

Tutorial Programme Workshop: Capacitating Tutors on Facilitation Skills Relevant for Tutorial Sessions, Tutors' Reflections, Experiences and Professional Development Workshop Needs at the Faculty of Management and Administration Sciences (FMPAS) at Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract

This study explores tutors' perceptions and experiences regarding a professional development workshop held on 14 May 2025 in the Faculty of Management and Administration Sciences (FMPAS). The research sought to understand tutors' reflections on the workshop's effectiveness, their developmental needs, and suggestions for improving similar interventions. A qualitative approach was adopted, drawing data from reflective responses provided by 48 tutors. Thematic analysis revealed strong appreciation for the training's relevance and delivery, while also highlighting areas for improvement, including more structured mentorship and technological upskilling. Recommendations include developing continuous support structures, tailoring content to diverse experience levels, and fostering communities of practice. These insights can guide institutions in designing responsive capacity-building initiatives that support tutors' professional growth.

Keywords: *Professional Development, Training, Workshop, Capacity Building, Performance Management.*

Introduction

Professional development remains a cornerstone of improving teaching and learning quality in higher education globally (Mapolisa & Mahlomaholo, 2021; Bozalek & Ng'ambi, 2021). Tutor development has gained prominence as institutions increasingly rely on tutors to enhance academic support and improve student success, especially in the context of large classes and resource-constrained environments (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2020; Van Zyl & Mentz, 2020). Workshops are among the most widely used professional development tools, offering structured opportunities for tutors to acquire new pedagogical strategies, reflect on their practice, and build collaborative teaching communities (Jantjies, 2022). However, the effectiveness of such workshops depends significantly on how well they align with tutors' actual needs and experiences.

In South Africa, tutorial systems are particularly vital in supporting students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, where dropout and failure rates remain high (Tshuma & Mafa, 2023). Despite growing institutional efforts to implement development programs, there remains limited research exploring tutors' reflections on the relevance, design, and practical applicability of these initiatives. Without such insights, institutions risk adopting a top-down approach to professional development that may not resonate with tutors' daily realities, leading to limited engagement and reduced impact.

This study seeks to address this gap by analysing tutors' perceptions of professional development workshops within South African universities. By identifying key strengths, limitations, and areas for improvement, the research contributes to designing more effective, inclusive, and contextually appropriate tutor development frameworks that can foster both professional growth and improved learning outcomes.

Problem Statement

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Although workshops are a common professional development tool in higher education, limited empirical research has explored tutors' reflections on their relevance, delivery, and practical applicability—particularly within the context of South African universities. Given the increasing reliance on tutors to support student success, especially in under-resourced institutions, it is vital to ensure that professional development initiatives are both contextually grounded and responsive to their unique challenges (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2020; Mapolisa & Mahlomaholo, 2021). Without a clear understanding of tutors' perceptions and experiences, institutions risk designing and implementing training programs that are misaligned with tutors' real-world needs, expectations, and teaching environments (Bozalek & Ng'ambi, 2021). This not only undermines the intended impact of such initiatives but also contributes to professional fatigue and disengagement (Tshuma & Mafa, 2023).

This study seeks to address this critical gap by examining detailed reflections collected from participants of the Faculty of Management and Administration Sciences (FMPAS) tutors' workshop held on 14 May 2025. By analysing tutors' voices, the study aims to uncover key strengths, highlight delivery challenges, and present actionable recommendations for future workshops. Insights gained will inform more tailored, relevant, and impactful tutor development strategies, contributing to improved teaching effectiveness and enhanced student learning outcomes within the South African higher education context (Jantjies, 2022; Van Zyl & Mentz, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by three key theoretical frameworks that provide a lens through which tutors' reflections can be interpreted as expressions of their learning needs and evolving professional identities. Firstly, Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1984) posits that adult learners are self-directed and prefer learning experiences that are practical, problem-centred, and relevant to their immediate professional contexts. Secondly, Reflective Practice Theory (Schön, 1983) emphasizes that meaningful professional development occurs when individuals critically reflect on their experiences, enabling them to make sense of their actions and improve future practice. Thirdly, the concept of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) highlights the importance of social participation in learning, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, shared experiences, and collective engagement within a professional community. Together, these theoretical frameworks guide the interpretation of tutors' reflections, offering insights into how they construct meaning, develop professionally, and engage with the broader academic community.

Empirical Literature

Recent empirical studies affirm that professional development initiatives play a crucial role in enhancing tutors' confidence, pedagogical competence, and overall effectiveness in supporting student learning (Jantjies, 2022; Van Zyl & Mentz, 2020). However, the success of such programs largely depends on their ability to be contextually relevant, inclusive, and participatory. Research has shown that generic, one-size-fits-all approaches to tutor development often fail to address the unique challenges faced by tutors in diverse and under-resourced higher education settings (Mapolisa & Mahlomaholo, 2021; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2020).

A persistent concern in the literature is the lack of sustained support mechanisms following initial training. Many development programs do not provide sufficient ongoing mentorship or opportunities for peer engagement, leading to limited long-term impact (Tshuma & Mafa, 2023). Moreover, as higher education increasingly embraces digital teaching and learning, technological competence has become a critical yet often neglected component of tutor training (Bozalek & Ng'ambi, 2021).

Recent scholarship advocates for the integration of digital literacy, blended learning strategies, and mentorship models into tutor development frameworks to ensure tutors are equipped to meet evolving educational demands (Jantjies, 2022; Van Zyl & Mentz, 2020). There is also growing emphasis on reflective practice and peer collaboration as essential elements of professional learning communities, which not only enhance individual practice but also foster collective growth and innovation within institutions (Bozalek & Ng'ambi, 2021; Mapolisa & Mahlomaholo, 2021).

Despite these advancements, limited research has explored tutors' own reflections and experiences with development interventions, particularly in the South African context. This gap underscores the need for research that centres tutors' voices to better understand how professional development initiatives can be tailored to support both individual and institutional goals.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for exploring participants' subjective experiences and perspectives in a naturalistic setting. The aim was to gain in-depth insights into tutors' reflections on the relevance, effectiveness, and applicability of professional development workshops in a South African university context.

Research Instruments

The study employed a reflective feedback form as the primary research instrument. This instrument was designed to capture tutors' immediate perceptions, experiences, and insights following participation in the professional development workshop. The reflective form consisted of open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely and in their own words. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritise depth of understanding over quantification.

Questions Asked

Participants were asked to reflect on key aspects of the workshop, including:

- What they learned from the workshop.
- Which aspects of the training they found most useful or relevant.
- Challenges or limitations they experienced during the workshop.
- Suggestions for improving future workshops or training sessions.

Timing and Procedure

The reflections were collected immediately after the workshop, during the final session on 14 May 2025. This timing was intentional, as it allowed participants to provide authentic and spontaneous feedback while their experiences were still fresh. Tutors were given approximately 15–20 minutes to complete their reflections in a quiet and non-pressured environment. The activity was facilitated by the workshop coordinators, who provided clear instructions and assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses.

Ethical Considerations

Before completing the reflection forms, tutors were informed that their responses might be used for research and publication purposes to improve professional development initiatives within the faculty. Participation was voluntary, and tutors were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would not affect their employment or academic standing. This ethical process ensured transparency and compliance with institutional research ethics protocols.

Ensuring Reliability and Trustworthiness

To enhance the reliability and credibility of the data:

Census sampling was used, meaning reflections were obtained from all 48 workshop participants, ensuring a comprehensive and representative dataset.

Participants provided reflections in their own handwriting or typed format, reducing interviewer bias.

The researchers conducted thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, promoting systematic and transparent interpretation.

Triangulation was achieved through cross-checking codes and themes among the research team members to minimize subjective bias.

The data were organized and coded using Microsoft Excel, which allowed for accurate tracking, categorization, and frequency analysis of emerging themes.

Data Source

Sampling Technique

A census sampling approach was employed, involving all workshop participants. This ensured comprehensive representation of the group and maximised the richness and diversity of perspectives captured in the data.

Data Analysis

Preparation of the Reflection Forms

The reflective feedback form used in this study was purposefully designed by the tutor co-Ordinator in collaboration with the workshop facilitators from the Faculty of Management and Public Administration Sciences (FMPAS) at Walter Sisulu University. Its preparation was guided by Reflective Practice Theory (Schön, 1983) and Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1984), both of which emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when adult participants are given opportunities to critically assess their experiences.

The form consisted of open-ended reflective prompts developed to elicit tutors' honest perceptions, experiences, and suggestions about the workshop. Before administration, the form was piloted internally among two faculty members to ensure that the questions were clear, unbiased, and aligned with the study's objectives. Minor revisions were made to enhance wording and flow.

Structure and Sample Questions

The reflection form comprised two parts:

Section A: Biographical Information

This section captured demographic details of each tutor to allow for context-based interpretation of their reflections. The following information was collected:

- Gender
- Age range
- Academic department
- Years of tutoring experience
- Highest qualification obtained

Section B: Reflective Questions

This section contained five open-ended questions designed to capture qualitative insights from participants. The specific questions were as follows:

1. What did you find most valuable or useful about the workshop?
2. What new knowledge or skills did you gain from the session?
3. What challenges or areas for improvement did you identify during the workshop?
4. How do you plan to apply what you have learned in your tutoring role?
5. What recommendations would you make for improving future tutor workshops?

These prompts encouraged tutors to engage in deep reflection rather than simple evaluation, aligning with the study's goal of understanding professional development experiences from the participants' own perspectives.

Demographic Details of the Tutors

A total of 48 tutors participated in the study. They represented various departments within the Faculty of Management and Public Administration Sciences, including Public Administration, Human Resource Management, Business Management.

The demographic profile of the participants can be summarized as follows:

- Gender: 29 females and 19 males
- Age range: Mostly between 20–35 years, reflecting early-career academics and postgraduate tutors
- Tutoring experience: Between 1 and 4 years on average
- Qualifications: Majority held Bachelor's degrees, while others were enrolled in Honours and Master's programs.

This demographic spread ensured that reflections were obtained from a diverse pool of tutors, providing insights across different academic levels and disciplines.

Selection of Participants

The study employed a census sampling approach, meaning that all tutors who attended the professional development workshop were included in the data collection process. No additional selection or exclusion criteria were applied. This approach was chosen to maximize representation and ensure that every participant's experience was captured.

Participation in the reflection activity was voluntary; however, all attendees consented to complete the form after being informed of its purpose and ethical considerations. Because the workshop targeted all active tutors in the faculty, the participants represented the full cohort of tutors currently engaged in tutorial support within FMPAS.

Purpose of the Workshop

The FMPAS Tutors' Professional Development Workshop, held on 14 May 2025, was organized to enhance tutors' teaching skills, pedagogical awareness, and professional confidence. Specifically, the workshop aimed to:

- Equip tutors with effective tutoring and facilitation techniques to improve student engagement.
- Foster reflective and critical teaching practices among tutors.
- Strengthen tutors' understanding of assessment practices, digital facilitation, and academic support roles.
- Provide a collaborative platform for tutors to share experiences, challenges, and strategies for improvement.

The broader institutional purpose was to ensure that tutors are adequately prepared to support student learning and success, especially in large and resource-constrained classrooms — a key concern in South African higher education.

Data Management Tools

Microsoft Excel was used to manage the data, code individual responses, and organize emerging themes. The use of Excel facilitated systematic categorization, cross-referencing, and visualization of qualitative data for clearer interpretation.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the reflective feedback from 48 tutors revealed three core themes: (1) Perceived Benefits of the Workshop, (2) Identified Gaps and Challenges, and (3) Suggestions for Improvement. Each theme is supported by qualitative quotes and frequency counts, demonstrating patterns in participants' responses.

1. Perceived Benefits of the Workshop

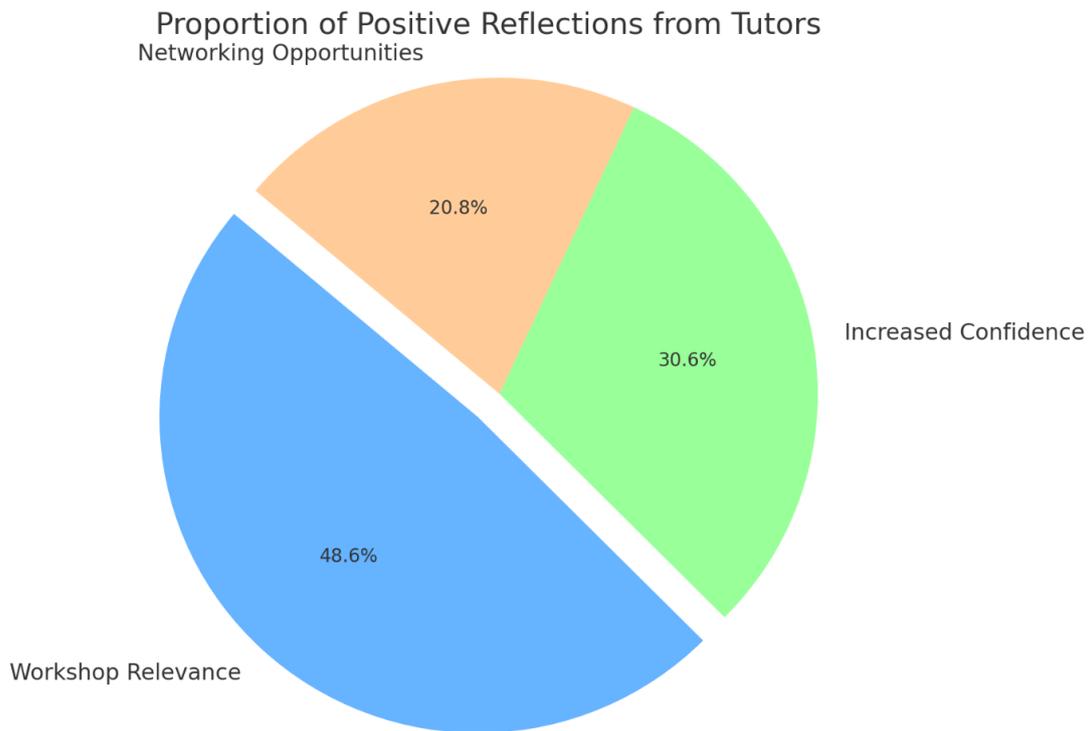
A significant number of tutors described the workshop as valuable and motivating. Many participants noted that they had acquired new teaching strategies and developed a stronger sense of confidence in their tutorial roles.

What did you find most valuable or useful about the workshop?

“It was an eye-opener. I learned new strategies for engaging students.”

“I feel more confident in my role.”

Theme	Description	Number of Participants (n = 48)	Percentage (%)
Workshop relevance	Tutors found the workshop content useful and directly applicable to their tutorial duties.	22	46%
Increased confidence	Tutors reported feeling more confident and motivated to perform their roles.	16	33%
Networking opportunities	Tutors appreciated interacting and sharing experiences with other tutors.	8	17%



These responses suggest that the workshop was successful in addressing core developmental needs of the tutors, particularly in enhancing their pedagogical awareness and self-efficacy. The high frequency of mentions related to relevance and confidence implies that participants felt the workshop aligned well with their roles and responsibilities.

2. Identified Gaps and Challenges

While overall feedback was positive, several tutors highlighted areas for improvement. Specific concerns included limited emphasis on digital tools, insufficient practical examples, and a lack of clarity regarding assessment practices and role expectations.

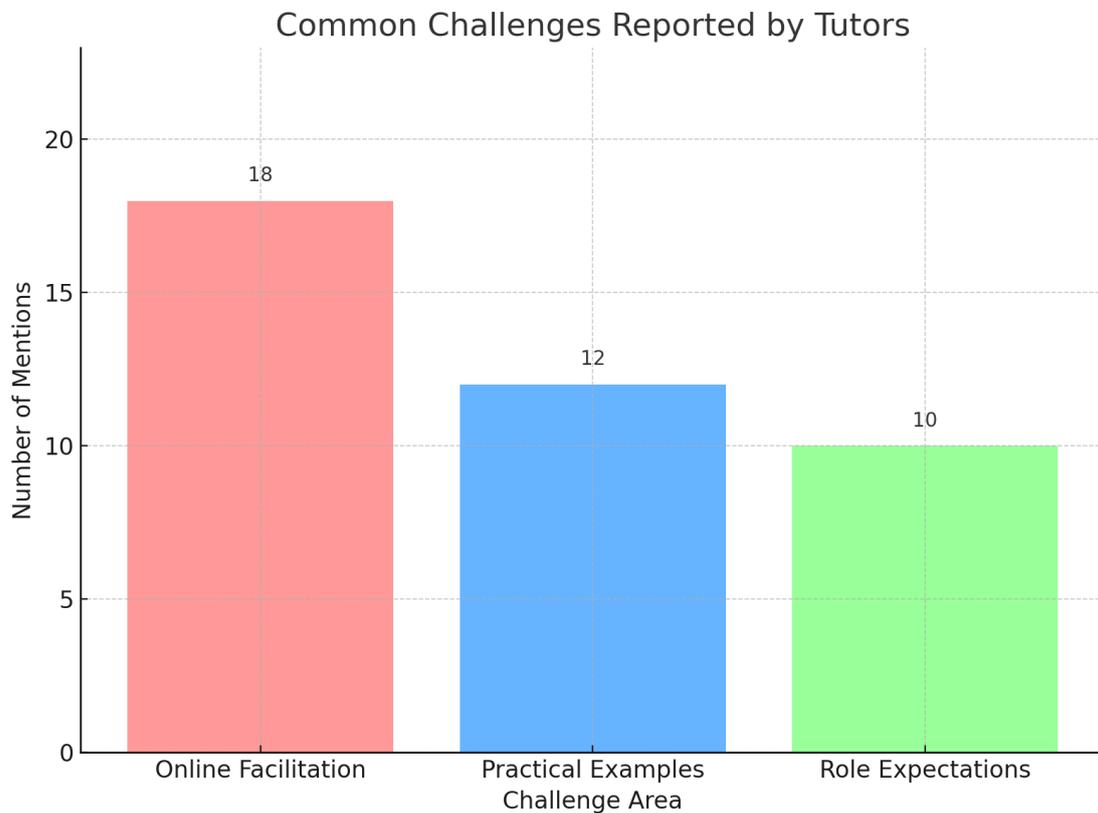
“I wish there was more time on digital tools.”

“More clarity on assessment practices would help.”

These observations point to a growing demand for digital literacy among tutors, especially as universities increasingly transition to blended and online learning environments. The first quote reflects a perceived gap in technological training, indicating that while pedagogical strategies may have been covered, the tools needed to implement them in digital contexts were lacking. The second quote reveals uncertainty around assessment practices, suggesting that tutors may not fully understand their roles in evaluating student performance—an issue that could compromise consistency and fairness in student support.

Challenge Identified	Mentions
Limited focus on online facilitation	18
Insufficient practical examples	12
Need for clearer role expectations	10

These concerns reflect a broader issue within higher education—namely, the need for workshops to evolve with the digital transformation of teaching and learning. Tutors' calls for more concrete examples and clarity on assessment highlight the importance of practical, hands-on guidance that aligns with institutional expectations.



bar graph comparing the frequency of common challenges reported by tutors, including limited focus on online facilitation, insufficient practical examples, and unclear role expectations.

3. Suggestions for Improvement

Tutors provided a range of constructive recommendations aimed at enhancing the structure and content of future workshops. Their feedback emphasized the need for ongoing support, expanded digital facilitation training, and the inclusion of career development components. These suggestions reflect a desire for continuous professional engagement beyond the initial workshop experience.

For instance, one tutor suggested

“Have follow-up sessions to share experiences.”

This highlights the value placed on peer learning and sustained dialogue, suggesting that post-workshop forums could reinforce learning and foster a sense of professional community. Another participant recommended:

“Include career planning workshops.”

This indicates that tutors view their roles not only in terms of academic support but also within a broader career trajectory and thus would benefit from development opportunities that align with their long-term professional goals.

Collectively, these reflections point to the importance of holistic and iterative professional development models that go beyond isolated training sessions to include mentorship, collaboration, and future-oriented planning.

Suggested Improvement	Mentions
Ongoing mentorship and support	20
Digital facilitation training	18
Career development content	12
More interactive activities	10

Areas for Future Research

Future research should examine the long-term impact of such workshops on tutors' teaching practices and student outcomes to determine whether the skills acquired are sustained over time. Comparative studies across faculties, disciplines, and institutions would also be valuable in identifying best practices and context-specific models of tutor development. Given the recurring concerns regarding digital preparedness, future studies should explore the effectiveness of digital literacy training and its integration into tutor development frameworks. Additionally, the role of ongoing mentorship and peer learning communities deserves further exploration, particularly in understanding how these structures support tutors' professional growth and motivation. Gathering student perspectives on the impact of tutor development could provide a more holistic understanding of its effectiveness and relevance. Lastly, research should investigate how participation in such workshops influences tutors' academic identity, career development, and progression, especially for those at the early stages of their professional journeys.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the workshop achieved its core objective of enhancing tutors' confidence, motivation, and perceived competence, especially in relation to student engagement and pedagogical awareness. Tutors overwhelmingly affirmed the workshop's relevance, with many describing it as "an eye-opener" and expressing greater confidence in their tutorial roles. These positive outcomes are consistent with recent scholarship asserting that context-specific, reflective training significantly contributes to tutor empowerment and performance.

However, the reflections also reveal critical shortcomings that must be addressed if such interventions are to be truly transformative. Notably, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the limited focus on digital tools and assessment clarity, echoing earlier concerns regarding the digital divide and insufficient technological preparedness in South African higher education. In an increasingly hybrid academic environment, digital fluency is not optional—it is essential. Tutors' reflections such as "I wish there was more time on digital tools" point to a mismatch between training content and the realities of contemporary teaching.

Moreover, the absence of continuous support structures, such as mentoring and follow-up sessions, further undermines the potential impact of once-off professional development workshops. This aligns with reflective practice theory, which holds that learning is iterative and deepened through repeated cycles of action and reflection. A static, one-time intervention cannot sustain the dynamic and evolving needs of tutors who operate in fluid learning environments.

The call for "follow-up sessions to share experiences" reinforces the need to establish Communities of Practice, where tutors can engage in shared learning, peer mentorship, and collaborative problem-solving.

Research supports this, showing that participatory, dialogic learning spaces promote professional identity formation and long-term development.

Furthermore, the demand for career planning workshops underscores a broader view of tutor development—not just as functional or operational training but as an investment in tutors' professional futures. This shift mirrors recent trends in higher education professional development, where capacity-building is increasingly framed in terms of long-term academic and career trajectories.

In sum, while the workshop succeeded in foundational skills development, the findings critically point to the need for a blended, sustained, and future-facing approach to tutor development. Institutions must evolve beyond one-off sessions toward integrated models that combine face-to-face training, online modules, reflective practice, mentorship, and career-focused components. Only through such a holistic model can tutor development be truly relevant, inclusive, and impactful.

Recommendations

Considering the findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of professional development initiatives for tutors. First, there is a clear need to develop continuous support structures that extend beyond one-off workshops. Institutions should establish formal mentorship programs, pairing novice tutors with experienced counterparts to facilitate knowledge sharing, professional guidance, and confidence building. Additionally, online platforms or forums should be created to enable tutors to access shared resources, exchange ideas, and sustain peer engagement across departments and campuses.

Secondly, it is essential to enhance tutors' digital competencies, given the increasing shift toward blended and online learning environments. Future workshops should incorporate practical, hands-on training focused on key tools such as learning management systems, online facilitation techniques, and digital assessment methods. Without this focus, tutors may remain underprepared to navigate the digital demands of modern teaching.

Third, professional development content should be tailored to the diverse needs of tutors. A differentiated approach is recommended, where sessions are designed to address varying levels of experience and responsibility. For example, new tutors may benefit from foundational pedagogical training, while experienced tutors could engage in advanced sessions that challenge their instructional strategies and leadership potential.

Lastly, the integration of career development content into training programs is vital. Including modules on academic career planning, postgraduate opportunities, and research skills will empower tutors to envision their roles within broader academic trajectories. This future-focused approach will not only enhance their engagement with current responsibilities but also contribute to their long-term professional growth within the higher education sector.

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