

**NEW CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY  
ASSURANCE:  
THE PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME  
AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN PHILOLOGY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ZARAGOZA (SPAIN)**

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***Abstract***

*The Department of English and German Philology at the University of Zaragoza has developed a Peer Mentoring Programme at the postgraduate level during the last four academic years. The main aim of this article is to focus on the positive evolution the project has undergone: the community involved has enlarged and the results have shown that the programme contributes to the development of personal and interpersonal competences, the improvement of the students' management of time and their academic results, which increases the quality of the postgraduate teaching and learning experiences. I would like to launch a further reflection on peer mentoring programmes by claiming that we should promote the power of human interaction and foster human values and interpersonal competencies at the university level if we want to assure quality in higher education during times of upheaval as those we are currently living.*

**Keywords:** quality, peer mentoring, innovation, English Studies, personal and interpersonal competences, values

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***1. Setting the Context***

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In the last few decades, pedagogical research in higher education has been mainly concerned with the devise of constructivist learning systems which encourage the students' acquisition of concepts, competences and skills promulgated by the European Space for Higher Education. As I said elsewhere (Pellicer-Ortín, 2011), the works of Spiro et al. (1992), Slavin (1999), Johnson and Holubec (1999) and Kagan (1992) fostered the belief in cognitive, cooperative and affective methods of teaching and learning as the most effective ones (Slavin, 1999: 15, 32, 36). After the Bologna Declaration of 1999, new approaches to teaching and learning have sought to create more flexible cognitive atmospheres and more efficient learning methods (Arnold, 1999; Scharlé and Szabó, 2000). For example, the expert Jane Arnold highlighted the importance of the affective side of learning (1999: 1-5) and the need to take into account the students' motivation (17), their individual learning styles (17) and their self-esteem (87) as key pillars in their learning processes. Along with this, Scharlé and Szabó also considered that some of the most relevant

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elements in any learning process are the development of the students' autonomy and accountability (2000: 3, 6), their involvement in the teaching-learning progression (80) and the need to implement student-centred attitudes in the educational systems (6) since, if students "have some control over the learning process" they can "assume responsibility for their learning" in a more successful way (80).

It is within this background that the Department of English and German Philology at the University of Zaragoza (Spain) has been developing a Peer Mentoring Programme at the postgraduate level during the last four academic years. We have realised that the students' insight into a course has a great influence on the quality provided by higher education institutions and, because of the new degrees that have been and are still being implemented in our university during the last years together with the current emphasis on designing effective systems of quality assessment in higher education environments, the perceptions that our students have about the quality of the teaching and learning processes has turned out to be one of our main concerns.

The project of innovation that I would like to expose throughout this article, entitled "Programme 'Tutor Quirón' in the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in the English Language and the PhD in English Studies as a complementary measure to the tutoring plan and as a method to guarantee quality in the Postgraduate Programmes in English Studies", derives from a number of previous projects that we have been implementing throughout the last years. In the academic year 2009/2010, we put into action the project "Study of the processes, strategies and workloads of the students in the Master's course in Textual and Cultural Studies in English as a means of guaranteeing the internal standards of quality", which was based on the assessment of the students' learning processes from the perspective of quality assurance in education. Compared to previous academic years, it was demonstrated that the increasing counselling role of the teachers and the tracking of the students' learning strategies echoed a more successful acquisition of concepts and competences and thus, a more integrative and realistic approach to learning (Pellicer-Ortín, 2011). Therefore, in the academic year 2010/2011, we decided that this procedure could be improved by combining this project with the mentoring programme, in which MA graduates acted as mentors of the current students of the Master. In 2011/2012, we extended the programme to the PhD in English Studies in our department; and nowadays, our main concern is to continue improving and institutionalising the mentoring system both at the MA and PhD levels.

To begin with, it is important to take into account some of the main characteristics of our Master and PhD programmes. The Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English is a 60 ECTS credit-degree, involving either onsite or blended learning modality. In the first semester, there are three compulsory subjects for all the students ("Approaches to the Study of the Literary Text in English", "Issues in

Film Studies”, “How to Write a Research Paper in English”); in the second semester, they must choose three subjects among a variety of eight subjects depending on their interests or labour perspectives (“Trends in Contemporary British Fiction”, “Main Trends in Contemporary U.S. Fiction”, “Alternatives to the Canon”, “Cinema, Culture and Society”, “Issues in Representation. Forms, Methods and Problems”, “British and U. S. Film Genres”, “Metalinguistic Resources in English Academic Texts”, “Computer Tools for Research, Professional and Teaching Purposes”); and then, there is a final Master’s Thesis (15 ECTS). The PhD in English Studies offered by the University of Zaragoza has been lately adapted to the requirements of the European Convergence. As may be inferred from the official website of this doctoral programme ([http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia\\_inglesa/doctorado/estudios-ingleses.pdf](http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/doctorado/estudios-ingleses.pdf)), its main aim is to “train students in the research methodologies in this area with a view to attaining the PhD degree in English Studies”. The Programme is a continuation of the graduate specialisation initiated in our Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English; and it “invites students to carry out research in one of these four lines: Contemporary Fiction in English; Cinema, Culture and Society; Cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural studies in academic and professional communication; and Translation of Literary, Specialized and Audiovisual Texts”.

Taking this background into account, three groups of participants have been involved in the project of innovation presented here: i) the MA students of the years 2009/2010, 2010/2011, 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 and the PhD students of the academic years 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 (mentees); ii) the teachers in the Master’s course and the PhD programme (this year there are 8 teachers involved in the project); mainly the teachers’ coordinator, the coordinator of the MA and of this project of innovation, and the coordinator of the doctoral programme in English Studies; iii) a group formed by 13 graduate students (12 mentors and the mentors’ coordinator) who have completed the Master’s course in the last four years and are either current PhD students in our Postgraduate programme or recent doctors working in the department. In the beginning, this project stemmed from a reduced group of teachers and some PhD students of the English Studies Department at the University of Zaragoza who decided to launch this project for the Master’s course in English in order to:

- a) Open a space to reflect on the students’ learning strategies and the workload of the postgraduate programmes;
- b) Help students integrate in the new learning process at the MA level, which is quite different from the learning styles students have to apply while they are undergraduates;
- c) Support students in their learning experiences by improving their academic performance together with their acquisition and development of personal and interpersonal skills;
- d) Try to avoid the students’ dropout;
- e) Promote feedback between teachers and students;

- f) Improve the quality of the Postgraduate degrees of our department.

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## 2. A Quality Culture

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In keeping with the preceding goal, our Peer Mentoring Programme should be framed within the “Programmes for the Strategic Innovation of the Degrees at the University of Zaragoza”, as our institution is playing an active role in the development of quality control and management systems, in line with the numerous learner- and quality- oriented educational programs that have been fostered in the European Space of Higher Education in recent years. Following the principles formulated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (cf. ENQA, <http://www.enqa.eu/> 2007), and drawing on Chickering and Ehrmann’s “Seven Principles of Good Educational Practices”, that is to say, of an education which i) encourages Student-Faculty Contact; ii) encourages cooperation among students; iii) encourages active learning; iv) gives prompt feedback; v) emphasises time on task; vi) communicates high expectations; vii) respects diverse talents and ways of learning (1987), most of the pedagogical research that is being carried out at the moment focuses on the creation of ground-breaking methods that can improve the quality of students’ learning experiences (Arnold, 1999; Newton and Ender, 2000; Sangeeta et al., 2004; ENQA, 2007; Muresan et al., 2007; Pérez-Llantada, 2010).

Regarding the particular use of Students as Partners or Mentoring programmes, it should be borne in mind that tutoring and mentoring practices are considered as essential factors in good-quality education systems (Álvarez, 2008: 72). More particularly, of the seven principles just mentioned by Chickering and Ehrmann, mentoring systems help to develop the first two practices, as they try to favour interaction between all the agents involved in the learning process, and the last two ones, since they are aimed at increasing the students’ motivation offering them individual attention to reflect on their particular and diverse ways of learning. As Lizzio argues in his article “University Students’ Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Academic Outcomes: implications for theory and practice”,

*a number of academic staff development practitioners have identified the informational and motivational ‘value added’ of ‘direct conversations’ between students and staff in the course improvement process. [...] Such interpersonally based processes enable us to not only gain a sense of students’ perceptions of subjects but also explore their sense of the underlying causes of problems and suggestions for change. (2002: 46)*

In other words, the interpersonal dimension mentioned by Lizzio must be considered when we want to obtain an insight into the learners’ awareness of their learning experiences in order to improve them. Also, according to the study “Mentoring & Coaching: Universidad y Empresa. Enfoques y experiencias para avanzar en el desarrollo de personas y conseguir mejores resultados” (2010),

carried out by Carmen Sánchez Ávila in the Spanish University context, those programmes that were initially aimed at expanding the human factor in the business sphere, such as coaching and mentoring programmes, have started to be applied to higher educational contexts very successfully. They help novice students to integrate into the educational context more quickly and efficiently (9), and they have demonstrated to be good methods to ensure quality within the university background (Tobajas and De Armas, 2010: 58).

Moreover, among the different quality models that have been developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages – “a client satisfaction principle”, “a process model of quality”, “quality based on results”, “quality personal development”, the “value-driven quality” (Muresan et al., 2007) –, our project is based on two of these models, explained in the *QualiTraining Guide* (2007): the “quality personal development” (14) and the “value-driven quality” (14). According to the quality model based on personal development,

*quality supports the motivation, the attitudes and skills of the people involved. In order for it to help maintain and improve quality, the institution needs to establish an environment which enables staff to develop and co-operate. This can be through staff development programmes, action research, peer observation, encouragement of innovation, quality circles. It implies an open style of leadership, with room for individual responsibility and initiative (14).*

And in line with the value-driven quality, “education is not just a mechanical industrial process, but embodies and tries to communicate values” (14), such as social cohesion. Enhancing these two models of quality, our mentoring practice attempts to relate the guarantee of the degrees’ quality to the acquisition of personal competences and values at university, returning the importance of human values and interpersonal skills, which had been lost during the previous decades when the main aspects of concern were the academic results of the students and the ranking of the universities (Bara, 2004), to educational institutions, fostering a direct correlation between the emotional and personal growth of the students and the improvement of their academic performance. Already in 1998, in the *World Conference on Higher Education*, the UNESCO signed the declaration on “Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action”, whose articles 1 and 2 remarked that one of the main goals of higher education should be to educate responsible citizens and consolidate ethical values that may guarantee a better society. Since then, a good range of research has demonstrated that the affective side of learning must be considered (Arnold, 1999: 1-5, 17, 87) if we want to achieve an education of good quality in the university context.

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### **3. Our Peer Mentoring Programme**

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Focusing on the particularities of our programme, having observed that, in order for the students to obtain successful results in the Master, they needed to follow a rigorous study plan and improve their self-learning strategies; we were inspired by the project “Tutor Quirón” of the Universidad Politécnica of Cartagena (cf. [www.upct.es/tutorquiron](http://www.upct.es/tutorquiron)) and the programme “Students as Partners” of the University of Manchester (cf. [www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/studentsaspartners/](http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/studentsaspartners/)), which were based on the fruitful results obtained from the collaboration between teachers, mentors and students in increasing the quality of the learners’ experience at university (Newton and Ender, 2000). Particularly, our programme works in the following way: the mentors are former students of the Master’s, which adds a more empathic dimension to the process and their own personal and academic experiences to the project. They hold various meetings with the students during the year in order to:

- a) Solve various academic, personal, interpersonal problems the students may be encountering;
- b) Monitor the academic results they obtain during the course;
- c) Elaborate a study plan for each part of the academic year;
- d) See if the students are completing the essays, if they use the bibliographical resources appropriately, if they need to improve their time management and organisational skills, if they are happy with the programme itself.

Basically, we have summarised the functions of every mentor as follows:

- a) Discuss and reflect on the students’ particular learning needs;
- b) Design a study-plan and develop efficient time management skills;
- c) Help students foster a feeling of community with their classmates;
- d) Provide information concerning conferences, courses, grants;
- e) Assess the students’ progress;
- f) Offer a counselling role different from that of the teachers and the academic tutors.

The mentor and the mentee hold several meetings during the year (a minimum of 5 meetings) in which they elaborate a study plan that examines the way they are completing their essays and assignments, together with the MA Thesis. Also in these meetings, the students can comment their problems and make suggestions to improve both the academic and the mentoring agenda.

Following Scharlé and Szabó’s idea that questionnaires are one of the best mechanisms to raise awareness in the students and to identify their different learning styles (17), a questionnaire was devised by a quality assurance specialist at our University so as to find out about the individual learning strategies and the skills that the students employed in all the subjects of the Master’s course together with the final MA dissertation, their personal dedication to the specific learning

activities requested in each subject, and their perception of the teachers' and students' role in their learning processes. This questionnaire was also designed following the principles established by the "Tutorial Project" set within the new procedures that have been fostered in the last years by the University of Zaragoza in order to ensure total quality systems in higher education (cf. [http://www.unizar.es/unidad\\_calidad/calidad/procedimientos/def/C4-DOC4-ANX6.pdf](http://www.unizar.es/unidad_calidad/calidad/procedimientos/def/C4-DOC4-ANX6.pdf)). The students have to fill in these questionnaires with their mentors at the end of each semester and while they are writing their MA Thesis, and we make use of statistical methods (SPSS version 8) to process these data. Salient among our previous findings has been the students' need to obtain support in their capacity to manage their time efficiently and in their use of bibliographical and other learning resources.

Furthermore, apart from the individual gatherings with the mentees, the project is carried out thanks to the rest of agents involved in the process. The mentors hold regular meetings with the mentors' leader and the teachers' coordinator in order to reflect on the project's evolution and implement new measures that may improve it and this coordinator is in charge of transmitting the results to the group of teachers involved in the project. This way, a process of mutual feedback among the different parts engaged in the project takes place and, thanks to the results obtained from the questionnaires we have analysed until this moment, the teaching staff has been able to revise the academic syllabus and introduce some changes into the workload of the different subjects, all this following the procedure of internal quality assessment of degrees established at our university (cf. [http://www.unizar.es/unidad\\_calidad/calidad/procedimientos/def/C4-DOC4-ANX13.pdf](http://www.unizar.es/unidad_calidad/calidad/procedimientos/def/C4-DOC4-ANX13.pdf)). Finally, in order to assess the acquisition of personal and interpersonal values and competences within the mentoring system, both mentors and mentees have filled in several surveys which focus on these aspects and allow us to gain more feedback about the students' learning skills.

Considering all these aspects, I would like to focus on the evolution the project has undergone along the years. Generally speaking, the community involved has enlarged and the results show that the programme contributes to the development of personal and interpersonal competences, the improvement of the students' management of time and their academic results, which increases the quality of the postgraduate teaching and learning processes.<sup>2</sup> I will also expose the new challenges that the programme is encountering today; and I would like to launch a reflection on the crucial need to have recourse to programmes like this in the critical situation our universities are going through at the present moment.

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<sup>2</sup> To gain a deeper insight into the mechanisms through which the outcomes of the project are assessed see Beatriz Oria and Oana Carciu's article "Evaluation of the Peer Mentoring Project at the University of Zaragoza (Spain)" (2011).

#### 4. Main Results: from 2009 to 2013

Regarding the results the programme has obtained during the previous years, it can be asserted that they have been very positive. It has been demonstrated that the increasing counselling feedback received by the students and the tracking of their learning strategies has given place to a more flourishing achievement of concepts and competences.

On the one hand, at the academic level, and according to the annual reports on the assessment of quality and learning outcomes of the degrees at the University of Zaragoza, it has been checked that, in comparison to the courses in which the mentoring system had not been implemented, many students have managed to complete all the essays and present their MA Thesis on time thanks to the planning they elaborated with their mentor.

On the other hand, at the (inter)personal level, we have been highly surprised by the positive aspects of the mentoring system in the development of personal and interpersonal values and competences both in the mentors and mentees. Most of them agree that the project has helped them develop some personal values like ethical compromise, companionship, responsibility and honesty; values which are quite important for their future work life. According to the personal and interpersonal competences initially designed for the degree (cf. <http://titulaciones.unizar.es/est-text-cult-leng-ing/apoyoservicios.html>), all the students thought that the mentoring system had contributed to improving their capacity to work autonomously, their social skills, and their ability to self-criticism and team work. However, we realised that, although most of the mentors believed that their capacity to work within a team had increased considerably (4.14/5), the mentees did not think they had improved in that aspect (2.14/5), which has led us to create a Facebook and a Moodle profile as well as a programme of social activities to facilitate the communication between the students and to help them work in a more collaborative way.

The following charts, obtained from the surveys answered by the mentors and mentees, are very useful to observe their own impressions on the development of these personal values and competences.

Values developed thanks to the mentoring programme

	Average MENTEES	Average MENTORS
Ethical compromise	3.57/5	3.75 /5
Appreciation of Diversity and Multiculturalism	2	3.5
Respect for different opinions	3.5	4.12
Companionship	3.67	4.62
Self-esteem	3	3.62
Responsibility	4	4.75
Honesty	3.5	4

Personal and interpersonal competences developed thanks to the programme

Capacity to...	MENTEES	MENTORS
Work in a team	2.14	4.14
Self-learning	3.86	3.86
Manage social skills	3.43	4.43
Manage formative skills	3.71	3.86
Work within an international framework	3.14	2.14
Be a leader	1.43	3.71
Assume others' leadership	2.29	4
Value your own effort and the others'	4	4.14
Constructive criticism and self-criticism	4.14	3.86
Engage with others	4.14	4.14
Self-motivation for success	3.71	4.29

Regarding the students' capacity to manage their time efficiently, one of the main aims behind the project, 42.86 % of the students completely agreed with the fact that the programme had helped them to manage their time better, 42.86 % thought it had helped them partially, and only 14.29 % did not think so.

Yes		42.86%
No		14.29%
Partially		42.86%

We were also very happy to see that 57.14 % of them considered that the programme had contributed partially to improving their academic results in the MA, 14.29% thought that it had helped them completely, and 28.57% did not believe there was a clear relation between their academic results and the peer mentoring.

Yes		14.29%
No		28.57%
Partially		57.14%

Other interesting findings were that 100% of the mentees thought they had received a very different support from that of the tutors at the academic level and 71.43 % underlined the importance of the (inter)personal factors in this respect; 85.71 % rated his/her mentor with the highest mark (5/5) and 57.14 % said they would repeat the experience or they even would like to be future mentors. With respect to the mentors, 71.43 % valued the experience as very good and 28.57% as good.

Consequently, one of the main aspects to be highlighted in relation to the positive outcomes of the project to date is that both mentors and mentees seem to have acquired essential skills such as autonomy, self-assessment, self-criticism, reflection on their own learning processes, and so forth. Skills which are closely related to the affective side of learning and the guarantee of quality that this project wants to endorse. Again, our claims are supported by Arnold, who argues that

*students often refer to the feelings and emotions that they have experienced in learning as criteria for their self-evaluation: a sense of self-value arising out of the perception that one is an indispensable member of a group, frustration with a project that came to a halt, confidence about future academic work, satisfaction with and pride in one's achievement, fun... The need to give emotions a legitimate place in education is increasingly clear. (1999: 153)*

Thus, these words support our belief in the power of emotions, values, personal and interpersonal competences to improve the quality of contemporary higher educational contexts.

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## **5. New Challenges**

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Nowadays, all these positive aspects, together with the desire to improve the weakest elements of the project, like the training received by the mentors and the communication among the students, and despite the cuts applied to our budget, the Peer Mentoring Programme keeps on growing.

Firstly, it has been extended to the PhD in English Studies: PhD students can also have a mentor to assist them, some of the recent doctors in the department, and we have introduced the so-called "TRIP" (*Thesis and Research In Process*) sessions. In these meetings, MA, PhD students, PhDs and teachers in the Department have created a space where they can share their doubts and problems while completing their theses and where we want to promote an atmosphere where students may exchange ideas in a relaxed way, which may help them progress in their research process and create a certain feeling of community and belonging together with the other students. In order to do so, in these sessions various PhD students (two or three) expose the situation of their research and/or any problem they are currently encountering, any idea they want to share with the audience, etc. Then, the rest of agents involved in the session offer their ideas and suggestions or share their own experience in order to provide the students with some feedback that may be useful both for the audience as a whole. Also, at the end of every meeting, we organise a kind of informal gathering for the students to get to know each other and feel more comfortable. There are three sessions every academic course and we are working on elaborating a database with information about all the PhD students in the Department, since until this moment there is not a unified register compiling this information. Also, we are promoting the use of Moodle and other social networks like Facebook as the most effective way to communicate with the students. The sessions we have held until this moment have been quite successful: PhD students have received very interesting feedback from their mates and teachers; more students have shown their interest in the programme; and the meetings have been organised in a more institutional way. All these aspects show our continuous engagement with the quality improvement of our degrees, in this case, at the postgraduate level, which is becoming more and more demanding due to the higher

number of students that decide to continue their studies to have more possibilities in the difficult current job market.

Also, in the new PhD programme, a portfolio has been designed for the doctoral students, an opportunity to reflect on their progress and to illustrate their diverse achievements while they complete their doctoral studies. This portfolio will work in a similar way to the one we are more familiarised with, the European Language Portfolio (<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/>), but in this case it will allow postgraduate students to observe the evolution of their learning and research process until they complete their theses. It will help them have a more integrative perspective of this stage of their student life; it will motivate them to improve those aspects that are not so well developed in the portfolio; and it will provide an objective record of the research, communicative, organisational and teaching skills they acquire during their PhD life.

Moreover, a new element of the project this year is the emphasis on the organisation of various activities to disseminate the positive outcomes of peer-mentoring systems. We are elaborating some promotional leaflets so that future MA students and the staff of the University of Zaragoza, together with other national and international universities, may know the main benefits of projects like this. In fact, this is the first year that the University of Zaragoza has launched a peer-mentoring programme at the undergraduate level, which shows that higher education institutions are becoming more aware of the importance of human resources when trying to improve the quality of education. Also, we are producing a promotional video where all the parts involved in the project give their testimonies and share their experiences, and in which we try to illustrate the way the project works. We think that the use of interactive media and technology is a good way to disseminate the results of our peer-mentoring system and to encourage other universities to follow similar initiatives. Indeed, we would have liked to organise an open-day workshop in the Faculty of Letters for the students of the last years to know the work a mentor may do but, due to the financial cuts, we will have to wait to organise this event.

Finally, as mentioned before, we have created a social programme in order to help MA, PhD students and the teaching staff to interact more informally, since we detected that one of the weakest aspects of the postgraduate programmes in our department was that the students tended to work very individually and they missed the feeling of belonging to a community. At the moment, we only have preliminary results of the effects of this social dimension on the quality of the postgraduate students' learning processes, but what we are observing is that the community involved in this project is growing year after year and that the students receive all these initiatives with a lot of enthusiasm and interest.

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## **6. Concluding Remarks**

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All these aspects considered, the evolution the project has undergone in the last four years evinces that the more we work on improving the mentoring system the better the quality of our postgraduate programmes turns out to be. Also, we have observed that, as the mentors have acquired more experience, they have attended some courses and conferences on these topics or they have been mentees before; they have managed to recognise their mentees' weakest aspects more easily and they have started to work more efficiently than the first years. In this respect, I would like to bring here some of their comments on the project: "I think that both mentors and mentees have learnt a lot thanks to this project, which has enriched us both academically and personally"; "Thanks to the interaction with my mentee I have been able to know myself a bit more and to feel useful"; "At the beginning I thought the experience was going to be quite positive, but it has gone beyond my prospects. Thank you very much!"; or "It has been very motivating to see the mentee follow my pieces of advice and how they worked and helped her to obtain better academic results". Their words may be good evidence of the fact that not only do the mentees receive feedback and improve their learning outcomes but the mentors are also aware of the benefits of this project for their future role as teachers or tutors.

After all, this short piece of study may be a proof of the enthusiasm present in our university for pedagogical innovation projects which can assure the quality standards in higher-educational contexts like the Master and Doctoral programmes at this Department of English and German Philology. Although the local significance of our findings must be taken into account, having recourse to the Deming cycle based on the "Plan-Do-Check-Act" stages in learning processes (1986), this innovation project contributes to guaranteeing quality in learning and to setting off a quality management procedure which demonstrates to be helpful in order to identify weak points and bring forth improvements of the teaching quality. It becomes evident that only by obtaining a more accurate view of the students' learning attitudes and strategies can the teaching staff supply the students' needs conveniently (Lizzio et al., 2002; Gibbs et al., 2007). Thus, adopting a set of standards to examine the knowledge, skills, competences, and attitudes developed in our Postdoctoral programmes is a challenging process, which we think is worthwhile when we fight for high quality standards in educating the future generations (Campbell et al., 2000: 95). In keeping with this, the attempts at returning to our University system a more personal, collaborative and emotional dimension should be praised since, following González's words, the quality of education does not only depend on the concepts and skills developed in a university syllabus but also on the values that are acquired during the learning process (2000: 74). Our engagement with systems based on students as partners has shown that this kind of programmes help to foster the education on values promulgated by the EEES and to reinforce the quality of our degrees, increasing

the possibilities to obtain a certain level of academic and professional success both for the mentors and mentees involved. This project has allowed us to create a common space to reflect on the structure of the degrees, the methodology applied, the students' workload and the tutoring system.

To conclude, I would like to call for a further reflection on peer mentoring programmes like this by claiming that we should believe in the power of human interaction and networking and foster human values and interpersonal competences at the university level if we want to guarantee quality in higher education institutions during times of upheaval as those we are currently living. Can we face the new challenges that the implementation of the Bologna system has created if we leave apart the affective side of all the agents involved in the process? Can we guarantee a good-quality higher education without considering the acquisition of human values and personal competences that may contribute to instructing future professionals with clear ethical values and an attitude of compromise and responsibility towards the rest of the society? According to the views exposed in this article, the answer would be negative. Only if higher education institutions become fully aware of the fruitful aspects of quality assurance systems, among which peer mentoring systems should be rightly placed, can we improve the learning process of contemporary students and their training in those values and personal competences needed for their future work life.

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