

## Chapter 12

### *Implications for policies and institutions: how institutions could benefit from*

#### *INSTALL*

José González-Monteagudo\*, Nunzia Rainone\*\*, Maura Striano\*\*, Paolo Valerio\*\*\*

*\*Department of Theory and History of Education, and Social Pedagogy, University of Seville, Spain*

*\*\*Department of Humanities, University of Naples Federico II, Italy*

*\*\*\*Department of Neurosciences, Reproductive Science and Odontostomatology, University of Naples Federico II, Italy*

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### **Introduction**

This chapter is focused on the implications of the INSTALL project for universities in terms of policies. Firstly we present some structural, cultural, and institutional traits of current universities, within a context of increasing globalization, diversity, complexity, uncertainty, and competitiveness. Then we summarize some key issues about policy and good practices centred on non-traditional and disadvantaged groups. A main goal of this paper refers to the specific implications from INSTALL to improve educational policies, learning environments and innovative interventions to promote academic and social

inclusion for underachieving students. This includes specific implications about European policies, international cooperation, innovation in education and training, social inclusion, widening participation, employability, relevance of voices and experiences of disadvantaged students, role of narratives and epistemological questioning.

### **Cultural and institutional dimensions of higher education institutions**

Although the main focus of the INSTALL project was to enhance reflexivity of underachieving and non-traditional students using narrative tools, it is apparent that it is only possible to fully understand this topic if we pay attention to economic, social, cultural and institutional factors related to students and their academic contexts (Johnston, 2011). Institutional and cultural dimensions in higher education have already a long tradition, usually developed in Sociology of knowledge, institutions, organizations, networks, and culture, as well as in social Psychology, cultural Anthropology and educational research. Here we draw on these fields, complementing from more general perspectives the contents of previous chapters, where the focus was more methodological and psychodynamic.

Like in other sectors, universities suffer the impacts of new structural factors, which transform institutions, groups, individuals and traditional habits of thinking and behaviour, legitimated over time. Among these factors it is necessary to take into account economic globalization, new systems of management, transformation of the Nation-state, new ways of political and citizen participation, new technologies, migrations, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, changing gender relations, the progressive crisis of patriarchy, and scientific and technological advances (Castells, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013). All these factors are impacting upon HE institutions as well as being affected by the work developed in universities. It is a dialectical and complex process.

Universities are being changed as a result of social transformations and also universities are influencing these processes as key institutions in charge of the creation and diffusion of knowledge and research.

Culture refers to norms, values, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, norms of conduct, and styles of language, assimilated, constructed and shared through social learning processes (Kottak, 2014). Culture in organizations is the set of shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide behaviour. New members learn the culture of their organization and their role in it during a period known as organizational socialization (Mendoza, 2004). Traditionally anthropologists had been more interested in that what unifies society and social groups, in shared traits. Thus Cultural Anthropology has insisted in commonalities among diverse cultures and groups. From a different origin and perspective, Sociology has focused more on social differences and inequalities, stressing the importance of making part of different collectives or groups -in function of social class, family background, gender, place of residence, ethnic characteristics, age and generations- to establish differences and explain social inequalities (González-Montegudo and Ballesteros-Moscosio, 2014).

Culture consists of two related yet different dimensions. On the one hand, the material dimension consists of material processes related to social activities, located in a specific time and space; it implies the use and manipulation of specific artefacts. In the case of universities, these objects are related to knowledge, teaching and research. On the other hand, we deal with the symbolic dimension. This second trait refers to social and individual processes of cognition, understanding and interpretation. The symbolic dimension of culture is related to values, norms, beliefs, religions, philosophies and ideologies (Kottak, 2014).

Prevailing social and cultural forms of socialization have a strong impact upon the socialization of academics, researchers and students. The functions and tasks of the universities, within a globalized and changing context, have been redefined in a contradictory way, under the influence of diverse and opposed political, economic, administrative, institutional and professional discourses (Ljunngren and Öst, 2008).

Information and Communication Technologies have been transforming and redefining university teaching and learning. Traditional communication face-to-face between students and lecturers has been altered while new forms of blended and online learning complement it. Teaching programmes developed via digital platforms have been growing and will grow more in the immediate future. In this context, attitudes towards lifelong learning are also changing dramatically.

Economic structural factors sometimes tend to be marginalized, emphasizing the role of institutional and cultural factors. Nevertheless it is necessary to pay more attention to economic factors, which influence academic success, completion and dropout. The family income available, the national and regional economic structure, the labour market and the possibilities of employment are important traits. The recent economic crisis seems to have had a double and paradoxical influence on university studies. On the one hand, in many cases degrees are not considered as a necessary requirement to access to employment or to progress in the labour market. In the current context of high unemployment, degrees are not a guarantee to access to the labour market and to stay in it. For example, Quinn (2004, 68) refers to the decline of traditional industries, the limitation of working opportunities and the lack of an apparent transition from the university degree to the local labour market. On the other hand, the increasing of unemployment and the decreasing of possibilities for accessing to a job by young people have raised the interest towards

university studies as a path to improve employability and a useful resource while the economic situation makes better.

The impact of social class in relation to university students (learning careers, identities, drop-out, specific difficulties, institutional habitus) remains in many occasions hidden. Social class is considered as an important dimension to analyse primary and secondary teaching. Nevertheless, in HE class tend to be ignored or marginalized as a perspective of analysis. Many academics do not perceive the social class as an important issue. It is supposed that, after having accessed the university, there is equality among students, regardless their social or family backgrounds (Crompton, 2008).

Different national contexts have some specific traits, which influence upon university settings. Some of these traits are: contemporary and recent history; features and backgrounds of the prevailing political system; shared values, including visions on effort and perseverance; use of time, including its implications in relation to yearly cycles of holidays, work, and school timetables; styles, traditions and socially legitimated ways of socialization, education and family values about children, young, and adults; self-perception of society and groups; stories, narratives, myths, which have been legitimated in different ways; traditions, feasts and celebrations; educational policy, laws and norms on education sector; social, economic and cultural profile of the local communities in which are located university institutions; groups and associations active in the social arena, such as political parties, trade unions, religious groups, and media; companies and the private economic sector, including the labor market; position of HE institutions in relation to the public/state and private sectors, including funding and tuition fees.

Institutional dimensions of universities include organizational and management issues, leadership, power, academic tasks, scientific fields, and disciplines. More specific levels of analysis refer to activities and processes developed within universities, in units of

middle and small dimension such as Departments, teaching activities, research group, committees, and so on. To fully understand universities in a systemic way means to pay attention to these interactions between different levels, from structural aspects to more interactive and small processes (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Lee, 2009). It is important the development of a sociocultural lens about students, underachievement and academic success, in order to grasp the complexity and nuances of disadvantaged groups in universities (Quinn, 2004).

The roles of universities have dramatically changed over the last few years, influenced by principles of transparency, credibility, diversity, improvement, quality, accountability, responsibility and social engagement (Taylor, 2009, 240-241). As stated by a researcher, the “transition from an elite to a mass system... has been neither smooth nor uncontested and is still also curiously incomplete” (McCaffery, 2010, 9). This author refers to several change drivers: globalization and internationalization, the knowledge society, social change, new ways of management, academic specialization, and postmodernism. In these emerging and uncertain contexts, issues about diversity, social inclusion and inequalities become crucial. Therefore universities have put more focus and interest on promoting and supporting teaching and learning processes aimed to underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (McCaffery, 2010, 10-24).

### **Policy measures to effectively support academic and social inclusion for non-traditional and underachieving students**

The social dimension of higher education has been reinforced in a series of European Council Conclusions (2006, 2010 and 2013) that highlight the responsibility of Member States to ensure equal opportunities in accessing and completing higher education. According to this series of Conclusions, measures to ensure greater access to, as well as

participation in and completion of higher education of non-traditional, disadvantaged and low performer groups include:

- a. Promote widened access by strengthening financial support schemes, such as student loans and means-tested grants
- b. Improve completion rates, by strengthening individualized support, monitoring and mentoring
- c. Provide adequate incentives for the mobility of students, particularly from disadvantages backgrounds
- d. Promote specific programs for non-traditional entrants.
- e. Facilitate the development of proactive strategies and related structures at institutional level, including outreach activities and lifelong learning opportunities, the provision of information on educational and labour market-related opportunities and outcomes, guidance on appropriate course choice, peer mentoring, and counselling and support services.
- f. Promote permeability and the development of flexible and transparent progression routes into higher education, in particular from vocational education and training and from non-formal and informal learning.
- g. Increase opportunities for flexible learning by diversifying the way in which learning content is delivered, for instance by adopting student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, by expanding part-time provision, by developing credit-based traineeships, by modularising programmes and distance learning through the use of ICT and by developing quality-assured open educational resources.

Recent research has also suggested some recommendations to increase retention and support non-traditional and disadvantaged students (Thomas, 2008 and 2012). As a result of a European funded research project, focused on the experiences of non-traditional

students, Field and Kurantowicz (2014) proposed these guidelines to foster the academic progress of at-risk students:

- The presence of suitable support prior to entry, including information and guidance, preparatory programmes, and visits to universities and induction programmes to integrate new students are highly important.
- Peer group support among students has high positive impact - peer support can benefit students, especially non-traditional students with low cultural capital and strange to university habitus.
- Programmes aimed at staff and service workers to student integration need to be in place.
- Practical support regarding financial support, counselling, child care, specialist study support, including ICT, libraries and learning resources.
- The first year of the student experience appears to be particularly important.
- At the same time, administrative systems can hinder academic success and retention, stressing formal rules and management that could exclude disadvantaged students.

Other authors (Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009; Pittaway and Moss, 2013) have embraced a curriculum-centred approach, which stresses the importance of student engagement to improve retention and success. This perspective highlights the development and use of learning and teaching strategies that promote a more active, student-centred approach to learning, which draws on students' previous experiences and interests, and helps to enhance course commitment and retention on the program.

The UK National Audit Office Report of 2007 makes recommendations to institutions as to how they might improve retention. "This involves: using management information to understand and promote retention; making a strategic contribution to retention; providing



support through personal tutoring; broadening the options for learning; providing specialist support; and extra support for students with disabilities” (Johnston, 2011, 50). Students’ support services have a central role to play in assisting students to ensure their progress in higher education but they alone are not the responsible for success and retention. Though most universities nowadays offer some type of students’ support services it is important to notice that their advice should be contextualised and be seen as easily accessible by learners. The research conducted by Morey, Robbins, O’Regan, Hall, Fleming and Mumford (2012) pointed out that all support for students must be easy for them to access in terms of physical access, ease of referral from others, ease of knowing who is available to help, transparent guidelines and boundaries in terms of promotion and marketing information.

In summary, as achievement and retention are related to a wide range of individual, social and organisational factors, there are a number of spheres in which higher education policies and institutions should pay attention at (Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey, 2002): academic practices – curricula, teaching, learning, assessment, academic support; social integration – formal and informal interaction with peers; student funding arrangements – responsibility for bearing the direct and indirect costs of higher education; personal support – to provide support in relation to individual personal circumstances. However, much remains to be done to help students in the EU, especially the most vulnerable, finish their degrees. What is being done is inconsistent and patchy and a holistic approach to retention is necessary (Quinn, 2013).

While it is clear that there is increasing policy attention towards addressing access to higher education, social inclusion, retention, non-traditional student support, with a variety of instruments being considered, many times these instruments are often still deployed in isolation, or not optimally combined in a truly systemic policy perspective.

Therefore, policies and practices developed to promote and provide the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education need to be more sensitive to the diversity of students and to the different structures of institutions (Gasman and Vultaggio, 2009). From a more specific perspective, Quinn's report (2013) on drop out in Europe concluded by saying that it is not widening participation per se that causes drop-out, as Denmark, which is recognized as being highly successful in widening participation, has the lowest rate of drop-out in the EU. Thus, the problem is rather a lack of attention to the needs of a more diverse student population and a lack of a student-centred approach in designing and delivering higher education programmes.

### **Contributions from INSTALL to higher education policies**

In this section we will be presenting some key contributions from our project that could contribute to both improve policy issues and suggest concrete ways of increasing university adaptation to non-traditional, underrepresented groups.

#### *European Union policies in the Area of Higher Education*

INSTALL has been well positioned to contribute to the implementation of the European Union 2020 Strategy as it sustained the empowerment of Europeans in inclusive societies through enhanced higher education. The project contributed to key policy issues, objectives and priorities of the European Union in a number of ways. It responded to the specific strategic priorities of the former Lifelong Learning Programme (now Erasmus+), such as promoting the acquisition of eight key competences throughout the education system at the tertiary education level (Villardón-Gallego, 2015; Yániz and Villardón-Gallego, 2015). As highlighted by the *2010 Joint Report on Education and Training*, the implementation of the key competences framework had been uneven: while advanced at

the school education level, the implementation of key competences across the EU had lagged behind in the higher education system. INSTALL responded to this specific issue, as it promoted the key competence ‘Learning to learn’ at the tertiary education level, as identified in a policy document on *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning- A European Union Reference Framework*, after the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2006. In addition to Learning to learn -the specific focus of the project-, INSTALL supported the acquisition of the key competences ‘Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship’ and ‘Cultural awareness and expression’.

#### *International cooperation*

INSTALL responded to the EU objective to support the achievement of the EU Area of Higher Education as it strengthened the linkages and working relations among higher education institutions. INSTALL was aligned with the EU objective to facilitate the development of innovative practices in education and training at the tertiary level, and their transfer, including from one participating country to others, since the project aimed at developing innovative methodologies and tools that would be implemented and replicated throughout the EU. This project showed a successful way of working together in a renewed Europe, dealing with differences and diversity in universities in relation to languages, national history, local cultures, institutional organization, leadership and management. An example of this way of working was the attention paid in the metaphoric mode of the training to the adaptation of the proposed proverbs and mottos to the most appropriated linguistic expressions in English, Italian, Romanian and Spanish, the four languages used in the training developed in this project, in order to better fit in the respective specific cultural and local context. It is apparent, from a more general viewpoint, that higher education will become more international, collaborative and

interdependent in the coming years. Our university institutions need to deep this dimension if they want to be key actors of economic development and innovative knowledge needed to offer better conditions to the citizens, in Europe and beyond. Moreover, this project has global and transversal implications, both for Europe and for other geographical areas across the world, as it shows a model of sustainable international project, to be disseminated and applied beyond the original contexts in which it was designed, developed and evaluated.

### *Innovation in education and training*

The project developed methodologies and tools to empower tertiary education institutions to more flexibly respond to non-traditional students' specific learning and pedagogical needs (Brockband and McGill, 2012). Our specific target groups will demand more attention and specific focus in the future to assure they receive high quality teaching and counselling, in such a way they develop all the potential to take advantage of the benefits of higher education. On the other hand, our focus on mentalization and reflexive skills represents an original contribution to develop a field of training and academic support under researched, at least if we consider the specific context of universities and the concrete groups of underachieving and disadvantaged learners. This project developed innovative research and training in higher education that has opened up a path to deepen in the future new approaches to support personal and academic needs of non-traditional students, promoting retention and completion, two key goals of European strategies in tertiary educational level.

### *Social inclusion*

INSTALL promoted the strategic objective of “equity, social cohesion and active

citizenship” of the Council Conclusions, “Strategic Frame for EU Cooperation in Education and Training (ET-2020), 2009. INSTALL was instrumental in ensuring that “vulnerable groups were not excluded from knowledge” (EU-2020). INSTALL was, indeed, well positioned to address the EU priority ‘Social inclusion in higher education’, as it aimed at widening the participation, and raising the performance and completion rates of underachieving and non-traditional learners.

The project related to the Lisbon Education and Training Progress Indicators and in particular to the target ‘Making learning more attractive’. The project did this by looking at issues of retention, completion and academic support in higher education for non-traditional students. A key outcome of the project was the identification of strategies and policies to support disadvantaged students throughout their university itinerary.

The key competence learning to learn, as a reflective competence or mentalization, in the INSTALL project, was the result of a group training process -the Narrative Mediation Path- aiming at increasing the students’ awareness of their own representations of the Self in training and education. Within the university context, it represented a competence in studying, a being-able-to-study, based on a set of abilities and knowledge integrated in a knowing-how. It means becoming aware of one’s own process of learning and one’s own needs, identifying the available resources and the obstacles to be overcome in order to learn in an effective way (Padilla-Carmona and Martínez-García, 2013). Our approach relates closely to perspectives such as self-directed learning and self-regulated learning, that have central in the last few years, promoting open, innovative ways of rethinking and transforming the role of learners and the learning process (García-Martín, 2012; Jornet-Meliá, García-Bellido and González-Such, 2012).

*Employability skills and transition to the labour market*

In addition, INSTALL aimed to increase the student target groups' employability skills, understood as the transferable skills needed by an individual to make them 'employable'. These skills are those that EU policies recommend to equip young people to carry out their role in the labour market to the best of their ability (Sánchez-García, 2013).

INSTALL methodology was useful in higher education settings. It can also be successful out of the university context, particularly when students finish studying and begin the transition to the labour market. If it is true that the objectives of the Narrative Mediation Path consisted in analysing the competences used to realize actions in order to build and make explicit new meanings of experience, and in fostering an awareness of how people know and how they know how to act in order to achieve more effective performances, then supporting participants' strategic action is not only instrumental in their university success, but also in their whole life. Through the Narrative Mediation Path they can acquire strategic competences and employability skills that will be very useful to increase their opportunity to access the labour market. In this sense, INSTALL contributed bridging the skills gap for the jobs of the future and making our education systems more responsive to the future needs to be promoted so as achieve a critical mass that will raise European competitiveness in a globalized and changing world (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

#### *Enhancing students' voices and experiences*

As stated by Field and Kurantowicz (2014), policy and practice will have a better chance of working if non-traditional and disadvantaged students are listened, giving voice to their experiences, expectations and needs. In our project, with its narrative focus, the voices and experiences of students were in the foreground (McCaffery, 2010, 271-289). Our training addressed the challenges of personal, social and academic student engagement to enhance the continued development of knowledge, understanding, skills and capacities

(Pittaway and Moss, 2013). In this context, the lived experience of learners is crucial to make visible the itineraries and problems of non-traditional learners, who have special difficulties and obstacles to develop successful university careers. We consider the recognition of vulnerable and disadvantaged students is pivotal to increase the rates of retention and completion in higher education of these groups (Finnegan, Merrill and Thunborg, 2014).

#### *Promoting emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills*

The INSTALL project conceived reflexivity as mentalization. This implied to pay attention both to cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. This approach echoes that promoted by Gardner and other scholars who have stressed the relevance of multiple intelligences, including emotional intelligence. Over the last few years these perspectives have become central in the educational debates, initially in pre-university education, and later in higher education contexts (Bisquerra, 2013).

Thus competences such as consciousness, self-regulation, autonomy, social skills, and skills for life and wellness, are nowadays a challenge for individuals and groups, in educational institutions and beyond. Our training responded to these challenges arguing that cognitive and emotional dimensions are complementary, and implementing a course that resulted in a positive improvement of emotional competences and resources, and all this in a short period of training. Therefore INSTALL offers to managers and educators theoretical insights and practical tools to enhance emotional skills, collective intelligence and personal resources useful to be successful in higher education and more generally in everyday life (Freda, 2008 and 2014).

#### *Narrative and experiential focus*

Narrative approaches are providing interesting contributions to the construction of a renewed educational and cultural theory, which is shaping up to be more culturalist, contextual and dialogical than traditional educational perspectives. This new intellectual, investigative, academic scene, in which the narrative paradigm is deservedly gaining ground, is well represented in INSTALL, both in its foundations and in its methods. We think our training represented a progressive psycho-pedagogical model to raise a critical awareness and enrich the powers of the kind to enable it to manage individual life experiences as well as social situations using narrative tools (Bruner, 1990). This made possible the training had a key focus on both social and individual empowerment. The use of stories was central in our training, and it will also be central if we want to stress students' experiences and perspectives. More generally, storytelling has become a key tool of institutions, programmes and managers to create, promote, legitimate and communicate processes related to innovation, research and training, in university contexts and beyond.

### *Epistemological questioning*

We need to question the kind of knowledge produced and transmitted in HE contexts. The political, ideological and epistemological criticism of knowledge is a challenge that we have in front of us when we undertake research in universities (Murphy and Fleming, 2000). Marxists, feminists, and postmodernists have strongly questioned academic knowledge, due to monopoly of truth, lack of relevance, lack of contact with the reality and reproduction of social inequalities. Our project critically addressed some of these challenges while trying to be useful to improve educational European policies and contribute to enhance learning opportunities. Our approach about mentalization and reflexivity as a way of self-knowledge and a critique posture was itself relevant in the



process of design, implementation, analysis and evaluation of the INSTALL training.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has presented the main traits of tertiary education level, located within the recent and current challenges of knowledge society, ICT and globalization. We have paid particular attention to policy issues as well as to specific implications of the INSTALL training regarding international cooperation, innovation, social inclusion, employability, voices of underachieving students, narratives and epistemological questioning. Thus we keep opened the debate about both potential challenges and actual benefits of this project, within a European, international and changing perspective aimed to support and enhance educational opportunities for non-traditional students in inclusive, non-threatening and friendly learning environments.

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