EVALUATION OF THE PEER MENTORING PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZARAGOZA (SPAIN)

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Abstract

This article aims to evaluate the implementation of a pilot Peer Mentoring programme targeted at master level at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). In order to assess the project, two surveys were conducted among the participants by the end of the academic year: one addressed to students and another one addressed to mentors. The findings of this study offer evidence to support the belief that this project holds a great potential for the enhancement of university's quality standards through the direct involvement of its students. Research towards this article was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, project no. FFI2010-15263, and by the Aragonese Government (Ref. H12).This research is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, FPU scholarship: AP2008-04473.

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Introduction

Current statements, policies and programmes (cf. the Common European Framework of Reference, Council of Europe 2001) point to the need to consider issues related to quality in the Higher Education system. This need is legitimized by a new context characterized by an increased level of mobility both for academic and work purposes. In addition, the globalized world we are living in has as a consequence raising concerns about the relevance of university degrees for the economy, increased competition among the universities and uncertainty in academic labor markets (see Johnston and Murray 2004). Thus, the internationalization of the academic and professional environments brings about the need to increase confidence in the career benefits for individuals. This phenomenon of internationalization triggers changes in the educational programmes offered by universities. The quality standards demanded by the European Higher Education Area are moving those people responsible for the design of the degrees to focus on the development of quality programmes to meet the needs and interests of students (cf. Pérez-Llantada, forthcoming; Mureşan

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2009; Sahney, Banwet and Karunes 2004). Thus, it is necessary to analyze the implications that their needs and interests have for the purpose, content and conduct of academic degrees.

The main aim of focusing on student satisfaction would be that of turning a degree into an opportunity for professional development by taking into consideration the student voice. However, although Johnston and Murray (2004) draw attention to the 'lack of attention paid to students' views' (2004: 31) in the examination of the quality of one PhD degree in particular, there are various studies on aspects related to student satisfaction issues by listening to the student's voice (cf. Williams and Kane 2009; Gallifa and Batalle 2010; Tsinidou, Georgiannis and Fitsilis 2010 among others). For example, in the Spanish context, Gallifa and Batalle (2010) present results from an inquiry on the 'total student experience' which encompasses aspects such as the students' evaluation of the course, teaching quality and satisfaction with the central services.

An alternative and innovative practice, which can be applied in the process of continuous quality improvement, has been proposed in the shape of the Peer Mentoring programme, based at the University of Manchester (see Ody and Carey, 2009). This model has already been adopted and successfully implemented in the Spanish context (see the Tutor Quiron Programme based at the University of Cartagena, Spain, *http://www.upct.es/convergencia/TutorQuiron/index.php*) and it is mainly conceived as complementary to the tutor's role. The programme's main advantage lies in the fact that it is student-led, that is, it involves students helping other students, focusing on the socio-pragmatic dimension of tutoring with the aim of raising confidence and student satisfaction, facilitating the students' integration into the academic and social life of the university, and developing personal and professional competences in the students involved in the programme.

Contextualisation and Objectives

The implementation of the Peer Mentoring programme at the University of Zaragoza can be traced back to the 2009-2010 project: 'Study of the student learning processes and academic workload for internal quality assessment in the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English' (PIECyT_09_2_575). This project was carried out in the 'Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English' aiming to improve the quality standards of the Degree. It involved both internal and external voices, that is, teaching staff and students. Quantitative and qualitative assessment procedures were designed to gather information on the students' learning processes and academic workload, which helped in the revision of the academic curriculum of those subjects taught in the Master. Following the results which suggested the value of the tutorial action for the enhancement of student satisfaction (cf. Annual quality assessment report in the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English' 2009-2010 http://titulaciones.unizar.es/documentos /infCalidad/344.pdf), this project evolved into the present programme:

'Introduction of the Tutor Quiron pilot study as an additional measure in the mentoring plan of the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English' (PIECyT_10_2_408), a trial project implemented for the 2010-2011 academic year. This programme was tailored as part of a feedback and action cycle which proves the commitment of the staff teaching in the Master with a robust and transparent quality assessment (feedback) cycle in the quest for 'the production of high status knowledge' (Tapper and Salter 2003: 4) (see also PESUZ_09_5_317 project: 'Application of C-Map Tools to improve curricular design and learning processes in the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English'). The programme involves those PhD students currently ascribed to the department acting as peer mentors and the students enrolled in the Master. It aims to improve students' overall learning experience by providing them with guidance on academic, social, work and administrative issues. An additional benefit consists in the opportunity for peer mentors to contribute to the nature, form and organization of the project in order to ensure sensitivity to students' needs and interests.

The aim of this article is to assess this pilot experience carried out in the "Master of Textual and Cultural Studies" at the English Department, University of Zaragoza, during the 2010/11 academic year by means of a survey conducted among the two groups of participants: peer mentors and students.

Design of the Peer Mentoring Project

In order to assess students' learning styles, processes, strategies, and workload, two main procedures were developed. On the one hand, a quantitative method of analysis was carried out by means of specific assessment procedures meant to quantify the above aspects. On the other hand, a qualitative evaluation of the project was conducted by means of the newly-implemented peer mentoring system. This article aims to present the outcomes of the latter.

The former method of assessment constitutes a continuation of the project started last year. It employs the same instruments and procedures used in the previous project, namely questionnaires and workload sheets filled in by students on a weekly basis. The second method of assessment of students' learning styles, processes, strategies, and workload consists in the experimental implementation of a Peer Mentoring system.

This project is based on the fundamental premise that cognitive methods of teaching and learning need to be complemented by affective ones for the attainment of academic success (Chory and McCroskey, 1999; Arnold, 1999; Olson and Wyett, 2000; Rompelmann, 2002; García, 2009; Maiorana, 2010; Tarabay, 2010). Therefore, this project aims at contributing to the creation of a safe space for students to discuss their ideas and share their problems with the hope of enhancing their academic results. The project consists in the establishment of a dynamics of coordination, orientation and monitoring between the students of the

"Master in Textual and Cultural Studies" and PhD students currently enrolled in the same program. Many of these students are research fellows with teaching responsibilities, or they are in some way involved in the Department's activities. Their function is to advise the Master students in different aspects of university life, supporting them in their learning process in coordination with their tutors. This guarantees the ongoing assessment of their work and helps overcome certain barriers which may exist between students and teaching staff, since the mentors become a link between the two.

Broadly speaking, the main aim of this project is two-fold: on the one hand, it tries to encourage a student-oriented approach to learning in Master students. On the other, it seeks to enhance the professional and personal development of PhD students (mentors). In the process, it is expected to collect valuable data about the students' learning processes which help ensure the maintenance of the levels of quality of the "Master in Textual and Cultural Studies". More specific goals include:

- To provide students with a supportive environment to assist them in the transition to the Master level. This includes orientation in different aspects, both in academic and in more "personal" terms.
- To improve academic results and to reduce the drop out rate in the Master by helping students organize their personal schedule in a more efficient way, so that they are able to meet their deadlines.
- To make Master students aware of the importance of their own agency in the successful outcome of their learning processes, encouraging autonomous learning, a fundamental skill in a research-oriented degree.
- To provide further opportunity for the development of intellectual and professional competences in PhD students (mentors) which will also be useful for their professional future, such as team-work skills, responsibility, social skills, decision making or leadership skills.
- To provide an additional mechanism for communication and feedback between teaching staff and students, thus assuring the quality of the Master.

Being a pilot experience, this project cannot be straightforwardly compared with those programmes from other institutions which have been running for a long time now, such as the 'Students as Partners' Programme currently held at Manchester University (UK), for instance. To start with, the project is not backed by institutional support yet, which means that mentors do not receive any kind of economic or 'academic' reward (meaning course credits or something of the like). This apparent drawback, on the other hand, ensures that those PhD students that agree to become involved in the experience do so for purely vocational reasons, thus guaranteeing their personal commitment with the project. As this article hopes to show, the lack of 'tangible' rewards for mentors does not diminish the appeal of the experience, since the benefits they report to have obtained from it are of a more "abstract" nature, mostly related to the acquisition of transversal skills and personal

values.

The mentoring activity is therefore entirely voluntary and it follows a one-on-one dynamics, thus making sure that students receive their mentors' full attention. The mentor's function is to put his/her previous experience at the disposal of the student, offering valuable advice on academic, administrative and social aspects of university life. However, it should be noted that mentors are not meant to replace tutors in their teaching functions. They may share experiences of the programme, give useful advice or recommend relevant readings, but they are not supposed to teach contents or review students' work. Similarly, they are expected to help students with administrative or personal aspects of university life, but they are not meant to replace administrative staff or to become students' 'friends'.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the programme is based on a hierarchical structure. A teacher leader supervises the work of several mentors, who, at the moment, and due to the initial stage the project finds itself in, are only responsible for one student.
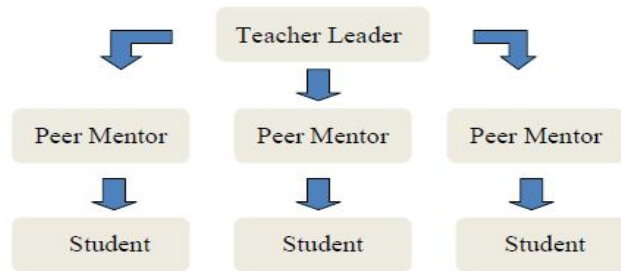

Figure 1. Structure of the programme

The peer mentors' relationship with the students is strictly delimited to ensure the programme's quality, as shown in Figure 2.
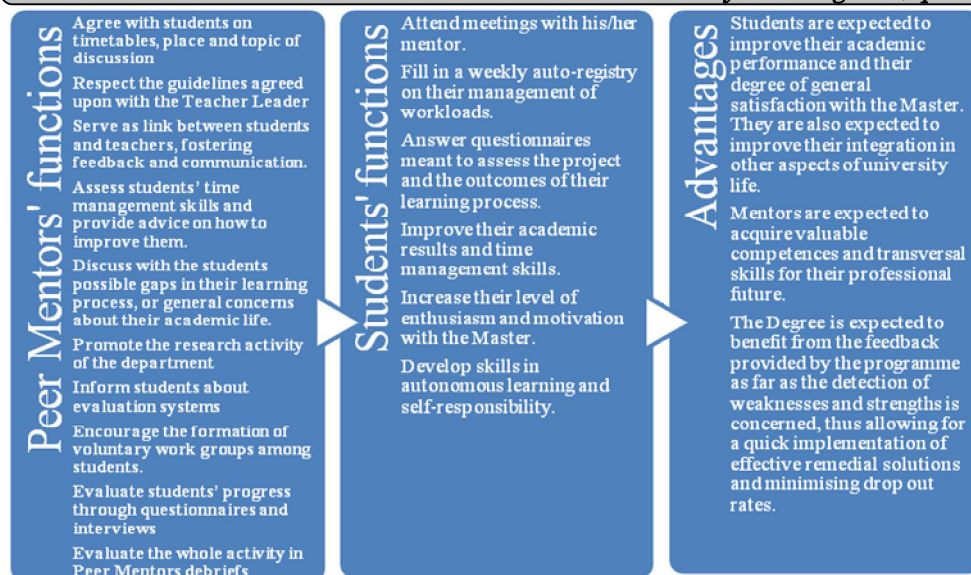
Figure 2. Functions of the participants in the Peer Mentoring trial project

Project Outcomes

Assessment of the Students' Experience

To assess the project, both mentors and students were asked to answer a questionnaire designed to look at what they considered to have learnt from the experience. The students' assessment of the programme will be presented and analyzed in this section.

Since one of the aims of the Master is, among other things, the development of a range of professional, social, affective and personal competences, the project focused on raising the students' awareness of those aspects related to the acquisition of these skills. This was assessed through those procedures and instruments described in the previous section (i.e., questionnaires, workload sheet). However, the evaluation of the project also involved an interpersonal dimension (i.e., interviews led by mentors). With this purpose in mind, students were asked to assess the project, the help received and its effects on their personal and academic experience. Overall, they all acknowledged that their participation in the programme was a motivating experience. This is mainly explained by the interpersonal component of the project, that is, they benefited from the interaction with people who are close to their experience and who can guide them and offer advice on different aspects related to personal issues. However, this does not necessarily mean that the academic aspect was neglected: although some students felt that the planning and time management factor could not be considered as directly related to their academic success, the programme appeared to have helped many of them in the organization of their workload.

This can be seen in Figure 1, which reflects the values and competences they considered to have developed during the mentoring process. These values and competences were evaluated on a scale ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 5. According to the data, students seem to have developed both social and affective awareness. The highest value was registered for 'responsibility', followed by 'companionship', 'respect for different opinions' and affective elements such as 'capacity for ethical commitment, 'honesty' and 'self-esteem'.

These findings show that the project was an invitation for students to reflect on their own learning. First of all, responsibility is related to issues of academic success, linked as it is with the ability to complete academic tasks satisfactorily. The importance given to the development of a sense of companionship among the participants confirms our intuition about the advisability of creating an 'affective' learning space: results show that learning processes are enhanced when interpersonal skills are taken into account in the teaching/learning experience. However, self-esteem – an important personal value – does not score high among the values acquired by students, which points towards an interesting future line of examination in this project.
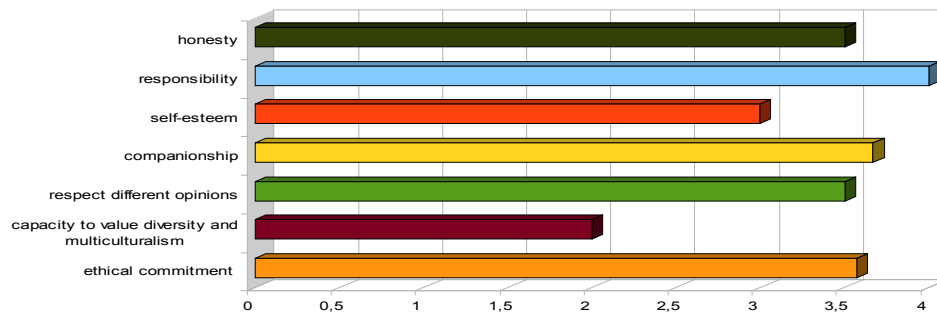

Figure 3. What have you learnt from this experience? Rate from 0 to 5
the acquisition of the following values present in the Master's Degree,
being 0 the minimum and 5 the maximum

A variety of competences are considered in the Degree, all of which were conveniently addressed in the assessment of the experience. Students were asked about their views on the acquisition of competences such as: team and individual work, managing of social and educational skills, working in an international context, leadership, assessing one's and others' work, critical thinking skills, personal engagement and self-motivation. Figure 2 records high levels for personal engagement, self-motivation, assessing one's and others' work and autonomous learning. This shows an increased awareness of the role that the individual plays in his/her learning process, which leads to better academic outcomes. It is also related to issues of trust in one's abilities to learn, to deal with new experiences and to approach them with confidence. The leadership and group work competences score

lower, presumably, as a result of the design of the pilot programme (i.e., one-on-one interviews). However, the project does seem to have changed attitudes and improved the development of interpersonal skills and critical thinking abilities. All in all, the students' general perception appeared to support the idea that the project ensures the development of competences necessary in their academic life experience.
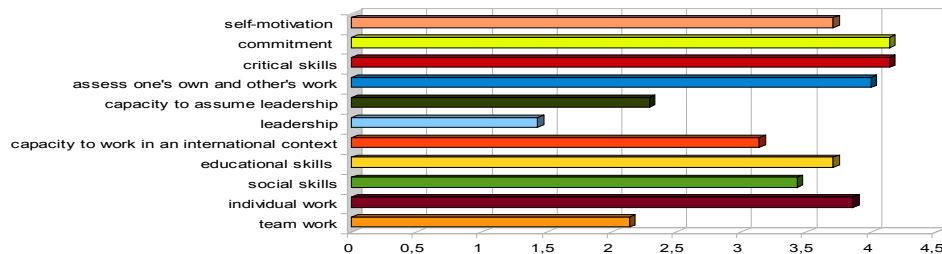

Figure 4. What have you learnt from this experience? Rate from 0 to 5
the acquisition of the following competences present in the Master's Degree,
being 0 the minimum and 5 the maximum

The students also answered a series of questions regarding the positive and negative aspects of their experience. The positive aspects concern issues such as:

- Receiving academic support with issues of organization and time management, as well as the establishment of objectives and deadlines.
- Receiving personal support and encouragement in other aspects of academic life.
- Getting to see things from a different perspective, which has a positive effect on academic work.
- Getting to know a person (the mentor), whose help may be valuable in the near future.
- Getting feedback from people who have recently had the same experience.

There is an emphasis on the support received at both personal and academic levels as a result of learning from each other and participating in the project as a whole. However, it can be claimed that, on the whole, participants voiced feelings of acknowledgement for the personal support more often that for the academic one. These findings corroborate, again, the importance of the interpersonal dimension in teaching/learning processes.

Regarding the negative aspects of the experience, many students felt that the workload sheet cannot provide a faithful record of the amount of real work invested in each subject. Although some of them regarded this instrument as a useful tool which helped them reflect on their daily practices and manage workloads better, it appears to be unnecessary for the majority of students. On the one hand, the process of recording the amount of weekly dedication to each subject is claimed not to reflect reality, either for affective reasons (one is more likely to

invest more time in those subjects he/she likes), or as a result of the design of the subject itself (there are subjects which demand more work at home than others). In addition, it appears that it is a time-consuming process for the students. However, apart from the general negative perception of the workload sheet, no other important drawbacks have been experienced. Thus, perhaps the workload sheet should no longer be included in the future, due to the negative feelings expressed by the students about this instrument.

The piloting of the Peer Mentoring programme has revealed shortcomings which will need to be addressed in the future. However, it appears that, in general terms, it has been assessed as a positive experience. As previously mentioned, one of its most salient aspects is related to the 'personal nature' of the project. Students valued very positively "having a kind of support different from the academic supervisor", not only at an academic level but also at a personal one (see Figure 3).
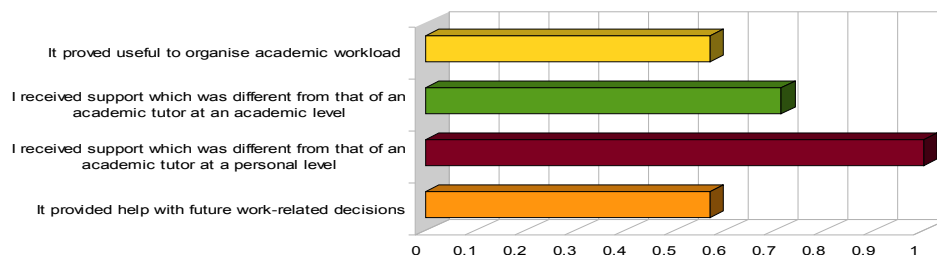

Figure 5. What did you take away from this experience on a personal level?

In addition to helping students organize their workloads more effectively, the guidance and advice received from mentors were highly valued in terms of the participants' future employability. It is important to stress this dimension, since past inquiries into the skills developed by the degree suggest that this is a relatively neglected aspect. The outcomes of this study argue in favour of the project as an instrument able to enhance the development of skills and competences highly valued in the workplace. In their suggestions for future improvement, students emphasized the importance of focusing on the interpersonal dimension of the project, acknowledging the benefits of sharing experiences with persons who feel closer to them and who can be of greater help in their integration in academic life. In the light of all these findings and of the valuable feedback provided by this project, it can be concluded that, apart from enhancing students' academic experience, this programme can be a very useful tool for the assurance of the quality standards of the Master in the context of a competitive and globalized Higher Education environment.

Assessment of Mentors' Experience

The evaluation of the experience from the mentors' perspective consisted mainly in a qualitative analysis of their opinions and reflections once the project had been

completed. The data obtained from the anonymous survey filled in by the participants were complemented by frequent group meetings in which different aspects of the project were regularly discussed and assessed.

As previously mentioned, peer mentors receive no economic or 'academic' reward so far, so it seems relevant to find out what moved them to take part in the experience in the first place. To this end, they were asked about their motivations and initial expectations about the project. These are diverse but, as in the case of students, mentors seemed to be clearly attracted to the 'personal' aspect of the programme. On the one hand, they liked the idea of getting to know their younger peers and helping them out with their previous experience. Therefore, most mentors got involved on the basis of purely 'altruistic' reasons: they wanted to be able to help others. On the other hand, they found the interaction with their own peers highly appealing: many mentors took part in the project just to be able to contact and share experiences with fellow PhD students. The interaction among them has proved to be highly beneficial for them, both in academic and personal terms. In this way, the programme has rendered an unexpected outcome: the mentors' positive influence on each other suggests that the project works not only on a unidirectional, 'hierarchical' basis, but also 'horizontally' as, thanks to this programme, mentors have been able to build a net of mutual advice and support.

Another source of motivation to become a mentor was PhD students' will to learn from the experience and to enhance their professional and academic development. In order to assess this aspect, they were asked which values and competences they considered to have developed during the mentoring process. Regarding the former, mentors highlighted 'responsibility' and 'companionship' as the most relevant personal values acquired during this experience.
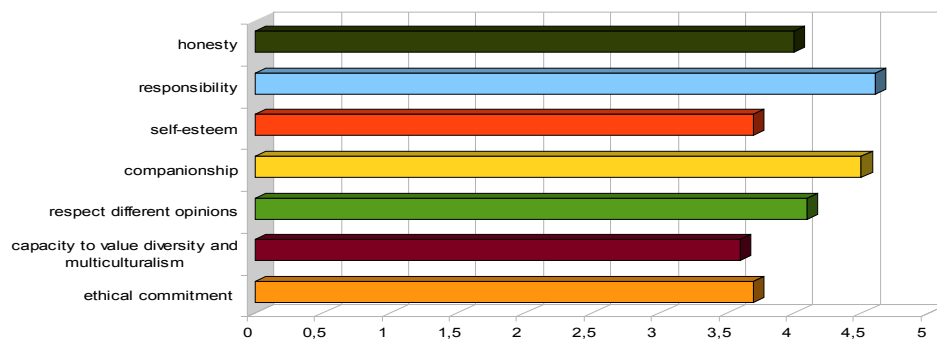

Figure 6. What have you learnt from this experience? Rate from 0 to 5
the acquisition of the following values present in the Master's Degree,
being 0 the minimum and 5 the maximum

These results dovetail with the participants' expectations about the project: on the one hand, being 'willing to help' is not enough to act as a student's formal advisor.

A considerable degree of personal responsibility and engagement is needed for the task. Results indicate that this project has contributed to promote these values in mentors. On the other hand, the development of a significant sense of companionship is another logical outcome of the programme, since the constant interaction among its members, both through formal and informal meetings, is likely to foster personal connections which help them cope with the different aspects of academic life. In this sense, it is worth noting that those values 'learnt' by the mentors coincide with those reported by the students, thus suggesting that the experience is equally enriching for both groups.

When questioned about the competences they believed to have acquired with this project, most respondents agreed on having improved their social skills. As previously mentioned, one of the project's aims was to introduce PhD students to tutoring. In this sense, the development of certain social skills, like empathy, leadership or communication skills, will be very valuable in their future role as university teachers. Apart from this, mentors also reported having enhanced other skills like the capacity for self-motivation, personal engagement and the ability to assess one's own and others' work: through the advice provided to their younger peers, mentors were able to reflect on their own learning processes, increasing their level of motivation and commitment with their own research. In this sense, many mentors pointed out the enhancement of another competence which was not initially included in the list: work management skills. Most mentors reported that having to advise others on how to better organize their study had helped them reflect on their own work management system and on its improvement. Lastly, many mentors commented on the development of team-work skills. Again, the acquisition of this competence is related to the 'personal' nature of the project and the fostering of a sense of companionship among its members.
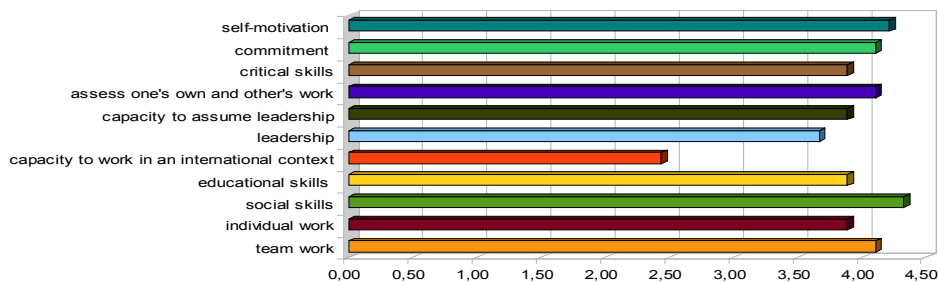

Figure 7. What have you learnt from this experience? Rate from 0 to 5
the acquisition of the following competences present in the Master's Degree,
being 0 the minimum and 5 the maximum

When the mentors were enquired about the positive and negative aspects of the project, the former seemed to outnumber the latter. The benefits gained from the experience include:

- A heightened sense of emotional well-being: respondents reported having felt good about themselves by helping others.
- Increased motivation: advising others on how to achieve better academic results proved a good exercise in self-motivation.
- Learning from the experience in academic terms: as future teachers and researchers, interaction with the students helped mentors reflect about their own teaching and research habits, contributing to their improvement.
- Possibility to establish a network of peers with whom to share experiences, enhancing team-work skills.
- Development of necessary professional competences for the future, such as responsibility, commitment and social skills.

As can be seen, the professional and personal benefits gained from the experience are intimately linked, although the mentors' answers suggest that the former are frequently perceived to stem from the latter. As one respondent stated: "all the rewards I expect to get from this project are of a personal nature. However, the more satisfied I am with my role as a mentor, the better my academic results will be, as both aspects go hand in hand".

As far as the project's drawbacks are concerned, some respondents pointed out that being a mentor is rather time-consuming. They also expressed a considerable degree of frustration when faced with certain situations in which they could not really help the student. In this sense, it should be pointed out that this is a voluntary project and it is not meant to solve the students' specific academic or personal problems. Academic shortcomings should be dealt with the help of the tutor. Similarly, personal problems of a more serious nature should be addressed to those specialized services offered by the university. Apart from this, mentors also complained about feeling occasionally insecure about their role: some respondents said that sometimes they were not really sure whether they were giving students the 'right' piece of advice. Others were afraid of 'influencing' them too much and not allowing students form their own opinions about certain issues. From these answers, it can be surmised that, in the future, it would be advisable to provide mentors with specialized training to help them deal with difficult situations.

Thus, being a pilot experience, the project has shortcomings that need to be addressed in the future. However, despite this, the qualitative evaluation of the mentors' experience is overall positive, as the following graph indicates:
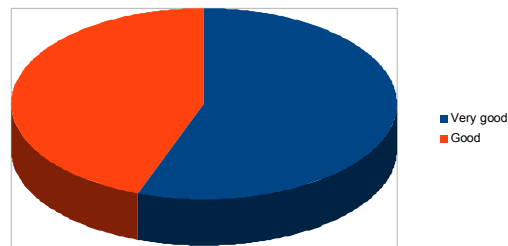
Figure 8. How would you assess this experience?

In general terms, it can be concluded that the Peer Mentoring programme has been a very positive experience on the mentors' end: it is worth noting that a project aimed at helping students improve their academic results and their integration in different aspects of university life proved to be equally beneficial for those who were meant to guide these students. Results indicate that mentors ended up acquiring the same values and competences the project was meant to foster in students and that they were able to establish a network of peer support which helped them in their academic and personal development. In this sense, the 'personal' character of the project should be emphasized once again: most mentors got involved for purely 'altruistic' reasons, and the rewards they obtained were mostly of a 'personal' nature: the enhancement of the mentor's own growth not only in knowledge, but also in personal skills and attributes constitutes a very remarkable – albeit somehow unexpected – outcome of the project.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be pointed out that, on the whole, the Peer Mentoring programme has been positively assessed. It has proved to be beneficial on three fronts: firstly, at the level of students, who acknowledged the advantages of participating in this project both on a personal and academic level; secondly, at the level of mentors, who were able to enhance professional skills and obtain a significant degree of personal fulfilment; and thirdly, at an institutional level, as the project opened a valuable feedback channel between students and staff which is helping reduce drop out rates and assure quality standards in the Master.

Being a pilot experience, the project is expected to be further developed in the future. In this respect, there are certain shortcomings that need to be addressed. As shown by the assessment of the results presented in this article, future challenges include:
- The need to provide appropriate training for mentors.
- In the future, 'personal' benefits may not be enough for the recruitment of mentors. More 'tangible' rewards should be provided, as well as academic recognition of their work (and also of the teacher leader).

- The achievement of the approval, awareness and value of the programme by the Master's teaching team.
- The development of procedures which assure the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

These improvements are crucial for the continuation of the project. The findings of this study offer evidence to support the belief that this is a highly valuable project which holds a significant potential for the enhancement of university's quality standards through the direct involvement of its students. However, its full implementation is highly dependent on the provision of institutional support. If the mentoring programme receives the support it deserves, it might develop into a highly beneficial project for all the parties involved.

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