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## **SUPPORTING STUDENTS FROM VULNERABLE CATEGORIES THROUGH THE MODEL OF TUTORING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – ATTITUDES, NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS**

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### **Abstract**

Tutoring is considered as an additional and extracurricular academic support for students, with the aim to help individuals in acquiring knowledge and developing new skills.

The aim of the research is to make a survey with students and to learn more about their attitudes, needs, experience and expectations towards the tutoring system in the higher education. Broader goal of the research is to gain data that will be used in developing a model of tutoring that can help students to overcome the difficulties in the learning process and easily to face the challenges in the academic and everyday life.

Data were gathered with a survey of current students attending the study programs at the faculty of Philosophy.


According to the responses of students, the tutoring function should be implemented by providing literature and teaching aids according to the needs of particular students who need support, explaining the tasks for exam preparation, helping with administrative tasks, instructions for using the university software, registering courses to be taken in an exam session, registering and certifying a semester, and other academic tasks during their studies. In order to achieve this, an individual higher education plan should be developed that involves adjusting the educational standards and contents made by the tutor, with the assistance of the professor.

The ultimate benefit and recommendation from the research are the creation of conditions for developing an educational model for supporting students from vulnerable categories, which can further be improved and applied in work with all students.

**Keywords:** tutoring, higher education, vulnerable groups

### **INTRODUCTION**

The inclusion of students from vulnerable groups in higher education implies an obligation to provide fair and effective higher education that meets their needs. This requires changes and adaptations in the system, by using available resources to



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support learning and build on current practices and knowledge. Related to this, tutoring of students from vulnerable categories is a current need of higher education, which would lead to the acquisition and addition of knowledge and skills of these categories of students.

Present research and knowledge about this topic in Macedonia can be considered as insufficient. There are several publications in which certain aspects of this issue are partially elaborated. Assigning a tutor for an extracurricular support is still an unfamiliar concept to many, although this kind of support can be very useful and valuable for students. Several studies on tutoring have been carried out based on conducted surveys, and their results cause criticism of the existing higher education system. However, none of these studies can provide sufficient information about the effectiveness of tutoring. Tutoring effectiveness can be determined based on observable tutor action and student performance documented over certain period of time.

In the context of more detailed elaboration of the topic, firstly is necessary to present the concept of tutoring by different authors. Behr (1990, 9) refers to tutoring as the supervision of students that is privately organized and funded by parents outside of regular school hours. According to Krüger (1991), tutoring should mean classroom or community activity after school hours that is extracurricular, more or less regular and mostly temporarily aimed at supplementing the deficiencies in the performance of classroom teaching. Kowalczyk and Ottich (2006, 85) defines tutoring as classes that take place, in addition to regular school hours, and aim to ensure success after school hours and are used to teach thematic units. According the different views in tutoring (Dohmen, Erbes, Fuchs, & Günzel, 2007, 16) we can synthetise its meaning as a process in which a knowledgeable and skilled person, known as a tutor, provides personalized instruction and guidance to a student in a one-on-one or small group setting. The goal of tutoring is to help the students understand and master specific subjects or skills that they might be struggling with. Tutors can provide explanations, clarify concepts, answer questions, and offer additional practice opportunities to enhance the student's learning experience. Tutoring can occur in various contexts, including academic subjects, test preparation, language learning, and more.

## **1. Tutoring as a model for supporting students in higher education**

According to the Education Strategy for 2018-2025 and in the Action Plan (2018) for reforming the education in the Republic of Macedonia, priorities have been set for ensuring the quality and effectiveness of higher education in accordance with European good practices. The focus is on increasing the efficiency of the learning process at universities, through dedication greater attention to each student, improvement of accessibility in higher education for students with physical disabilities as a vulnerable category of students and general priorities have been set in




the education system for the gradual introduction of a differentiated approach in teaching, that means adapting teaching process according to the needs of students from vulnerable categories.

Based on these priorities, this scientific research aims to improve the quality of higher education by detecting the educational needs of students from vulnerable categories and proposing ways to fulfil their expectations and demands. Tutoring as a supportive extracurricular activity is often associated with the possibility to improve the poor academic results (in the form of grades or feedback from the academic staff) and with the further improvement of the learning achievements of students.

Motives related to the labour market may also influence the introduction of tutoring with the assumption that additional learning support increases the qualifications of future employees and thereby improves their chances for suitable position in the labour market. There are also motives related to the educational system as well. If students are not content with the individual support they receive during regular classes, they could benefit from the extracurricular support and compensate the lack of knowledge.

In order to elaborate the term students from vulnerable categories, we will use definitions of some relevant authors. In addressing the question “What is vulnerability?”, Mackenzie et al. (2014) proposes a distinctive taxonomy of different sources (inherent, situational, and pathogenic) and states (dispositional and occurrent) of vulnerability. For example, inherent vulnerabilities are those that are intrinsic to the human condition and may depend on factors such as age, gender, race, and disability. Situational vulnerability arises from a specific context, such as the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups, and can be short-term, intermittent, or enduring. The extent, duration, and degree of impact of situational vulnerabilities may depend partly on the resilience of individuals. Changes occur in students’ personal lives due to (temporary) financial, family, or other changes, which may worsen and classify the individual into a certain vulnerable category. Pathogenic vulnerability can be caused by institutions as one source, but interpersonal relationships as well as institutional structures can be sources of pathogenic vulnerability.

Tutor can become a vital and significant assistant in the educational process that leads to the acquisition and addition of knowledge and acts as an intermediary between the university, the teacher, and the student. Our research project entitled “Supporting students from vulnerable categories through the tutoring model in higher education - attitudes, needs and expectations”, which was supported by the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, and realized at the Faculty of Philosophy (2022), encouraged, and opened up many questions relevant to this subject, especially in the area of inclusive education. That is why tutoring in higher education is seen as an auxiliary tool for students from vulnerable categories and precondition for successful implementation of the concept of inclusive education.



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Inclusion is not just about providing access of students with disabilities to mainstream classrooms. It means providing all students regardless of race, language, class, geographic location, and disability with an equitable and effective education that meets their needs as students (Thousand, Burchard, 1990). “The social dimension of the Bologna process is responsive towards the needs of students that reflect the diversity of populations, and the background of students should not have an impact on their participation in higher education achievement.” (European Commission, 2015).

Higher education system can support the achievements of students through the involvement of experts from various profiles, the academic staff and other university resources, and with these to provide support in implementing inclusive education in higher education in several areas:

- enabling resource services from the university/faculty by engaging experts in inclusive teams, supporting the academic staff, and supporting the students in inclusive higher education by a tutor;
- modifying the university curricula according to each specific stage of education and define learning results based on the competencies that should be acquired in line with the personal development, independence, and social skills of the students;
- the faculty in line with the non-governmental sector and other sources can meet students demands with a high level of support that will allow them to focus on their studies and to improve current learning achievements;
- tutors provide support in acquiring knowledge and developing skills of students from vulnerable categories, respecting the different needs of students, and providing them with help and support in adapting to the different educational and social situations;
- tutors can participate in the development of an individual higher education plan with the assistance of academic staff, as well as in the development of specific teaching aids.

In order to support the learning process of the students from vulnerable categories, if necessary, tutors can be hired in the faculty as teaching assistants. Adequate attention should be paid to these pedagogical staff, who will be significantly involved in the process of inclusion of students from vulnerable categories in higher education, so that conditions will be created for the development of strong communication between the tutor, the professor, and the student.

The implementation of inclusive education in higher education is often seen as a separate initiative to pursue innovative changes in promoting student success at university. Inclusive education requires changes and adaptations, making use of available resources to support learning and building on existing practices and knowledge.



The focus of this scientific research is on the approaches, models, and effects of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories in cooperation with higher education institutions, as vital part of the society. The perceptions of students from the vulnerable categories regarding the enhancement of their education are also examined. The results of research should contribute to the development and implementation of additional pedagogical approaches and methods, which will increase the educational opportunities of students from vulnerable categories.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The topic of the research is related to the role of the tutor in the extracurricular work with students from vulnerable categories in the higher education and possibilities to contribute and improve the learning achievements of these students.

The main goal of the research is to determine models and characteristics of tutoring in the system of higher education, their efficiency, justification as well as the importance of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories.

Consequently, the hypothesis framework has been drawn from the goal and tasks of the research and according to them, one general and three specific hypotheses have been set.

### **General hypothesis:**

X0: Tutoring offers a special educational support that allows improvement of the success and knowledge of students from vulnerable categories.

### **Specific hypotheses**

H1: Tutors have a high degree of motivation to work with students from vulnerable categories.

H 2: Micro methodical models of tutoring in the extracurricular process need to be planned according to the specific needs, interests, and opportunities of students from vulnerable categories.

H3: Tutoring offers special educational support that enables support for students from vulnerable categories.

According to the goals and tasks of the research, an appropriate research instrument (questionnaire) was developed through which the educational needs of the students, the educational models for tutoring, the meaning and effectiveness of the tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories are determined. Survey with students took place in the classrooms with support of teaching staff from university who delivered the questionnaire to the students.

The research sample consists of 551 students from all study programs from the first cycle of the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje.

### 3. INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the following text, we present some of the data gathered with use of the research techniques. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented at the beginning, followed by an analysis of the results obtained on the individual questions from the questionnaire-scaler and their discussion in relation to the set of the research hypotheses.

Regarding the question “Does your university/faculty have tutoring centres that provide support to students from vulnerable categories to improve academic success and learning achievements?”, the percentage of students’ negative answers is extremely high (70.78%), while one quarter or 24.14% declared positively. Most of the surveyed students, even 90.38% declared that they did not have any help and support from tutors during the academic school year.

Interesting results are obtained from the question “In what way do you think that tutors could provide support with tutoring classes?”. List of student responds are presented in Table 1. A quarter of the students declared that as tutors, they would help students from vulnerable categories by explaining and determining the material for preparing exams and exercises, and also, they could assist in providing academic literature and teaching aids, according to the needs of the student. The least elected option (10.14%) is that they will be of help in using the UKIM software and electronically registering and administration during the exam sessions through the I know system.

**Table 1: Types of support for students from vulnerable categories during tutoring (Data are taken from the survey)**

Categories of responds:	<i>f</i>	%
a) assistance in providing academic literature and teaching aids (according to the needs of the student)	287	21.55%
b) individual higher education plan, which implies adjustment of educational standards and contents (made by the tutor with the assistance of the professor)	191	14.34%
c) using adapted teaching aids and assistive technologies during tutoring classes	218	16.37%
d) explanation and determination of the material for preparing the exams and practical exercises	324	24.32%
e) administrative regulations (help and guidance for enrolment in semesters and administrative evidence)	177	13.29%
f) using the university (UKIM) software, registering courses and exams electronically through the university (so called I know) system	135	10.14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1332</b>	<b>100.00%</b>



According to the students' opinion most preferable persons for tutors are the peers-students, who can most effectively provide help and support to the students from vulnerable categories. A small percentage of responders believe that the special education teacher, the psychologist, and the social worker, as well as the coordinator of their institute could also be helpful to them. Additional materials and literature, organizing workshops or visiting seminars would be of great interest to students from vulnerable categories. For those who have difficulties with oral or written expression, students demand to be allowed to have options for expressing their knowledge either in writing or oral examination. Students with special educational needs can also benefit if they can use specialized software during the exams, and be assisted by experts in this process.

Regarding the availability and need of academic resources and didactic materials at the Faculty of Philosophy, more than a quarter of student respondents stated that during the past semester library resources were available to them on a daily basis. Most of the students stated that they find useful to have workshops every day. Regarding communication and consultations with the professors and other academic staff, more than half of the students had communication once a day or once or twice a week. According to the claims of the students, one third of them consider that the instructions for using the I know system (electronic index) are available to them daily, but half of them need daily instructions on how to use it. 39.33% of students have access to all the necessary textbooks and reading materials, but a larger number, or 68.19%, need more textbooks and learning materials. A quarter of the students have access to all necessary manuals, but a larger number of them need access to more manuals. Additional working materials are available to 40.44% of students every day. 40.44% of the students consider as necessary to use audio and video materials daily during the academic teaching, but a quarter of the students declared that audio and video materials were never used in the academic teaching.

Digital contents during academic teaching were used once to twice a month according to 28.16% of students, and for 39.60% of them it is necessary to use them daily in the teaching process. During the academic teaching, books, magazines, encyclopaedias were used once to twice a month according to 28.78% of students, and for 41.14% of them it is necessary to use them daily in the teaching process. To the question "Which additional competencies do you think should be developed to improve the quality of education and the educational needs of students from vulnerable categories?", 17.38% of students believe that they need to develop strategies for successful learning, and at the lower rank they put the development of skills for foreign languages and the development of research competencies. As additional competencies that need to be developed during education and that will be needed by students from vulnerable categories, the respondents emphasize the developing a system for using Braille and sign language needed for easier communication with students from vulnerable categories, and developing statistical knowledge and skills.



As essential skills for their academic success, students stress: oratory, communication, social skills, and IT skills. They accent the great need to develop academic skills for writing seminar papers, reports, improve statistical knowledge and skills, presentation skills, as well as receiving more frequent guidance for their individual work from professors. Students would like to visit seminars, participate in trainings, workshops, participate in debates on various topics, acquire knowledge of foreign languages, and enrich their vocabulary with foreign professional expressions. They wish to improve their confidence, self-awareness, persistence, motivation, socialization, and ingenuity.

Participation in group projects for learning through research and own experiences is underlined as one of the most important, but also learning through problem solving, introducing different ways and strategies for effective learning, realizing more practical teaching and visits to the institutions relevant for their profession.

Students believe that frequent visits to educational centres, educational institutions, institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Red Cross and Red Crescent will be of great benefit during their studies. They propose more opportunities for mobility through Erasmus, CEPUS, CET and CDI, and the involvement of more experts who will support and prepare students for their inclusion in society as academic citizens. Some of the students required access to more books, manuals and scripts that should be available to them for free or be available online, free laptops for the vulnerable category of students and availability of reading rooms throughout the day. People with special needs (people with disabilities) need assistive devices, adapted benches, personal assistants, and organized transportation.

According to the responds, 61.99% of the students partially agree that the teaching methods are adapted to the different learning styles and abilities of the students. More than half of the students partially agree with the statement that the methods of assessment and evaluation are adapted to students with disabilities. 54.01% of students partially agree that the faculty offers services appropriate to their educational needs. 60.36% of students think that the acquired academic knowledge and skills contribute to their success. Half of the respondents partly believe that the Faculty of Philosophy offers a friendly academic and learning environment for students from vulnerable categories. 47.54% of students partially believe that the rights of students from vulnerable categories are respected at the faculty. The number of students who would fully or partially recommend the Faculty of Philosophy to other persons from vulnerable categories is almost equal.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of inclusive education in higher education is often seen as a separate initiative to keep progress and innovative changes for promote student success in higher education. Inclusive education requires changes and adaptations,



making use of available resources to support learning and building on existing practices and knowledge.

Tutoring is considered as an additional and extracurricular academic support for students with the goal to help each individual student to acquire academic knowledge and skills. It can be organized in small groups of students, but it can also be individual, depending on the circumstances and needs of the students. Through the process of tutoring, students are encouraged to develop the competence on learning how to learn, the process of learning becomes more interesting and effective, and self-confidence towards what they learn increases.

The results of the research indicate the justification and importance of tutoring for students from vulnerable categories. Through this research, the degree of readiness and quality of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories was determined, as a factor in improving their success within the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The results of the research determined the current state and educational needs of students from all study programs on the first cycle at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, related to the existing educational models and the effectiveness of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories.

According to the responds, tutoring of students who need support and assistance is implemented by providing academic literature and teaching aids according to the individual needs of the student, explaining and determining the material for the preparation of exams and practical exercises, assistance in relation to administrative regulations, guidance for enrolments and administration of the semesters, operational guidance for using the university software, electronic evidence of exams and learning achievements through the electronic system, developing individual higher education plan which implies adjustment of educational standards and contents made jointly by the tutor with the assistance of the professors and other academic staff. Further implementation of these recommendations is essential for overcoming the difficulties encountered by students during their studies.

Research on this topic is needed to be carried out in higher education and based on the results and gained knowledge to develop and introduce a consistent methodology for tutoring work with students. These results represent a solid basis for developing an appropriate educational model for the advancement and modernization of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories. According to this model, the tutoring of students who need support and help will be implemented by providing the resources according to the student's needs. This concept will enable easier overcoming of the difficulties encountered by students during their studies and more successful preparation of colloquiums, exams, and other types of academic tasks during their studies. Creating this kind of additional learning through tutoring, is quite responsible, complex, and challenging, and requires comprehensive and concise planning by professional teams of experts and practitioners.

State institutions should show more interest in this topic, improve, and increase the effectiveness of educational achievements by creating motivation of students



with extracurricular tutoring work. This problem should not be left out and isolated, but on the contrary, it should be supported. It is the right time to emphasize the issues needed to be solved in the process of implementation of inclusive education, to raise awareness in the society and overcome ethnic prejudices and marginalization.

The results obtained from the research also initiate a useful base that could significantly improve the quality of work and support for students from vulnerable categories in higher education at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. At the same time, the benefits of this research are also seen in the need to encourage this kind of scientific research to be carried out in all units of the University and to work synchronously on the creation of educational models for work and support of students from vulnerable categories in order to facilitate and overcome the difficulties in the learning process, to support student in achieving better results, in personal development and of course to cope more easily with all the challenges they face in the academic, but also in the modern way of living.

The ultimate benefit and recommendation from the research carried out is the creation of conditions for developing an appropriate educational model for the advancement and modernization of tutoring work with students from vulnerable categories, which can further be used, developed, and applied in work with all students. Indirectly, through this approach, the professional development of the university's teaching and collaborative staff will be affected, and the activities of the student organizations will also be sensitized. In this way, the European recommendations for raising the quality and evaluation of higher education will be continuously followed and applied.

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