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UNED

Innovative impact

Drop-out rates are especially high in distance learning (Simpson, 2012). However, a more detailed analysis of this problematic reveals that the abandonment occurs, fundamentally, during the first year; moreover, during the first semester, before the first exams or even before the delivery of the first learning activities. Around 30-40% of students drop-out in these early stages in traditional European distance education universities such as the OPEN UK (Simpson, 2003) or the UNED (Sánchez-Elvira, 2014). More than 50 years of research in the field let us conclude that motivation and engagement are crucial for students' retention (Tinto 2009, Anderson, 2006, cit. Simpson, 2012) and that this motivational factor is especially relevant during the first university year. The question is, what can undermine the motivation of freshmen in distance education environments, and how to promote their engagement? **Institutional induction programmes may be a good answer for improving retention and students' satisfaction**, and digital technologies powerful tools to help to attain this main goal.

Online Induction Programmes.

Supporting prospective and new ODL students: The institutional approach

Introduction

The evidence of years of research concludes that first-year students face special difficulties in this period of integration in college. That might explain the high rates of abandonment in this specific time due to different reasons, basically a lack of academic and social integration in the institution (Tinto, 1993). This problem is even worse in Open and Distance Learning, ODL, (Simpson, 2012). ODL and, especially, virtual learning environments, can be considered as more demanding, in general, as they imply different ways of teaching and learning procedures, requiring higher levels of students autonomy and self-regulated learning, in parallel with new digital competences, as well. In addition, ODL students present greater heterogeneity and substantial differences from traditional on-campus ones, being usually older and part-time students with professional and personal responsibilities. Also, very frequently, students present lower levels of prior education and they have stopped studying many years ago… so… that makes a difference… but this is why ODL institutions share a common social mission.

The first thing to explore is about the difficulties that new ODL students face during their first year and its consequences. Research on the most frequent causes of students' drop-out and failure in ODL programmes can be grouped into two main areas, the institutional and the individual ones (Sánchez-Elvira, 2014; Simpson, 2013):

Institutional perspective: unclear and insufficient information and orientation; inefficient instructional design and poor quality materials for an autonomous learning; scarce and/or ineffective interaction and communication with the academic and administrative staff; lack of communication channels between peers. In sum, poor or ineffective institutional support services.

Individual perspective: insufficient prior education levels; low availability of time and overload perception due to professional and personal responsibilities, incompatible with study requirements; financial problems; low digital competences; difficulties to self-regulate learning such as low intrinsic motivation and engagement, perception of low self-efficacy and academic competencies and unrealistic expectations; poor learning strategies, such as inefficient time management, difficulties at planning and organization, procrastination and low persistence, avoidance of difficulties and lack of efficient study habits, in general, especially in online environments.

The good news is that all these difficulties can be overcome if institutions develop appropriated preventive and supportive actions.

Some examples

Some **good examples** of induction programmes and actions can be found in ODL European Universities. Information about them is available on scientific literature and institutions websites. Simpson (2013), presents an extended information about actions in the **OPEN UK**. The **Spanish Distance Education University (UNED)** offers a comprehensive **Institutional Induction Programme** (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, 2014, 2016). With more than 50.000 new students every year, the Programme is based on three-stages thought to help students in the development of autonomy and self-regulated learning: Information/ orientation, Training opportunities for becoming a successful distance education student and Monitoring during the first year. Some successful actions have been developed such as the online induction communities for new students in each faculty; and online formal and open courses for the development of students' competences for distance education, under OCW and MOOC formats. The **OPEN NL** offers a very interesting online program named **StudyCoach,** developed and directed by Marion Stevens. The program has an app version. Other sources of information about this topic can be found in a recent international book on the experiences in induction of ODL Universities in Europe and Latin-America (Cruz Benzán and Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, 2016) and in some of the EMPOWER webinars of the Student Support Group of Expertise: *Institutional support for prospective and new students in online and distance education* (A. Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, coord,), *Student dropout in distance education* and *Theories of student support for retention* (O.Simpson).

How to support prospective and new students in online environments under an institutional perspective? : Online Induction Programmes

The above picture calls for a better design of student support services in ODL, paying special attention to the first year. Nevertheless, it seems that, although good induction actions seem to have positive effects on students' retention and progression, and student integration as well, a lack of institutional policies on induction in ODL can be appreciated, characterised by the general absence of institutional induction programmes (Harper, Kenning & Holwell 2015). In this sense, ODL Universities should develop specific support strategies for their prospective and new students, organized around **Institutional Induction programmes**, once students' needs and difficulties have been identified.

Induction programmes should be characterised by:

- An **institutional and holistic approach**; that is, being **comprehensive, systemic and coordinated**, based on the joint participation of every agent in the institution that could play a significant role in giving support to the new student.

- An ongoing **process-based approach**, not only focused on early stages but being developed along the first year. This continuous progression would be integrated by three main steps: 1) providing the **information and guidance** that prospective and new students might need about the institution, curricula, programs, methodology, technical and skills requirements, learning resources, contact procedures, and so on; 2) offering students **training opportunities** for becoming successful and self-regulated online learners; and 3) **monitoring and giving support** whenever might be needed along the first year, based on the proactive approach underlined by Anderson (2006) and Simpson (2013), and enabling early interventions.

- Finally, they should be focused on the development of online learning communities based on what Levy (2006) named as **networked learning**, seeking to enhance communication and socialization through effective communication and interaction channels, with the institution and between peers, promoting the dialogue, a group identity and a sense of belonging and safety feelings in what, for students, is a new environment.

Either in isolation or well integrated into broader and more ambitious programs, the following are good examples of the most common online actions that have been developed by ODL universities, to give support to their new students:

Information and Orientation to guide students through their first steps, helping them to organize and plan their studies

- Specific websites for the delivery of information and orientation to prospective and new students, including welcome pages and induction packages. These resources are supposed to be attractive and motivating for students,

including multimedia content and interactive resources.

- Automated online self-diagnosis procedures for prior self-assessment of required competencies for ODL.
- Guided online procedures such as guidance to enrolment.
- Face-to-face and/or online workshops and seminars before or after students' enrolment.
- New possibilities such as the use of chatbots on the websites.

Training programs

- Brief formal and/or informal online courses to prepare students for online learning and for the levelling of prior knowledge and competences, as well, before or after enrolment. Open Educational Resources and, more recently, MOOCs and its variants such as NOOCs, SPOCs, etc., can be useful induction tools in this context.
- Blended induction courses offered by Local Centres.
- Virtual modules to provide prior experiences of practice and management of the platform and its tools, in a safe environment that allows failures.

Monitoring

- Asynchronous communication channels and synchronous, as well, whenever possible.
- Synchronous "help-desk/live desk on the web for technical support.
- Induction online communities for new students aiming at orientating and guiding them, as well as creating group identity.
- Peer-mentoring programs using e-mentoring and social nets.
- Use of institutional social networks such as Facebook or Twitter.
- Specialised Units for orientation and counselling.
- Learning analytics to monitor students' performance, facilitating the development of early interventions.
- Online self-applied interventions to modify risk behaviours such as academic procrastination or anxiety.
- Use of apps for mobile self-monitoring.

Conclusion

ODL First-year-students require specialised support from their universities to succeed in the process of integration in their studies and institutions. In general, induction programmes are not delivered under wide-comprehensive frameworks and policies in ODL institutions. Nevertheless, broad and general standards procedures for evaluating the quality of Institutional Support in ODL include induction actions as quality indicators (e.g. the e-Xcellence Manual, EADTU, 3ª ed., 2016, or the OLC / CALED Quality Scorecard for online programs).

Until now, a wide range of different actions has been developed to give support to distance education students in their first year, and there is a substantial body of research on their effectiveness, although an evidence-based methodology would be necessary to obtain general conclusions. Undoubtedly, in increasingly technologically enriched learning environments, a long and exciting road opens before us to explore new ways of supporting our new students under more adaptive and personalised ways.

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