

Student Evaluation as a Tool for Improving Tutor Performance in Open and Distance Higher Education: A Conceptual Review with Reference to the Hellenic Open University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate, through a literature review, the characteristics of student evaluation of tutors that make it an effective tool for enhancing their role within the context of open and distance higher education in Greece. In today's globalized environment -shaped by the increasing demands of everyday life and the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic- distance education has emerged as a necessary educational mode, prompting a reassessment of existing pedagogical practices. Within this framework, student evaluation of teaching staff is recognized not only as a mechanism for quality assurance but also as a formative feedback tool that can actively support professional development. This study critically analyzes the current evaluation system at the Hellenic Open University, identifying both its strengths and its weaknesses, such as the absence of interim evaluations and structured reflective mechanisms. A functional definition of tutor improvement in open and distance education is proposed as a dynamic and continuous process of professional development, incorporating empathy, technological competence, pedagogical adaptability, and the constructive use of student feedback. The article concludes with a recommendation for institutionalizing participatory and reflective evaluation mechanisms as a critical condition for enhancing educational quality in open and distance higher education.

Keywords: Improvement Evaluation, Tutor improvement, Evaluation in Open and Distance Learning, Evaluation at the Hellenic Open University, Tutors' Evaluation

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1 Introduction

The evaluation of the educational process by students has been a subject of research and discussion in the international literature (Spooren et al., 2013). Although it was initially considered a tool for controlling teaching quality, its significance as a mechanism for professional development and improvement of teaching practice has gradually been recognized (Richardson, 2005; Ioakeimidou, 2018). In Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments, the formative character of evaluation aligns closely with the philosophy of such institutions (Lionarakis & Spanaka, 2010). Moreover, it becomes a necessity due to the methodology employed, since the participants are physically distant. This is a fact that often compels tutors to rely on multiple tools to understand students' needs. Therefore, the evaluation of tutors by students could serve as a supportive mechanism in enhancing their role, particularly in addressing student needs (Kounatidou et al., 2019).

This study adopts a functional definition of tutor improvement in ODL and employs a theoretical framework that perceives evaluation not merely as an assessment of student satisfaction but primarily as a continuous, formative, and reflective tool that is organically integrated into feedback and learning cycles (Kolb, 1984). Within this framework, the main characteristics of the current evaluation system of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) -the only higher education institution in Greece whose philosophy and methodology fully align with the principles of open and distance education (ODE).

- Are interpreted to explore their contribution to improving the role of tutors and to identify emerging challenges?

Building on this analysis, the present study contributes to the literature by proposing an operational framework that links student evaluation of tutors with structured processes of reflection, feedback, and professional learning. More specifically, it develops an implementation-oriented matrix that translates theoretical principles of formative evaluation and experiential learning into concrete institutional practices, addressing a persistent gap in the literature concerning the systematic connection between evaluation results and verified professional improvement.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a literature review methodology, aiming to synthesize and critically evaluate existing scholarly work regarding the evaluation of tutors by students in the context of open and distance higher education. The choice of this approach is grounded in the view that a comprehensive understanding of evaluation systems, their theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and implications for professional development can be achieved through the systematic analysis of published research, institutional frameworks, and empirical findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The literature review was guided by the following research aims:

- To investigate the conceptual evolution of tutor evaluation in higher education, with emphasis on its transition from a summative quality assurance mechanism to a formative tool for professional growth.
- To identify and analyze the pedagogical and institutional characteristics that enable student evaluations to contribute meaningfully to tutor improvement, particularly in the context of ODL.
- To assess the strengths and limitations of the current evaluation system at the HOU, using international practices as a comparative framework.
- To explore theoretical models -such as Kolb's experiential learning cycle- that frame evaluation as an integrated and developmental process for educators.

2.1 Literature Search Strategy and Sources

To enhance methodological transparency and rigor, the literature review followed a structured but non-restrictive search strategy, appropriate to the interdisciplinary field of e-learning and ODE. Searches were conducted in major international academic databases commonly used in educational research, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These searches were complemented by targeted retrieval of institutional and policy documents from organizations relevant to higher education quality assurance and distance education (e.g., ENQA and national quality assurance agencies).

The search employed combinations of keywords and phrases aligned with the study's focus, including *student evaluation of teaching*, *tutor evaluation*, *formative evaluation*, *teaching improvement*, *open and distance learning*, *e-learning*, and *higher education quality assurance*. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine and combine search terms.

The literature search primarily targeted publications from 2000 to 2024, corresponding to the period during which e-learning and ODE became systematically embedded in higher education. However, earlier seminal and foundational works in the fields of evaluation theory, distance education, and experiential learning (e.g., Piéron, Cronbach, Scriven, Moore, Kolb) were deliberately included, as they constitute the theoretical foundations upon which contemporary evaluation and improvement-oriented models are built. To further enhance transparency, the review process followed the general principles of structured literature reviews as recommended in PRISMA-style reporting, adapted to the scope of an interpretive educational review. The stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion were documented, and the number of sources at each stage was recorded.

2.2 Inclusion, Exclusion, and Screening Criteria

The literature review included sources from peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, conference proceedings, institutional reports, and official policy documents. Inclusion criteria comprised:

- Direct relevance to formative evaluation, tutor performance, and student feedback in ODL contexts;
- Empirical studies or theoretical analyses addressing the implementation and outcomes of evaluation mechanisms in higher education;
- Sources offering comparative insights between Greek and international practices, particularly those involving structured evaluation frameworks.

Exclusion criteria included studies focusing exclusively on primary or secondary education, publications lacking a clear evaluative or pedagogical framework, and non-scholarly sources without theoretical or empirical grounding.

The initial search yielded approximately 138 records across all databases and sources. After the removal of duplicates and clearly irrelevant titles, 96 records remained for title and abstract screening, of which 52 were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The full texts of the remaining 44 publications were then examined for eligibility and included in the final analysis, as they met the conceptual and methodological requirements of the study. This iterative screening process resulted in a focused and conceptually coherent corpus of literature that provided both empirical evidence and theoretical grounding for the analysis.

2.3 Analytical Approach

The selected literature was categorized into four main thematic areas:

1. Historical and theoretical evolution of evaluation in higher education.
2. Formative evaluation models and their application in distance learning.
3. Institutional case studies on tutor evaluation systems, including HOU and international counterparts such as OU/UK and the University of St Andrews.
4. Reflective and experiential learning theories, with emphasis on integrating student feedback into professional development cycles.

The analysis combined descriptive synthesis with critical and comparative interpretation to highlight strengths, limitations, and opportunities for enhancement. In alignment with the study's epistemological orientation, improvement is not treated as a static outcome but as a

dynamic, ongoing process of professional learning shaped by context, feedback, and reflective practice. Accordingly, this literature review seeks not merely to report existing findings but to interpret them within the broader aim of transforming evaluation into a catalyst for change in ODL environments.

2.4 Quality Appraisal of Sources

Given the diversity of research designs in higher education and distance learning research, a brief qualitative appraisal of sources was conducted to ensure the robustness and relevance of the evidence base.

The appraisal focused on the following criteria:

- clarity of research purpose and theoretical framework,
- transparency of methodology and data sources,
- relevance to tutor evaluation and improvement processes,
- contribution to understanding the formative use of student feedback.

Rather than applying a formal scoring system, sources were therefore appraised holistically in relation to methodological transparency and conceptual relevance, as this was considered appropriate for an interpretive and theory-informed review design. Overall, most empirical studies demonstrated adequate methodological clarity, although relatively few examined the verified impact of evaluation on actual teaching improvement over time. This gap in the literature is particularly significant in open and distance education and directly informs the conceptual orientation of the present study, which approaches improvement as a process of professional learning manifested in practice.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Towards a Functional Definition of Improvement

Each of us holds a different perception and opinion regarding the meaning of “improvement” in education. Indeed, the concept of improvement can be defined in various ways depending on who is defining it, when, in what context, for what purpose, and with what intended outcome. According to Ioakeimidou (2018), differing perceptions of quality -and consequently of improvement (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], 2015)- are inevitable yet desirable within a process of continuous transformation in an educational institution aiming to enhance its quality. Just as in a quality assurance process in education, in a process of improvement assurance, the objectives and the procedures through which they are pursued and evaluated are directly linked to the social, economic, political, and cultural context within which they are defined, assessed, and implemented (Ioakeimidou, 2018).

The improvement of the tutor’s role in university-level ODL is not a unidimensional concept (ENQA, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Newton, 2007). Rather, it is a multidimensional construct subject to ongoing semantic reframing (Ioakeimidou, 2018). The improvement of the tutor’s role in ODL can be defined, among other things, as a dynamic and continuous learning process (Kolb, 1984) grounded in the philosophy of open education and the methodology of distance education—core elements shaping the tutor’s role in ODL (Kounatidou & Lionarakis, 2024). This implies that the enhancement of the tutor’s role can be achieved through a learning process that emphasizes not only what and how someone learns but also what they can do with the knowledge they acquire (Lionarakis, 2024).

For the concept of improvement to acquire practical value and guide educational policy, it must be defined in terms of specific, assessable, and observable characteristics. Within the framework of this study, improvement is not treated as an abstract or general notion but rather as a combination of five core domains of professional development, which confirm the multidimensional role of the tutor and can be highlighted through student evaluation (Papadimitriou & Lionarakis, 2010):

1. **Pedagogical adaptability:** Refers to tutors' ability to adjust their teaching practices according to student needs. In an ODL context, this means considering students' diverse educational and social backgrounds, assisting in the achievement of autonomous learning. Improvement in this area is reflected in the ability to differentiate explanations/examples, use alternative forms of support (e.g., videos, brief guidelines, supplementary materials), and accept and incorporate student suggestions during instruction, thereby enhancing learning opportunities (Rogers, 1983).
2. **Teaching effectiveness:** Refers to tutors' capacity to foster autonomous learning among students. Tutors serve as guides, cultivating critical thinking, autonomy, and information literacy skills. Since ODL focuses less on knowledge transmission and more on developing these competencies, tutors must continuously explore new strategies to cultivate them, considering the evolving profiles of their students (Moore, 1972).
3. **Utilization of student feedback:** Refers to tutors' ability to use student feedback formatively to enhance interaction, support, and teaching effectiveness (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). This involves recognizing recurring patterns in evaluations, integrating student observations into teaching practices, and documenting changes in subsequent interactions.
4. **Continuous professional development and technological proficiency:** Refers to tutors' engagement in training programs, workshops, and communities of practice on interactive teaching techniques in ODL, managing modern digital tools and learning platforms, and enhancing students' emotional and social support. The philosophy of open education promotes autonomy and lifelong learning, requiring tutors to stay updated on contemporary pedagogical approaches and be trained in their application (Salmon, 2005).
5. **Communication availability and social presence:** Refers to tutors' ability to foster a supportive learning environment that encourages student participation (Garrison et al., 2000). Improvement here is measured by the speed and quality of responses to inquiries, presence and active participation in group sessions, and the sense of support and accessibility reported by students.

From this perspective, and for the purposes of this study, the improvement of the tutor's role in ODL is defined as:

“A continuous learning process that enhances tutors' professional development and is reflected in measurable changes in the domains of pedagogical adaptability, teaching effectiveness, communication presence, utilization of feedback, and technological proficiency, as perceived and recorded by students themselves.”

3.2 Origins of Evaluation and the Transition to Formative Evaluation in Education

The concept of evaluating the teaching process -at least in its formal and systematic form- emerged in the 1920s when Henri Piéron, a French psychologist, initiated efforts to assess teaching without including feedback from students or learners (Spooren et al., 2013). In the

decades that followed, various approaches were developed, often focusing on the summative assessment of instructors' performance at the end of an academic period.

A significant shift occurred in the 1960s with the work of Cronbach and Scriven, who introduced the distinction between formative and summative evaluation (Scriven, 1967; Cronbach, 1963). Formative evaluation was conceptualized not as a mechanism for final judgment but as a tool for continuous improvement, providing feedback during the teaching process to enhance learning outcomes. This pedagogical perspective found strong advocates in later years (Bloom et al., 1971). They integrated formative assessment into the mastery learning theory, emphasizing feedback loops that allowed for immediate instructional adjustments (Bloom et al., 1971).

In higher education, especially in open and distance learning contexts, formative evaluation takes on an even greater significance. The physical separation between tutor and student necessitates mechanisms that enable the ongoing adaptation of teaching practices. Internationally, various systems have been developed for this purpose. For example, the OU/UK employs the Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) survey, which combines quantitative indicators with qualitative feedback to improve course delivery (Richardson, 2005). Similarly, the University of St Andrews uses the Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs), integrating both statistical results and thematic analysis of open comments to inform teaching improvements (Ginns et al., 2007).

In Greece, the institutionalization of evaluation in higher education began with the establishment of the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA) in 2005, later succeeded by the Hellenic Authority for Higher Education (HAHE) in 2020. Within this framework, the Hellenic Open University has implemented its own evaluation system, aligning with the broader European quality assurance principles set by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2015).

To operationalize the conceptual framework developed in this study, a structured evaluation and improvement matrix is proposed. The matrix translates the theoretical principles discussed above into concrete institutional actions, linking evaluation themes with feedback mechanisms, support activities, and expected improvement outcomes. The following sections analyze the key dimensions that inform the development of this matrix, which is presented in consolidated form in Section 3.6.

3.3 The Evaluation System at the Hellenic Open University: Strengths and Challenges of the System

Since 1997, the Hellenic Open University (HOU) has established the Internal Evaluation Unit (IEU) as an independent entity within the university by decision of the Senate (Makrakis, 1998). One of its main functions is the evaluation of the educational process at HOU, and more specifically, the work of tutors (HOU, n.d.). The primary aim of this process is to enhance the quality of teaching and the overall educational experience. The existing evaluation system is designed to ensure the reliability, transparency, and usefulness of results for decision-making and the improvement of practices. Despite its positive features, the system faces challenges in functioning more effectively as a mechanism for enhancing the tutor's role. Below is an interpretative approach to its main characteristics.

One of its key characteristics is the guarantee of student anonymity when completing the questionnaires, which constitutes one of the most positive features of the evaluation process. The ability to express oneself freely and without fear strengthens the authenticity of responses and encourages participation (Chen & Hoshower, 2003). However, the absence of structured mechanisms to support instructors in interpreting and reflectively using evaluation results

limits the transformation of evaluation from a static indicator into a tool for professional learning (Spooren et al., 2013). International literature emphasizes that anonymity is most effective when accompanied by mechanisms of pedagogical support (Marsh, 2007; Seldin, 1999).

Another key feature of tutor evaluation at HOU is the maintenance of a systematic archive of evaluations by academic year, allowing for longitudinal analysis and the identification of improvement or deterioration trends. This serves as an important tool for monitoring educational quality. However, the emphasis on quantitative indicators and closed-ended questions, without corresponding qualitative interpretation, may lead to superficial diagnoses (Beran & Rokosh, 2009). Statistical comparisons are useful primarily when combined with opportunities for reflective interpretation and advisory support (Berk, 2013; Richardson, 2005).

At HOU, evaluation is conducted mainly at the end of the academic period, allowing for comparative assessment between academic cycles. This characteristic helps describe the broader picture of the educational process by identifying student needs in an aggregated way and supporting the extraction of generalized conclusions. However, the exclusive use of final (summative) evaluation does not allow instructors to receive feedback in time to adjust their practices within the same semester. The absence of formative evaluation therefore limits the function of evaluation as a tool for ongoing pedagogical improvement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cohen, 1981).

The evaluation system at HOU is also characterized by a degree of transparency, as results are made available to instructors and coordinators, thereby contributing to accountability and educational responsibility. However, there is no systematic feedback mechanism for students on how their comments are utilized, nor an institutionalized framework for supporting instructors in interpreting and integrating results into their professional practice (Seldin, 1999; Berk, 2005). Although some efforts are made to make evaluation results available to students, they are not yet presented in a sufficiently accessible or pedagogically meaningful way. Strengthening the system through formative, reflective, and feedback-oriented mechanisms could support the transition from a measurement-oriented process to one that actively promotes professional learning and continuous improvement (Kounatidou & Lionarakis, 2024).

3.4 Integrating Evaluation into the Kolb Cycle

The evaluation of the educational process by students is internationally one of the most widespread feedback and quality mechanisms in higher education institutions (Richardson, 2005). However, the mere recording of student opinions is not sufficient for improving the role of tutors. The effectiveness of evaluation depends, among other factors, on the way it is embedded within a clear theoretical framework, ensuring that the results are interpretable, reliable, and genuinely useful for enhancing the educational process. In the absence of such a theoretical foundation, evaluation risks resulting in fragmented or superficial interventions (Guskey, 2002; Schön, 1983).

The international literature converges on the view that the evaluation of teaching staff has truly transformative potential only when it is incorporated into cycles of active learning and reflection, centered on the educator (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Marsh, 2007; Berk, 2013). Within this context, the integration of the tutor evaluation process into Kolb's experiential learning theory provides powerful interpretative tools for upgrading evaluation practices at the HOU.

At HOU, the evaluation of tutors can be seen not merely as an administrative or accountability procedure but as an effective tool for learning and professional development when it is embedded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model. This model represents a cyclical learning process consisting of four distinct stages: concrete experience, reflective observation,

abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of open and distance learning, the characteristics of HOU enable the implementation of this model in a functional and pedagogically meaningful way.

The first stage of Kolb's learning cycle, concrete experience, corresponds to the daily interaction students have with tutors, both in synchronous Contact Group Meetings and in asynchronous communication (email, forum, Moodle platform). These experiences include the clarity of assignment instructions, the quality and timeliness of responses to questions, the tutor's availability during periods of high workload, and the support provided to students with learning or technical difficulties (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Kolb, 1984). Such experiences constitute the primary material upon which every evaluation is based.

The second stage, reflective observation, involves students reflecting on their experiences and translating them into evaluative judgments by completing the electronic questionnaires of HOU's Electronic Evaluation System. This process enables students to critically record their learning experience. Additionally, the possibility of providing qualitative comments allows for a deeper processing of the learning experience from the student's perspective, thus reinforcing the reflective function (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). The data generated here represent a form of metacognition, describing not only what happened but also how the student experienced it and what they believe should change.

The third stage, abstract conceptualization, takes place when the evaluation data are systematically processed by the University's Quality Assurance Unit. The use of historical data, year-to-year or tutor-to-tutor comparisons, and thematic pattern analysis are processes of theoretical generalization that allow for the formation of intervention strategies aimed at improving teaching (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Richardson, 2005). At this stage, tutors are expected to formulate theoretical conclusions about their role based on these findings.

The final stage -often absent or only partially implemented at HOU to date-concerns the active experimentation with the conclusions in practice. At HOU, this might include actions such as adapting communication with students, improving the way course materials are managed, or strengthening tutors' supportive presence in digital classrooms. More specifically, this could involve revising feedback methods (e.g., using annotated PDFs instead of general comments), introducing optional short instructional videos, adding supplementary digital support tools (e.g., quizzes or discussion forums), and adjusting tone and style of communication to reduce the perceived distance between tutor and student. Tutors who choose to implement such changes and re-evaluate their impact in the next evaluation cycle fully participate in Kolb's learning cycle. In this way, evaluation becomes directly linked to the tutor's continuous professional development, contributing to the creation of a culture of ongoing improvement (Berk, 2013; Seldin, 1999).

The methodology and philosophy of HOU are particularly conducive to applying Kolb's cycle for several reasons. The majority of the university's students are adults with a well-developed capacity for reflection. Tutors operate with a high degree of autonomy, as their students' educational profiles vary significantly, giving them the opportunity to design and apply personal improvement strategies. Finally, the technological nature of distance education allows for the structured collection of data and flexibility in its use (Kounatidou & Lionarakis, 2024).

Nevertheless, the absence of institutionalized mechanisms to support tutors in interpreting and integrating evaluation results limits the completion of the experiential learning cycle. For evaluation to function as a genuine professional learning mechanism, the stage of active experimentation must be institutionally reinforced. The practical implications of this

requirement and the institutional conditions that support it are examined in the following sections (Kounatidou & Lionarakis, 2024).

3.5 Validity and Bias Issues in Student Evaluation of Tutors

Although student evaluation of teaching staff is widely used in higher education and particularly in open and distance learning contexts, the international literature has consistently highlighted important validity and bias-related limitations associated with student ratings. These limitations do not invalidate student feedback per se, but they do necessitate cautious interpretation and complementary evaluative mechanisms (Marsh, 2007; Spooren et al., 2013).

One well-documented concern relates to disciplinary and contextual norms, as student expectations and evaluation criteria may differ across fields of study and course formats. In distance and online learning environments, tutors are often evaluated not primarily on content delivery, but on dimensions such as availability, clarity of guidance, responsiveness, and emotional support-factors that may not be directly comparable across disciplines (Spooren et al., 2013).

Another recurring issue concerns the relationship between grading practices and student ratings, commonly referred to as grade leniency bias. Empirical studies have shown that higher student satisfaction scores may be associated with perceived grading generosity rather than instructional effectiveness, raising concerns about the use of student evaluations for summative or comparative purposes (Boring et al., 2016; Marsh, 2007).

Moreover, a substantial body of research has identified systematic biases related to gender and race, indicating that female instructors and instructors from minority backgrounds may receive lower ratings despite equivalent or higher teaching effectiveness. These biases appear to persist in online and blended learning environments, where interaction patterns and communication styles may further influence student perceptions (Boring, 2017; Heffernan, 2022).

Within the context of ODE, these validity concerns are particularly salient, as student evaluations primarily reflect learners' perceptions of tutors' supportive and facilitative roles, rather than direct measures of teaching quality or learning outcomes. For this reason, student evaluation should be conceptualized as one critical but partial source of evidence, especially when the primary goal is formative improvement rather than accountability or ranking (Kounatidou et al., 2019).

To enhance the validity and developmental value of tutor evaluation, the literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of triangulation, combining student feedback with additional sources of evidence (Berk, 2005; Seldin, 1999; Spooren et al., 2013). These may include peer review of teaching, teaching portfolios documenting reflective practice and professional development, and learning analytics derived from learning management systems (e.g., participation patterns, feedback timeliness, interaction frequency). When integrated within a formative framework, triangulation allows student evaluations to inform professional learning while reducing the risk of bias-driven interpretations (Guskey, 2002; Seldin, 1999).

3.6 From Evaluation to Improvement: An Implementation Roadmap for the Hellenic Open University

For student evaluation of tutors to function as a genuine improvement-oriented mechanism, it must be embedded within a structured and operational framework that supports reflection, dialogue, and pedagogical action (Kounatidou & Lionarakis, 2024). Building on the dimensions analyzed in the previous sections, this section proposes a feasible implementation

roadmap for the HOU and presents an operational matrix that synthesizes these dimensions into a structured framework for improvement-oriented evaluation.

A first critical element concerns the timing and frequency of evaluation. In addition to the existing end-of-cycle evaluation, the introduction of interim formative surveys during the academic period could enable tutors to receive timely feedback and adjust their practices while the learning process is still ongoing. International research indicates that mid-course evaluations enhance teaching effectiveness when feedback is actionable and supported institutionally (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

For such formative mechanisms to function effectively, it is important to define measurable indicators that allow institutions and tutors to monitor the use and impact of evaluation feedback. Indicative indicators may include turnaround time between the completion of a mid-course survey and the communication of summarized results to tutors, student response rates in interim surveys, the proportion of tutors who report implementing at least one pedagogical adjustment following formative feedback, and the frequency with which tutors communicate to students how feedback has informed changes in teaching practices. Such indicators do not aim to evaluate tutors in a summative sense but to monitor whether evaluation processes are actively used as instruments for professional learning and pedagogical adaptation.

Second, evaluation results require institutional support structures to be interpreted and used constructively. Rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators, tutors should be supported through reflection workshops, peer discussion groups, and pedagogical coaching, where evaluation data are examined in relation to teaching goals and student needs (Berk, 2013; Seldin, 1999). Such structures help transform evaluation from an accountability mechanism into a learning process.

Third, the development of digital dashboards could enhance the usability of evaluation data. Dashboards presenting longitudinal trends, comparative indicators, and anonymized qualitative themes would allow tutors to monitor their professional development over time without fostering competitive or punitive comparisons (Marsh, 2007; Guskey, 2002). When combined with qualitative feedback, learning analytics can support evidence-informed pedagogical decisions in distance education environments (Siemens & Long, 2011).

Finally, the effectiveness of the evaluation system depends on the existence of feedback loops. Tutors should be encouraged to communicate to students how evaluation feedback has informed changes in teaching practices, thereby reinforcing student engagement and trust in the evaluation process. Research consistently shows that students perceive evaluation as more meaningful when they can observe its impact (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Richardson, 2005).

The implementation of enhanced evaluation and feedback mechanisms must also consider data protection and ethical considerations. Student evaluations constitute personal educational data, and their collection and use should comply with institutional regulations and applicable data protection frameworks, ensuring anonymity, restricted access, and the presentation of results in aggregated form. In formative evaluation contexts, particular attention should be given to ensuring that evaluation results are used for developmental rather than punitive purposes, and that both tutors and students are clearly informed about the purpose and use of evaluation data (Guskey, 2002; Seldin, 1999).

To illustrate the practical application of this roadmap, a small-scale pilot scenario may be considered in the context of a distance learning course at HOU. Mid-course formative feedback could be collected during the middle of the semester through a short online questionnaire focusing on communication clarity, feedback timeliness, and perceived tutor support. Results could be summarized and communicated to tutors within a short and predefined time frame,

allowing them to implement targeted adjustments, such as clarifying assignment instructions, modifying response practices, or introducing additional digital support materials. At the end of the course, tutors could briefly document which adjustments were implemented, thereby closing the feedback loop and providing evidence of reflective practice. Even a limited pilot of this type could provide useful insights into the feasibility and pedagogical value of formative evaluation practices in the HOU context (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Guskey, 2002).

Together, these elements form a realistic and institutionally feasible roadmap through which tutor evaluation at HOU can evolve into a sustainable mechanism for continuous professional improvement, fully aligned with the experiential learning cycle described earlier.

Table. Operationalization matrix of tutor improvement domains at the Hellenic Open University

Domain of tutor improvement	Key indicators (student-based)	Data source	Use for improvement
Pedagogical adaptability	Clarity of explanations; responsiveness to learning needs; flexibility in support	Student questionnaires; open comments	Adjustment of teaching strategies; targeted pedagogical support
Teaching effectiveness	Support for autonomous learning; clarity of guidance; perceived learning facilitation	Student questionnaires	Reflection on teaching role; redesign of support practices
Communication & social presence	Timeliness of responses; availability; perceived approachability	LMS logs; student feedback	Enhancement of interaction patterns; communication guidelines
Use of student feedback	Acknowledgement of feedback; visible changes across cycles	Longitudinal evaluation data	Feedback-informed action planning; reflective practice
Technological & professional development	Effective use of digital tools; support in online environment	LMS analytics; student feedback	Targeted training; professional development planning

Note. Summarizes the proposed operationalization of the five domains of tutor improvement, linking student-based indicators, data sources, and their formative use for professional development.

4 Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated that the evaluation of tutors by students within the framework of open and distance learning can serve as a substantial tool for professional development and qualitative enhancement of teaching, if it is embedded within a structured and reflective framework (Kounatidou et al., 2019). When conducted with anonymity, systematic data collection, and clear criteria, evaluation can strengthen tutors' pedagogical adaptability, technological competence, communicative presence, and teaching effectiveness (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Marsh, 2007). However, the absence of intermediate formative mechanisms and the predominant focus on quantitative indicators limit the dynamic and feedback-oriented nature of the process (Berk, 2013). At the same time, the study acknowledges that student evaluations are subject to well-documented validity and bias limitations and therefore should not be used as standalone indicators of teaching quality, but as part of a broader, triangulated formative evaluation framework.

The application of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model offers an interpretative basis for integrating evaluation into cycles of professional learning. Within this framework, the

triangulation of student feedback with peer review, teaching portfolios, and learning analytics strengthens both the interpretive validity and the developmental value of tutor evaluation. Through the stages of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, evaluation can be transformed from a control mechanism into a learning and improvement tool (Kolb, 2005). The full implementation of this cycle requires institutionalized support actions, such as reflection workshops, peer coaching, and targeted training sessions for each evaluation thematic area (Guskey, 2002).

Moreover, both international and Greek experience indicate that the student voice acquires real value when combined with transparency in the use of results and with feedback to students on how their comments are utilized (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Richardson, 2005). In the case of HOU, the institutional strengthening of formative evaluation, combined with professional support mechanisms for tutors, can lead to a culture of continuous improvement that will enhance both teaching quality and the overall educational experience of students.

In addition, the feasibility of implementing improvement-oriented evaluation models in the Greek higher education context is influenced by specific regulatory and institutional conditions. Although student evaluation of teaching is widely established as a quality assurance practice, it is rarely linked to formal certification of teaching improvement or to structured professional development pathways (Berk, 2013; Spooren et al., 2013). In many cases, evaluation processes emphasize the collection and reporting of quantitative data, while systematic follow-up actions—such as mentoring, reflective workshops, or documented improvement cycles—remain limited (Guskey, 2002; Seldin, 1999). Furthermore, in open and distance education institutions, where tutors often work under part-time or fixed-term arrangements, constraints related to time allocation, continuity, and participation in long-term professional development activities may affect implementation. These contextual factors do not preclude the adoption of formative and improvement-oriented approaches; rather, they indicate that such models should be introduced gradually and in ways compatible with existing institutional structures, prioritizing formative feedback, voluntary participation, and internally coordinated support mechanisms. This context also helps explain why evaluation practices have historically functioned more as formal procedures than as mechanisms for verified professional learning, a gap that the present study aims to address (Kounatidou et al., 2019).

In summary, the evaluation of tutors by students should not be regarded as a fragmented or purely formal procedure, but as part of a broader, participatory, and reflective quality assurance system. The proposed implementation roadmap and operationalization matrix provide a practical bridge between conceptual analysis and institutional action, offering HOU a feasible pathway for translating evaluation data into sustained professional improvement. The systematic utilization of results, their integration into experiential learning cycles, and institutional commitment to supporting instructors constitute critical prerequisites for moving from a measurement-oriented culture to a learning and development-oriented culture (Berk, 2005; Kounatidou et al., 2023; Seldin, 1999).

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