot of information to assimilate [...].

Teacher 7: I think that this project is a very good and useful initiative, but it will take time for it to become more visible to everyone, and above all for it to be a space in which to share our doubts and also to share our materials. University teachers, especially in the early years, feel very neglected in these kinds of matters and this can be a very useful tool for this.

In the same way, the need to generate a greater network of collaboration between colleagues has been expressed.

Teacher 8: I think it is necessary to generate greater synergies between colleagues, many things are done but we don't know about them. And generating resources to work on joint innovation projects is essential and necessary.

Teacher 9: I think it is important, as well as creating support resources, to generate a collaborative mentality within the department. A good way is to find out how each subject in the department works, look for synergies and coordination to improve our learning as teachers and that of the students (diversity of methodologies, etc.). Perhaps, a seminar where this topic is shared or a "Look and act" between our subjects.

Discussion and Conclusion

Regardless of the university institution, it is of great interest to condition the internal dynamics in order to offer quality teaching, as well as to promote reflective professionals committed to their teaching function. Precisely with the development of this project and the corresponding empirical study, the aim has been to focus on this. The experience, in general terms, has been assessed as positive by the main parties involved. The degree of satisfaction with the program has been high.

During the development phase of the program,

guidance, information and resources aimed at introducing improvements in teaching activities have been offered. Specifically, continuous support has been provided by the coordination of the degree program. In addition, participants have been given the opportunity to reflect on the teaching function and the professional and personal competences needed to position themselves for the demands of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), an aspect whose importance is recognized by authors such as [14,36]. And, in this scenario, the figure of the degree coordinator has been decisive in the processes of horizontal and continuous counseling.

Contrasting the information obtained here with the results of other research studies, certain similarities can be seen that are worth highlighting. Firstly, regarding the usefulness of mentoring for university faculty, studies such as [27,37] also found very satisfactory benefits after implementing and monitoring programs aimed at mentoring the work of junior faculty. Regarding this field of research for the improvement of university practice, in recent years a substantial body of national and international literature [38,39] has highlighted the need to stimulate pedagogical training among teachers who have just begun their professional careers in the university environment.

Many of the teachers who participated in this study demand more intense and frequent support during their teaching, especially new teachers, a fact that is in line with the findings of other studies [40-42] related to the needs of new teachers. Although it is the most novice teaching staff who are most in need of support, those teachers with years of experience in university teaching have not mastered some basic procedures such as the publication of marks, exam revision, maximum dates for keeping an exam, complaints procedures, how to manage tutorials (virtual, face-to-face...), or knowledge about committees and the general management of the center and the university, among others. Broadly speaking, there is a lack of knowledge of institutional documents: assessment regulations, Q procedures, recruitment processes, and basic departmental instructions for coordination and faculty regulations. In this regard, other studies [43-45] have also found a generalized lack of knowledge, on the part of all university teaching staff, about different strategies and actions related to management and teaching in Higher Education.

On the other hand, personal and social interactions among the teaching staff can be assessed as less than full, as many colleagues do not know each other. We understand that, to a large extent, this is due to the high number of teachers who work part-time and who, in addition to teaching a limited number of hours, generally do so in the afternoon. In this context, this leads to uncohesive groups or micro-working groups. We cannot ignore the fact that this situation can condition the coordination and integration processes in the center. Coexistence and communication is,

consequently, an aspect that should be promoted in order to generate synergies and more compact working networks.

On the other hand, the information gathered in this study, therefore, reveals a type of university teaching practice in which training is required to facilitate the new functions and tasks to be carried out. There has been a great deal of scientific support [46-48] for the need to value and meet the pedagogical training demands of teachers, in addition to research tasks. It is not only the mastery of an isolated discipline that is required but rather the development of a set of globalized competencies including teaching and university management.

Although no explicit measures have been used to analyze the impact of this accompanying project on the university teaching function, the general assessment submitted by the teaching staff directly involved reflects the significant gains that have been made in their teaching and management work. To varying degrees, the project has led to progress and advances at four different levels: firstly, in the improvement of teaching activity in all its dimensions (planning, development and evaluation of teaching-learning processes, tutoring, innovation and involvement-participation with the center and department); secondly, in progress in terms of coexistence skills, resulting from greater interaction and knowledge among the teaching staff; thirdly, in the improvement of teaching coordination; and finally, in gaining a more detailed knowledge of the teaching function in the field of Higher Education, especially with regard to the teaching work of junior and associate teaching staff. In short, the provision of all these actions aimed, in line with [49], to have an impact on the professional competencies of teachers and on the provision of a learning community in which everyone feels involved and participates, based on responsibility and commitment to educational improvement.

In terms of lessons learned, a series of essential issues are proposed for the progress and improvement of this experience. Firstly, more information about the project, highlighting the fundamental purpose of the program, the dynamics it aims to promote, and other aspects that may encourage participation. On the other hand, there is a need for greater activation and promotion of the activities provided. An interesting observation refers to the possible creation of the figure of the mentor for new teachers, the benefits of which have been highlighted in previous research [50,51]. Finally, we propose the planning and implementation of specific seminars for new teachers and the prior analysis of their needs in order to adjust to them.

We understand that the continuous changes that have occurred in the professional practice of university teaching make it necessary to reformulate and transform the figure of the teaching staff [52-54]. Therefore, the training of these teachers and the support offered to them during their teaching activity will probably be a key aspect that will

guarantee the quality of university teaching. It is a question of strengthening teachers as true leaders of change and innovation. It should be noted, however, that to ensure that this support and accompaniment is truly effective, an optimal combination of the training possibilities offered by the very institutions in which these teachers carry out their professional work is required [55,56].

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