

Counselling for (disadvantaged) students

Models of intervention and experiences at two european universities

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Abstract

Higher Education is experiencing a critical reform process in which, among other things, the importance of the social dimension has been highlighted. The essential role that the University has to play in promoting social cohesion and reducing inequalities should be translated into the provision of adequate services to students and the creation of more flexible pathways (London Communiqué, 2007).

As a consequence, international studies (such as the Eurostudent project) have been promoted, allowing a first characterisation of the different “publics” that enter Higher Education, and providing statistical and comparable data on many European countries. However, it is necessary to go beyond this information, adopting a more in–depth perspective that allows us to go deeply into the daily reality of non–traditional students. This paper presents the process and results of research that has been developed in two university contexts which have different traditions regarding the provision of support services for students: the University of Seville and the University of Nottingham.

First, a description of the profiles of non–traditional students in both contexts is made, emphasising some of the problems and difficulties they experience. This information comes from the analysis of written narratives of a total of 33 students (23 in the University of Seville and 10 at the University of Nottingham).

Second, existing services in both universities are described, exploring the opinions of the technical staff of these services concerning the mechanisms and support strategies commonly used. This information has been collected through 8 open–question interviews of technical staff and people in charge of the support services in both universities.

Beyond looking at the comparison between the services and profiles in both contexts, the results are intended to serve as a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses in the support given to students with non–traditional profiles, who may present disadvantages and the risk of social and academic exclusion.

Keywords: non–traditional students, disadvantaged students, counselling services, international approach, models of intervention

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that higher education is experiencing a decisive reform process which shows the importance of its social dimension. Thus, the London Communiqué (2007) sets out that higher education must play an essential role in promoting social cohesion and in reducing inequalities, and facilitate appropriate services to students and create more flexible pathways.

As suggested by Odds (2010), the improvement of the conditions of students' access and continuation is more than a democratic argument: has entered the front line of the international debate about universities.

Students with profiles very different from the usual pattern (from economically disadvantaged environments, with a job or a family to deal with, disabled, etc.) access to higher education increasingly more frequently. Previous statistical studies (Orr, Gwosc & Netz, 2011) show that this new university public is an important percentage in many European countries. This can be what McNair (1998) refers to as an "invisible majority", both for legislators and managers and for those who research in the field.

These specific conditions (age, family and work responsibilities, disabilities, coming from a different ethnic, cultural or economic background) can mean a disadvantage concerning academic progress in the university. Therefore, higher education should ensure all measures needed to promote *inclusive education*, *equity* and *social cohesion* while *preventing the university drop-out* of students who need support to fulfill their educational potential because of disadvantages caused by personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances.

As a consequence, it is necessary to improve our knowledge and comprehension of the barriers and difficulties that these disadvantaged students can experience. At the same time, it is necessary to identify which services universities offer to guarantee their full integration into academic and social life.

This communication presents the results of two studies which have explored both aspects (the experiences of disadvantaged students and the characteristics of support services). First, a study was carried out in the University of Seville and later this was replicated in the University of Nottingham, given that there is a greater tradition of support services for non-traditional and disadvantaged students in the

United Kingdom. It does not mean to offer a thorough comparison of both contexts but rather to simply show the characteristics and singularities of each of them.

2. Aims

The purpose of this study is to investigate the characteristics and needs of non-traditional (disadvantaged) students at university, identifying the potential strengths and difficulties they experience in their academic development. Also, we aim to describe the Students' Support Services, their usual strategies to help students and the way that they are organised.

3. Method

The studies have a narrative approach, as we are interested in studying students' perceptions and descriptions, and we consider that the narrative approach is effective in providing insights into complex and contextualised student experiences (Benson et al., 2010). The use of the students' written narratives and open interviews have been combined to compile the information. Specifically, in the Spanish context, there were narrations of 23 students with a different, non-traditional profile (mature students, from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, with family and/or work responsibilities, with special educational needs and belonging to other ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities) and 6 interviews of Support Services staff. In the UK context, 10 students took part with written narratives, as did two people from the Students' Support Services and Widening Participation Team) were interviewed.

The analysis of the information was carried out from a qualitative perspective, aiming to extract significant category analysis which allows the points of view of the people involved to be gathered.

4. Results

Experiences of disadvantaged students

Regarding the results obtained we highlight, on the one hand, the analysis of the narratives of the non–traditional students taking part in the study. This is very diverse with respect to their needs and experiences. It is not only based on the context (Spanish and British) but also the different experiences we find within each of them, in part due to the specific characteristics of each group (students of other cultures, mature students, etc.). Some aspects that are more or less common in all the students are outlined.

Practically all the narratives, regardless of the characteristics of each group, showed that the first weeks of the first year are a critical period in which they experience the greatest difficulties. In this sense, the students stated that they were confused and somewhat distressed, basically because of two issues: adapting to academic life and its regulations and adapting personally to a new life which involved living outside the home.

I found difficulties in adapting to the new environment, because it was totally different that that I had been used to. I felt sometimes that I had help from nobody, when I faced difficulties in my studies. The first moments were exciting and frustrating at the time, because the amount of work was huge, I was not able to deal with it (British, Daphne).

Thus, I remember that the first weeks were challenging, as I had to get adapted here, not only in my academic life but also in my personal life (house, etc.) (British, Paul).

We can highlight the high motivation and resilience of the non–traditional students and, especially in the Spanish case, the many negative experiences which could have led to dropping out but which were overcome thanks to their persistence, motivation and effort.

(Studying at University) It's what I have been searching for many years. I got it a bit late, but I got it and now I will not give it up! It's what I've been looking for a long time (Spanish, Hernan).

And this implies that the students consider that, for them, to achieve

academic success means a double effort with respect to a traditional student.

Being a bit sensible, you have to provide more to reach the same, that is, you have to do twice, to get the same. That's my conclusion of a non-traditional student, I do the same that someone else does, but I have to do it twice (Spanish, Man).

In global terms and although many difficulties and specific problems are enumerated, the great majority of the participants value their academic progress as being very satisfactory. This progress is considered to be in part due to the support received from different sources which we will analyse later, but it is also perceived as the result of their motivation and persistence.

Difficulties? Architectonic barriers. I have been asking for the adaptation of the building for four years at university but they haven't done it (...). I've been asking for a reform for years but I am not being listened to. One time out of many, I went to "complain" about the lifts, the help they gave me was: "We can give you a stick to press the buttons" [...] I am not going to stop until I get the building adapted, maybe I'll do so for the last year of my degree, but, at least, this will remain for more people in similar situations to mine (Spanish, Yria).

The day-to-day university description of the ways in which the students plan and approach how they study and respond to the demands of the university context is also different between the students of the two contexts. This is explained by the different teaching traditions in Spain and the United Kingdom.

The work schemes which are most common among the Seville students are based on continued and persistent class attendance. High lecture attendance is one of the most common patterns among non-traditional students, and it is considered by individuals as key to learning. Taking notes, asking for further explanations of concepts that are difficult to understand, participating and giving their opinions, help them to optimise their personal study:

I need to attend lectures to understand the subject, if I don't attend, I feel I'm missing something (Spanish, Magister).

However, tutorials (which are normally held individually or in

small groups at the teacher's desk) are not considered as important as lectures and only a few students indicate using this resource. When they do attend, tutorials tend to be regarded as a 'problem-solving' device and not as a mechanism for guiding their own learning:

I haven't made much use of tutorials, I haven't had doubts to resolve through them (Spanish, Emma).

In the case of the students in Nottingham, the trend is to work more individually. This is seen to be helped by the tutor's personal supervision. In general, the support and the follow up facilitated by the academic tutors are valued positively.

So far I think that my progress is successful and I am absolutely satisfied by the things that I learn and research and from the support and supervising that I receive. The main factor that affected my performance in a positive way is the support that I receive from the university, from my supervisor and my colleagues (British, Paul).

In spite of these nuances in their way of facing study, a key aspect linked to academic success always appeared in both contexts: the need of appropriate time management from the very first days.

My previous professional experience made me much more confident and efficient in the use of my time. I can give each task a balanced importance and not be overwhelmed by circumstances (British, Peli).

I wake up around six in the morning everyday, and I end my working day at the campus about 9 p.m. (Spanish, Isabel).

I often make schedules to organise my time (Spanish, María).

Regarding the support that the students perceive as receiving, important differences appeared. We understand them to be also due to sociocultural factors. As has already been commented upon, for students in the British context, the tutor's support is key, as well as the general Students' Support Services. In this way, these students know well what these services offer and turn to them frequently and value them very positively.

Except that, everything is fine and this is helped by the university's peaceful environment and the good services that my superiors and my peers provide. . . (British, Henn).

In contrast, the Spanish context participants do not know about these services as an alternative to overcome their difficulties.

I use only a few services, I'd better say none, because I do not know about them; if we were given more information, maybe I would use them more (Spanish, Lidia).

For the Seville students, the main sources of support cited are family, spouse or partner, and classmates. This support takes different forms: providing motivation, helping economically, and offering technical assistance to complete assignments (for example assisting building concept-maps, PowerPoints, and so on).

The relationship with my classmates. . . is very important to me. We have become a family (Spanish, Yria).

If I have an academic problem, there is always a fellow student who helps me and gives me advice (Spanish, Isabel)

When Spanish students discussed family and partner support, they reflected on the multiple ways they receive help from loved ones: the economic contribution, of course, but also help looking after their own children to facilitate university attendance and encouragement during hard times.

Since my brother and I were young, our parents have instilled us with the significance of studies, and they have shown us they were working hard so that we could study and have a good future. . . (Spanish, Cristi).

My parents have influenced my learning, my father is an educated man and he likes talking about interesting topics, my mother helps me with my studies and she tries to motivate me and my brothers (Spanish, Carlos).

I was lucky to meet in my first year a fellow student who is also non-traditional, and, as a consequence of her disability she deals with study in the same way as me. Since then, we have made a team (Spanish, M. José).

In the case of the participants of the UK study, what appeared

more frequently is the feeling of isolation and loneliness which a majority of students experience. They miss the support of friends and companions and this makes their process of adaptation difficult both in the academic and the personal area.

My problem in studying in here was studying alone. Back home, I had friends to study together and ask questions any time but even though I have friends in here it is hard to study together (...) One difficulty about life in here is making British friends. It is hard to make friends and you just give up after a while (British, Earl).

Students' Services

Generally, Students' Support Services in both contexts are not different regarding the profile of the students that they are aimed at, nor in the activities which are carried out with a view to their needs. However, a different functioning with respect to the organisation is noted. So it is that in British universities and, in particular, in the University of Nottingham, although the services have a different content (orientation services to help students with disabilities, capacity-building programmes for widening participation in the university, etc.), they function integrated into a unique scheme (the same management is in charge of different departments). For practical purposes this means a greater integration of their staff and, of course, also of the activities that they offer. In comparison, the Students' Support Services in Spain function more fragmentedly. This occasionally brings about an overlapping of the offer of activities within the same university.

In the unit, as its name indicates, we work mainly supporting disabled students of the University of Seville (Spanish, techn 1).

"We carry out legal advice according to the existing legislation (Spanish, techn 2).

All types of students in general. If they are students who don't speak Spanish or students with some kind of disability, we redirect them to other companions who work more specifically with them (Spanish, techn 4).

Although the work focus is adjusted to what some authors have called "the services model" (Rodríguez Espinar et al, 1993), which tends

to work with a sector of the student population more reactively than proactively and is based on responding to difficulties that have already been detected, a faint tendency has been noted in the English context to develop a more proactive proposal than that which is noted in Spanish universities. In this way, when a specific programme or activity aimed at filling a gap is created, this programme is directly oriented at the whole group of students and is not limited to a sector of the students. This is the philosophy which all the services work with.

If it's good for one student in particular, it's good for all the rest (British, techn 1).

The financing model is seen to be key in these services. In the UK all the activities are carried out according to state subsidies that depend on, amongst other things, each university's management. This financing arrives directly at the service and does not depend so strictly on the politics of each government team. Added to this form of financing is an additional system based on private donations and the voluntary workers who are quite frequent in British culture. As a positive effect, the services have funds to carry out activities that have a strong impact, such as is the case of the Widening Participation Office, which develops orientation programmes which begin in Secondary Schools. However, the compensation lies in the work of those in charge of each unit being more raising funds than planning actions, as is shown in the two interviews with people in charge of services.

I spend most of my work time raising funds that guarantee the continuity of all we do (British, techn 2).

5. Conclusions

It is important to emphasise that this work only briefly presents some of the results of our study as, because of space limitations, we have not gone more deeply into much of the information gathered, especially that of the students' narratives.

In spite of this, we can sketch out some reflections about the strong and weak points in potentially disadvantaged students, as well as in the services which deal with their needs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of the experiences of potentially disadvantaged students.

Strengths/Opportunities	Weaknesses/Threats
High level of motivation and resilience of non-traditional students (S, N)	The first weeks in the university are outlined as a critical moment in the academic, personal and social adaptation process (S, N)
High level of class attendance and participation (S)	The students express many difficulties – both academic and personal (S, N)
Good individualised academic support which is positively valued by the students (N)	Sparse use of tutorials as an individualising learning element (S)
Good skills/attitudes of time management (S, N)	Scant knowledge and use of the Students' Support Services (S)
Familial and social fabric which cushions difficulties and disadvantages (S)	Social isolation, meager support relations between companions (N)
Important support role of companions (S)	Action of the services focused on solving problems already expressed (S, N)
Diversification of the services to deal with the needs of specific groups (S, N)	Insufficient coordination between services, need for a more holistic and conciliatory plan (S)
Positive valuation of the support services (N)	

(S)= Applicable to the students and/or services of the University of Seville
(N)= Applicable to the students and/or services of the University of Nottingham

In our opinion, to thoroughly know the daily experience of non-traditional and/or disadvantaged students is an essential question in the current panorama of Spanish universities and, in particular, of the University of Seville. In this way, the Students' Statute passed in 2010 considers the need to improve the support offered to students in the sense of integrating and coordinating the numerous services which currently exist. This integrated and holistic plan — similar to the one in the UK context — would mean a key advance in satisfying the needs of all students.

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