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Thematic Dossier
TEACHER TRAINING: CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES IN TIMES OF ACCELERATION

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ESSENTIAL COMPETENCES OF TUTORING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERCEPTION OF TUTORS AND STUDENTS

COMPETENCIAS ESENCIALES DE LA TUTORÍA EN LA EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: PERCEPCIÓN DE TUTORES Y ESTUDIANTES

COMPETÊNCIAS ESSENCIAIS DE TUTORIA NA EDUCAÇÃO A DISTÂNCIA NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: PERCEPÇÃO DE TUTORES E DISCENTES

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Abstract
Considering the growing trend of courses in distance education and the importance of tutoring functions in the teaching-learning process of students, this study aims to identify the technical, managerial and social skills that are necessary in the exercise of the role of tutor in distance education from the perception of tutors and students of higher education. For this, a quantitative, exploratory and descriptive research was carried out, with the application of questionnaires. In total, 91 tutors and 1038 students participated in the study and their responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results point to similarities in the perceptions of tutors and students who understand the skills to provide feedback, guide course activities/schedule, ability to assess students and accompany them throughout the

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online process, capacity for planning and organization, managing the virtual classroom, acting according to ethical considerations, communication skills and motivating students as very important. It is, therefore, up to the tutor to develop them in order to increasingly contribute to greater quality in teaching and learning in the distance modality.

Keywords: Distance education; Tutor; Mediator; Key competences; Learning.

Resumen
Considerando la tendencia creciente de los cursos de educación a distancia y la importancia de las funciones de tutoría en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de los estudiantes, este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las habilidades técnicas, gerenciales y sociales que son necesarias para ejercer el rol de tutor en la educación a distancia desde la percepción de tutores y estudiantes de educación superior. Para ello se realizó una investigación cuantitativa, exploratoria y descriptiva, con la aplicación de cuestionarios. En total, 91 tutores y 1038 estudiantes participaron en el estudio y se analizaron sus respuestas mediante estadística descriptiva. Los resultados apuntan a similitudes en las percepciones de tutores y estudiantes que entienden las habilidades para retroalimentar, orientar las actividades/horarios del curso, capacidad para evaluar a los estudiantes y acompañarlos a lo largo del proceso en línea, capacidad de planificación y organización, manejo del aula virtual, actuación de acuerdo con las consideraciones éticas, las habilidades de comunicación y la motivación de los estudiantes son muy importantes. Corresponde, por tanto, al tutor desarrollarlos para contribuir cada vez más a una mayor calidad en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en la modalidad a distancia.

Palabras clave: Educación a distancia; Tutor; Mediador; competencias clave; Aprendizaje.

Resumo
Considerando a tendência crescente de cursos na modalidade de educação à distância e a importância das funções de tutoria no processo de ensino-aprendizagem dos discentes, este estudo tem como objetivo identificar as competências técnicas, gerenciais e sociais que se fazem necessárias no exercício do papel de tutor na educação a distância a partir da percepção de tutores e alunos do ensino superior. Para isso, foi realizada uma pesquisa de caráter quantitativo, exploratório e descritivo, com aplicação de questionários. Ao total, 91 tutores e 1038 alunos participaram do estudo e tiveram suas respostas analisadas por meio de estatística descritiva. Os resultados apontam para similaridades nas percepções de tutores e alunos que entendem as competências de fornecer *feedback*, orientar as atividades/cronograma do curso, capacidade de avaliar os alunos e acompanhá-los durante todo o processo *online*, capacidade de planejamento e organização, gerenciar a sala de aula virtual, atuar conforme considerações éticas, capacidade de comunicação e de motivar os alunos como muito importantes. Cabe, portanto, ao tutor desenvolvê-las a fim de contribuir cada vez mais com uma maior qualidade no ensino-aprendizagem na modalidade a distância.

Palavras-chave: Educação a distância; Tutor; Mediador; Competências-chaves; Aprendizagem.

Introduction

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With the development and advancement of new technologies related to social demands, especially with greater autonomy and flexibility in time and space management, and the difficulty of access to large centers, the last few years have observed a significant growth in distance learning. The recent Covid-19 pandemic further contributed to this increase (SILVA, 2021; MASALIMOVA et al., 2022). According to the latest higher education census developed by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP, 2023), 16,736,850 undergraduate spots were offered to students in the distance learning modality in 2021 in Brazil, which corresponds to 73.8% of the total spots available. Moreover, with a total of 2,477,374 new students, the number of entries represented an increase of 474% compared to 2011. The same occurred with the number of courses offered, going from 6,116 in 2020 to 7,620 in 2021, which denotes a growth of 24.6% in just one year (INEP, 2023). These data reveal an upward trend that directly affects the positioning and development of teaching strategies, given the differences compared with in-person learning.

Distance learning employs technologies like the internet, audio, videoconferencing, and other means of communication to enable the dissemination of knowledge, contact, and support between instructors and students who are physically distant (NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS [NCES], 2023). The continuous availability of courses and the interaction enabled by forums, posts, and video lessons, for example, eliminate barriers of space and time to offer great flexibility for learning, especially for those who work in addition to studying (CHAVES; MELO, 2020; CLARK, 2020; RIELDING, 2020; SILVA, 2021; ORAKCI; KARAGÖZ, 2022).

Considering the particularities of this teaching modality, the tutor plays a fundamental role (MESQUITA, 2022). They are responsible for direct contact with the students, providing them with the necessary conditions for achieving the learning goals in asynchronous and synchronous tasks (LIU, 2020). Their functions include, among others, monitoring activities, motivating the students, organizing the virtual classroom, clarifying questions, helping in the use of technological tools, and

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managing performance (MATTAR et al., 2020; SARAIVA, 2020). Chaves and Melo (2020) also highlight the role of technological, cognitive, and sociocultural mediation for the student, with the tutor viewed as an essential piece for the success of the teaching-learning process.

These tutoring functions in distance learning clearly differ from the traditional roles played in in-person education (LIU, 2020). Thus, they require a set of unique competencies that allow the tutor to act efficiently, that is, a series of skills, attitudes, and knowledge (ARIFIN et al., 2017; CHAVES; MELO, 2020; LANGESEE, 2022). According to Grzybowska and Lupicka (2017) and Massuga, Soares and Doliveira (2021), the competencies associated with the role of tutor can be divided into three segments: technical competencies, linked to the knowledge necessary for performing professional activities encompassing the use of information technologies and didactic-pedagogical activities; management competencies, related to the ability to perform administrative, bureaucratic, and organizational activities; and social competencies, associated with the ability to interact, motivate, support, and build a pleasant and welcoming online environment. The demands for developing an adequate and effective teaching-learning process make it necessary to focus on these core competencies that will result in the full performance of the tutoring function in distance learning (CHAVES; MELO, 2020).

Some studies have investigated the relationship between distance learning tutors and competencies, like Murphy et al. (2011), Setlhako (2014), Borges et al. (2014), Chien et al. (2016), Li et al. (2017), Adnan (2018), Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018), Hrastinski, Cleveland-Innes and Stenbom (2018), Campbell et al. (2019), Kara and Can (2019), and Mattar et al. (2020). However, limitations are still evident regarding the research focus, for example, which is not centered directly on comprehensively finding competencies and understanding those essential for playing the role. Moreover, the literature is restricted to international scenarios, with little attention to the Brazilian context. There are also sample limitations and scarce studies that analyze the student's perception of the skills needed by the tutor.

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Thus, to expand the available theoretical field in the context of a growing distance learning trend and the importance of the tutor role in the performance of students who choose the modality, this study aims to identify the core technical, managerial, and social competencies to the tutoring function in distance learning from the perception of higher education tutors and students. The results are expected to contribute to the performance of university tutors concerning the development of core competencies fundamental for the quality of their practice in distance learning.

Distance teaching and learning

Distance learning can be defined as an individualized process of knowledge acquisition mediated by a set of technologies that allow the participants to interact indirectly (OBLOBERDIYEVNA; TURCHIYEVAN, 2022). It involves planned learning in several places different from the set in-person education location (MOORE; KEARSLEY, 2008).

The history of distance learning is well documented, especially in the 20th century, although its beginnings are disputed. According to Sumner (2000), the history of distance learning is no exception to the history of education in general since it is divided between the demands of society and the demands of the distance learning system. For Sardi and Carvalho (2022a), the creation and evolution of this teaching modality took place in parallel with technological and communicational development. In this context, in general, the evolution of distance learning can be divided into generations throughout history (MOORE; KEARSKEY, 2008).

The first stage of distance learning development consisted of correspondence education, which started in 1728 when the Boston Gazette advertised a course to be taken by sending materials via mail. Later, in the 20th century, distance learning occurred through radio and television, with significant progress from the 1960s on. The third generation's main characteristic is the invention of a new modality of education organization in the so-called open universities. Distance learning enabled

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those who wished to get a higher education degree to study in their homes by accessing open university courses. Then, the teleconferencing stage appeared, which allowed real-time communication and more interactive learning. Finally, the fifth generation of distance learning developed with the internet, and virtual classrooms dominate the learning practices in the modality. Therefore, it prioritizes the use of teleconferencing and computers joining text, audio, and video on a single platform, providing real-time interaction between students and instructors with constructive methodologies of collaborative learning (MOORE; KEARSLEY, 2008; MESQUITA, 2022; SOUZA, 2022; SARDI; CARVALHO, 2022b).

In Brazil, the creation of the Open University of Brasília in 1992 and the development of the first distance higher education degree in 1998 at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) stand out (SARDI; CARVALHO, 2022b). Distance learning was regulated in 2005 in the country by Decree No. 5.622/2005. Nowadays, it follows Decree No. 9.057/2017, which replaced the previous one. Since this period, distance learning courses have evolved, especially in higher education and technical and vocational courses (NERLING; DARROZ, 2021).

This evolution of distance learning is under permanent construction; as technologies develop, such as augmented virtual reality and artificial intelligence, for example, the possibilities of interactivity tend to grow, continuously collaborating to build a vigorous and active virtual environment with inexhaustible sources for learning (CHAVES; MELO, 2020). Advances in information technology, with the development of new software and applications, have proven effective for building knowledge in distance learning (ROA; MATUTES; OMBAJEN, 2022). For Rielding (2020), new technologies will greatly impact distance learning, increasingly leading students to engage and interact with each other.

Considering the particularities of this teaching modality, Clark (2020) clarifies that there are two modes of distance learning classes: 1. Synchronous: educational sessions are scheduled, enabling the interaction between student and professor at

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that specific moment through chats and video conferences, for example; and 2. Asynchronous: educational sessions are not scheduled. The material is available online, and the student develops their activities as they suit their routine.

Distance learning has many advantages, which leads many students to choose it. Among them are the uninterrupted access and available sources so students can learn without interfering with work or other activities, cyberspace, saving time, and reducing travel expenses and related costs (CLARK, 2020; MASALIMOVA et al., 2022). On the other hand, the disadvantages include the difficulty in monitoring student attendance and evaluation reliability (SANLDOZ-ÖZGEN; KÜÇÜKALTAN, 2023), in addition to other factors related to impersonality and the lack of practical activities (CLARK, 2020). However, advances are already predicted in the sense of possibly providing experience laboratories in distance learning through simulations, feedback systems, and virtual reality (CLARK, 2020).

It is also worth mentioning that distance learning requires greater commitment from the student and closer support to their demands. Therefore, interaction between instructors and students through two-way communication is fundamental for interactive learning and supporting educational activities (NIKU, 2023). In this sense, the tutor emerges in distance learning as an advisor and supervisor of students as they fulfill their online and offline tasks (LIU, 2020; SOUZA, 2021). The tutor can be defined as a facilitator of virtual learning processes in a modern higher education environment (LANGESEE, 2022). Their function is to support the student in the learning process answering their questions regarding the lesson contents through technological resources (SARDI; CARVALHO, 2022a; 2022b). They can also be considered the link between the academic structure and the student, mediating between the education dimensions (MESQUITA, 2022). Among their attributions are the personalized, motivating, and continuous interaction with the student, organizing virtual classes, clarifying expectations regarding performance and interaction level, monitoring learning, coordinating the access to material and activities, providing feedback, encouraging knowledge acquisition, and

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creating a friendly atmosphere among the students (CHAVES; MELO, 2020; MATTAR et al., 2020). It should be added that the tutor's attitudes and behaviors are crucial for student success and, consequently, to legitimize the academic excellence of distance learning courses since they are directly linked to learning and facilitating teaching (CAMACHO, 2022). Thus, given their essential role and the particular demands of distance learning, tutors need specific competencies to exercise their function (ADNAN, 2018).

Tutor competencies

The term "competence" gained expressiveness in 1959 with the work "*Reconsidered motivation: the concept of competence", by* Robert White, an American psychologist who defined it as an imperative personality for superior performance and high motivation (SALMAN; GANIE; SALLEM, 2020). Later, in 1973, David McClelland, publishing his paper "*Testing for competence rather than intelligence*", recognized competencies as significant predictors for employee performance in executing tasks (MCCLELLAND, 1973). In this perspective, McClelland argued that competencies are one of the most important factors predicting occupational success compared to traditional aptitude tests that measure performance (ARIFIN et al., 2017; STAŠKEVIČA, 2019).

Since then, the term has been widely accepted and applied in several areas and organizations, although there is still some conceptual confusion. According to Salman, Ganie and Sallem (2020), the literature discusses competencies as underlying characteristics of an individual that lead to superior performance and, at the same time, as behavioral characteristics to perform labor functions within an expected standard. According to Fleury and Fleury (2001), competencies are related to knowing how to act, involving mobilization, integration, and transfer of knowledge, resources, and skills that provide positive returns in the form of economic value for the company and social value for the individual. Souza (2022), on the other hand, understands that competence is the ability to perform a task with a certain degree of complexity.

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Despite the numerous approaches, an accepted conceptual standard defines competencies as a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the optimal performance in a given task/function (ARIFIN et al., 2017; STAŠKEVIČA, 2019; SALMAN; GANIE; SALEEM, 2020). In this sense, according to the Council of the European Union (CEU, 2019), knowledge is linked to concepts, facts, ideas, and theories already established that help to understand an area or subject. Skills are the ability to execute processes and employ existing knowledge to achieve results. In turn, attitudes are connected to the willingness and mindset to act or react to specific ideas, people, or situations.

Among the classifications, Arifin et al. (2017) understand that competencies can be cognitive when related to conceptual knowledge; functional when concerning work performance (technical skills); social, referring to attitudes and behaviors in communication with others; and meta-competencies, associated with the personal ability to face the current situation or acquire new competencies as required by the occupation. This study employs an approach based on the classification adopted by Grzybowska and Lupicka (2017), which presents three categories: technical competencies, encompassing knowledge and skills required by the work; managerial competencies, covering problem-solving and decision-making skills; and social competencies, related to values and motivation used in the interaction with others.

According to Staškeviča (2019), each profession has a group of core competencies that describe a combination of knowledge, skills, and personal attitudes to perform its functions, also known as a competence model. In this sense, considering the role of tutoring in distance learning, it is essential that tutors have a set of competencies directed at performing their activities, so that they can fulfill their role of mediator of the teaching-learning process (TENÓRIO; TELES; TENÓRIO, 2016; METZ; BEZUIDENHOUT, 2018).

The literature on the subject is still limited in identifying tutor competencies in higher education distance learning, as revealed by Massuga, Soares and Doliveira (2021). Among the studies, Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018), investigating the e-tutor role in a South African university, cover a series of competencies divided into

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three sectors: social involvement, management of the online environment, and development and creation of supplementary material. Similarly, Setlhako (2014) sought to determine the roles and competencies of 11 distance tutors within the same context of higher education in South Africa. Technical knowledge to operate technology stands out as a competence acquired before acting as a tutor, whereas using software, maintaining contact with students and professors, respect and diversified learning, managing student interaction, and leading and controlling the discussions are competencies developed after working as a tutor.

In the same vein, Campbell et al. (2019) indicated the ability to facilitate learning, academic skills, ability to build up trust, motivation, social interaction, and collaborative teamwork skills as necessary competencies for tutors in group classes. Tenório, Teles and Tenório (2016), in turn, view motivating learning, using a clear and friendly language, accepting the diversity of students' knowledge, stimulating critical thinking, assessing development, and providing feedback for the tasks as essential competencies. The ability to stimulate critical thinking in the students stood out as the most important from the tutors' perspective.

Chien et al. (2016) also focused on exploring the development of moral reasoning skills of online tutors, recognizing five competencies: moral character, problem-solving, affection, empathy, and social interaction. Borges et al. (2014), diagnosing competencies necessary for the tutor role in distance learning, pointed to mastering the content and the ability to operate the virtual environment and technologies to help interact with students as technical competencies. Moreover, they indicated student motivation, individual attention, cordiality, empathy, persuasion, teamwork, commitment, planning, and organization as behavioral competencies. Mattar et al. (2020), in a systematic review of papers in Portuguese, studied the competencies and functions of online tutors in distance learning and developed a model to assist in the training of tutors. The most cited competencies in the studies reviewed consist of management skills, content-related knowledge,

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pedagogical knowledge, communication skills, socio-affective skills, and technological skills.

In turn, the study by Li et al. (2017) identified, from the perspective of students and tutors, the ability to facilitate the cognitive process of the course contents, motivate students, facilitate interaction, and maintain a cordial learning environment as the most important competencies. Moreover, taking this delimitation into account, Murphy, Shelley and Baumann (2010) and Murphy et al. (2011) found empathy toward the student, individual guidance, attention to affective issues, knowledge about the subject, information technology skills, and establishing a friendly environment as the competencies considered essential by the students. Finally, Souza (2022) pointed out, through literature research, that mastering the content, operating communication media, and knowing distance learning fundamentals are the core competencies for the tutor to develop the teaching-learning process.

Thus, given the still limited literature and the importance of the competence-based approach to assess the performance of a given function, new studies aimed at gathering knowledge, skills, and attitudes fundamental to performing the distance tutor role in higher education are necessary. They should also include, in addition to the tutors', the perception of students regarding the degree of importance. In this sense, results can be expanded regarding the performance of university tutors, contributing to an improved quality of the teaching-learning process in this already widespread education modality.

Methodology

This study is exploratory, quantitative, and descriptive, aimed at understanding the competencies intrinsic to the tutoring role in distance learning in higher education from the perspective of tutors and students. According to Creswell (2010), quantitative research aims to test objective theories by investigating the relationship between variables measured by instruments, which allows the subsequent use of statistical techniques. When exploratory and descriptive, the

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research intends to expand knowledge about the phenomenon studied and describe its frequency, nature, characteristics, causes, and connections (BARROS; LEHFELD, 2007; ZANELLA, 2013).

As the data collection instrument, questionnaires were employed to profile tutors and students and obtain information on the competencies necessary to perform the tutor role in distance learning. The questionnaire included questions on pertinent information to profile the participants, like gender, age, city, university, and degree, adding the time in the function for the tutors. The participants were not nominally identified. Regarding tutor knowledge, skills, and attitudes, competencies described in the literature were covered, based mainly on the work of Massuga, Soares and Doliveira (2021), presented and divided into three main groups: technical competencies, managerial competencies, and social competencies, as classified by Grzybowska and Lupicka (2017) (Chart 1).

For each group, tutors and students rated the competencies according to their degree of importance employing a 5-point Likert scale: 1 for "not important", 2 for "not very important", 3 for "moderately important", 4 for "important", and 5 for "very important". The questionnaire was written on the Google Forms platform and made available through cell phones (via Whatsapp) and e-mails for distance learning students and tutors in Brazil. Given the extensive research universe and the impossibility of spatial delimitation, the selection of participating universities, tutors, and students occurred by accessibility, that is, the researcher selects the cases to which they have access, admitting their representation of the universe (PRODANOV; FREITAS, 2013). This process occurred through contacting course coordinators of public and private universities that offer distance learning. It should be noted that the research project and the data collection instruments were approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP), according to decree No. 4783405/COMEP/UNICENTRO.

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Chart 1 – Distance learning tutor competencies according to the literature

TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES	MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES	SOCIAL COMPETENCIES
Providing feedback Developing learning activities and content Ability to evaluate students Guiding course activities and schedules Forwarding homework/contents/activities Mediating online communication and discussions Facilitating learning and skill development for the student Having experience in the subject/mastering the content Knowledge about using the system and in Information Technology (IT) in general to perform their activities Stimulating the student's critical thinking Facilitating group learning Ability to assess the course Knowledge about work routines	Managing the virtual classroom (activities, schedule, etc.) Managing and keeping records Solving student-related problems (participation, access to the virtual environment, grades, documents, etc.) Accompanying the student throughout the process (grades, classes taken, etc.) Establishing ground rules for student interaction Ability to plan and organize Making technological choices for the online environment Developing the tutorial plan for the course Leading and controlling online discussions	Ability to communicate (using clear, friendly, and cordial langugage) Acting according to ethical and moral considerations Encouraging social/interpersonal interactions Showing empathy Ability to persuade Encouraging reflection Motivating students Providing individual attention to each student / advice and suggestions according to their needs Ability to provide emotional support Providing a welcoming, friendly, reliable, and stimulating online environment Solving conflicts amicably Regulating student behavior

Source: Elaborated according to the literature reviewed[6]

A total of 91 tutors and 1038 students participated in the study and had their questionnaires validated. The data were then analyzed for absolute frequency and relative frequency percentage, median, mode, and interquartile range. In other words, univariate descriptive statistics was used, employing central tendency measures, dispersion measures, frequency analysis to calculate simple variables, and constructing graphs and tables to facilitate representation (MARTINS; THEÓPHILO, 2007; SAHU, 2013). The analysis employed the software Statistical Package for the Social Science – SPSS version 20.0©.

6 Murphy, Shelley and Baumann (2010); Murphy et al. (2011); Borges et al. (2014); Setlhako (2014); Chien et al. (2016); Tenório, Teles and Tenório (2016); Li et al. (2017); Adnan (2018); Hrastinski et al. (2018); Metz and Bezuidenhout (2018); Campbell et al. (2019); Kara and Can (2019); Matar et al. (2020); Massuga, Soares and Doliveira (2021).

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Results and discussions

This section presents the main results found in the investigation. Initially, the sample of tutors and students investigated is characterized. Then, descriptive statistics are presented referring to the perception of tutors and students regarding the core tutoring competencies in distance learning.

Characterization of the sample investigated

The sample of 91 tutors who work in distance learning reveals that 76.9% are female, with a greater predominance of the age group between 18 and 39 years old. Moreover, the time of experience is distributed equally, with most having worked as a tutor between one and three years (33%) and 17.6% for ten or more years (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Profile of the tutors surveyed.

Variables investigated		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	70	76.9%
	Male	21	23.1%
Age	Under 18	4	4.4%
	18 to 28	33	36.3%
	29 to 39	39	42.9%
	40 to 50	14	15.4%
	51 to 61	1	1.1%
Time of experience	1 to 3 years	30	33.0%
	4 to 6 years	22	24.2%
	7 to 9 years	23	25.3%
	10 or more	16	17.6%

Source: Research data.

Looking at the universities where the tutors surveyed work reveals that most of them develop activities at the State University of Maringá (UEM) (46.2%) and Midwestern State University (UNICENTRO) (25.3%), as shown in Figure 1. In addition, they act in courses of Pedagogy (34.1%), Public Administration (27.5%), Portuguese (20.9%), Biological Sciences (7.7%), History (6.6%), Physical Education (5.5%), Mathematics (4.4%), Physics (4.4%), Computing (1.1%), and Business (1.1%).

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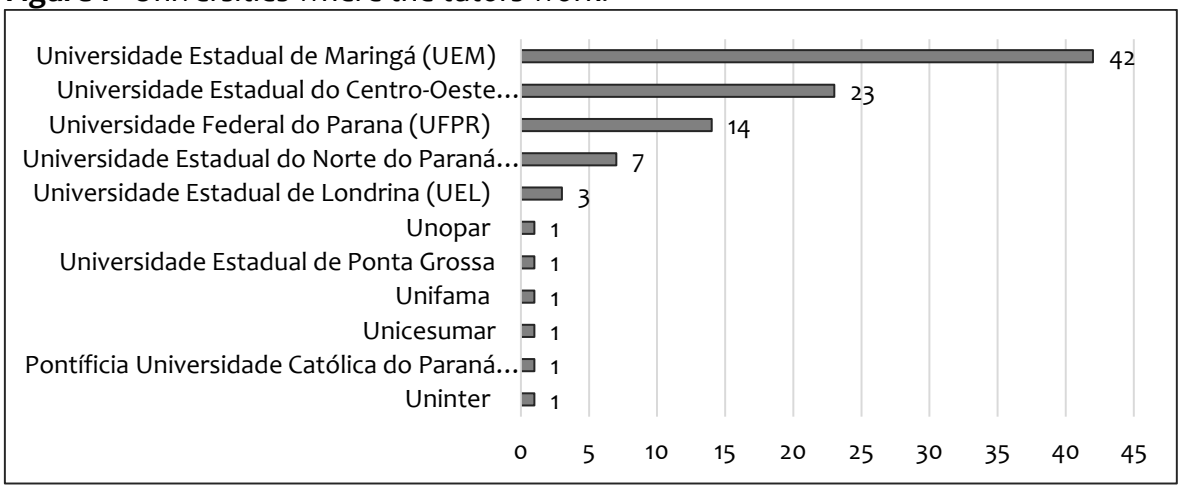
Figure 1 - Universities where the tutors work.



Source: Research data.

The 1038 students who answered the survey were, for the most part, female (74%), aged between 29 and 39 (41.7%) (see Table 2). These data are consistent with the portrait of higher education in Brazil, where most students are female in undergraduate courses. In addition, on average, students enrolled in distance learning are 32.4 years old (INEP, 2023). Among the cities where the students live, Ponta Grossa (13.5%), Curitiba (4.1%), and Jaguariaíva (3.6%) stood out, all in the state of Paraná (see Figure 2).

Table 2 - Profile of the students surveyed

Variables investigated		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	768	74.0
	Male	265	25.5
	Prefer not to identify	5	0.5
Age	Under 18	3	0.3
	18 to 28	270	26.0
	29 to 39	433	41.7
	40 to 50	254	24.5
	51 to 61	73	7.0
	62 or more	5	0.5

Source: Research data.

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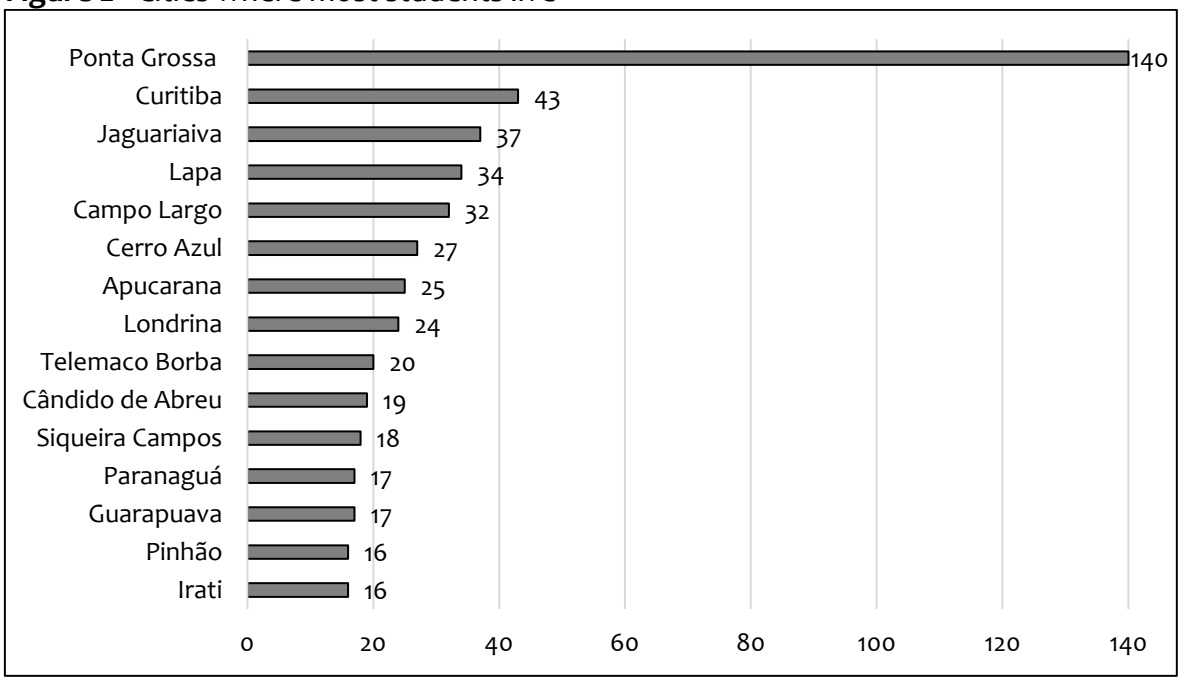
Figure 2 - Cities where most students live



Source: Research data.

In addition to the cities presented in the graph, students from 188 more cities from the states of Mato Grosso, Paraná, Santa Catarina, São Paulo, Brasília, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Ceará, Rio Grande do Sul, Rondônia, Goiás, and Espírito Santo were identified, which reinforces the breaking of space barriers and great flexibility of distance learning (CHAVES; MELO, 2020; CLARK, 2020; RIELDING, 2020; ORAKCI; KARAGÖZ, 2022). Similarly, several universities are cited by students as the in-person bases of their distance learning courses, with the State University of Ponta Grossa (UEPG) (76.4%) and UNICENTRO (13.7%) standing out (see Figure 3).

Among the undergraduate courses taken by the students, Pedagogy is again in first place (33.3%), followed by Portuguese (19.3%), Geography (9.4%), Computing (9.4%), and Public Administration (9.4%). In addition, the courses of Physical Education, Mathematics, History, Biology, Administration, Computer Science, Physiotherapy, Chemistry, Food Sciences, Physics, Social Work, Forestry Engineering, Production Engineering, Pharmacy, and Phonoaudiology were mentioned. The data reveal the high variety of areas encompassed by the survey and the advances of distance learning in terms of diversity of courses currently offered, driven in large part by technological development (MESQUITA, 2022; ROA; MATUTES; OMBAJEN,

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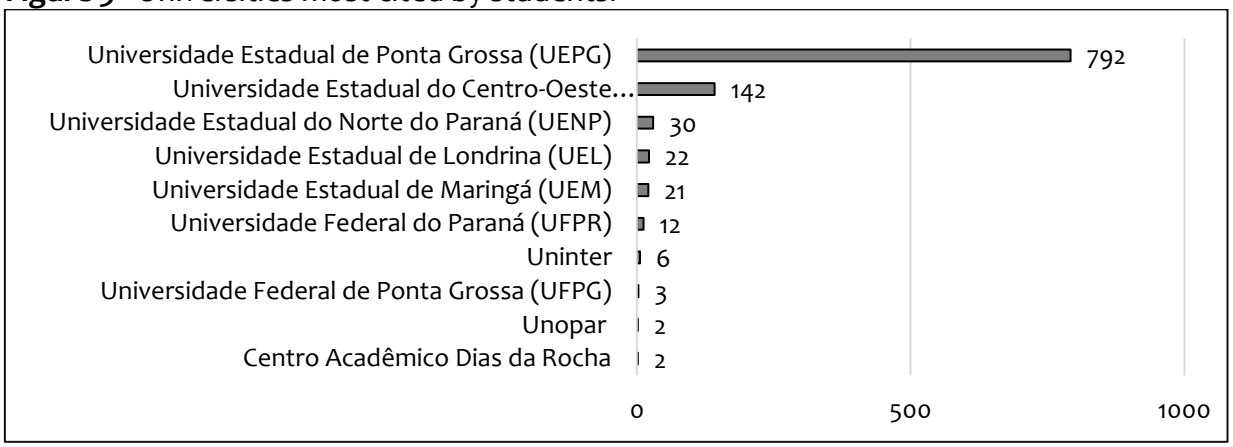
2022).

Figure 3 - Universities most cited by students.



Source: Research data.

- Importance of tutoring competencies from the perspective of tutors and students

The descriptive statistics results, obtained using the SPSS software, generated Table 3, which presents the absolute and relative frequency, median, mode, and interquartile range of each question of the blocks of technical, managerial, and social competencies answered by the tutors. These values make it possible to analyze the variation of perceptions as a function of the distribution of answers given by the respondents.

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Table 3 - Absolute frequency, percentage relative frequency, median, mode, and interquartile range - perception of tutors.

		Absolute frequency (Percentage relative frequency)							
		NI	PI	IP	I	MI	Median	Mode	AIQ
Technical competencies	Providing feedback	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	7 (7.7 %)	83 (91.2 %)	5	5	0
	Developing learning activities and contents	2 (2.2%)	6 (6.6 %)	9 (9.9 %)	31 (34.1 %)	43 (47.3 %)	4	5	1
	Ability to evaluate students	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	11 (12.1 %)	80 (87.9 %)	5	5	0
	Guiding course activities and schedules	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	9 (9.9 %)	82 (90.1 %)	5	5	0
	Forwarding tasks/contents/activities	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	4 (4.4 %)	17 (18.7 %)	70 (76.9 %)	5	5	0
	Mediating online communication and discussions	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	18 (19.8 %)	71 (78 %)	5	5	0
	Facilitating the student's learning and skill development	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	19 (20.9 %)	70 (76.9 %)	5	5	0
	Having experience with the subject/mastering the content	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	3 (3.3 %)	27 (29.7 %)	61 (67 %)	5	5	1
	Knowledge about IT and how to use the system	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	18 (19.8 %)	73 (80.2 %)	5	5	0
	Stimulating the student's critical thinking	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	19 (20.9 %)	70 (76.9 %)	5	5	0
	Facilitating group learning	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	6 (6.6 %)	25 (27.5 %)	60 (65.9 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to evaluate the course	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	5 (5.5 %)	31 (34.1 %)	54 (59.3 %)	5	5	1
	Knowledge of work routines	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	20 (22 %)	71 (78 %)	5	5	0
Managerial competencies	Managing the virtual classroom	1 (1.1%)	0 (0 %)	5 (5.5 %)	17 (18.7 %)	68 (74.7 %)	5	5	1
	Managing and keeping records	1 (1.1%)	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	22 (24.2 %)	66 (72.5 %)	5	5	1
	Solving student-related problems	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	6 (6.6 %)	18 (19.8 %)	65 (71.4 %)	5	5	1
	Accompanying the student throughout the process	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	2 (2.2 %)	19 (20.9 %)	69 (75.8 %)	5	5	0
	Establishing ground rules for student interaction	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	4 (4.4 %)	28 (30.8 %)	59 (64.8 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to plan and organize	1 (1.1%)	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	19 (20.9 %)	70 (76.9 %)	5	5	0
	Making technological choices for the online environment	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	17 (18.7 %)	36 (39.6 %)	36 (39.6 %)	4	4	1
	Developing the course tutorial plan	1 (1.1%)	4 (4.4 %)	12 (13.2 %)	35 (38.5 %)	39 (42.9 %)	4	5	1
	Leading and controlling online discussions	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	6 (6.6 %)	36 (39.6 %)	47 (51.6 %)	5	5	1
Social competencies	Ability to communicate (clear, friendly, and cordial language)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	10 (11 %)	81 (89 %)	5	5	0
	Acting according to ethical and moral considerations	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	8 (8.8 %)	83 (91.2 %)	5	5	0
	Stimulating social/interpersonal interaction	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	5 (5.5 %)	20 (22 %)	66 (72.5 %)	5	5	1
	Showing empathy	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	3 (3.3 %)	19 (20.9 %)	69 (75.8 %)	5	5	0
	Ability to persuade	0 (0 %)	2 (2.2 %)	9 (9.9 %)	30 (33 %)	50 (54.9 %)	5	5	1
	Encouraging reflection	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	18 (19.8 %)	72 (79.1 %)	5	5	0
	Motivating students	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	3 (3.3 %)	15 (16.5 %)	73 (80.2 %)	5	5	0
	Providing individual attention to each student	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	7 (7.7 %)	17 (18.7 %)	67 (73.6 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to provide emotional support	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	13 (14.3 %)	33 (36.3 %)	44 (48.4 %)	4	5	1
	Providing a welcoming, friendly, and stimulating online environment	0 (0 %)	1 (1.1 %)	5 (5.5 %)	16 (17.6 %)	69 (75.8 %)	5	5	0
	Solving conflicts amicably	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	6 (6.6 %)	16 (17.6 %)	69 (75.8 %)	5	5	0
	Regulating student behavior	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.2 %)	18 (19.8 %)	30 (33 %)	40 (44 %)	4	5	1

Legend: NI (not important); PI (not very important); IP (moderately important); I (important); MI (very important); AIQ (interquartile range). **Source**: Research data.

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The technical competencies block reveals that providing feedback (91.2%), guiding the course activities/schedule (90.1%), and evaluating students (87.9%) were the competencies most rated as "very important" by the tutors. This is denoted in the attributions directed to performance described in the literature, like clarifying questions through technological resources, collective construction of knowledge, participation in the evaluation processes, and monitoring activities (BARBOSA; CASTRO, 2017; MATTAR et al., 2020; SARAIVA, 2020).

On the other hand, the competency of developing learning activities and contents was rated as the least important (47.3%), which can be explained by the task belonging to the professor in distance learning. According to Liu (2020), several roles stand out in this teaching modality, such as the professors in charge of the course, who create the didactic-pedagogical materials, lecturers who teach the online course, coordinators responsible for administrative functions, and tutors, who instruct, guide, and help students in performing tasks.

Among the managerial competencies, the one considered most important in the survey was the ability to plan and organize (76.9%), followed by accompanying the student through the online process (75.8%) and managing the virtual classroom (74.7%). These competencies are directly associated with the definition of tutor functions since they act as an advisor and supervisor of the student's activities (LIU, 2020; SOUZA, 2021), which requires planning and organization regarding deadlines and tasks to be performed, for example. Moreover, according to Vegliante and Sannicandro (2020), tutoring involves accompanying and supporting an individual or group in a virtual environment where the teaching-learning process occurs. In the same vein, Sardi and Carvalho (2022a; 2022b) emphasize this support function performed by the tutor by being available to answer students' questions. Besides, organizing the virtual classes is viewed as one of their attributions (CHAVES; MELO, 2020; MATTAR et al., 2020).

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Making technological choices for the online environment (39.6%) and developing the course tutorial plan (42.9%) received the fewest mentions as "very important", which can be explained again by the distribution of functions among the various roles played in distance learning, with the coordinator generally being in charge of technological choices and definition of the tutorial plan (LIU, 2020).

Finally, regarding social competencies, acting according to ethical considerations and the ability to communicate were indicated as very important by 83 (91.2%) and 81 (89%) tutors, respectively. Given the characteristics of distance learning, essentially related to a teaching-learning process occurring in a virtual environment, the tutor often becomes the main interlocutor with the students concerning clarifying questions and performing activities. Two-way communication is crucial for interactive learning (NIKU, 2023). Thus, the importance attributed to communication is justified, considering that it is a fundamental tool to enable the spread of knowledge and contact between tutors and students who are physically distant (VEGLIANTE; SANNICANDRO, 2020).

In the same way that interaction is viewed as essential, ethics should guide the performance of any profession, including tutors. Ethics is a reflective activity that directs action towards the common good. It considers values that should be adopted to promote life and is highly important in the educational context since it is geared towards the formation of citizenship in the individual (GONÇALVES, 2016).

Still regarding social competencies, the ability to provide emotional support and regulate student behavior are also seen as important, but with fewer mentions. This is because these competencies may not manifest themselves with much intensity in the online interaction environment, where personal and physical proximity are impossible. Consequently, there is no intimate contact with the students, making it difficult to identify their emotions and feelings (CLARK, 2020). Moreover, in distance learning, regulating student behavior is secondary since the pedagogical approaches require greater participation and commitment from the students, who must manage their learning (SETLHAKO, 2014).

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Table 4 - Absolute frequency, percentage relative frequency, median, mode, and interquartile range - perception of students

		Absolute frequency (Percentage relative frequency)							
		NI	PI	IP	I	MI	Median*	Mode*	AIQ*
Technical competencies	Providing feedback	6 (0.6%)	13 (1.3 %)	27 (2.6 %)	157 (15.1 %)	835 (80.4 %)	5	5	0
	Developing learning activities and contents	14 (1.3%)	33 (3.2 %)	76 (7.3 %)	269 (25.9 %)	646 (62.2 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to evaluate students	8 (0.8%)	12 (1.2 %)	31 (3 %)	200 (19.3 %)	787 (75.8 %)	5	5	0
	Guiding course activities and schedules	8 (0.8%)	13 (1.3 %)	33 (3.2 %)	183 (17.6 %)	801 (77.2 %)	5	5	0
	Forwarding tasks/contents/activities	12 (1.2%)	18 (1.7 %)	66 (6.4 %)	250 (24.1 %)	692 (66.7 %)	5	5	1
	Mediating online communication and discussions	13 (1.3%)	15 (1.4 %)	65 (6.3 %)	258 (24.9 %)	687 (66.2 %)	5	5	1
	Facilitating the student's learning and skill development	11 (1.1%)	18 (1.7 %)	68 (6.6 %)	244 (23.5 %)	697 (67.1 %)	5	5	1
	Having experience with the subject/mastering the content	8 (0.8%)	16 (1.5 %)	43 (4.1 %)	187 (18 %)	784 (75.5 %)	5	5	0
	Knowledge about IT and how to use the system	9 (0.9%)	16 (1.5 %)	59 (5.7 %)	254 (24.5 %)	700 (67.4 %)	5	5	1
	Stimulating the student's critical thinking	8 (0.8%)	26 (2.5 %)	60 (5.8 %)	265 (25.5 %)	679 (65.4 %)	5	5	1
	Facilitating group learning	12 (1.2%)	34 (3.3 %)	84 (8.1 %)	293 (28.2 %)	615 (59.2 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to evaluate the course	10 (1 %)	26 (2.5 %)	70 (6.7 %)	276 (26.6 %)	656 (63.2 %)	5	5	1
	Knowledge of work routines	6 (0.6%)	23 (2.2 %)	46 (4.4 %)	274 (26.4 %)	689 (66.4 %)	5	5	1
Managerial competencies	Managing the virtual classroom	5 (0.5 %)	21 (2 %)	58 (5.6 %)	330 (31.8 %)	624 (60.1 %)	5	5	1
	Managing and keeping records	6 (0.6 %)	13 (1.3 %)	61 (5.9 %)	344 (33.1 %)	614 (59.2 %)	5	5	1
	Solving student-related problems	7 (0.7 %)	15 (1.4 %)	51 (4.9 %)	277 (26.7 %)	688 (66.3 %)	5	5	1
	Accompanying the student throughout the process	9 (0.9 %)	17 (1.6 %)	52 (5 %)	253 (24.4 %)	707 (68.1 %)	5	5	1
	Establishing ground rules for student interaction	9 (0.9 %)	26 (2.5 %)	95 (9.2 %)	358 (34.5 %)	550 (53 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to plan and organize	2 (0.2 %)	14 (1.3 %)	41 (3.9 %)	278 (26.8 %)	703 (67.7 %)	5	5	1
	Making technological choices for the online environment	13 (1.3 %)	26 (2.5 %)	112 (10.8 %)	330 (31.8 %)	557 (53.7 %)	5	5	1
	Developing the course tutorial plan	12 (1.2 %)	33 (3.2 %)	98 (9.4 %)	330 (31.8 %)	565 (54.4 %)	5	5	1
	Leading and controlling online discussions	12 (1.2 %)	21 (2 %)	100 (9.6 %)	303 (29.2 %)	602 (58 %)	5	5	1
Social competencies	Ability to communicate (clear, friendly, and cordial language)	6 (0.6 %)	13 (1.3 %)	35 (3.4 %)	188 (18.1 %)	796 (76.7 %)	5	5	0
	Acting according to ethical and moral considerations	6 (0.6 %)	6 (0.6 %)	34 (3.3 %)	208 (20 %)	784 (75.5 %)	5	5	0
	Stimulating social/interpersonal interaction	7 (0.7 %)	16 (1.5 %)	68 (6.6 %)	272 (26.2 %)	675 (65 %)	5	5	1
	Showing empathy	10 (1 %)	9 (0.9 %)	42 (4 %)	250 (24.1 %)	727 (70 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to persuade	13 (1.3 %)	37 (3.6 %)	110 (10.6 %)	327 (31.5 %)	551 (53.1 %)	5	5	1
	Encouraging reflection	8 (0.8 %)	15 (1.4 %)	49 (4.7 %)	284 (27.4 %)	682 (65.7 %)	5	5	1
	Motivating students	8 (0.8 %)	14 (1.3 %)	41 (3.9 %)	196 (18.9 %)	779 (75 %)	5	5	0.25
	Providing individual attention to each student	11 (1.1 %)	16 (1.5 %)	59 (5.7 %)	265 (25.5 %)	687 (66.2 %)	5	5	1
	Ability to provide emotional support	23 (2.2 %)	69 (6.6 %)	168 (16.2 %)	299 (28.8 %)	479 (46.1 %)	4	5	2
	Providing a welcoming, friendly, and stimulating online environment	13 (1.3 %)	27 (2.6 %)	74 (7.1 %)	296 (28.5 %)	628 (60.5 %)	5	5	1
	Solving conflicts amicably	14 (1.3 %)	15 (1.4 %)	89 (8.6 %)	331 (31.9 %)	589 (56.7 %)	5	5	1
	Regulating student behavior	49 (4.7 %)	70 (6.7 %)	185 (17.8 %)	303 (29.2 %)	431 (41.5 %)	4	5	2

Legend: NI (not important); PI (not very important); IP (moderately important); I (important); MI (very important); AIQ (interquartile range). **Source**: Research data

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The responses of distance learning students about the same groups of competencies associated with the tutor role reveal similar results of perception, denoting a certain homogeneity in the degree of importance of the competencies. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of the results, illustrating these similarities.

The mentions regarding the technical competencies reveal a congruence with the tutors' answers, with providing feedback (80.4%), guiding course activities and schedule (77.2%), and ability to evaluate students (75.8%) being the competencies most rated as "very important". On the other hand, the competencies of facilitating group learning and developing learning contents and activities presented fewer responses in this category, with 59.2% and 62.2%, respectively. The novelty here lies in the fewer mentions as "very important" of the competence of facilitating group learning, which can also be explained by the characteristics of distance learning. The online environment and the possibility to do tasks anywhere and anytime according to the students' needs leads to a more individualized way to study (CLARK, 2020).

In the group of managerial competencies, similar to the tutors' perception, the competence of accompanying the student throughout the process (68.7%) stands out with a high number of "very important" votes. Distance learning requires closer support to the students' demands, and the tutor is a fundamental element to engaging the student through constant support (LIU, 2020; MESQUITA, 2022). Subsequently, students indicated the ability to plan and organize as a highly significant managerial competence, which is also identified by Espinoza-Freire and Rojas-Garcia (2019). The following competencies stand out as less important than the others: establishing ground rules for student interaction, making technological choices, and developing the course tutorial plan, which, again, might be a reflection of students not seeing these functions as tutor attributions (LIU, 2020).

In turn, the students' assessment of the significance of social competencies presents similar results to the tutors' perception. The competencies most mentioned as "very important" were the ability to communicate with clear, friendly, and cordial

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language (76.7%), acting according to ethical and moral considerations (75.5%), and motivating students (75%). The latter is also widely cited in the literature as one of the core tutoring competencies (TENÓRIO; TELES; TENÓRIO, 2016; CHAVES; MELO, 2020; MATTAR et al., 2020; SARAIVA, 2020; VEGLIANTE; SANNICANDRO, 2020). Similarly, the competencies of regulating student behavior and providing emotional support received the fewest "very important" votes in the social competencies group, with 41.5% and 46.1%, respectively.

These similarities between the perceptions of tutors and students can be confirmed in Table 5, which presents the sets of variables for each questionnaire for tutors and students, with a grouping of responses.

Table 5 - Comparison between tutor and student responses.

Categories	Tutor Responses		Student Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Not important	7	0.2%	368	1.0%
Not very important	24	0.8%	756	2.1%
Moderately important	159	5.1%	2350	6.7%
Important	714	23.1%	9132	25.9%
Very important	2190	70.8%	22686	64.3%
Total	3094	100%	35292	100%

Source: Research data.

The results show that the general indices for each response category did not present high variability, which means that the respondents had similar perceptions regarding the degree of importance attributed to tutor competencies. This reinforces the focus on the competencies selected by this study as very important for playing the role of tutor in higher education distance learning.

In general, it is understood that tutors are fundamental for student success, being the first and main contact between the university and the student and playing the role of facilitating the teaching-learning process in virtual environments (METZ; BEZUIDNHOUT, 2018; VEGLIANTE; SANNICANDRO, 2020; SOUZA, 2021; CAMACHO, 2022; MESQUITA, 2022). The online tutoring process is, therefore, a critical factor for the acceptance of e-learning and perception of university quality (METZ; BEZUIDENHOUT, 2018), which can be proven by Espinoza-Freire and Rojas-Garcia (2019), who found that tutoring deficiencies like lack of support and motivation are causes of high dropout rates among distance learning students.

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Thus, given their essential role combined with the particularities of distance learning, tutors must develop core competencies to exercise their function (ADNAN, 2018). Studies that have investigated this relationship, especially considering notions of the relative importance of each competence, classify the informative function as the most important (METZ; BEZUIDENHOUT, 2018); indicate the competencies of facilitating the cognitive process of the course content, motivating students, stimulating critical thinking, providing feedback, facilitating interaction using clear and friendly language, and building and maintaining a cordial learning environment as essential (TENÓRIO; TELES; TENÓRIO; LI et al., 2017); and distance learning students point out the articulation of communication, motivation, meeting individual needs, and attention to affective issues (MURPHY et al., 2011). This study, in particular, showed nine competencies cited as the most important in the view of tutors and students, as displayed in Chart 2.

Chart 2 - Summary of the tutoring competencies viewed as the most important by tutors and students.

COMPETENCE GROUP	ASSOCIATED COMPETENCIES
Technical competencies	• Providing feedback; • Guiding course activities and schedule; • Ability to evaluate students.
Managerial competencies	• Managing the virtual classroom (activities, schedule, etc.); • Accompanying the student throughout the process (grades, classes taken, etc.); • Ability to plan and organize.
Social competencies	• Ability to communicate (using clear, friendly, and cordial langugage); • Acting according to ethical and moral considerations; • Motivating students.

Source: the authors.

Although it is possible to segment technical, managerial, and social competencies according to the degree of importance attributed, this study also found a homogeneity in the results since, for each question in the competence blocks, the responses given most frequently were "very important" and "important", in that order. This highlights the relevance of all the competencies already indicated in the literature for tutoring in distance learning. In this sense, it is up to the tutor to observe that the competencies must be considered jointly, establishing a dialogue between them so that they adapt to specific situations, as described by Chaves and Melo (2020).

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Final considerations

This study's main purpose was to identify the technical, managerial, and social competencies required to work as a tutor in distance learning from the perception of higher education tutors and students. To achieve this goal, the study applied questionnaires structured around a 5-point Likert scale relative to the degree of importance of each competence found in the literature. In total, 91 tutors and 1038 students participated in the study and had their responses analyzed.

There are several competencies associated with the tutoring function in distance learning since their activity is permeated by a series of characteristics linked to the particularities of this teaching modality. Their functions translate into supporting and accompanying the student in their teaching-learning process, engaging them, and promoting constant support to their needs by developing a personalized interaction.

Using univariate descriptive statistics, according to the groups assessed, the results reveal that, in the perception of students and tutors, the competencies of providing feedback, guiding the course activities and schedule, the ability to evaluate students and accompanying them throughout the online process, the ability to plan and organize, managing the virtual classroom, acting according to ethical considerations, the ability to communicate, and motivating students were the most mentioned as "very important". On the other hand, the competencies of developing learning contents and activities, facilitating group learning, making technological choices for the *online* environment, developing the course tutorial plan, establishing ground rules for student interaction, providing emotional support, and regulating student behavior received the fewest mentions as "very important".

Therefore, similarities were observed in the responses of tutors and students and, although it is possible to differentiate the relative importance of each competence when comparing the mentions of the categories evaluated, the results indicate homogeneity, considering that the responses most given were "very

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important" and "important" in each question block. This confirms the relevance of all competencies found in the literature regarding the tutor's role in distance learning. Therefore, they should develop and perfect them to improve quality of teaching-learning in the universities wherein they work.

In short, the expansion of the tutor's role becomes noticeable nowadays, combined with the growth of distance learning and, especially, the expansion of hybrid learning, which has already been adopted by several institutions. In the theoretical aspect, the study complements the literature already written about tutoring in distance learning with the comprehensive list of competencies associated with the role in the particular Brazilian context, jointly analyzing the perception of tutors and students in a relatively large sample. This study, using the competence-based approach, also enabled the analysis of the core competencies to perform tutoring roles, therefore contributing to improving tutor performance in higher education.

Limitations of the study include the concentration of responses from universities in the state of Paraná, which may interfere with the representation of perceptions at the national level. However, far from exhausting the theoretical field, this investigation can contribute to the development of new studies whose purpose may be directed to expanding the sample field or the practical analysis of how to develop these competencies as to their effectiveness.

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