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TUTORING NEEDS OF MASTER'S STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The objective of the case study was to detect the tutoring needs of a group of master's students to write their theses. A qualitative analysis of interviews was carried out with eleven participants, who showed that they required guidance on the research process and support from their tutors to finish their dissertations. Likewise, the results showed the lack of methodological knowledge both in the search for scientific information and for the design of your projects.

Keywords: Tutoring, research skills, academic support, investigative process

INTRODUCTION

In most postgraduate courses, the final requirement to obtain the degree involves, among other criteria, the completion of a research project, in which students see the need to complete a thesis. At this point, teachers assume that students have the necessary tools to do so and this is not the case (Martin and Khan, 2017).

One of the most complex academic tasks that exist in universities is thesis tutoring (Lindsay, 2015). It involves a process of interaction between at least three actors: the thesis tutor, the institution and the student. This experience represents a complex mix of academic, practical, intellectual, emotional situations and transformations that can become obstacles to overcome throughout the development of the dissertation and have to be attended to by tutors and university authorities (Adenagbe, et al, 2021; Hodgson, 2020; Baptista, Huet, and Jenkins, 2011).

A postgraduate student must have research skills acquired throughout their training to carry out their theses, however, in many cases, this is not the case, generally the methodology subjects are not very motivating for students (Barraza and Barraza, 2021), and they become aware of the importance of these skills until they have to develop a project. (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Students require resources that support the completion of their research, such as academic writing and research methods, goal setting and time management, as well as emotional support in the form of stimulation, needs that are covered by multiple advisors. forms (Roberts, Tinari, & Bandlow, 2019).

Barraza and Barraza (2021) describe some of the problems that students face during their postgraduate studies. Firstly, they require deploying intellectual skills such as understanding scientific texts, analysis and synthesis, systematization and organization of ideas. In the same way, they present difficulties when making arguments and expressing ideas, especially because they recognize the lack of knowledge and insufficient reading skills. Finally, they showed that they had problems in choosing the topic and during the documentary research, pointing out the need to receive, from their tutors, precise and clear feedback on the progress of the thesis presented.

There is research that analyzes the research competencies that postgraduate students have achieved (e.g. Lora-Loza et al., 2020; Martínez, and Márquez, 2014; Murtonen, Olkinuora, Tynjälä, et al., 2008). However, they do little to explore the students' point of view on what these competencies represent for them and their tutoring needs; studies on this fact could provide knowledge that can contribute to the support of students (Spaulding, 2012).

The tutoring process involves a close relationship between tutor and student with the aim of achieving mastery of the knowledge necessary for the development of their thesis, which leads to strengthening research and autonomous work skills, as well as establishing an emotional connection of security and confidence that will help manage the uncertainty and stress that arises from the activities related to the construction of their research (Cruzata-Martínez, 2018; Hernández

et al., 2016). For their part, García et al. (2022) points out that the lack of teaching of research skills combined with a not very positive attitude towards research by students has led to this type of knowledge being seen as of little use for academic and professional work, which has a negative impact the motivation for completing a thesis (Vera and Vera, 2015).

Yob and Crawford (2012) mention that the needs of thesis students correspond to two domains for which advisors must be prepared. The first is academic, which includes four elements: a) professional, disciplinary and technical competence; b) availability of the teacher; c) the induction of students' adaptive processes; and d) the challenge of building reflective thinking and self-criticism. The second is psychosocial, the teacher must show: a) respectful, open and genuine personal qualities for a good relationship with the student; b) communication that inspires trust, support and security; c) emotional support, one of the most important tasks related to caring for the student's well-being, self-esteem and confidence. For their part, Baptista, Huet, and Jenkins (2011) found that students sought support from their advisors in three dimensions. Academics related to writing and scientific skills. The interpersonal that includes communication, cooperation and empathy. The intrapersonal associated with motivation, persistence and responsibility.

The way in which tutors attend to the needs of students affects the efficiency with which the thesis is developed (Delgado, 2020), this work requires multiple skills and the use of many hats as noted by Roberts, Tinari, and Bandlow, (2019).). One of them is clear, respectful and detailed feedback, a frequent request from thesis students that allows them to remain focused and oriented in their research task, avoiding involvement in activities unrelated to their theses. In this regard, Matin and Khan (2017) found that the absence of discussions with supervisors at regular intervals hinders the progress of the thesis work. On the other hand, the availability of the tutor provides emotional and moral support, contributing to success in the research work, the fact that the advisor has a recurring space to assist the thesis student makes him feel supported and safe.

We can conclude that the needs that students have to carry out their thesis work are very varied and complex, representing a strong challenge for advisors. This is why the objective of this study was to try to understand the difficulties that the teachers were facing in the development of their theses, while they were taking the subject designed for this purpose.

METHOD

The sample was intentionally selected and consisted of 11 master's students (5 women and 6 men) who were studying a subject whose objective was the development of the thesis project.

A brief interview was applied based on an open question in which students were asked to consider their own perspective and experience to describe the tutoring and support needs they required in the process of constructing their thesis projects. This question was sent to them by email and they were asked to re-send it by this same means, filling out at least one page. The session was closed until all participants completed the task, which took about 30 minutes. After a first reading of the eleven texts collected, the participants were asked again to clarify or expand some of the ideas expressed.

The analysis was carried out following the procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2002), open coding was done to label and code categories, as well as axial coding to interrelate them. Finally, through selective coding, the categories obtained were organized and described, generating

the substantive theory that emerged from the participants' narratives.

RESULTS

The open and axial coding led to the construction of the analysis model presented in Figure 1. Four tutoring needs were found. The first *without defined direction* It is the need to find the problem that will be addressed, they feel disoriented and little interested in any topic. The second, the *ignorance of the investigative process*, The participants frequently expressed the need to have research training and acknowledged not knowing the methodological foundations, even with a previous course. The following two categories emerged as intervening conditions, which according to Strauss and Corbin, 2002) are aspects that facilitate or restrict the development of a phenomenon, in this case the process of writing a thesis, and they are: accompaniment and precurrent skills. Accompaniment refers to the need to have a tutor who walks alongside them throughout the process, an intervening condition that facilitates the development of the thesis. The fourth category, precurrent skills, a restricting condition, refers to the necessary skills and knowledge that were learned before facing the completion of the thesis, in order to successfully develop the work. These four categories and their components are described below.
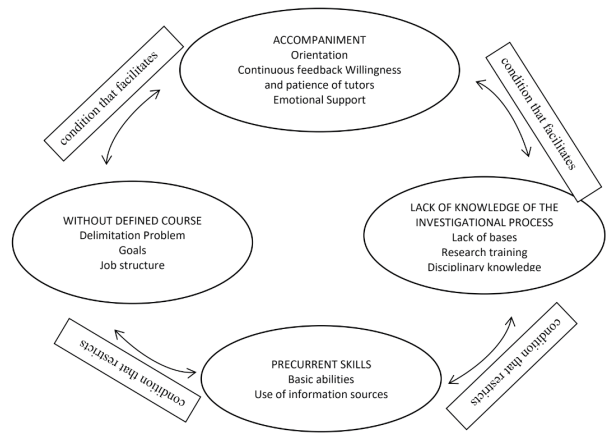

Figure 1. Model of students' support and tutoring needs.

WITHOUT A DEFINED DIRECTION

To name this category, what was expressed by one of the participants was used verbatim. It is made up of three subcategories: the delimitation of the problem, the specification of the objectives and the structure of the work and correspond to one of the first challenges when facing the thesis, it is these aspects that will define not only the theme but also the motivation. and attitude during the investigative process. The setting of the study represents insecurity, frustration and desperation for them, being the most complicated part of the process.

At first, the students did not have a specific problem or were debating between various options, they were faced with the need to convert broad and non-specific general topics into a defined thesis project, decision-making was a conflictive situation for them. They also indicated that they did not know how to identify, limit and establish the scope of the aspects that could be addressed from a scientific perspective. from here the subcategory arose **problem delimitation**. A recurring difficulty for students is going from a broad topic to identifying the specific variables to be studied.

The second subcategory referring to the **objective specification** It is another of the

processes with the greatest conflict due to the difficulty of defining the goals to be achieved in the project and writing them clearly and precisely. Likewise, they comment that the mere writing of the objective was extremely complex for them and they could not put in a simple and clear text what they intended with their work.

The third aspect was the lack of knowledge of the **work structure**, The students did not know the elements or sections that made up the thesis document or its content, nor did they know the sources of information related to their topics. They mentioned a certain resistance when having to follow the scientific guidelines established for carrying out an investigation; it is possible that this is due to the requirement of systematization, order and coherence that the investigative process requires and that they seemed to be unaware of.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESS

The three subcategories that define this dimension allow us to understand the complexity that students face when trying to develop research, these are: the lack of methodological bases, initial training in research and disciplinary knowledge.

Master's students recognize **the lack of bases** of the research process, they repeatedly mention not knowing or not remembering the basic methodological concepts, from the statement of the objective to the development of the theoretical framework and the technical resources to propose an appropriate method. Another aspect that was difficult for them to understand was the coherence and congruence between the elements that a project includes, that is, they do not know the integrative logic that underlies the investigative process.

Derived from the above, the participants pointed out the need to have courses that would provide them with **research training** to achieve solid knowledge of methodological resources. Although some of them had taken methodology courses, they emphasized that this knowledge was necessary for the preparation of their theses.

Finally, **disciplinary knowledge** was another of the students' needs, specifically related to the particular topic of their projects. They were unaware of theories and studies related to the topics addressed. For them, this activity was a discovery and little by little they found the importance and usefulness of the literature review that made it easier for them to better understand their research problems. Likewise, they required specialists to guide them and exemplify how to develop studies related to the topics addressed.

ACCOMPANIMENT

This category is defined by four aspects: orientation and guidance, continuous feedback, the disposition and patience of the tutors, as well as emotional support. Accompaniment is an intervening condition that makes it easier for students to find the direction of their research and understand the research process.

From beginning to end, the **orientation and guidance** of the teachers/tutors in the development of the projects is essential support for the participants. They pointed out that, from the identification of the topic to the final proposal of the methodology, they require guidance, especially in the initial phases to define the study problem.

The second subcategory is **continuous feedback**, students emphasized the need for constant step-by-step and precise advice on the development of their projects. Due to the presence of constant doubts, they required extra-class attention to receive suggestions and illustrative examples of the various elements of an investigation.

Within the accompaniment process, two

aspects that are important for the participants are **tutor availability and patience**, They consider that this supports the development of their work in a very important way.

The last subcategory within this dimension was **emotional support**, for them having the encouragement and interest of the tutor/teacher, as well as empathy, served as motivation or incentive to advance and conclude their research.

PRECURRENT SKILLS

In this last dimension, two subcategories were generated related to skills that the students did not acquire throughout their basic and higher education studies, which became conditions that restricted the development of their projects and they had to develop them at the same time as the development. of his theses. The first was called **Basic abilities**, taking the words of one of the participants, the second corresponds to the skills of **searching for sources of information**.

The **basic skills** were related to strategies for writing and communicating in written form in a logical and coherent manner, with the ability to analyze and synthesize in the management of literature, and with the difficulty in expressing one's thoughts.

One of the great challenges in the development of their projects was the **search for information sources.** First, they did not know how to use library and database resources or repositories to search for articles or books related to their topics. Furthermore, they could not identify bibliographic materials relevant to their objectives. They discovered that scientific articles from specialized journals are essential materials for their theses, which they had never read and found difficult to understand.

DISCUSSION

Although the results of this research reinforce the findings of previous research (Barraza and Barraza,2021; Valenzuela et al., 2021), they also demonstrate that teachers and universities have a great challenge in teaching research processes. The courses taught on this knowledge are not enough to motivate and provide students with research skills that support the completion of their theses.

A strong problem to be resolved involves the curricular planning of university programs, the teaching of research and the training of tutors who carry out thesis advisory work. It is possible that for some readers this case study represents an isolated fact or inherent to the participants studied. However, it is a recurring fact that advisors constantly comment on and that requires the design of efficient teaching strategies that contribute to better preparation of students in the field of research.

Emotional support, guidance, encouragement, availability and continuous presence of the tutor seem to be essential elements for the completion of degree theses, as demonstrated by this study and the research of Delgado (2020), Yob and Crawford (2012).) and Baptista et al. (2011), this is a need that both in the present study and in various investigations seems to be a strong demand from students and a great challenge for advisors.

Universities must promote a professional culture linked to science (García, 2022) not only for the generation of future researchers, but also for students to develop scientific, objective and orderly thinking to face the problems derived from their professions, commit to the constant production of knowledge and in particular, being able to write their theses without so many setbacks.

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