

E-TUTORING EVOLUTION IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXTS: REFLECTIONS BASED ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

EVOLUZIONE DELL'E-TUTORING UNIVERSITARIO: RIFLESSIONI A PARTIRE DA ESPERIENZE DI STUDENTI ITALIANI



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ABSTRACT

In the Italian university context, we are witnessing a normalization of online degree programs, even in traditionally in-person institutions. E-tutors are also involved in these change processes, and their role has always been considered strategic. A qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews with a limited number of students from 5 Italian Universities reveals reflections on possible strategic reformulations of the traditional functions of e-tutoring.

Nel contesto universitario italiano assistiamo ad una normalizzazione di corsi di laurea online a distanza, anche in Atenei tradizionalmente presenziali. In questi processi di cambiamento sono coinvolti anche gli e-tutor, il cui ruolo è sempre stato considerato strategico. Da una ricerca qualitativa condotta attraverso interviste semi-strutturate ad un numero ristretto di 5 atenei italiani emergono riflessioni rispetto a possibili riformulazioni strategiche delle funzioni tradizionali dell'e-tutoring.

KEYWORDS

e-tutoring, high education, students' perception
e-tutoring, formazione universitaria, percezioni studenti

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Introduction

In an era of extraordinary change, accelerated by innovations in digital technologies, the higher education system faces significant challenges, including the need to provide flexible, innovative, and high-quality learning pathways. Online university education responds to an increasingly widespread and cross-cutting demand for inclusiveness and accessibility. Among the key figures involved in the ongoing transformation - alongside the role of the e-teacher - we find the figure of the e-tutor. This role has always been considered strategic in online and distance learning, both for achieving educational objectives and for ensuring the learning experience' quality (Selmi et al. 2024).

In the European context, important reflections have emerged within the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which have been taken up and further developed by working groups of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). These groups highlight the value of the e-tutor as part of the teaching staff (Raviolo 2020). More recent documents reaffirm the relevance of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA 2015), particularly regarding the "student-centred learning" paradigm, the need to implement flexible learning environments, and the promotion of innovative experiences involving the entire academic staff (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2024).

Special attention has been given to e-learning pathways in higher education (Huertas Hidalgo et al. 2018), in order to offer university programs that "encourage a sense of autonomy in the learner while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher" (ENQA 2015 p. 12). Therefore, Universities are called upon to ensure "a range of resources to assist student learning" with human employees including "tutors, counsellors and other advisers" (ENQA 2015, p. 14). These guidelines are confirmed in the latest EHEA documents, endorsed by the 47 Ministers of Higher Education who are part of the initiative: higher education institutions are required to ensure "access to adequate and qualitative learning resources and inclusive learning spaces tailored to each individual student's needs, as well as student support services, such as counselling, mentoring, and tutoring" (EHEA 2024, Learning, p.21). "Students need access to high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching, in line with their needs and interests, to develop competencies needed to tackle global challenges ...We acknowledge the crucial role of teaching staff in supporting high-quality, learner-centred and

innovative learning and teaching” (EHEA Tirana). Moreover, the evolution of generative AI, through the advancement of Intelligent Tutor Systems (ITS), raises urgent challenges - providing opportunities for support but also posing the risk of eroding some traditional functions of the e-tutor.

1. The Italian University Context and the Theoretical Framework.

The Italian university context is currently facing numerous challenges driven by rapid and ongoing technological and social transformations. One particularly noteworthy development is the growing demand for online degree programs. This trend has been clearly documented in recent years through various reports on enrollment in Digital Universities (DLU). The latest report by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System (ANVUR) on Higher Education in Italy showed that the number of university students has drastically increased over the past decade, primarily due to telematic universities (DLU) (Turconi & Martiniello 2024).

This trend is further confirmed by the most recent data published on the Higher Education Data Portal, a platform maintained by the Ministry of University and Research, concerning students enrolled in DLUs for the academic year 2023/2024 (Fig. 1). It is now a well-established phenomenon of continuous growth, which no longer involves only working students and reflects a profound shift in contemporary society. A growing number of students with diverse backgrounds and needs are turning to this form of higher education, which apparently meets an increasing demand for flexibility and personalization.

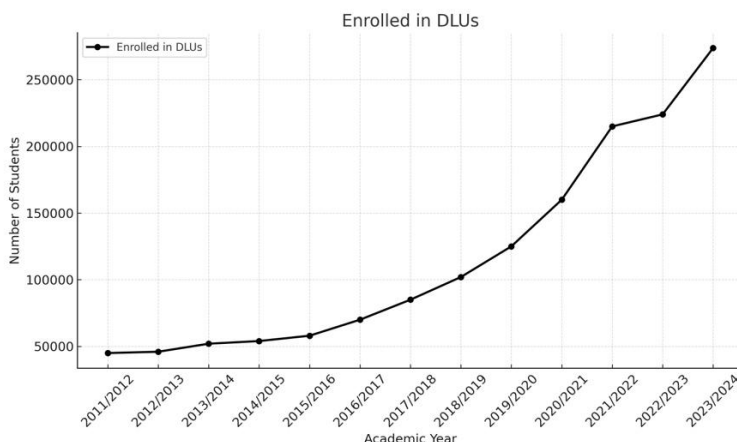


Figure 1. Enrolled in Italian DLUs (USTAT, 2025)

To address current educational challenges, significant financial investments are supporting innovation processes in higher education, both at the European level (NextGenerationEU) and nationally (PNRR). Edunext (Italian Universities Digital Education Hub) has recently brought together 35 universities and 5 AFAM institutions, offering a wide range of digital learning pathways delivered in blended or predominantly online formats. In Italy, in fact, alongside the educational offer of the 11 DLU—relatively “young” institutions (the first DLU in Italy, UniMarconi, dates back to 2004) and highly specialized in this field - there is also the online education provision of historic public and private institutions offering fully online degree programs.

Italian legislation is accompanying and guiding these developments: Ministerial Decree 1835 of December 6, 2024 (D.M. 2024) has updated the existing legislative framework with the aim of establishing quality standards for both digital and traditional universities. These standards are designed to ensure meaningful student–faculty interaction, high-quality teaching, and rigorous skills assessment and certification criteria. At the same time, there is a wide variety of e-learning models, which significantly affect the diversity of tasks and identities attributed to the e-tutor’s role. In the Italian context, more than 20 years after the Moratti-Stanca Law (D.M. 2003), there are still no national certifications regarding the professional qualification of university e-tutors, nor are there structured training paths with common national requirements. Although current regulations still identify three categories of e-tutors - technical, disciplinary, and course-based -

there remains a need for clarity concerning the roles of these figures (Rivoltella 2006). Indeed, it is still difficult to define a clear identity for the e-tutor across diverse Italian university contexts: in some programs, the traditional functions of disciplinary e-tutors are assumed directly by faculty members (for example, in courses with small student groups), while in others, course-based e-tutor roles are organized through structured peer tutoring services in which senior students mentor incoming students (in Italian: “e-tutor di matricole”). The academic literature in the field (Rotta & Ranieri 2005; Rivoltella 2006; Vegliante & De Angelis 2019; Vegliante & Sannicandro 2020; Rivoltella 2021; Mauro 2023) has provided a fairly clear and detailed understanding of the roles, functions, activities, and competencies of e-tutors, supported by field studies conducted in several major Italian universities, such as Università Cattolica of Milan, E-Campus, and IUL (Triacca et al. 2019; Ferrari & Triacca 2021; Raviolo 2019; Raviolo 2020; Raviolo et al. 2021; Ferrari et al. 2021; Raviolo et al. 2023; Nardi et al. 2024). Theoretical and pedagogical discussions in Italy have also drawn from international studies on e-tutoring, particularly those highlighting the strategic importance of moderation activities (Salmon 2001) and the concept of “presence” in online learning environments—cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Garrison et al. 1999). The list of competencies required for these roles has been structured around central and peripheral functions (Denis et al. 2004), encompassing actions of facilitation, guidance, and student support on cognitive, emotional, and organizational levels. The evolution and refinement of automated Intelligent Tutor Systems (ITS), as well as ongoing experimentation with AI-driven conversational chatbots and virtual tutors in augmented reality, raise new questions about the potential erosion of certain traditional functions of the e-tutor (Chinedu & Ade-Ibijola 2021; Jian 2023; Garavaglia 2023; Labadze et al. 2023; Ab Rahman et al. 2024; Batsaikhan et al. 2024; Khan 2024; Lata 2024; Susilo 2024; Willis 2024). Experimental trials are already underway, and early field studies are available on topics such as the effectiveness of AI tutoring systems for personalized learning and students’ perceptions of these innovations (De Giuseppe & Tornusciolo 2023; Hajeer et al. 2024; Triberti et al. 2024; Baily & Warner 2025; Tanchuk & M. Taylor 2025).

2. Research Design

Our study aims to assess the evolution of e-tutoring within Italian university contexts. The research was guided by the following questions: 1) What significant actions have been implemented regarding tutoring interventions? 2) Are the functions, roles, and competencies identified in the theoretical framework and national regulations confirmed in practice? 3) What perceptions emerge with respect to AI-tutoring prospects in online university contexts?

An exploratory investigation was conducted, with particular attention to students' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were used to bring out the participants' lived experiences and expressed opinions, highlighting both opportunities and critical issues regarding tutoring methods, functions, and practices (Demetrio 2020). This fieldwork followed a desk research phase, mapping publicly available online documentation (e-tutoring regulations, university service offerings, etc.) and collecting relevant policy documents.

Five Italian Universities were involved in the study: three DLU (Pegaso University, Mercatorum University, and UIL) and two traditional Universities offering fully online degree programs (University of Turin and University of Palermo). The selection of institutions was guided by several criteria: diversity of e-learning models, geographic distribution, and, in the case of digital universities, significance in terms of student enrollment (Pegaso University currently enrolls nearly 100,000 students) and institutional relevance (e.g. Mercatorum University is affiliated with the national Chamber of Commerce; UIL maintains a specific institutional connection with INDIRE, the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research).

A total of 24 students volunteered to participate in the interviews, which were conducted via the Meet platform between June 2024 and January 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Participant characteristics, collected through a Google Form questionnaire, are summarized in Table 1.

Factor	Category	Count
Gender	F	17
	M	7
Age	20-25	4
	25-30	6
	30-40	8
	>40	5

Place	North	10
	Center	6
	South	8
Education Level	High School Diploma	4
	Bachelor's Degree	11
	Master's Degree	9
Precedente esperienza universitaria	Traditional Public University	12
	Traditional Private University	1
	Digital University	2
	None	9

Table 1. Study Participants

The qualitative analysis tool was developed based on Rivoltella’s model of e-tutoring functions (Rivoltella 2006, 2021), which encompasses all areas of learning support defined by Italian regulations (D.M. 2003; D.M 2013; D.M. 2024). Table 2 presents a comparison between the main functions of university e-tutors and the types of support actions mandated by Italian legislation, while Figure 2 visually illustrates the overlap among the areas corresponding to the three e-tutor profiles defined by the regulations. (Table 2, Fig. 2)

<i>RIVOLTELLA MODEL</i>	<i>LEGAL FRAMEWORK</i>	<i>TYPE OF E-TUTOR</i>
Technological function	Technical and administrative support	Technical e-tutor
Social function	Support for moderation Coordination of student groups	Disciplinary e-tutor
Conceptual Pedagogical function	Teaching support Activities in virtual classrooms Motivational support	Disciplinary e-tutor
Organizational function	Guidance and monitoring support Activities in virtual classrooms	Course e-tutor Disciplinary e-tutor
Evaluative function	Monitoring support	Disciplinary e-tutor

Table 2. E-tutor roles in Italian University

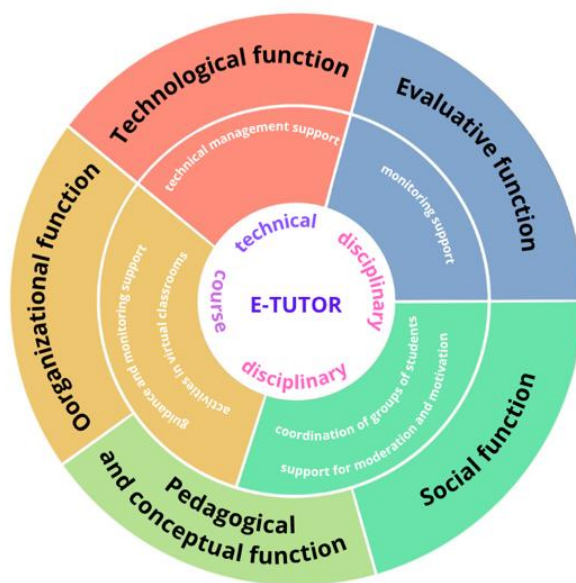


Figure 2. E-tutor roles in Italian University

The semi-structured interview guide (Table 3) was developed based on this reference framework and subsequently used for the content analysis of the interview corpus. The e-tutoring experience was deliberately framed within a broader reflection on the overall online university learning experience in order to assess the nature and significance of the interactions reported by the students.

Opening phase	Greetings and introduction
Open-ended question	Would you like to freely describe your online university experience? What were the most significant elements?
Structured questions	1. What forms of e-tutoring have you experienced? 2. In your opinion, what were the main functions carried out by the e-tutors you interacted with? 3. Which interventions did you find most helpful and meaningful, and which ones less so? What methods seemed most effective to you, and why? 4. Based on your experience, how does the e-tutor's role compare to that of the professor? What are their specific roles? 5. What kind of interaction did you have with e-tutors and professors (in what form, and do you think it was important)? 6. During your fully online academic path and within the e-learning model, did you feel the need for an e-tutoring service? Did the presence and mediation of e-tutors meet an actual need of yours?

	7. Do you think e-tutors' functions could be replaced by automated study support tools? What form of tutoring do you believe is essential in an university distance learning context? 8. Did you interact with other students?
Conclusion	To conclude, are you satisfied with the experience you had? If you could go back, what would you change? What suggestions would you give to improve the online tutoring experience?

Table 3. Semi-structured interview guide

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The resulting text corpus (approximately 120 pages) was analyzed using a content analysis methodology that integrated different approaches, supported by two qualitative data analysis software tools. The analysis did not follow the principles of Grounded Theory; instead, codes were created and grouped in MAXQDA based on our reference model, with the aim of reflecting on whether the model could be confirmed or should be revised. For the open-ended initial question and the perceptions related to AI-tutoring prospects, a lemmatic analysis was performed using T-LAB, focusing on word associations.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis conducted using MAXQDA led to the identification of 55 codes, grouped into several major categories represented in Fig. 3.

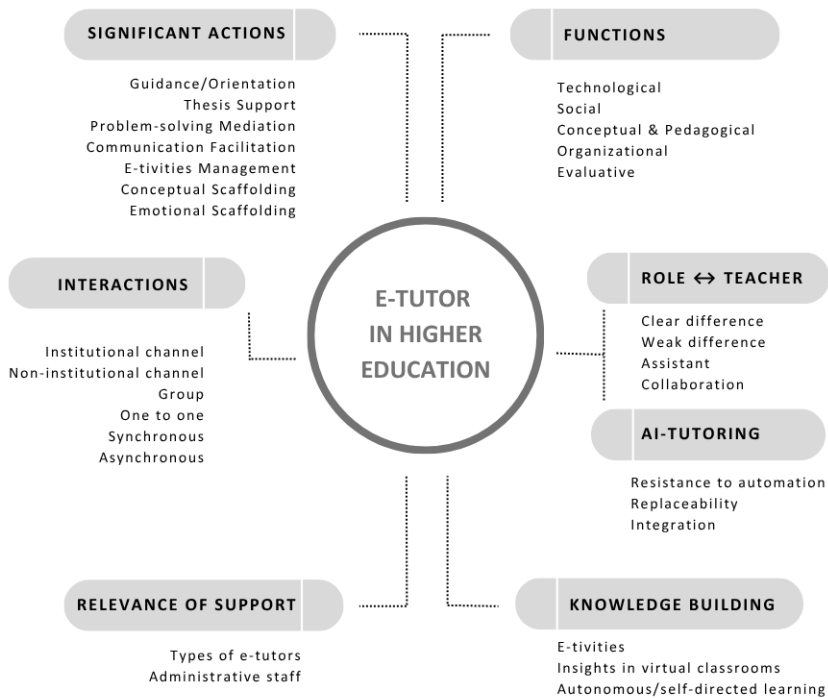


Figure 3. Code–Category map for data analysis

The five primary functions of online tutorship received varying levels of confirmation in the interviews. The following Tables (4–7) show the frequency of code occurrences (Freq.), each exemplified by a representative sentence from the corpus, as well as the number of documents in which the code appears (number of participants who reported related experiences).

When interpreting the tables, it is important to note that interviewees had experienced different models of e-tutoring organization. In some universities, for example, the role of the disciplinary e-tutor was assumed directly by faculty members, due to the small number of students (approximately 20 per class group). This explains why not all codes appear across all 24 interviews. In some cases, students also described their learning as essentially self-directed, conducted independently and without the need for e-tutor support.

Category	Code	Sentence	Freq.	N.
Functions	Technological function	"I did/did not interact with the technical e-tutor."	22	17
	Social function	"The e-tutor did/did not encourage and moderate interaction among students."	61	15
	Conceptual Pedagogical function	"The e-tutor served as a point of reference for in-depth exploration, explanations of subject content, bibliographic advice, thesis support, and anxiety management."	60	16
	Organizational function	"The e-tutor played an important role in organizing, moderating, and guiding the learning process."	44	17
	Evaluative function	"The e-tutor was/was not involved in the assessment process."	18	10

Table 4. Function-related codes

The technological function is only weakly confirmed: there is no evidence of a systematic role played by e-tutors as reference points for technical support. None of the interviewees spontaneously mentioned the presence or role of a technical e-tutor; when prompted with a specific question, most reported resolving technical issues independently, thanks to the intuitiveness and effective functionality of the e-learning platform. When technical or administrative needs arose, students typically contacted the university's administrative office, which handled and resolved such issues promptly, according to the participants' accounts. In a few cases, disciplinary or course e-tutors provided guidance on digital tools useful for learning or acted as intermediaries in resolving technical problems.

The social function is also only partially confirmed. In terms of motivational support and relational proximity, the disciplinary e-tutor is clearly recognized as playing a significant role - especially during the process of structuring and writing the thesis, where one-to-one interactions are central. In group assignments and e-tivities - where implemented - the e-tutor encourages participation and collaboration.

However, the role of the e-tutor as an animator, facilitator, or moderator of online communities appears less impactful, partly due to the widespread use of alternative, well-established modes of interaction through social media. A clear trend emerges whereby students autonomously organize themselves into informal online groups, used for exchanging information, offering emotional and motivational support, and, in some cases, engaging in collaborative study practices.

The conceptual and pedagogical function is strongly confirmed. Disciplinary e-tutors play an active role in clarifying complex topics and concepts (particularly through synchronous interactions and forum discussions). They provide additional bibliographic resources for further study or thesis preparation; offer support in managing anxiety; deliver feedback that enhances students' confidence and motivation; and ensure a human presence that students consider a valuable aspect of the learning process. However, the pedagogical function largely depends on the individual initiative of the disciplinary e-tutors. There were no reported references to activities fostering critical reflection on digital environments or on students' rights and responsibilities in relation to the use of platforms and online learning spaces more broadly.

The organizational and structural function is also consistently confirmed. Some students found the guidance offered by disciplinary or course e-tutors to be essential for structuring their study path, managing time effectively, and setting timelines and deadlines for e-tivities, exams, and thesis work. Perceptions of the personalization of support varied: in some cases, students received targeted, individualized guidance; in others, the interaction was more standardized.

The evaluative function, finally, is only partially confirmed. Feedback on e-tivities was sometimes provided individually and sometimes collectively; in many cases, students engaged in self-assessment through standardized quizzes and tests available on the platform. More consistent support was reported during the thesis writing phase.

However, the role of e-tutors in the assessment process remains rather unclear and inconsistent. Many students reported not knowing how the evaluation by e-tutors was conducted or what weight it carried in the final grading of exams. A critical issue concerning this function is the perceived lack of communication and collaboration between faculty members and e-tutors.

Regarding the perceived significance of tutoring actions (Table 5), it should be noted that in response to the question about the need for e-tutoring support, 16 participants answered negatively and 8 positively. Nevertheless, the most meaningful support actions reported were those related to conceptual and emotional scaffolding provided by disciplinary e-tutors. These included methodological support (e.g., source research, time management, thesis writing assistance, information on material organization, exam schedule, etc.) and theoretical/disciplinary support (e.g., clarification of subject-related doubts, exercises, further study), especially during the thesis phase and in managing e-

tivities. In addition, participants highlighted the human proximity, motivational support, reassurance, empathy, and monitoring efforts carried out by e-tutors to encourage regular platform use and study habits. Course e-tutors were recognized, albeit to a lesser extent, for facilitating communication with faculty and mediating the resolution of administrative and organizational issues.

Category	Code	Sentence	Freq.	N.
Significant Actions	Guidance/Orientation	"They guide you, they have an orientation function, they help broaden your perspective."	10	7
	Thesis Support	"Tutoring interventions were particularly meaningful during the final phase, while working on the thesis."	16	8
	Problem-solving Mediation	"They are a point of reference when problems arise or when you need help."	20	12
	Communication Facilitation	"They are well connected with faculty and administrative offices and help facilitate communication."	10	7
	E-tivities Management	"They manage e-tivities and moderate activities in virtual classrooms."	12	5
	Conceptual Scaffolding	"They explain, provide exercises, go deeper into topics, and offer methodological and bibliographic advice."	28	11
	Emotional Scaffolding	"They are available, reassuring, convey empathy and human closeness, and know how to motivate."	34	16

Table 5. Significant Actions - related codes

Concerning the roles of e-tutors in relation to those of instructors, students do not always clearly distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of disciplinary and course e-tutors. In some cases, the disciplinary e-tutor assumes functions typical of a teaching assistant, and their perceived effectiveness largely depends on the degree of interaction and collaboration with the course instructor.

Interaction modalities (Table 6) were generally reported as effective, both in one-to-one and group formats, and through both synchronous (virtual classroom activities, video calls) and asynchronous channels (emails, noticeboards, and forum groups), whether institutional or informal. Overall, however, the use of noticeboards and forum groups appears limited: group interactions mainly take

place through non-institutional channels, particularly WhatsApp or Telegram groups, or via student-organized video calls.

Asynchronous interaction within platform-based spaces thus seems to be underutilized and undervalued. This not only reduces the traceability of exchanges between students, instructors, and e-tutors but also raises considerations about the need to redesign asynchronous activities to foster interaction aimed at knowledge co-construction within virtual student communities.

Category	Code	Sentence	Freq.	N.
Interactions	Institutional channel	Platform chat and/or video calls, institutional e-mail, virtual classrooms	97	23
	Non-institutional channel	Whatsapp, Telegram, personal e-mail, private phone	40	19
	Group	Among students; between students and faculty; between students and e-tutors	94	20
	One to one	With faculty members, e-tutors, or administrative offices	53	21
	Synchronous	Calls and/or video calls, virtual classrooms	69	22
	Asynchronous	Forum groups, platform noticeboards, e-mail, social media messaging	99	24

Table 6. Interaction Modalities - related codes

Student perceptions regarding the potential integration or replacement of e-tutors by artificial agents (Table 7) are mixed and strongly influenced by their previous experience with emerging interactive tools, particularly conversational chatbots. It should be noted that none of the participants had, at the time of the interviews, encountered ITS systems enhanced by AI implemented by their home universities for study support. As such, the responses reflect students' imaginaries and expectations concerning a possible evolution of e-tutoring in the era of artificial intelligence.

Overall, a strong scepticism emerged toward the effectiveness of full automation - an idea that the vast majority of interviewees found concerning. The underlying concerns relate to both social aspects (e.g., the risk of excessive student isolation) and human factors (e.g., empathy, personalized motivational support, and emotional warmth are considered irreplaceable by machines). Notably, students also expressed critical reflections on the quality of teaching: the uniquely human

ability to support learning by contextualizing knowledge construction within a meaningful framework is not currently perceived as replicable by AI systems.

However, many participants acknowledged the potential usefulness and effectiveness of AI tools trained for specific academic content. Some viewed automation positively when limited to specific, repetitive tasks - e.g., using AI to provide basic information or technical clarifications related to e-tivities or platform use. Technological and organizational functions were identified as potentially automatable, especially in relation to frequently asked questions. Chatbots, for instance, could provide immediate feedback on both content-related issues and administrative/logistical matters.

Nonetheless, relational and pedagogical support was widely seen as the exclusive domain of qualified human professionals - whether faculty members or e-tutors - capable of addressing complex and highly personalized needs.

Category	Code	Sentence	Freq.	N.
AI-Tutoring	Resistance to automation	"I prefer having another person in front of me, someone I can interact with, ask questions, and engage in dialogue."	25	14
	Replaceability	"I don't think the role of the e-tutor is a primary one, and in my opinion, it can be replaced by AI agents."	5	3
	Integration	"While human mediation should not be eliminated, integrating AI into e-tutoring processes can provide valuable support."	28	14

Table 7. AI-Tutoring - related codes

Conclusions

Overall, student satisfaction with the online university learning experience is very high. Particularly appreciated are the flexibility it offers, the ability to self-manage thanks to asynchronous delivery, the quality and efficiency of Learning Management Systems (LMS), the diversity of learning objects, the depth of content - especially for its practical applications in the professional world - the opportunity for interaction and on-demand personalization, and the promptness and availability of both the teaching staff and administrative personnel.

The evolution of learning environments and the optimization of LMS platforms (e.g., Moodle at UIL, the University of Turin, and the University of Palermo; proprietary platforms at Mercatorum University and Pegaso University), together with the now widespread use of online interaction and learning methods, have significantly reduced students' perceived need for specific technical support. In many cases, university-provided guidelines or welcome handbooks, sometimes accompanied by orientation webinars at the beginning of the program, are considered sufficient. In this scenario, it is legitimate to question whether the traditional role of the technical e-tutor - whose function appears to be increasingly marginal - is still necessary today.

Moreover, the social and evaluative functions of the e-tutor are only partially confirmed. With regard to social function, it is essential to consider the broader evolution of digital interaction in contemporary society and the transition toward *onlife* communities (Floridi, 2015) and new relational modes in the age of social media and AI (Riva, 2025). Students often prefer forms of interaction that are not mediated by institutional platforms and tend to self-organize into informal social groups. The now widespread familiarity with both synchronous and asynchronous digital communication, combined with the evolution of user-friendly and mobile-responsive e-learning platforms, suggests possible changes to the social function of the e-tutor.

These technological and social transformations also reflect a shift in educational models, increasingly oriented toward self-directed and self-managed learning. Only one student, in response to the initial open-ended question about the general online study experience, spontaneously identified e-tutoring as a meaningful aspect of their academic journey. However, during the interviews, participants strongly reaffirmed the pedagogical-conceptual and organizational-structural functions of e-tutors. The presence of well-trained support figures - when coordinated effectively with instructors - was seen as enhancing both the academic and human experience for most interviewees, albeit for different reasons.

The most relevant actions included not only conceptual scaffolding but also emotional scaffolding, both of which were considered difficult to replace with AI-enhanced automated agents. Participants also emphasized the important role of e-tutors in mediating between students, faculty, and the institution. Especially in fully online learning paths, where the social dimension may be weakened and the risks of isolated self-learning increase, human presence remains essential for facilitating

knowledge construction, guiding students beyond rote learning through interpretive frameworks, and supporting the fundamental skill of learning to learn. The management of e-tivities - where disciplinary e-tutors have traditionally played a key role - presents several critical points worth reflecting upon. These activities are not always mandatory, and there is a lack of clear and consistent criteria for their evaluation. As a result, the evaluative function of e-tutors often lacks impact and may lead to misunderstandings.

Targeted instructional design interventions for planning e-tivities across different courses could help reduce student confusion and make group activity moderation more strategic and effective. The issue of managing student group interactions is especially relevant from a constructivist perspective and as a means of balancing otherwise fully self-directed learning.

Likewise, the insights gathered on the management of synchronous spaces - currently required by national regulations to account for 20% of instructional time—offer further points for discussion. These sessions are sometimes used to clarify student doubts, provide additional exercises, or manage e-tivities. Students often recognize these moments as meaningful opportunities for learning, both in terms of relational engagement and for discussing content and methodologies. However, such sessions also present challenges for working students or those who, for other reasons, cannot attend virtual classes at fixed times. From an internationalization perspective, time zone differences could further complicate synchronous participation.

Despite its limitations in terms of sample size and participant type (only students were involved), the present study offers important directions for further research. Future studies should ideally include faculty and e-tutors, involve additional universities, and integrate quantitative analysis.

Is it not time to clearly define professional roles - adequately trained for current and future challenges - that can support faculty in both digital and traditional universities, ensuring meaningful learning and collaborative knowledge-building for all students? Ongoing technological and social transformations suggest the need for more strategic forms of e-tutoring, integrated with structured mentoring and peer-mentoring models - some of which have already been piloted (Tinoco et al., 2020; Di Vita, 2021; Bussu & Contini, 2023). These developments call for structured, up-to-date, and nationally and internationally certified training pathways (e.g., Open Badges) for new professional roles to support the Universities of the future.

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