Advising students
with complex trajectories

A Practical Handbook

ADVISING STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX TRAJECTORIES

A practical handbook

Project

Consortium members

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. What does it mean to advise students in differentiated learning contexts and environments (online, onsite and hybrid)?

Advisors play a crucial role in Higher Education institutions (HEI) in assisting students throughout their academic journey. They contribute to the successful integration of students in the institutional environment by helping them plan and select courses and guiding them on how to achieve academic and career goals. But, they also follow up and support the students trajectory by addressing academic challenges, personal issues, or conflicts that might hinder a student's progress. The role of advisors also includes monitoring the students' progress, supporting them in exploring career options and preparing for the job market, and engaging in initiatives to improve student resilience.

The ultimate goal of advisors is to empower students to make informed decisions, foster their personal and academic development, and enhance their overall higher education (HE) experience. Advisors can have a significant impact on a student's success and well-being throughout their HE trajectory.

Advising students in differentiated learning contexts involves tailoring educational guidance and support to meet the diverse needs, preferences, and learning styles of students in various learning environments. HEI must recognize that each student learns differently, and should adjust their instruction, assessments, and support strategies accordingly to create an inclusive and effective learning environment.

However, the learning environments can be also quite diverse. These may include online, onsite, and hybrid learning settings. Each of these modalities requires using specific approaches. Overall, the key to advising students in differentiated learning contexts is to be adaptable, attentive, and empathetic.

## 1.2. What does it mean complex student trajectories?

Differently from traditional understanding, successful student experiences in HE do not follow necessarily a homogeneous, sequential, or continuous trajectory. To achieve their qualifications,

HE students increasingly find the need to delay, interrupt or change direction in the course of their studies. This does not stop them from achieving success at their own pace and in their own time.

If we recognize student trajectories as a complex phenomenon, this allows us to better describe and understand how students navigate in the course of their HE experiences. It also allows us to identify appropriate resources and good practices for institutions to support students with diverse needs and experiences to achieve their learning outcomes.

1.3. What are good practices?

The concept of good practices originated in the private sector (Gamson, 1991) and from there it was rapidly exported to the public sector. There is no single or agreed definition. A good practice to be considered as such requires meeting four criteria: to be innovative, to be effective, to be sustainable and to be replicable (UNESCO, 2003 in Gradaille & Caballo, 2016). Cevallos, Alcívar & Cordero (2019) identify good practices as experiences of successful practices carried out with the objective of implementing some strategy, methodology, design, model, modality or different management process which brings about educational improvement, i.e., innovation.
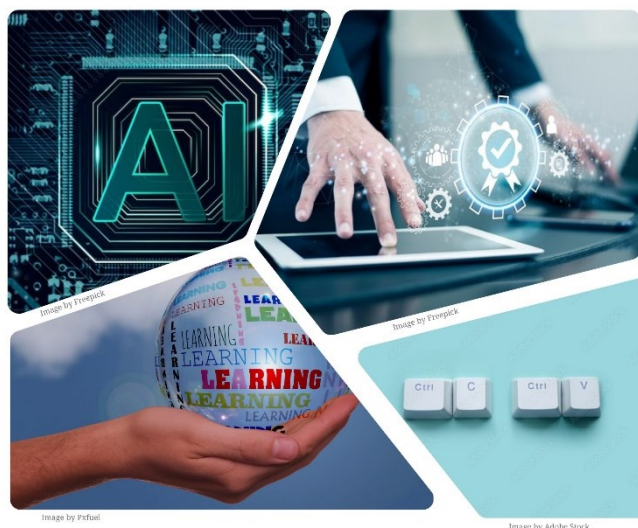
Hall and Jennings (2008) propose a gradation of good practices (including in this term both policies and programmes and simpler actions/projects) based on the availability of scientific or quasi-scientific evaluations of the results obtained. They distinguish between best practices (those that have proven effective and efficient), evidence-based practices (which focus on outcomes assessed on the basis of systematic empirical evidence), and 'promising' practices (those that are still difficult to evaluate and yet worthy of attention). In addition to this gradation, the particularities of the context must be considered. It is desirable that good practices be evaluated to show their positive effect and their transferability to other contexts.

In the context of the complex trajectories of HE students, we identify good practices as those experiences that support and guide the students' trajectories, understanding that these are diverse and non-necessarily lineal. Therefore, these are practices aimed at accompanying the incorporation into the university of new students, change of trajectories to other studies or another

institution or learning modality, trajectories in which the graduation years are delayed or stop-out trajectories.

1.4. What is a facilitating institutional environment: policies, practices, and culture?

Currently most students who enroll in a HEI do not come from the institution's location. They may come from very different regions or countries. Moreover, some will remain living far from campus, attending classes and performing learning activities fully or partly online. In addition, students, faculty and staff increasingly represent a wide diversity of generations and backgrounds. This transformation brings along a lot of familiar but also new issues and challenges.

To build a facilitating environment, HEI need to have tools and processes that deal with diversity of candidates and with communication technologies. In terms of policies the unbounded types of candidates' HEI have to define systems of information and of access to deal with the potential diversity. Policies must address a wide scope of profiles and of cultures of participants. Considering practices, HE should have an attitude of continuous improvement to learn from others and from own experiences. Practices need to be reliable and flexible to accommodate different needs, situations, and cultures. HEI communities should embrace inclusion and diversity by being a social reference for openness and transparency. In fact, while an institutional culture based on openness and transparency takes time to consolidate in the academic world, it is undoubtedly instrumental for facilitating inclusion, equity and diversity. In this same direction, HEI need to have a close connection with society for that ensuring good communication. An appropriate interface with prospective candidates is critical. A dynamic and attractive web presence, combined with the action of specialised offices is the right approach.

2. GOOD PRACTICES FOR INTEGRATING STUDENTS

2.1. Preparing access to HE

Smooth access to HE depends on the provision of clear information on programs, on bureaucratic procedures and rules. It can also be quite helpful for HEI to provide guidance on how to organize a first visit to the campus, or the indication of an assistance unit, or even of information on facilities upon arrival. First impression is sometimes what counts and HEI need to have a good start when dealing with new students.

Another relevant aspect is that HEI should make a strong effort to know the profiles, the aspirations and the social conditions of incoming students. Some new students want to learn, while others just expect to obtain a diploma and others even refer to HEI as a platform for accessing new diverse futures. Respecting the learning styles of students might be helpful to

adapt the initial access procedures and to define instructional activities. Academic and non-academic staff should be prepared to receive newcomers from different backgrounds and origins. Specific training is a good approach for ensuring that goal. Also, HEI should be prepared to support the integrations of foreign students. To do that they have to understand their specific needs. For instance, foreign students must receive useful information on how to survive in the new environment. Simple things as how to use health, transportation, or food services might represent a have support.

2.2. Tutoring pedagogical support

Pedagogical support for newcomers in HE is fundamental due to the transition from high school to a more autonomous environment in terms of activities and choices. Dedicated offices to train and to inform newcomers on how to study, on how to use time and on how handle stress of being

in independent mode of living and of studying. Most HEI have dedicated units to provide support to newcomers, while other leave it to the contribution of older students or former graduates. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. Some HEI indicate a mentor or tutor for each student from the academic staff. The two meet weekly or with other intervals and the goal is to integrate the student with a member of faculty. This time spent by teachers is considered in the academic load thus facilitating the recognition of the importance of having a faculty member helping the newcomers.

Other HE have voluntary courses, online or face to face, to help the newcomers acquire study habits and to facilitate the newcomer understanding of the HE academic life. These courses are generally decided as a function of each field of study and of the college or department culture. Courses are taught by teachers from education sciences, from older academic staff or from older students. In any case the goal is to face with success a common situation resulting from the differences of previous academic experiences of newcomers and the new scenarios faced at HE in general. It is, apparently, the main reason of dropouts the fact that newcomers cannot adapt individually to the new environment of HE.

2.3. Student social and economic support

A student cannot perform well if the minimum conditions for its wellbeing are not fulfilled. A student that has not enough nutrition and sufficient social integration will face difficulties in performing as expected. In many countries, public investment in HEI represents a major political effort for improving competences and qualifications of the population. If not for social and moral reasons this economic observation should be taken as a motivation for ensuring appropriate public funding for providing lodging, food and clothing to students.

It should be noted that not all students have access to social support in equal terms. In fact, students coming from lower economic classes, minority religious groups or different ethnic groups, as well as students with handicaps or unusual behaviors typically suffer from uneven treatment. HEI should be able to identify students in these situations and provide them with the necessary support either externally or internally. The lack of a clear integration in the student population is a major reason for dropout and should be tackled collectively and pro-actively.

2.4. Personalizing learning paths

Applying again the equity criterion, it is also paramount for HEI to realize that each individual student is a person with unique features, personality and skills. It is necessary to follow the performance of each student and take necessary actions if there are significant deviations. In fact, some of the factors favouring dropout can be identified by analysing student and class performance data. The observation of grades and attendances compared with class performance, as well as of learning analytics reports, is useful to identify problems with student learning path.

It is clear that one size does not fit all, and teaching and learning should adapt to the needs and to characteristics of each student. The majority of students can generally deal with a unique way of teaching, of assessing and of supervision. The others need most of the times personalised approaches taking in to account the learning styles, the study habits, the intellectual profiles and the social-economic status. There is a growing consensus about the inadequacy of current assessment methods which apply the same traditional exam or similar style of summative assessment tool for an entire class without differentiating according to students' profiles.

As Teixeira & Mota (2020) state, the digital transition should promote a more participatory learning culture, as changes in how knowledge and information are produced, transmitted or distributed in networks often escape the control of organizations and institutions. "Learning and assessment must be based on trust and collaboration; thus, the growing importance of the ethical aspects involved" (Teixeira & Mota, 2020, 181).

2.5. Institutional good practices for inspiring you

We can find an example of good practice in the Civil Engineering Department, University of Sains, Penang, Malaysia, which was collected by the project Tuning Southeast Asia. The Outcome Based Education is the approach taken in this program and the program learning outcomes are present everywhere from each classroom to the stair steps. Students are conscious of the reasons why they are studying, and which will be the added value at the end of the studies. The department has a system based on a computer program, COBE, Civil Outcome Based Education where each student has a record of performance towards each of the program learning outcomes. It is in the form of a mandala and the progression of each student is recorded as a percentage of each learning outcome. The recording of achievements is done by the teachers and analysed by the academic dean and by respective teachers. Measures are taken whenever corrective measures are necessary.

Another example of as good practice is the Engineering School, Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China. It was observed while participating in the project Tuning China. In this HE there is a quality department that also analyses each class performance in terms of grades, assessment methods, problems faced by students and by academic staff. Each student must fill regularly a survey that is universal and nominal. This allows the quality department to follow each student performance in his own words together with the academic staff interviews. Survey about class addresses technical issues, personal questions, social participation and academic performance. The existence of a quality unit dedicated to student performance is probably an example of the concern of HEI for the student performance and wellbeing.

Check also the following good practices for preparing student recruitment and supporting student's incorporation in the HEIs:

ARGÓ PROGRAM - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

TESTIMONIES - WHAT DO OUR STUDENTS SAY? (TESTEMUNHOS - O QUE DIZEM OS NOSSOS ESTUDANTE - Universidade Aberta (Portugal)

GET TO KNOW THE UNIVERSITY (CONÈIXER) - Universitat de València (Spain)

CREDIT TRANSFER - Open University (United Kingdom)

INTRODUCTION ON THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT MODULE (MÓDULO DE AMBIENTAÇÃO ONLINE – MAO) - Universidade Aberta (Portugal)

WELCOME SESSIONS – Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

PEER MENTORING PROGRAM - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

ESPRIA (IMPROVING FIRST-YEAR STUDENT MENTORING) - Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain)

PEER TO PEER (ENTREIGUALS) - Universitat de València (Spain)

ACCESS MODULES - Open University (United Kingdom)

3. GOOD PRACTICES FOR ACCOMPANYING STUDENTS

3.1. Drop-out prevention

We refer to good practices for accompanying students when these are aimed at students who are already part of the university. There is a growing diversification of student constituencies that have resulted from HE expansion over the later decades of the twentieth century (Burke, 2016). This expansion, also called massification process, has considerably changed the university and students' social experience and, although, the students' experiences can look like as individuals, the weight of the institutional context and the study conditions are not the same everywhere (Dubet, 2017).

The good practices for accompanying students have as their main objective to support greater persistence and engagement. Lack of guidance and accompany good practices is a significant cause of drop-out from university studies, especially during the first year.

Good practices related to dropout are characterized by being preventive or reactive. These practices were introduced with the aim of preventing possible cases of dropouts and reducing dropout rates and changes of studies due to the difficulty of fitting in at the university.

The practice called *Projecte Brúixola* (Compass Project, Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona) is a perfect example. It aims at establishing a relationship of trust and engagement within the university by connecting university students and pre-university students. It works as a good practice for the prevention of possible cases of dropout due to the relationship of preparation for university entrance that is established among the students who participate in the program.

The practice *Dropout Prevention Tool* (Univesitat Oberta de Catalunya), on the other hand, is a tutor support tool for monitoring the academic activity of recently enrolled and re-enrolled students. Tutors contacting students at risk of drop out using a tool to control their online interaction.

It is also worth mentioning the good practice entitled *OU Analyse* (Open University). It is a tool used for the tutors to prioritise contacts with students who may be at risk of dropping out. These tools allow to the tutor information in order to give best advice on how to get through this without dropping out the studies.

3.2. Reorienting students

The perspective of complex trajectories, as we argue in this project, broadens the view by recognise that trajectories do not always develop in a continuous sense. Complexity focuses on trajectories of delay, interruption or change. Changes in trajectories need to establish resources in universities to accompany the reorientation towards other studies or possibilities.
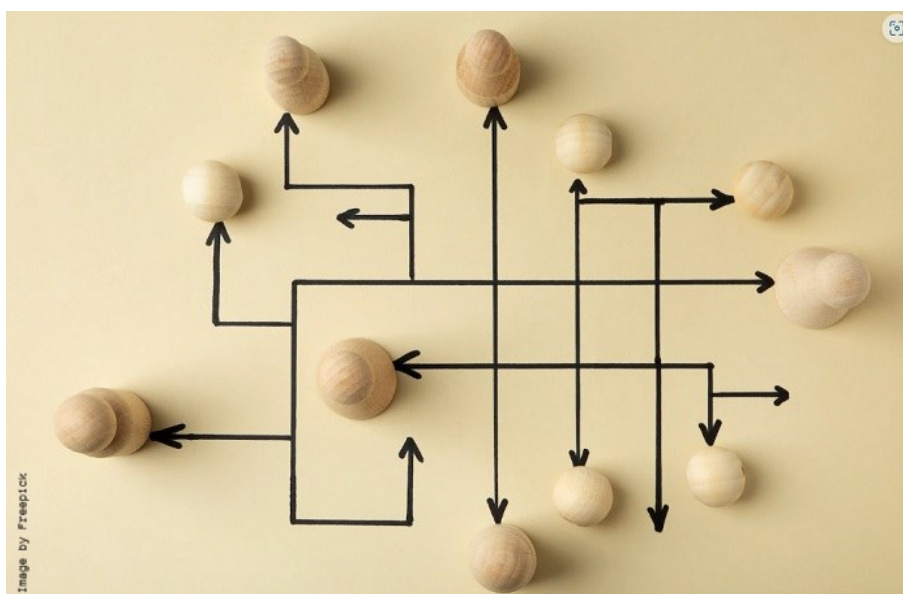
Not all universities consider it positive to support the change of studies or reorientation, because it has traditionally been understood as a failure. However, changes of studies imply a plurality of learning experiences for students, which has an added social value, if HE is seen as part of a broader perspective of lifelong learning (Villar et al., 2012).

The following good practice is directly related with the reorientation in a positive sense and to consider that the reorientation is a possible option. This good practice called *Semestre Réo* (Réo Half-year, Université de Bourgogne) aims to help students who find themselves in academic difficulty and risk of dropping out after their first semester at university. Courses of different basic topics is organised to help students who find themselves in academic difficulty and risk of dropping out after their first semester at university.

3.3. Special needs student support and inclusion

HEI have developed programmes and resources to attend trajectories and experiences of students with special educational needs. These resources are concerned to access, and general conditions for staying in HE with success through pedagogical support to ensure better conditions to achieve academic success for these students, as extra time to exams and other adaptations.

Universities should consider the especially sensitive transition of students with disabilities during their first year and even the first weeks of attendance with a proactive action (Moriña, 2017).

In our collection of good practices, we have identified programmes dedicated to the care of students with special educational needs. Some of these are highlighted below.

The good practice called *UVDiscacitats Voluntariat* (UVDisability Volunteering Program, Universitat de València) is a program aims to support accompany students with disabilities so that they integrate into university life and have satisfactory access to teaching resources and academic structures. The actions in which voluntary students collaborate are the adaptation of material to accessible formats and the taking of notes. Volunteering is essential to raise awareness and accompany these special educational needs students' trajectories.

The *Statute for Students with Special Educational Needs* (Universidade do Porto) is an internal regulation that enable them, for example, to have more time to conclude the exams. This specific regulation is part of the inclusion policy, which requires the elimination of all factors that disadvantage students with disabilities.

3.4. Institutional good practices for inspiring you

Check the following additional good practices and feel inspired by these successful initiatives:

STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN DISTANCE AND DIGITAL EDUCATION - Universidade Aberta (Portugal)
MODELO PEDAGÓGICO VIRTUAL® (MPV) - Universidade Aberta (Portugal)
TUTORIAL ACTION PLAN (PAT) - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)
SOCIAL SUPPORT OFFICE - Universidade do Porto – Portugal
FEES PAYMENT THROUGH SERVICES PROVISION - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)
SPECIAL STATUS WORKERS - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)
TUTORIAL ACTION PLAN - Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain)

4. GOOD PRACTICES FOR PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL COUNSELLING AND SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL TRANSITIONS

4.1. Student psycho-pedagogical assessment

Providing psycho-pedagogical assessment and support to students is crucial for HEI to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment. These assessments are designed to understand the individual needs, strengths, and challenges of students, especially those with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, ADHD, or autism spectrum disorders, as well as other cognitive differences, or behavioral issues. This allows to tailor support and interventions, designing

personalized support plans for students based on their unique cognitive and learning profiles. These plans may include such different aspects as academic accommodations, extended time for exams or assistive technologies. In addition, it may also include targeted interventions and counseling services to address emotional or behavioral challenges.

By understanding their cognitive strengths and weaknesses, students can receive targeted support to optimize their learning experience. Which leads to improved performance and overall success. As shown during the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting mental health and well-being of students is also very important for HE institutions (Teixeira & Mota, 2020). Psycho-pedagogical assessments often include evaluations of students' emotional and psychological well-being. Early detection of mental health issues enables institutions to provide timely counseling and support.

The ultimate goal is to promote inclusivity and diversity within the HE institutions' community. Services which provide psycho-pedagogical assessment and support to HE students can both help them go through the transition (Secondary-Higher education), thus contributing to their integration, but also follow them through their full trajectory, fostering their personal development and educational guidance.

The key beneficiaries are specially students at risk of underachievement for some particular reason or situation. In the case of the Universitát Autónoma de Barcelona, these services have been introduced because of a particular concern with sexual health and prevention of AIDS among young people, at a time when this issue constituted a public health problem.

4.2. Student orientation and integration

Providing orientation and integration programs is instrumental to ensure a smooth transition of students into HEI's life, fostering a positive and supportive learning experience. As it is well known, entering a HEI can be a most significant life change for students. Understandably, it often comes with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Orientation programs help ease this transition by providing essential information about what to expect, what is expected and who can help navigating the HE trajectory. It familiarizes students with their new environment, building a sense of belonging which makes them feel more comfortable and confident from the outset.

Orientation programs facilitate opportunities for students to connect with each other, faculty, staff, and current students. Building these connections early on helps students form friendships, support networks, and a sense of belonging, reducing feelings of isolation or homesickness.

Moreover, these programs should raise awareness amongst new students of the support services provided. including academic advising, counseling, health services, and career development. I tis also critical that they help new students to know institution policies and procedures, such as academic regulations or code of conduct. Understanding these policies early on promotes responsible behavior and a positive institutional culture.

Orientation programs often include academic workshops, course modules and study skills sessions to equip students with essential skills and tools for navigating the learning environment, specially in the case of online learning, and to conduct successfully their learning experiences. In addition, these initiatives should also emphasize inclusivity, diversity, and intercultural awareness, contributing to promote a welcoming and respectful institutional environment for all students.

Some orientation programs involve mentoring, allowing new students to learn from the experiences of past graduates. This interaction can inspire students and provide insights into potential career paths.

4.3. Embracing the diversity of student profiles

Embracing the diversity of student profiles is essential for HEI to create an inclusive and enriching educational environment. This starts by adopting and communicating inclusive policies that support diversity and equity. These policies may encompass admission practices, financial aid opportunities, accommodation services, and support for underrepresented groups.

Another major good practice is for institutions to develop programs and initiatives that cater to the unique needs and interests of diverse student groups. Also, to establish safe and inclusive spaces where students from diverse backgrounds can gather, share experiences, and find support.

Simultaneously, HEI should conduct diversity and sensitivity training for faculty and staff members to create a more welcoming and understanding institutional environment. Training can help educators and advisors recognize and address unconscious biases, adapt their teaching methods to diverse learning preferences, and effectively support students from different backgrounds.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION
Image by Freepick

Other significant good practices include implementing inclusive curricula, encouraging interactions and collaborations among students from diverse backgrounds, and providing accessible learning resources. However, advisors can once again play a pivotal role in regularly seeking feedback from students regarding their experiences on onoine/onsite campus and their perceptions of inclusivity. This feedback can be used to continuously improve and refine diversity initiatives.

HEI need to be proactive in addressing any systemic barriers that may hinder the full participation and success of students from diverse backgrounds. This may involve addressing issues related to affordability, campus accessibility, and institutional biases. Embracing diversity and complexity not only enriches the educational experience of students, but also prepares them to thrive in an increasingly interconnected, diverse and complex world.

4.4. Support educational and professional transitions

With the dissemination of the notion of lifelong learning, HEI are increasingly recognising students' trajectories as a lifelong process as well. Moreover, supporting educational and professional transitions of students to the labour market has become a crucial responsibility for HEI in recent years.

This support can be provided in multiple ways. First and foremost, institutions may provide comprehensive career counseling services to help students explore different career paths, understand job market trends, and identify their strengths and interests. Advisors can guide students in developing career goals and creating personalized action plans.

Other good practices include organising internship and work placement programs, collaborating with companies and organizations. These opportunities allow students to gain practical experience, build their professional networks, and apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. There is also the possibility of conducting workshops and training sessions focused on developing essential employability skills or providing assistance with resume writing and interview preparation.

Another interesting, good practice is to facilitate networking events and platforms that connect students with alumni and industry professionals. This can be linked with mentoring programmes. Some institutions organize career fairs and recruitment events where employers can interact with students directly. Other create job placement offices or teams dedicated to connecting students with job opportunities and assisting them in the application process. There are even many HEI who provide resources, mentorship, and funding opportunities for students interested in starting their own businesses or ventures (start-ups).

By implementing these good practices, HEI can empower their students with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to navigate educational and professional transitions successfully, ensuring their preparedness for a fulfilling and successful career in the labour market.

4.5. Institutional good practices for inspiring you

Good practices about the transitions of students to and from social and professional contexts can be found not only in institutional-led services or programs, but also in several EU-funded projects. PartnerUP, DISK – Digital Immigrants Survival Kit and 5P-Competences' - Adult Education for Sustainability (www.eucen.eu) represent interesting recent initiatives to promote continuing education for all in several perspectives like senior population, digital competences, sustainability, basic skills and using digital resources. However, learn also about the positive impact of the following institutional good practices and consider how these examples might be useful in your HEI context:

UNITAT D'ASSESSORAMENT PSICOPEDAGÒGIC (PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL ASSESSMENT UNIT) - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

ORIENTATION AND INTEGRATION OFFICE - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

UVASSESSORIES (PSYCHOLOGICAL, SEXOLOGICAL, PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL AND LEGAL COUNSELLING) - Universitat de València (Spain)

AULAbERTA – Universidade Aberta (Portugal)

COURSE FOCUSED ON THE PROFESSIONAL CAREER - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

RESEARCH GRANTS - Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

UVJOB (UVOCUPACIÓ) - Universitat de València (Spain)

NAU DELS ESTUDIANTS (TRAINING SPACE) - Universitat de València (Spain)

Brief note on the Complex Trajectories project

The Complex Trajectories project is an initiative funded by the Erasmus+ programme which

focuses on understanding the complex trajectories of students at university, supporting those who navigate them. In practical terms, the project aims at contributing to establish a system of regular monitoring of student trajectories in order to adjust the development of policies supporting these trajectories at different levels of the system and university institutions.

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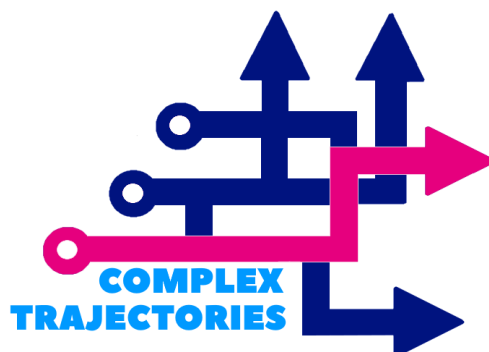
The project has three main parts. One of them is dedicated to the development of a methodology for analysing student trajectories that is transferable to other HE contexts. The project tries also to understand and compare trajectories of students in the different universities of the consortium. This analysis focuses on complex trajectories, especially those that transit from one face-to-face institution (or program) to another at a distance (or vice versa), and in the disadvantaged profiles (by reason of social origin, migrant background, geographical, etc).

Among the project's several outputs there are two MOOC. One is on longitudinal analysis and the other on good practices of tutorial support to HE students following complex academic trajectories.

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Saiba Como

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Glossary

Academic Persistence: The ability of students with complex trajectories to overcome challenges and persist in their HE pursuits, often supported by personal determination and a strong support network.

Adult Learners: Students who are older than the traditional undergraduate population and may return to HE after being in the workforce or raising a family.

Complex Trajectories: Refers to the diverse and non-linear pathways that students may experience throughout their HE journey. These trajectories often involve multiple transitions, interruptions, or changes in academic pursuits, which can be influenced by personal, social, economic, or health-related factors.

Flexible Learning: A method of learning concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalisation of their learning experiences. Students are given freedom to determine how, what, when and where they learn. Open learning, distance learning, online learning or work-based learning are all forms of learning which typically provide flexibility to the student in terms of access, content, time, pace, and/or delivery mode.

Inclusive Pedagogy: Teaching practices that embrace diverse learning styles and accommodate students with varied backgrounds and experiences.

Peer Mentoring: A support strategy where more experienced students guide and mentor those with complex trajectories to ease their transition into HE and promote academic success.

Re-Entry Students: Individuals who return to HE after an extended break, often due to personal reasons.

Student Success Initiatives: Campus-wide efforts aimed at enhancing the academic, social, and emotional well-being of students with complex trajectories, improving retention and graduation rates.

Student Support Services: Resources and programs provided by institutions to assist students with complex trajectories, including academic advising, counselling, career services, and financial aid assistance.