The Role of an International TUTOR in a Tutor Group
CREATORS

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International tutors have a key role in facilitating the adjustment of new international students to the new academic culture and everyday life. An international student may be an exchange student arriving in Tampere to study only for a semester, or s/he may be a Bachelor’s or a Master’s degree student who will live and study in Tampere for several years. For all, adapting to their new everyday environment, a new way of studying and student life as well as the Finnish culture may seem daunting. Especially degree students are expected to take full responsibility for their academic progress as soon as they enter university while also adapting to a new way of life in a new country and finding a new circle of friends. An international student tutor is an invaluable help for the new student in this process and an important part of new student orientation at the start of studies. As peers, tutors are able to offer support that would not otherwise be available.

Tutors introduce new students to the practicalities of their field of study as well as to the key people, events and university life in general and thereby ease new students’ transition to Finnish higher education. International tutors also help new students with finding the facilities and services they need in their everyday life in Finland. New students may find it difficult to get all the important information that they need, or be overwhelmed by the wealth of information. The help and support provided by their tutor and tutor group may therefore be invaluable in navigating the intricacies of Finnish university life. In addition, tutors advise new students on how to find all the necessary information and instructions by themselves later on.

In addition to practical help with everyday things, tutor groups meet to offer new students the opportunity to share their thoughts with others who are in the same situation. New students are keen to build networks and find new friends, and often the first people they get to know in their university are their tutor and their fellow tutees. The emotional support and information that new students receive from their tutor and fellow students makes the start of studies much easier.
As an international tutor, you must plan your tutoring activities in advance as you will have a great deal to remember. It will also make new students feel safe, if your work is well-coordinated and you come to the meetings well-prepared.

Your plans may include a number of details, such as how you will divide your workload with your tutor pair, how you will manage your time during the most hectic days in August, where the group will meet, how the students will learn to know one another, what topics will be discussed at each meeting, and how the group will stay in contact. You should also find out in advance what you are expected to tell your students. For example, all international tutors are expected to help their tutees with practicalities concerning arrival, introduce them to the facilities and services available on campus and to advise them on planning which courses to attend on their first year. International tutors should contact their students well before the Welcome Week - it may be important for new students to know that someone will be waiting for them when they arrive in Tampere.

When planning the activities of your tutor group, please be aware that the composition of the group will affect the future activities. The students’ home country and previous study background may cause them to have different kinds of questions and needs. The size of the group will have an impact on the atmosphere and the initial getting-to-know-you phase. As your group may be made up of individuals with widely divergent personalities and cultural backgrounds, you should leave room for the students’ own ideas and preferences in your plans.
Get off to a good start

The success of tutor groups hangs largely on the tutor. As the new students in your tutor group will place their expectations upon you as their tutor, your active participation and leadership are vastly important, especially at the beginning. By being active, you set an example for your students. This will lay a strong foundation for all later tutoring activities.

The mood and atmosphere within the group may vary from time to time. At first, the international student will be concerned about administrative matters such as registration and about getting established in their new homes. After this it will be time to focus more on social activities. Some ice-breaker activities may be necessary at first to ensure that everyone can relax and feel comfortable.

Please remember that it is not your fault if the atmosphere initially feels a little stiff. When people find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, they react differently; some become quiet while others become even more talkative than usual. Be prepared to expect different reactions from your students. This will make it easier for you to deal with different emotional responses and not be overwhelmed by them.

What should I do when everyone is settled and my tutor group meets for the first few times?

◊ Be prepared to answer a wealth of questions and find creative solutions to practical problems.

◊ Help the students get to know each other. You may have to give them a little nudge; try ice-breakers and team-building activities!

◊ If you are not keen on game-like activities, you can help the students become acquainted by encouraging them to chat and share experiences. The key thing is to find an ice-breaking activity that comes naturally to your group.

◊ Make sure that all your students have the opportunity to contribute to the discussions and activities.

◊ Explain the purpose of tutoring activities to your students: What are tutors for? Why should all new students participate in tutoring activities?

◊ Most importantly, you should make every effort to foster a safe and relaxed atmosphere within your group.
Ice-breaker activities

Ice-breaker activities are an excellent way to get people talking with each other. You can include these activities in the first meeting of your tutor group or any time later on. The internet is bursting with examples of fun ice-breakers. For the first few meetings, it may be best to select activities that do not put too much pressure on the participants.

Introduce a Friend
The group is split up into pairs. The pairs interview one another for a few minutes, for example, about their hobbies, family, home country or taste in music. Then each one introduces the person they were paired with to the rest of the group.

Two Truths and a Lie
Each member of the group must come up with three statements about themselves. Two of these statements must be true and one must be false. The others try to guess which of the statements is the false one.

The Key Ring
Everyone gets out their key ring and tells what all the keys are for. They end up talking about themselves and their lives in the process.

Name Game
The tutor begins by saying their name. The second person sitting next to the tutor repeats the tutor’s name and then says their own name. The third person repeats the names of the previous two and then says their own name. The game continues until the last person repeats the names of everyone else and ends with saying their own name. You can modify this game, for example, so that everyone states their own name as well as a hobby or a favourite food.
Once the students find their place in the group, they will start taking more responsibility for the tutor group’s activities. While your role as tutor will gradually become smaller, you will continue to occupy a key role in the group: the ultimate responsibility for the continuity of the group’s activities rests with the tutor.

It is the tutor’s job to ensure that no one is left behind. You need to keep the students informed of the time and place of the group’s meetings and encourage everyone to attend. You should contact students who do not show up for the meetings and make sure that they know when and where the group is due to meet next. This way, you can make sure that no one inadvertently drifts away from the group. However, new students should not be pressured into participating in the sessions: if someone chooses not to take part in tutoring activities, they have every right to do so.

As team spirit builds up and the atmosphere becomes more relaxed, it will become easier for individual students to voice their opinions. Please be aware that conflicts become more likely at this stage. Rather than evade conflicts, the members of the tutor group should openly acknowledge that they have different opinions. You should give everyone the opportunity to be heard and give equal consideration to all views. Gentle humour can often help diffuse difficult situations but remember to be respectful and take personal and cultural differences into account.

It is only natural that the students in your group will not become equally close with all the others – this also applies to you. Nevertheless, it is your responsibility to ensure that everyone is treated equally.
A tutor group is a medium for introducing new students to university life in Finland. You should therefore discuss at least the following themes with your students:

◊ Practicalities, such as registration, email, student information systems etc.
◊ Introduction to the campus area
◊ Services available on campus. Who can students contact with questions or problems?
◊ Studies: study plans and timetables, enrolling on courses and exams, the organisation of courses, etc.
◊ Extracurricular and leisure activities on campus.
◊ Topics proposed by the group members.

It may also be useful to discuss and compare the features and practicalities of academic life in Finland and in other countries.

Tutors and tutees are free to decide which activities they want to pursue. The events and activities should be diverse and cater to different tastes. You can also get together with other student tutors to arrange meetings that bring together the different tutor groups to allow the new students to get to know each other.

The members of your tutor group decide together when it is time to end the meetings. However, tutors of degree students are expected to provide support to new students and answer their questions throughout their first year and therefore tutoring activities should be spread out over the entire academic year. You can maintain contact with your students, for example, by organising lunch dates and reminding them of the deadlines for course and exam enrolments.
The tasks of a tutor at different stages of the academic year

Before new students arrive on campus – plan ahead
◊ Get ready! Outline a plan for your tutoring activities.

The initial stage – break the ice!
◊ Be active! Encourage your students to get to know each other and take active part in tutoring activities.

The busy stage – the tutor group meets to discuss anything and everything in a relaxed atmosphere
◊ Keep the group going! Make sure that no one is left behind.

With the academic year rolling ahead, new students ‘fly the nest’
◊ They still need your support, so remember that your tutor-ship continues until the end of the academic year.
What if everything does not go according to plan?

What if the group is passive?
It may happen that some of the group members remain passive, aloof and drop out of the activities despite all your efforts to the contrary. In this case, it is possible to continue the activities with just the students who are interested in participating or, for example, merge the group with another tutor group. Please remember that it is not your fault if your group is passive – some new students may not have the time to take part in tutoring activities, may feel they do not need the help, or they may find it difficult to find a place in the group for whatever reason. You should not be overly worried about it if a student drops out of the activities despite your encouragement and support.

What if some of the students are very quiet?
Once you get to know your students better, you will notice that some of them may be introverts while others are extroverts. Your group must have room for both types. If the quiet students find it initially difficult to speak up during the meetings, you can, for example, ask them face-to-face how they are doing.

What if some of the students are very talkative and dominate the conversation?
Some of the students may be so talkative that others have a hard time getting a word in edgewise. You may have to interrupt them at times and give others the floor, for example, by asking them directly what they think about the matter at hand. You can divide tasks and responsibilities among the students to encourage everyone to contribute.

Cultural backgrounds may also manifest as what may seem differences in personalities, temperament or behaviour. Cultures also affect how we interpret information and the behaviour of others. To make sure everyone feels accepted and informed, remember to ask questions and check for understanding, avoid assumptions and stereotypes and be respectful.

You should always keep in mind that as adults the students are responsible for their own actions. Your role as a tutor is focused on helping new students get to know each other and introducing them to the Finnish academic culture and their new environment. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, remember what your role as tutor entails; you are not expected to do everything and you can always turn to the university employees for assistance. You should also browse through the early intervention guidelines that outline the procedure for responding to concerning behaviour.
Student tutors are largely free to decide the activities of their group, but this freedom comes with responsibility. As a tutor, you have a great deal of influence over new students who listen intently to your every word. You should therefore take a minute to consider how to bring up your opinions about, for example, courses and events. It is important that tutors share their personal experiences but they should also highlight the fact that their opinions may not be the only correct ones.

You may also have expectations towards yourself. You should have a clear understanding of your role as tutor and what is entails, but you should not take on too much responsibility or set unrealistic goals for yourself. Do not neglect your own studies and wellbeing. While planning your tutoring activities, you should consider how your own studies will fit into the schedule.

I would advise future international tutors to keep in mind the varied backgrounds and resulting different approaches you need to take to the students.

The most important task of a tutor is to make new students feel genuinely welcome in their new community.

Be active and open-minded and relax. Everything will work just fine!

Remember to have fun every once in a while!
Be active and as approachable as possible. Do not project your own values onto new students but make a genuine effort to get to know their values and interests. Listen to what your students have to say.

Be available during the orientation week. You’ll get everything done eventually and you can always ask for help if there’s something you don’t know.

You have to be genuinely enthusiastic about something to inspire others to become enthusiastic, too. You should be passionate about tutoring. Remember that a positive tutoring experience may have a surprisingly far-reaching impact on the future studies and later life of individual students.

I would recommend taking a proactive approach to introducing students to the guilds, as it is may be hard for internationals to identify with the guilds by themselves.

Be yourself! All tutors do not have to be alike. You should find your own way of doing things.

Talk to the fuksis! You should not be afraid to make a personal connection with them. Tutoring is the best way to socialise and build new contacts.
Thank you for becoming an international tutor!

Your work is greatly appreciated!