

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RE – ORIENTATION AS STRATEGY FOR UNIVERSITY RETENTION

By Victoria de Ortuzar & Mariela Di Meglio *

Abstract

This paper is in line with the research “*Assessment of inclusion strategies in order to reduce university dropouts and re-orientation in other educational and training places*” (Gavilán, M. 2014-2017). That research, still in progress, is intended to assess inclusion strategies aiming at reducing university dropouts that are carried out in the significant courses of the different fields of knowledge at the National University La Plata.

This study seeks to account for the problematic issue concerning the dropout of and admission to the academic system and the strategies and considerations its approach has generated. Special emphasis is placed on the analysis of the program “back to see/look again” working on the concept of reorientation as a possible strategy in relation to university retention.

Keywords: Dropout; Strategies; Reorientation.

1. Introduction

This paper is in line with the research “*Assessment of inclusion strategies in order to reduce university dropouts and re-orientation in other educational and training places*” (Gavilán, M 2014-2017). Its objective is to account for the problematic issue concerning the dropout of and admission to the academic system and the strategies and considerations its approach has generated.

That research, still in progress, intends to assess inclusion strategies aiming at reducing university dropouts that are carried out in the significant courses of the different fields of knowledge at the National University La Plata, which were analysed in a previous research project solely referred to the “*University Dropout - Inclusion Strategies*” (Gavilán, M. 2010-2013).

Both research studies have brought different UNLP academic units together and have generated some reflections, actions and suggestions so as to modify, optimize, adapt or create the most adequate conditions depending on the difficulties detected contributing to increase retention or include those who drop out of the university system in other educational and training contexts.

* Specialists in Vocational and Educational Guidance, professors of the course Vocational Guidance at the Faculty of Psychology of the National University of La Plata (UNLP). E-mail: marieladimegio@gmail.com.

2. Starting Point

Education conceived as a right and the policies developed in this sense in recent years have made it possible for a large population – people who were not able to gain access or did not even think of doing so for years – to have access to the university. However, this situation brought along, according to several sociological studies, a widespread growth of the enrolment with the subsequent diversification of students, in which inequalities in the access to education are shown: “to arrive does not mean to stay”; to do so, capabilities, skills, resources – which not everyone has acquired throughout their primary and secondary education – are required. This adds a new difficulty to degree courses, the different academic levels the university lecturer has to deal with in the first academic years.

The need to address the dropout issue is the focus of concern for universities in general and for UNLP in particular, to the extent that its Strategic Plan (2010-2014) has Teaching as First Strategy and its General Objective reads: “To meet the demand of society for higher education, promoting social equity, preserving equal opportunities and improving the quality of public offer.” Its Specific Objectives are, among others: “To encourage inclusion and permanence of students in pre-grade, grade and post-grade training, attempting to reduce the segmentation of the population and continuing with the strategies of containment and monitoring of students.”

It is worth noting that UNLP has been implementing many different strategies for several years in order to ensure equity and opportunity, among which we may find: different modes of admission, guided, distance and face-to-face; financial support scholarships for notes, transport, rent; university canteen and lodging; preparation courses on basic subjects taught by UNLP lecturers for secondary school students, free teaching training degree for the UNLP teaching staff; as well as some curricula modifications to allow for students to obtain an early contact with the specific subjects of the degree courses, among other things.

3. Detected problems concerning admission and/or permanence

On the basis of these considerations, and as a result of our research, we have borne in mind two stages of analysis: a) *the Institution* and b) *the student entrant*.

As regards the institution, we want to emphasise the importance of reflecting upon the need for the teaching training of the university teaching staff. Pedagogical training should be part of the lecturers' training, especially those who teach in the first academic years and enable, more often than not, a meeting with the young students and allow them through different pedagogical strategies to get closer to knowledge and to stay in the system.

In this respect, the research suggests that the faculties are interested in the teaching training of their teaching staff and the subsequent incentive to study for a teaching training degree course which is freely offered by the Chancellor's Office, as a

strategy aimed at providing pedagogical tools directed towards a comprehensive view of the university student and the teaching practice.

On the other hand, the student's / entrant's chance of becoming a university student is affected by manifold causes and/or variables which should be addressed by admission and permanence policies.

Continuing with our line of research we have classified the different inclusion strategies (Gavilán, M. 2015), which our university fosters for the benefit of the students who enter, into:

- *Pedagogical strategies* (introductory courses, consolidation plans, text comprehension programs, study habits, tutors, students, etc.)
- *Social strategies* (canteen for students, the student's house, nurseries for students' children, and several financial support scholarships), among them are those strategies which are implemented by the university community to include disabled students.

We should add, to this situation, personal difficulties, in which we include: difficulties in the transition from secondary to university education; failed vocational choices; difficulties in adapting to the new educational situation.

We understand inequalities can be neither denied nor underestimated, rather it is through their recognition that a project can be thought of according to each individual. Capability, effort, perseverance and determination are not enough. Each educational and/or working project involves specific skills. To acknowledge them allows to develop them and not to foster an endless supply of frustrations. Not everyone "is good at the same thing, diversity has to do with the wealth of contributions".

The imagery that argues that studying is synonymous with university does not acknowledge other options and homogenizes the education field, thus excluding a lot of people. Overestimating university options, including titanic efforts to support them, is a safe road to frustration, ignoring the true imbalance between means and ends proposed for an end.

In this perspective we consider that the population having access to higher studies at present differs from the student university traditionally received. Admission became massified not only due to social and historical changes but because the new students come from the most varied of areas, and with the most varied educational background. Also this implies another spatial numeric and pedagogical arrangement in order to approach them. This generates agreements or disagreements in the different academic units and the personal stories each young person may build.

Disagreement between what the university offers and what the student may take, the student who the university waits for (in terms of the ideal university student) and the student who actually arrives. Disagreement that we cannot ascribe to the institution or the student, but which frustrates the imageries and expectations in relation to each other. To name this, the authors Fabri - Cuevas speak of **disconnection**, as "presence of new subjectivities, whose features differ from those the school format waits for and demands" (Fabri-Cuevas, 2012).

Our previous research on university dropout suggests that many initiatives have been undertaken by different academic units in this sense, however, in spite of them, that individual who initially chose, decides to interrupt, leave, pause, or abandon his/her academic choice. From our point of view it is impossible to underestimate factors such as motivation, lack of information or distorted information, unfulfilled expectations, goals and unease within the institution.

The **early** dropout (defined as that which takes place in the first academic year) of the higher education system is one of the most relevant dropouts, according to the UNLP statistics.

In the framework of the convention with the Secretary of the Office of Academic Affairs and the Career Resource Centre, the program "back to see/look again" has been being implemented since 2012 serving freely young people in crisis with their choice either because they join spontaneously or because someone in the Faculty staff refers them to the program.

Today we meet young people demanding early vocational reorientation, i.e. in the first half of the first academic year. We might identify two types of groups:

1. Those students who enrol at university but do not start attending courses.
2. Those students who enrolled and attended the admission course subjects and started attending subjects in the first semester.

This population is characterized by young people of 18/19 years old, who have not taken part in vocational guidance processes to elaborate their academic project. In this first stage, they find themselves in a situation in which they have chosen the degree course having neither reflected nor had previous information and in which difficulties are posed when facing the specific demands of that stage. Generally, in these cases, admission at a faculty does not mean knowledge of the contents, career path, and training opportunities, or getting closer to the professional role, to the professional field, or sufficient self-awareness. That lack of knowledge and/or limited reflection on what choosing and making a decision upon a degree course means brings about instability and uncertainty which frequently starts with absenteeism and ends up with dropout and a deep feeling of frustration.

In relation to the personal situation of students with difficulties in supporting a university project we find pedagogical and subjective difficulties. Becoming a university student is an identity process which brings into play psychic mechanisms of identification, discrimination, reflection which do not always take place in the logical periods of a first academic year, maturing process being in these times delayed? Postponed?

We know that unlike not too distant times, the personality traits of the youth entering the university have varied as a result of, among other aspects, social changes they are not unfamiliar with which affect, for example, the possibility of projecting in time, acknowledging skills and their own interests, knowing activities, discriminating the world of options.

Therefore we consider that the early articulation between university and secondary education system becomes a necessary action for the young person who enters

university so that he/she does so through a reflective process involving the consideration of interests, skills, resources, requirements, demands, possibilities, etc.

Another population to be considered would be that one constituted by a second group of reoriented students who have already entered the degree course and have attended the first years; this group expresses its crisis is linked to personal situations, the development of other working or family projects. As regards the academic world, the difficulty lies in continuing with the chosen degree course, that is, to pass subjects and to keep up-to-date the subject correlation scheme. Such a population is included in the processes of vocational guidance and/or tutoring as monitoring strategies for the permanence and graduation at the university system.

4. Vocational guidance as a strategy for containment

Taking the statistics at the Career Resource Centre as a reference, almost 90% of those who come and seek for support in order to choose again did not undertake guiding processes before entering their first degree course, thus accounting for the significance of guidance as a preventive strategy.

In the face of the 'failed' choice which is experienced as "failure", "disappointment", "confusion", "discouragement", "demotivation", we think it necessary the early intervention to facilitate the articulation between the academic grade and the university. Having access to higher education implies a previous reflecting process in which the individual who chooses a road towards the university degree knows and acknowledges the characteristics of such a project, and the real possibilities of carrying it out. This includes the willingness and necessary skills to carry out the project and their own resources to be brought into play along the way.

This issue becomes a permanent question for us, either as advisors working with adolescents about to graduate and young people who have entered the higher education system without knowing how to stay, or as university professors of the sixth year of the Psychology degree course who in the framework of the research at the course Vocational Guidance are working on the issue of retention and permanence. This comprehensive view of the problem and the population who decides to study as a life project makes us wonder: what leads a young person to become a university student?

As a result of the increase of enrolment, its attrition increases proportionally as well. Thus, what seems to be a right for everyone can also be perceived as an inequality producer sustained in the different conditions for admission.

We understand that the retention programmes should aim at this population mainly, not only focusing on economic difficulties but especially on difficulties of cultural and symbolic capital as well.

Vocational guidance as a space to generate dialogue, reflection and acknowledgement of the problem constitutes then a privileged place for intervention.

5. Devices for intervention

The program “back to see/look again” reaching all academic units of UNLP and being funded by the Office of Academic Affairs intends to contribute from the essence of Orientation in its preventive look, with the necessary reflection many young people need to make facing problems related to their life projects in general and the education project in particular.

Objectives:

- To collaborate in the reflection on the difficulties encountered in the chosen degree course.
- To elaborate a diagnosis about the present level of orientation.
- To deepen and revise the self-awareness and the obstacles encountered for the fulfilment of their vocational and educational project.
- To analyze the change of degree course as a learning situation and a situation of personal and social growth.
- To give new meaning to what has been done acknowledging experiences to strengthen the assumption of the educational and working life project.

Methodology:

The Re-Orientation Vocational Occupational processes adopt a group device and comprise the development of:

- Eight weekly meetings of an hour and a half long.
- The groups will be made up of a minimum of 6 students and a maximum of 10 students, coordinated by psychologists specialised in guidance who belong to the Career Resource Centre.
- Once the group process is finished, some individual interviews may take place should these be required, monitoring the young students until the concretion of the project.

From June 2016 it is implemented for the fifth year in a row, requiring only the submission of the certificate of registered student status issued by the academic unit of origin in order to join it.

The implementation was publicized through the dialogue with representatives of each Academic Unit (Secretaries of Students Affairs, Secretaries of Academic Affairs) and through different media publications, especially through the paper EL DÍA and interviews to the Head of Career Resource Centre by Radio Universidad.

Each year, 10 groups of 8 to 10 students each one were made up and went through the Re-Orientation processes from June to December.

As a group dynamics and on the basis of many demands received through admission interviews, the relevance of the program is assessed in relation to the demand made by the students. In this sense, then, interviews were conducted which allowed, through listening to the student, to discriminate and decide on the chance to be included in a reorientation group or on the necessary referral to UNLP health system in

compliance with the Department of Mental Health, for those cases should the situation so require or whose problem goes beyond the approach of this framework.

Another possible intervention according to the demand and as a result of the admission interview is to place the student in an individual reorientation process provided his/her problem, age, or academic situation.

6. Characteristics of consulting students in 2015 as an illustration

6.1 Faculties of origin of the vocational reorientation processes and number of cases

In 2015, 81 students were included in reorientation group processes coming from the following Faculties: Applied Sciences, Legal Sciences, Medicine, Economics, Humanities and Education Sciences, Journalism and Social Communication, Fine Arts, Social Work, Psychology, Engineering, Architecture, Odontology, Natural Sciences and Museum, Agricultural and Forest Sciences, and Veterinary Sciences.

Faculties	Number of cases	Field they belong to ²⁶	Per field
Engineering	8	Engineering	8
Legal Sciences	4	Social	27
Economics	16		
Journalism and Social Communication	6		
Social Work	1		
Humanities and Education Sciences	8	Human	14
Psychology	6	Health	9
Medicine	6		
Odontology	3		
Natural Sciences	2	Natural Natural and Applied	5
Applied Sciences	1		
Veterinary Sciences	2		
Architecture	4	Art, Design and Architecture	16
Fine Arts	12		
Total	81	Of the 6 Fields	81

²⁶ According to the PROGRAM "COME TO UNLP"

6.2 Age of the consulting students

The leading age for consultation is 18 years old, representing 37.5% of the consultations included in the reorientation groups.

We understand it is in the first academic year where we can identify problems related to time management, doubts about the choice made, anxieties inherent to the new stage, difficulties in integrating into university life, little or no information when entering the degree course, fantasies about what the degree course implies and/or requires.

A second majority component of consultation is at 19 years old. 27.5% of the student consultations are recorded in this moment attributing the difficulty in terms of our records to the encounter with the degree course itself and with the academic obstacles of the degree course.

Then, 11.25 % of the students are 20 years old at the time of the consultation. 15% of the students consult at 21 years old and 10% at 22 years old, maximum age to be integrated in the group processes considering a range age of common problems and situations.

This age distribution in relation to the beginnings of the program, in 2012, when the consulting age was more varied, with older students and with a variety of problems which included, but were not limited to, the project revision, made it possible to work within the groups in a more operational and productive way, and eventually approach other situations in an interdisciplinary or an individual perspective.

90% of the consulting students have not taken any type of previous orientation process

7. MAIN RESULTS

From the assessment of the processes carried out, the students highlight their importance in terms of:

- Getting to know themselves, acknowledging their capabilities and preferences beyond the pressures for job prospects in their options, or family expectations.
- Being able to distinguish tastes, hobbies, and professions, in terms of formulating a project.
- Organizing and clarifying ideas as regards what causes their choices, redirecting priorities and possibilities within the new choice.
- Knowing, seeking, discovering, deepening occupational information, leading to adapt the decision to each personal situation.

Provided it is a free process, it is worth noting the level of commitment students assume, being **the general dropout rate of the groups of 10%** mainly responding to young people who go back to their places of origin (it is very difficult for them to stay in La Plata when they no longer attend courses) or who state they look for another kind of help, or who considered they had overcome the problem after some initial progress, among other reasons.

In general, we might say that as a result of the experience in the reorientation process, the students who make consultations decide to:

- continue/ resume the degree course they started, by reflecting through the guiding work that the problem did not lie in their lack of interest for the degree course but in the difficulties in understanding and organizing both the study and university life.
- change the degree course within UNLP – from the point of view of our conceptualization we define it as ‘internal migrations’ – changing the field after acknowledging another type of interests, the possibility of reflecting on the way the previous choice was made, thus allowing the student to reconsider his/her life project, his/her present interests and redefine them without abandoning the university project.
- consider personal processes which modify the vital reality (family, job, economic situations) and, on the basis of that reality they go through, choose a shorter degree course within the scope of previous interest, thus being able to reevaluate other shorter training opportunities within Higher Education.

NEW CHOICES MADE BY STUDENTS AFTER THE PROCESSES

8. CONCLUSIONS

From the results of the present research we may find some indicators: in all cases the group processes seek not only to choose the degree course name but mainly to increase the self-esteem of those who make consultations, through the possibility to build new possible roads according to the personal situations each student goes through. Likewise, the students who make consultations can make a choice in terms of their interests and possibilities to help them not to stay away from the training circuits, with all its implications for the subjectivity of each student and of the community they belong to.

We consider as the most important results of this guiding intervention not only the fact that young students can rethink their own discomfort, identifying the difficulties students encounter and looking for a solution –which is not necessarily the dropout– but also it is the meeting with other students with similar conflicts that makes it possible to listen to other possible solutions, to other options, generating reflection, fostering peer identification, overcoming self-absorption and frustration they suffered from when they first came to us; and finally, taking into account the statistical data listed above, we should mention the fact that the intervention makes it easier for about 70% consulting students to remain within the UNLP Academic System.