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INSTALL
BASELINE REPORT.

THE SITUATION OF THE DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INSTALL PROJECT UNIVERSITIES: THE STATE OF THE ART

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INTRODUCTION

This report tries to present the characteristics of the contexts in which the INSTALL Project (*Innovative Solutions To Acquire Learning to Learn)* is being developed. Of the five universities[1] actively engaged in this project, an initial, contextual analysis has been made in relation to the number, characteristics and situation of disadvantaged students who are the targeted population of Install. The analysis, as well as this report, tries to address three key topics: the national and institutional context, the profiles of underachievers, non-traditional and disadvantaged students, and the statistics on retention, drop-out and underachievement in each of the universities.

Though common guidelines have been taken into account, each context presents singular characteristics that have made really difficult the establishment of common patterns. For instance, in some universities there is a lack of information or statistics on issues like drop-out or retention rates or, in other cases, there are not comparable data. So, what presents here, is a first attempt to describe the baseline for the Install project intervention, highlighting both the specific and the general patterns that can be found in the five universities in which the project is to be implemented. A general view of the number, characteristics and situation of disadvantaged students is provided which let us give some methodological guidelines for the design of an intervention aimed to cope with their disadvantages.

Firstly, the individual reports of each university are presented. Secondly, we deal with the common and differential patterns found in the previous reports, trying to stress the more important features to be taken into account for the intervention. Based on this review, the criteria to select the target students are later presented. After that, we present the methodological guidelines for such intervention, according with the previous analysis. And finally, the report gives an overview of the effectiveness of the intervention.

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[1] The participants universities are: University of Naples Federico II (from here forth, UNFII), Italy; University of Seville (US), Spain; National School of Political and Administrative Studies (NSPAS), Romania; Aarhaus University (AU), Denmark; National University of Ireland-Maynooth (NUIM), Ireland.

1. INDIVIDUAL REPORTS

1.1. UNFII Baseline Report

1. National, cultural and institutional context

Since 1999, Italian university studies have been fully reformed so as to meet the objectives of the "Bologna process". The university system is now organised on 3 cycles: the 1st cycle academic degree, that is the Laurea, grants access to the 2nd cycle, and the Laurea Specialistica/Magistrale, the main degree of the 2nd cycle, gives access to 3rd cycle doctorate programmes resulting in the degree called Dottorato di Ricerca. In addition to the mentioned degree sequence after the Bologna pattern, the system offers other degree programmes and related degrees both within the 2nd and 3rd cycles.

I. First cycle. Undergraduate studies consist exclusively in Corsi di Laurea-CL (1st degree courses) aimed at guaranteeing undergraduate students an adequate command of general scientific methods and contents as well as specific professional skills. General access requirement is the Italian school leaving qualification, awarded on passing the relevant state examinations, after completion of 13 years of global schooling; also foreign comparable qualifications may be accepted. Admission to individual degree courses may be subject to specific course requirements. First degree courses last 3 years. The Laurea (L, 1st degree, and bachelor-level of the Bologna process) is awarded to undergraduates who have earned 180 ECTS credits. The L allows transition to the labour market, access to the civil service and/or regulated professions; it also grants access to all degree programmes of the 2nd cycle.

II. Second cycle. Post Graduate studies include:

A) Corsi di Laurea Specialistica/Corsi di Laurea Magistrale-CLS/CLM;

B) Corsi di Master Universitario di 1° livello-CMU1.

A) CLS/CLM are aimed at providing postgraduates with an advanced level of education for the exercise of a highly qualified activity in specific areas. Access to CLS/CLM is by the Italian 1st degree (L) or a foreign comparable degree; admission is subject to specific course requirements determined by individual universities; workload: 120 ECTS credits; length: 2 years. The final degree, Laurea Specialistica/Magistrale-LS/LM (master-level of the Bologna process), is awarded to those graduates who, once satisfied all curricular requirements, have also defended an original dissertation in the final degree examination. The change of the degree name from Laurea Specialistica into Laurea Magistrale was agreed upon in 2004. A limited number of 2nd cycle programmes, namely those leading to professions regulated by EU sectoral directives (in dentistry, human medicine, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture), are defined "one long cycle degree programmes" (Corsi di Laurea Specialistica/ Magistrale a ciclo unico-CLSU/CLMU); they differ from the majority of usual CLS/CLM in the following characteristic features: access is by the Italian school leaving diploma or a foreign comparable qualification; admission is always subject to entrance exams; curricula consist of just one long cycle of 5-6 years (at present, only the CLSU/CLMU in human medicine takes 6 years), and a total number of 300-360 ECTS credits. All LS/LM and LSU/LMU allow transition to the labour market, access to the civil service and/or

regulated professions; they also grant access to research doctorate programmes as well as to all other degree courses of the 3rd cycle.

B) CMU1 consist in advanced scientific courses or higher continuing education studies, open to the holders of a Laurea-L or a foreign comparable degree; admission may be subject to additional conditions. Course length is min. 1 year. The degree Master Universitario di 1° livello-MU1 (1st level university master) is awarded to graduates who have earned 60 credits at least. The MU1 does not give access to DR programmes nor to other 3rd cycle degree courses.

III Third cycle. Postgraduate studies consist of the following typologies of degree courses:

A) Corsi di Dottorato di Ricerca-CDR (research doctorate programmes);

B) Corsi di Specializzazione-CS (specialisation courses);

C) Corsi di Master Universitario di 2° livello-CMU2 (2nd level university master courses).

Credits: degree courses are usually structured in credits (crediti formativi universitari - CFU). A university credit generally corresponds to 25 hours of global work per student, time for personal study included. The average workload of a full time student is conventionally fixed at 60 credits/year.

Classes of Degree Courses: all CL and CLS/CLM sharing the same educational objectives and the same fundamental types of teaching-learning activities are organised in groups called "classi di appartenenza" (classes of degree courses). The content of individual degree courses is autonomously determined by universities; however, when establishing a CL or a CLS/CLM, individual institutions have to adopt some general requirements fixed at the national level. Degrees belonging to the same class have the same legal validity.

Academic Titles: the latest university legislation has defined the academic titles corresponding to the degrees of the Bologna sequence. The L entitles to be called "Dottore", the holders of an LS/LM have a right to the title as "Dottore Magistrale, the DR attributes the title as "Dottore di Ricerca".

Academic Calendar: The basic unit for the Italian higher education system is the academic year, which starts on 1st November and ends on 31st October. However, courses can start as early as September/October and, generally, are held thorough the end of May/middle of June. Teaching activities are divided into two semesters: from September to February and from February to July. There are two half–term holidays, at Christmas and Easter, and a summer holiday, from the end of July to the beginning of the courses of the next academic year.

Regarding the context of the **University of Naples Federico II**, it is one of Italy's largest universities. It has thirteen faculties, eighty-two departments, over 3,000 on the academic staff and more than 4,500 administrators. Current student enrolment is still about 100,000 with 3.124 lecturers and professors.

The university is divided into three Divisions (Poli), which act as semi-independent bodies as regards the teaching and research management for thirteen faculties and eighty-one

departments grouped, within each division, according to academic and research profiles. Thus the Science and Technology Division includes the Faculty of Science (which, in turn, includes the schools of Mathematics, Physics, Natural Science and Biological Science), the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Architecture. The Division of Life Science includes the Faculties of Medicine, Pharmacy, Veterinary Science, Agricultural Science and the recently established Faculty of Biotechnological Science. The Social and Human Science Division includes Economics, Law, Arts, Political Science and Sociology..

There are three types of courses: **1st cycle** (undergraduate), **2nd cycle** (graduate), and **one long cycle degree programmes** (only in Dentistry, Human Medicine, Pharmacy, Veterinary Medicine, Architecture) that differ from the majority of usual Postgraduate studies in the following characteristic features: access is by the Italian school leaving diploma or a foreign comparable qualification; admission is always subject to entrance exams; curricula consist of just one long cycle of 5/6 years (at present, only the course in human medicine takes 6 years), and a total number of 300, 360 ECTS credits. Undergraduate courses are based on a three-year curriculum, graduate courses are for students who are already graduates and the courses last for two years.

The Federico II University services offered to non traditional/disadvantaged students are the following:

Orientation

SOFTel (Servizio Orientamento, Formazione e Teledidattica) develops and coordinates the orientation, and tutoring activities, supports teaching and the use of new technologies in didactics, fosters workshops and training courses after completion of school or university education. Furthermore, SOFTel aims at strengthening the links with high schools, companies, and institutions interested in orientation. SOFTel deals with orientation at all stages of the university career: on first registration, during the university studies, and at graduation.

Specialized Tutoring Services

Specialized Tutoring Services offer activities with the aim of involving students with disabilities in university life by removing any didactic, psychological, pedagogical and technological barriers that prevent him or her to have equal opportunities of study and treatment.

E-learning

Federica is the e-learning portal created by the University of Naples Federico II as an effort to provide free access to academic knowledge: lessons, summaries, research materials, images, videos, links to web-sources. With *Federica* students have a single free access to different learning experience: open education sources, podcasting, living libraries, and *Federica* 3D, the virtual campus. All the materials produced by *Federica* are open access and free of charge. All the 13 Faculties of the University if Naples Federico II participate in the project. With *Federica*, students enrolled on any faculties, also non traditional and disadvantaged student, can use the Federico II learning materials everywhere and at any time.

Counselling

The counselling section offers students who are living in a state of distress, the space to talk about him or herself in order to identify, starting from their personal experience and exploring the emotional state and relational ways of the student; those factors that may obstacle the continuation and completion of their university studies or cause uneasiness and personal dissatisfaction. In detail, the duties of the Counselling Section offered to the student are: Brief Counselling (cycle of four individual meetings), and Extended Counselling (psychological course, with a maximum of 20 meetings, distributed on the basis of the student's needs) and group discussions. Furthermore, the psychologist of the Counselling Section is available for meetings and consultations on specific aspects related to disability for operators, volunteers of the civil service, professors and parents who feel the need to discuss any issues that may arise with the emotional impact that exposure to illness and disability can create.

Facilities

ADISU (Azienda per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario of Regione Campania) assigns, every year, scholarships, student accommodations, and tickets restaurant, for non traditional/disadvantaged students (especially with low income and living far from the University venue) who have successful university careers. This way, ADISU aims at encouraging students with better university marks and social/economical problems to attend university courses.

Part-time working experiences

The University of Naples Federico II offers to non traditional/disadvantaged students with better university marks the opportunity to have a part-time working experience (150 hours) in one of the Universities libraries.

Educational and cultural activities

The Federico II University promotes and supports student associations. At present there are more than fifty student associations which bring together students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. These associations create different initiatives and cultural activities, including sporting and artistic events or even social and political forums.

The current economic crisis that has struck Italy, as well as the rest of Europe, has brought with it over the last eight years, a gradual reduction of funds for public services and, particularly, of the State funds allocated to Italian universities. At the same time, though, universities have been requested in an increasingly insistent way to realize their activities with more efficiency and effectiveness despite economic difficulties and funding cuts. All this has not led to an increase in university fees, but to a great difficulty in supporting services for students.

The Censis Report 2011, however, shows causes for hope: having to face cuts, the Italian universities have been compelled to be more dynamic in terms of fundraising, even at the international level. Over 550 millions Euros arrived between 2008 and 2010 primarily from the

European Union, which corresponds to 86,6% of the total funds, while the remaining 13.4% came from other international stakeholders and from the world of business.

The VI Eurostudent Survey analyzed the life and study conditions of Italian students by examining the academic years from 2000 to 2009. The survey states that four out of ten students can combine study and work (understood as casual work) and the majority of young people deciding to study at university (75%) attend the university courses living in their parents' home and commuting. Commuting is a real "survival strategy" adopted by students, particularly those with disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, who can not afford the costs of living far from home. On average a student pays 1.160 Euros in fees per year.

The number of graduates (as a percentage) with a job is 76.6% whereas in the European Union the average reaches 82.3%. In Italy 50% of those who work have a job position not corresponding to their current qualifications. But similar problems concern also secondary schools: only 75% of young people took a secondary-school diploma and among these only 65% decided to enroll on university degree courses. Furthermore, 20% of the latter did not graduated (Censis, 2011).

There is also an increase in the number of adult students: 7.5% of first year registered students are at least 25 years old, 13% of registered students are aged from 25 to 29 years, 6% are 30 years and over. In addition to economic motivation, students are forced to work in order to be autonomous or through an "anxiety about finding work", because an immediate entry into the world of work will allow them to reduce the time taken looking for a job after graduation. Employers appreciate work experience, besides education. It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that the crisis has eroded the household savings and thus the ability to finance their children's studies, the poorer classes continue to invest in university education, considering a degree as a vehicle for social mobility.

In 2009, 64.7% of students did not receive any economic support (neither a partial exemption from the fees nor an ADISU scholarship, usually assigned together. However, inequality in the geographical distribution of scholarships persists. In 2010, the last year of the survey, the funds used for the provision of scholarships decreased by 60%. As a consequence of this decrease, the amount of the supplementary funds approaches again the level of a decade ago. The challenge consists entirely in the ability of the university system, economic system and policy-makers not to leave students alone to face the impact of the economic crisis and to pay its costs.

2. Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

- Underachieving students

The first problem in studying academic performance of underachieving students concerns the difficulty in definition and identification of the underachieving students. Underachievement is commonly seen as a discrepancy between the level of student's performance and his/her academic potential (Berger, 1990; Berube, 1995; Fascilla, Hanninen & Spritzer, 1991; Johnson, Saccuzzo & Guertin, 1994; Matthews & McBee, 2007).

The underachievers are usually defined as gifted students, that is, students who have skills/competencies to achieve an excellent academic performance, but who, due to numerous factors, do not achieve as much as they could.

Reis and McCoach (2000) proposed an operational definition of underachievement and they asserted that "underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between *expected achievement* (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and *actual achievement* (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations). To be classified as an underachiever, the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement must not be the direct result of a diagnosed learning disability and must persist over an extended period of time. Gifted underachievers are underachievers who exhibit superior scores on measures of expected achievement".

The reasons for the poor performance of the underachieving students were also traced to psychological, relational and social / community factors. The scholars agree that there is no single cause that explains this underachievement (Baum, Renzulli, Hebert, 1995; Myers, 1980) but there are numerous factors, both inside and outside of the formative setting that can contribute to underachievement in gifted students. These include family and community dynamics (e.g., parents' attitudes to school and the role modeling they provide, the nature of home support, sibling rivalry and the loss of a 'special' label), school/university curriculum and teaching methods (rote learning, rigid teaching styles and curriculum content, inexperienced and inflexible teachers) and personality traits (lack of social skills, poor study skills or low metacognitive skills, trouble focusing, low self-esteem or low self-efficacy, trouble connecting effort with outcome) (Baslanti & McCoach, 2006; Berube, 1995; Rimm, 2003; Siegle & McCoach, 2005; Carr et al., 1991; Yu, 1996). Generally, gifted underachieving students are more likely to be male, seemed to come from conflictual family where there is an opposition between parents about educational style and they are influenced by the quality of relationship with their peers (Matthews & McBee, 2007).

Despite the great number of international studies undertaken to analyze the role of these variables on the performance of the underachieving students, only a few studies have focused on Italian underachieving students. Most of the research has analyzed the performance of Italian students using as a criterion for comparison not so much the potential of the student in the academic context, but the optimum performance to be taken into consideration in respect of more general academic criteria, such as the number of exams, the average result in examinations, the time taken to pass exams or to graduate, and the university drop out. In addition, the academic performance has been correlated with the socio-cultural factors, commonly associated with Non Traditional Students (NTS) or Disadvantaged Students (DS), that, according to international and national literature, are often considered a subcategory within the broader category of the underachieving students. Usually, the NTS / DS have poor performance, even if, as is evident from the Italian literature that will be presented below, there is not always a clear relationship between all the characteristics commonly attributed to the NTS / DS and poor performance.

- Non-traditional and disadvantaged students

The research carried out in Italy on the subject has focused primarily on the detection of drop-out rates in our country. The Italian university drop out rate particularly deserved attention for two reasons: it is the highest among OECD countries and has been persistent over the last thirty years. The number of students who graduate is traditionally around 30% of students who enroll on the first year of a university course. This outcome is considered an indicator of low performance of Italian universities.

The attention of researchers has only later focused on the identification of the specific characteristics (purely social, personal and cultural) of the student drop-out that could be considered predictors of university drop out.

These characteristics, which refer to the definition of the profile of the traditionally understood NTS / DS have then been put in relation with the academic performance of students by showing how often, but not always, the NTS / DS are underachieving students who achieve poor academic performance. In particular, the academic performance of these students has been measured in different ways, leading to the identification of three types of students: the so-called drop-out students (who leave the university or change faculty during these years), the Late Graduate Students, (who achieve a degree after the deadline set by the different university systems), and the Inactive Students (who accumulate a delay in passing exams, or in obtaining credits on the first or second year). According to the analyzed research, undoubtedly, there is a close relationship between these three categories of students, because too often inactivity in the first year course leads to the drop-out or the delay in the attainment of a degree. For example, research conducted by Belloc, Maruotti and Petrella (2010) at "La Sapienza" University of Rome, considering more than 11,000 students in 16 faculties of that University, first showed that an exceptionally high percentage of students (37.1%) is composed of "inactive students", that is those who do not pass any exam during the first two years of study. Among those who drop-out of the university, 76% are inactive students. Similarly, 83.6% of those who change faculty are inactive students.

Because of such data, often generalizable to other university contexts, it becomes essential to intervene in favour of inactive students in order to prevent their university drop out.

The Italian studies were focused on a specific type of student, or considered all three types of students with poor performance, outlined above. However, it should be noted that the research in this area is not so well-established, because reliable national database with full individual student records are not available, thus making difficult any empirical work on the issue. Only in recent years researchers have started to systematically explore the determinants of Italian university students performance.

Regarding studies which focus particularly on students' drop out, although the existing empirical literature points to the fact that there is no one simple explanation or solution to help students towards degree completion or fulfillment of their goals, it also shows that one significant factor affects university drop-out more than others, namely the *educational background* (Di Pietro, 2004). Cingano and Cipollone (2003; 2007), for example, studied the determinants of dropout

probability using a representative sample of Italian upper secondary school graduates. They focused in particular on variables as the social-economic status (SES), educational background (EB) and local conditions (LC). First, they found that the family background powerfully impacts on the decision to withdraw from tertiary education: students born to academic fathers are subject to significantly lower withdrawal risk than those born in disadvantaged families. They also found that the individual educational track matters, although part of the educational background effects should also be imputed to socio-economic status of the family, acting through the choice of secondary school.

Checchi et al. (2002; 2003), using administrative data on students enrolled on private and public universities in Italy and applying a formal model of educational investment, found out that the family income does not affect the enrollment process to the university, whereas the *parental background* definitely counts for the degree completion. Moreover, they discovered that being a member of richer families reduces the time to get a degree and the probability of drop out because those students have better chances in the labor market as a result of the family networking.

Aina (2005), in an another study conducted with a sample of 1,489 people between 18 and 28 years old who were living with their parents or at least with one of them, analyzed the determinants of students' propensity to drop out of university. The data set includes many variables related to the family background, such as the educational qualifications of parents, marital status, family size but it does not contain any information about students abilities and faculties. The aim was to evaluate the probability of being enrolled on university, of drop out and getting a degree, given a specific parental background. She investigated the drop out phenomenon stressing the importance of parents' characteristics in order to observe if the intergenerational transmission does count in terms of positive university outcome. She highlights the importance of the family background in the withdrawal decisions: students having parents with low education increase the probability of drop out of 50% compared to those who have graduate parents. She also found that students who live with just one parent (because of widowhood or divorce) have fewer chances of getting a degree and, at the same time, being a member of small family reduces the rate of drop out. There is also evidence that drop out is higher during the first years of university, especially for male and worker students. The main and interesting result is related to the fact that the withdrawal decision is deeply influenced by parental characteristics. This evidence showed how "poor" family environment affects the probability of enrolling on the university as well as the probability of drop out emphasizing that the family background transmission does matter in term of university performance and it is responsible for the persistent segregation in educational achievement.

A study by Schizzerotto (2003) analyzes dropouts from "Università di Milano Bicocca". Results highlight factors which bear on dropout probability more than others; the author finds that age of students at the time of enrollment, secondary school educational background and marks in secondary school leaving qualification, as well as distance between the university and student's home are crucial factors.

Boero *et al.* (2005) look at two universities (University of Cagliari and University of Tuscia) and find that the probability to complete a university degree course is highly influenced by differences in students educational background when they enter university. Then, consistently with

the existing empirical literature, find that the high school type and final mark have a statistically significant effect on drop-out probability.

In a recent paper, Belloc *et al.* (2010) study university dropouts in Italy using data from the School of Economics of "Università di Roma La Sapienza". The authors find interesting data contrasting with existing literature: contrary to what the predominant literature have suggested, they find that male students drop-out less likely than women and that adult students (often workers) have a lower probability of drop-out maybe because they have strong motivations to conclude the degree course once they have enrolled. Similar results have been obtained about non Italian students. While to study in one's own city does not affect the probability of withdrawal, non Italian students drop-out of the university less likely than Italians do. According to the authors, this happens for two reasons: first, foreign system of secondary education are probably better than the Italians in supplying students with the educational skills required to successfully undertake a degree program; secondly, foreign students that study in Italy have a high incentive to conclude the university program on which they enrolled, because of the high fixed costs (both financial and psychological) that they bear in transferring to an other country different from their own. Contrary to what might be intuitively expected, the higher the secondary school final mark, the higher the probability of university withdrawal; so, those students who attended general high schools (licei) are more likely to drop-out of the university. The authors interpret this result suggesting that dropouts would reveal a dissatisfaction of those students with regard to the university degree chosen. Moreover, their empirical investigation shows a statistically significant impact of students characteristics such as income on dropouts. In fact, being the lowest income class the benchmark, having a medium economic status does not have any significant effect, while those students in the highest income class are more likely to drop-out. The fact that lower class students drop-out less likely than rich ones is probably due to financial pressures, which still influences university student success. In an another study, Belloc et al. (2011) on a sample of students of "La Sapienza" University of Rome found that, contrary to the works of Boero *et al.* [8], there was a non-linear relation between students' income and drop-out probability. Indeed, their empirical results show that medium-income students are the least likely to withdraw from the university, while very poor and very rich students are more likely to do so. This may suggest that, on the one hand, bad economic conditions make retention difficult, and that, on the other hand, high-income students may have lower motivations to graduate.

Regarding Italian studies concerning underachieving students – not only students who completely drop out the university curriculum – they have focused on both the cumulative delay in the entire university career, and the aggregate delay during the first year. For example, the study of Triventi and Trivellato (2007; 2009), analyzed two types of Italian students having low academic performance: drop-out students (the students who don't complete their studies and leave university without obtaining the degree) and Late graduates who represents the percentage of graduates who have obtained the degree after the formal end of the attained program. They found that in Italy there are not only inequalities in enrollments and graduations as traditional research has shown, but also disparities in the way students conduct their studies. In particular, the resources of the family of origin affect the risk of dropping-out, of having a postponed graduation and the duration of the delay in gaining the degree when this goal is reached. So upper classes not only have more

opportunities than working classes to enter university and obtain a degree, they also have less chances of dropping-out, and graduating behind schedule.

Gitto, Minervini and Monaco (2011) in their study about Italian university dropouts, analyzed the number of dropouts both for university students who enroll for the first time and all other university students, proxied by the number of students who did not obtain any university credit (CFU). On the basis of MIUR data, they demonstrated that the number of students who have not earned any learning credits by the end of their first academic year after enrollment is also noteworthy. The number of university students who are inactive (they have not earned learning credits for some time, and have been therefore stuck in their university career) tends to decrease; nevertheless, the reduction in the number of first year students who do not get credits is of small proportion. Information about students' background, as seen in other studies, verified the positive correlation between a good performance at school and university results. While the liceo (corresponding to the general school) is usually expected to provide a strong background for further academic studies, professional and technical institutes usually have work and practical skill orientations. A positive correlation between university dropouts and quota of students coming from professional institutes instead of liceo, confirmed this hypothesis. Similarly, the grade at the secondary school leaving qualification should corroborate the intuition that students who did well at high school are likely to succeed at university. While this second hypothesis is confirmed by results, so that students who obtained a grade between 90 and 100 (best result) achieved credits during their first year at university, they note that quotas of students who attended professional or technical institutes as well as liceo are positively correlated with inactivity at university (although the estimated coefficient is higher for professional institutes): such a result might be a signal of a general worsening in the education level reached by students when they enroll on the university, independently of the type of high school attended in the past. Overall, it would seem that variables related to demand (students' background) are more relevant than those related to supply (university degree courses) in explaining credit acquisition for new enrolled university students.

Aina (2011) studies the determinants of the length of time required to attain a degree with data provided by the Consorzio AlmaLaurea on Italian graduates from 46 universities, referring to students who took the degree in 2008. The significance of this topic arises from the observation that Italian tertiary education system is characterized by an average time to undergraduate degree that is longer than the minimum prescribed period since there is no official limit to the number of years that a student can be enrolled on a program of study. Delayed undergraduate degrees are common in Italy despite the major changes to the education system following the 2001 reform. When the length of course programs was reduced from 4/6 years to 3 years, a substantial increase in the number of students graduating within the prescribed legal time span was expected. However, according to the national statistics, slightly fewer than 30% of students graduate within the prescribed period (ISTAT 2008).

Several characteristics of the institutional framework help to explain this poor performance of Italian students in terms of time to complete their degree course. First, relatively free university access results in poorly motivated and unqualified students enrolling on university courses, which increases dropout rates and average time to degree.

Second, the reduction in tuition fees for students continuing after the official duration of their undergraduate courses does not encourage graduation within the minimum period. Third, until

recently, the Italian university funding system did not provide any incentive to reduce the quota of students not graduating on time. Aina finds that women, who represent the majority of the graduate population, are overall more likely than males to earn their degree in a shorter time. If we look at the initial conditions, students with a general high school diploma (licei) and higher final grade get the degree more quickly. The link between parents' education and graduation time, as expected, is negative, so higher is parents' education, lower is the time to graduate. The mobility variable, which indirectly captures motivation and ambition, together with the family's capability to provide financial support, shows that students who attend a university outside their home province complete the university curriculum more quickly. However, taking occasional jobs during university and having to rent a flat reduces the chances of graduating within the minimum period. As expected, the number of sessions needed to graduate is inversely proportional to class attendance. Finally, descriptive statistics highlight that there are considerable geographical differences in terms of average time for getting the degree. Students attending universities located in the south of Italy seem to take longer (stay enrolled for more terms) than students at universities in the north.

As far as the research realized within the context of the University Federico II is concerned, there are few studies on the relationship between the delay in graduating and variables referable to characteristics typically associated with the NTS/DS. In a research by Piccolo & Iannario (2008), conducted on a sample of 2324 Political Sciences graduates at the University of Naples Federico II, the authors identified a significant relationship between gender and delay in graduating: in particular, women spend less time in getting the degree than their male university mates. And, moreover, the former graduate with higher marks. In an another study by Piccolo (2008), based on a large data set of Political Sciences graduates at the University of Naples Federico II, the author shows how the final marks are related to students' background and career. In particular, he finds that the getting of the degree and the final mark depend on gender and secondary school diploma marks: women with higher marks at the high school leaving qualifications succeed in graduating earlier and with higher marks.

In conclusion, the Italian research conducted in this field shows the difficulty in defining the specific characteristics of Italian students with poor academic performance, measured both in terms of drop-out and delay. Despite some significant variables (related to income, type of high school attended and the mark in the high school diploma) the only variable always associated with poor academic performance is parental background, understood primarily in terms of educational/cultural level, rather than socio-economic level: the higher the parents' educational level, the more likely the students are to obtain a good academic performance.

3. Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

In the University Federico II of Naples, which is a Mega State university2, it has been observed that from 2008 to data, there have been 390.841 enrolled students, of which 219.014 are women (56.04%) and 171.827 are men (43.96%).

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2   Censis includes the University Federico II as a Mega-University. This means that it has a large number of enrolled students (data of the academic year 2008/2009).

From a detailed analysis of the characteristics of students across the student population there have been:

- 25,665 working students (6.56%);

- 112,436 "fuori sede" students [students living outside the Region of Naples] (28.76%);

- 2,038 foreign students (0.52%).

As regards, however, the types of enrollment, the University Federico II records:

- 18,222 "studenti ripetenti" [students who have not achieved a number of credits required to access the next academic year and, therefore, are obliged to repeat the year by filling in the gaps reported] (4.66%);

- 129,142 "fuori corso" students [students failing to get a degree in the prescribed time] (33.04%).

In addition, specific categories of students represent a significant portion of the entire student population, as shown by the following data.

- 0.14% of the working students are "studenti ripetenti" and 98.87% are "fuori corso" students;

- 4.61% of the "fuori sede" students" are "studenti ripetenti" and 36.58% are "fuori corso" students;

- 7.1% of the foreign students are "studenti ripetenti" and 30% are "fuori corso" students.

The percentage of "studenti ripetenti" and "fuori corso" students is the same between men and women. This makes us reflect on the fact that today it is an understatement to consider women as a disadvantaged group, by virtue of their gender.

With regard to students enrolled on the three year degree course, during the past 4 years there have been 309,663 registered for the first year: 58.18% of these are "in corso" [students who have passed the exams in the prescribed time], 34.24% "fuori corso" [students failing to get a degree in the prescribed time], 5.61% "ripetenti" [students who have not achieved a number of credits required to access the next academic year and, therefore, are obliged to repeat the year by filling in the gaps reported], and 1.93% *sub conditione*.

73.01% of the enrolled students have a high school diploma from a general school. 60.35% of these are "in corso" and 32.71% are "fuori corso".

43.47% of students who attended a general school have a low grade high school diploma, while 56.51% have a higher grade.

50.3% of students who attended a vocational school have a low grade high school diploma, while 49.67% have a higher grade.

27.03% of students attended a vocational school. 52.2% of these are "in corso", and 38.46%

"fuori corso".

46.38% of students from a vocational school have a low grade high school diploma, while 53.54% have a higher grade.

These data seem to confirm the European data according to which a low grade high school diploma corresponds to a higher probability of university failure.

Furthermore, it can be noticed how the percentage of students from general education institutions has increased from 70.63% to 73.85% over the last 4 years. These data can be read in the light of the new trend affecting the whole of Europe in these times of crisis and recession, in which it is increasingly difficult to find work, namely that families invest in the education of their children, enrolling them on general schools that can give them a good preparation in order to attend university in the best way.

1.2. US Baseline Report

1. National, cultural and institutional context

The University of Seville is among the oldest in Europe. It comprises 31 centres and 125 departments which teach 70 undergraduate programs and 44 masters. More than 68,000 students were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in 2009-10, as well as another 7077 that were attending to languages classes or lifelong learning courses (University of Seville Yearbook, 2010).

Under the "Napoleonic" system of Higher Education (HE) adopted by Spain in the nineteenth century, universities were completely regulated by laws and norms specified by the State. This strictly regulated HE system was very much an elitist system. This situation began to change during the 1970s, when the system started to shift – as elsewhere in Europe - from an elite

to a mass higher education system. After the restoration of democracy following Franco's dictatorship between 1939 and 1975, the promulgation of the new constitution in 1978 stated that university transformation was one of the main objectives of both academics and political parties in Spain.

Since then, there has been an important process of political and administrative decentralization. At present, Spain has fifty public universities (taking up 91% of all student registrations) and 27 non-state universities (9% of registrations). Of these private universities, one third of them are owned by the Catholic Church.

In spite of the historical determinants in our country, long time underneath a dictatorship, the educational system in general, and the HE system in particular are relatively open in their approach. Public HE institutions are better situated than private ones at national and international rankings. Also, the cost of HE, though in constant increase, is below that of universities in many European countries, being the average cost for a complete degree (240 credits) around 3.512€ (MEC, 2011).

Since 1971, an especial measure has significantly contributed to equity in access to HE for 25-year older students that do not meet the requirements of the traditional route for access (upper-secondary education plus entrance examination). These mature students can gain access to university simply by passing an especial examination. That means that their access is not conditioned on the basis of their academic marks in case of places limitations. This had promoted the access to university for a 9 per cent of students by 2006 (Eurostat, 2009). This is an ever-increasing trend as new similar measures have just been approved.

The most significant legal contribution to access policy is specified in the University access regulations (RD 558/2010 and RD 1892/2008). This is one valuable development in the establishment of some level of positive discrimination to improve access to university for traditionally disadvantaged groups, reserving a certain percentage of places in courses leading to official degrees. Some of the advancements that this regulation implies are:

a) First, it unifies previously dispersed concessions into a single legal body.

b) It balances the access requirements for high school and vocational education students, in cases of high demand degrees. While high school students had to complete the entrance examination to access HE, vocational students were granted a reserve of 30 per cent of places. In certain degrees, the number of places applied for by students is greater than the number of places offered, and the different access conditions inform a slight advantage for vocational students.

c) It also expands the non-traditional routes to access to university by creating two new ones: access for people over 40 years - for which only professional experience is required - and for people over 45 years - for which an entrance examination is required.

d) Finally, the system provides a special reserve of 5 per cent of places for disabled students.

These developments have been reinforced through the Statute of the Students (RD 1791/2010) which provides the regulations of the rights and duties of university students. Likewise, this Statute promotes important improvements in the services that university provides for students in general, and disadvantaged students in particular, by:

- Establishing the need for developing insertion and guidance programs in order to facilitate the integration of disadvantages students in the institution.

- Promoting the equality of opportunities in the access.

- Fostering conciliation of studies with family and working life.

- Creating new figures aimed to promote better guidance and attention to special needs students. These new figures are the Degree tutor and the Special Needs Students' tutor.

According with this new decree, all Spanish universities are currently developing their own and specific Students' Statutes. Among them, it is the university of Seville, which already had a General Students' Regulation (Acuerdo 3/CU 19-03-2009) that contained important measures aimed at students attention: insertion activities, mentoring programs, career services as well as training courses for the development of the basic academic skills (ICT and languages).

This US Regulations pays special attention to some groups of students who are initially considered as potentially disadvantaged:

e) Disabled students.

f) Pregnant students or those with family burdens.

g) Students in need to combine working and academic life.

h) Talented sportswomen and sportsmen.

i) Those experiencing serious situations (victims of mistreatment, of gender violence and of terrorism).

All the above mentioned groups receive a preferential treatment in the support and advice services of the university, and also have curricular adaptations or special paths according with their specific academic needs.

However, it does not seem that some of these measures have been reinforced (for instance, curricular adaptations) beyond the implementation of the access courses or the courses for the use of ITC. Anyway, the type of services that US offers might meet some of the special needs of disadvantaged students. All services are initially offered to all students and they can provide support in issues like employment, grants and economic aid, and psychological, social, legal and pedagogical assistance, among others. Only two services in our university are directly targeted to non-traditional students: the Aid to Students with Disability and the Attention Services for the Foreign Community. Also, there is a specific Guidance Service focused on access which not only provides counselling for students who want to go into university, but also promotes guidance programs for upper-secondary and vocational educational teachers and counsellors.

It is important to note that in the vast majority of the services, the kind of intervention implemented has to be required by the users - for instance, legal or psychological assistance -. This intervention could be described as sporadic, limited to specific aspects and always on demand, and the actions implemented are based on a problem-solving approach instead of being continuous and planned.

Adding to this, the current economical crisis affects to these important legal advances. On the one hand, the unemployment rate raised to 21.5 at the end of 2011 (National Statistics Institute, 2011) with a total amount of 4.98 millions of unemployed. In Andalusia, data are even worse as there is a 30.93% of unemployed people, reaching the 53.70% in the case of young people under 25 years old.

On the other, the crisis has already conditioned university budgets which have been considerably reduced. The consequences of this reduction are obvious: the cuts in the teacher'

and student' body, as well as the lack of funds for research and teaching, and, in general, for Bologna Reform.

As many young graduates cannot find a job, they tend to extend their training by enrolling again in higher education. Even those workers with a degree, who have lost their jobs, make the decision to return to university searching for a very specialized education (like masters degree) that could enhance their employment opportunities. This is being a very frequent fact among the professions involved in construction and building (architect, engineer), for long time considered the ones with the best career prospects. Nowadays, many of these brand-new unemployed architects or engineers turn their eyes to the Master in Secondary Education, which leads to the stability and security of a civil servant job. As a result, the university is receiving a high demand of places from people above 25 years.

A further consequence of the economical crisis is the shift of the employment and social dynamics. In this sense, many young people are now more inclined to accept mobility to other areas with better career opportunities. That happens in professionals such as nurses, medical

doctors or even engineers, who expand the job search to the European job market instead of remaining unemployed in their country.

2. Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

Literature on HE in Spain has paid little attention to the importance of developing understanding of the experience of university students. Beyond basic socio-demographic profiles and specific aspects such as the needs of disabled students, or the factors related to drop-out, there is a huge lack of information about cultural and cognitive characteristics of students (Ariño et al., 2008).

For instance, terms like "underachievers", "disadvantaged" or "non-traditional" students are scarcely used in the Spanish context to refer to the ever increasing non-conventional populations coming into HE that might experience some difficulty in getting adapted to the institution or getting a final success in their graduation. This lack of discussion of the groups' experience, added to the inexistence of official records on their characteristics- shows the invisibility of the students, both for those in charge of decision-making and regulations, and for those researching in the field; an 'invisible majority' (McNair, 1998) if we consider the data we are presenting here.

Other related terms have occasionally filled the gap of more direct recognition of "disadvantaged" and 'non-traditional' students. Thus, *mayor de 25* (older than 25, mature) is the most frequently used term, referring to those who enter university via an access route designed for this age group: In Spain since 1971, applicants without admission qualifications can enter HE via an entrance examination. This entrance examination is only open to those 25 years old or older.

Disabled is also commonly used to describe all students with special needs. However, other circumstances, such as having a low educational and/or socio-economic background, being the first generation in the family to access HE, or having family commitments, do not exist as categories of possible disadvantaged students in Spain. Hence, not being named, students with these characteristics are included in the general mass of students, regardless of the differences they might present.

More recently, the Statute of the Student (RD 1791/2010) acknowledges for the first time the part-time student condition and establishes the need of special measures aiming to promote their qualification through flexible educational paths.

According to Eurostudent (2008), 38 per cent of Spanish students are 25-years or older, in comparison with the EU average of 34 percent. This has been an ever-increasing trend during the last 10 years, as the age structure in graduate and postgraduate programs has significantly changed, and the number of people under 30 years has doubled while the percentage of students below 25 has dropped 10 points since 1999-00 (MEC, 2011). Thus, the number of 'traditional' students accessing HE is decreasing and this trend will continue in coming years (Angoitia and

Rahona, 2007). The high percentage of mature students is seen as a direct consequence of the aforementioned special route of access.

Other relevant features of non-traditional students in Spain are the following (Eurostudent, 2008; MEC 2011):

- 1.9 of students feel impaired in their studies by disability.

- 4.1 per cent of students have dependent children.

- 4.1 of graduate students come from overseas. Most of them (45.6 per cent) come from Latin America and the Caribs, but also from EU27 (30.7 per cent) and North Africa (7.4 per cent).

- The percentage of students from a disadvantaged social background, according to parents' educational level, is 28.37 (father) and 33.85 (mother), and 3.5 per cent of students have parents with low incomes.

Likewise, the number of students entering university after completing vocational education is also increasing. These students enter university with a mean age of 23 years, and with a much stronger practical training but less generic education than upper secondary students (Bejarano and Flores, 2011).

According to this data, a significant percentage of Spanish university students are seen to be 'non-traditional' or even "disadvantaged". For example, taking only age as a criterion, over one third of students are mature, as well as almost 30 percent coming from families with low levels of education. Given that existing statistics are scarce and limited - for example, only accounting for students of other nationalities but not those from other ethnic groups -, they show a high percentage of university participation by non-traditional students, and more importantly, an upward trend in recent years.

Despite the increasing volume they represent, there remain few studies that have delved into the characteristics of disadvantaged students in Spain. Mature and disabled students are the groups that have received some attention from researchers. Regarding mature students, the vast majority of them enroll in social science degrees, and some surveys (Bermejo et al., 2011) – working with non-representative samples - found a dropout rate of approximately 22 percent, highlighting problems including the difficulty of combining paid work and studies, lack of effective study habits, and the perception of a lower level of skills compared to younger peers.

In general, these students seem to have a more responsible attitude towards study, and know better what they want and how to go about achieving this (Zabalza, 2004). However, they complain that teachers often do not acknowledge their presence in class and, thus, their previous experience can rarely be drawn on in class (Adiego, Asensio and Serrano, 2004).

As to disabled students, some researchers (Castellana and Salas, 2005; Moriña, 2011) have focused on their particular needs, finding that teaching staff are perceived as the main barrier to participation, mainly due to inflexible attitudes and non-inclusive methodologies used in

lectures. For this reason, commentators point to the need to provide specific training to teachers to address special needs effectively (Sánchez Palomino, 2009).

Regarding social class, many Spanish academics do not perceive it as an important issue, despite evidence that university students bring with them structural factors related to their family origin, which impact degree choice, and the length of time spent to complete a degree (Solano, Frutos and Cárceles, 2004). It is sometimes supposed that, after having entered HE, there is

equality among students, regardless their social or family backgrounds (González Monteagudo and Ballesteros, 2011a). The main supposition informing this perspective is that students with fewer economic resources will have access to grants and financial support, and that this is all they need to access university.

A recent review of previous research in Spain (Cabrera et al., 2006a) showed a list of indicators that have been associated with success in higher education:

- Persistence to finish the degrees despite the obstacles.

- Motivation towards the degree.

- Effort inverted in favour of future achievements.

- Adjustment between their skills and the degree requirements.

- Satisfaction with the degree in course.

- Ability to delay the rewards.

- Ability to overcome difficulties.

- Long-term clear goals.

- Ability to firmly head to the future.

- Perseverance in keeping their plans.

- Perseverance in the daily work.

- Attendance to lectures and tutorials.

- Attitude to asking teacher when they have doubts.

- Habit of looking over the subjects previously studied.

- Habit of keeping subjects up to date.

Many of these indicators also appears as relevant in the narrative study of González Monteagudo and Ballesteros (2011b) carried out with non-traditional students in the University of Seville. In addition, these authors stress the influence on academic success of factors like the family support (specially the stable economic situation) and the previous academic background.

However, many students had a lack of training in academic skills (to search for and filter information, to write essays, to study for examinations). They did not have good preparation for this in secondary schools. And also usually universities do not have specific programmes to improve academic skills during the first year or semester. Lecturers in the same study (González Monteagudo and Ballesteros, 2011b) also stressed the need of implementing short courses, seminars and other activities during the first and second semester to overcome deficiencies in this domain.

All the data provided in the previous sections are from the national context, and little or none information can be added in relation to the University of Seville. It is hard to make an accurate estimation of the number of possible disadvantaged students in our university as statistics only reflect their age and nationality. If we go by the data collected in the Yearbooks of the university, the percentage of 25-years or older students has increased by nearly 3 points since 2002-03, currently being 29.82 per cent in the graduate courses. That means that almost 1 out of 3 students are 'non-traditional' according to their age. Likewise, the percentage of students from abroad has remained relatively stable since 2002-03, having nowadays reached 2.27 per cent. These students mainly come from Africa, Latin America and other EU countries.

Surprisingly, there are not official statistics in the US that deals with the progress of the students across their studies and degrees. What are the retention or drop-out or underachievement rates? No information is provided regarding this point, and it is not possible to determine the percentage of students with low achievement, neither identify the personal or situational characteristics associated with failure or underachievement in the university. Only some researches carried out in other national universities –presented in the next paragraph- offer information about retention or drop-out rates.

3. Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

A recent OECD report (Santiago et al., 2009) suggested that little emphasis is placed on student progression through tertiary studies, with little special support or follow-up measures to assist those students who experience more difficulties. There is little evidence that students' progress is closely followed by teachers and that students for whom a disadvantaged background has been identified receive any particular attention. As a consequence, we lack detailed, in-depth information about how non-traditional/disadvantaged students in Spain progress through university, what needs they present, what they demand from university institutions, or even, how they experience their daily lives on campus.

The percentage of people between 25-64 who have graduated in university is 27% in Spain, while in Europe and OECD countries is 39 and 38% respectively (OECD, 2011). One report on University Quality (Consejo de Coordinación Universitaria, 2002), showed that only 26% of graduated students get their diplomas in the original time of the Study Plan. The drop-out rate, for all degrees, is 26%. However, statistics on dropout and continuation of studies provide little or no account of the rate of retention of disadvantaged students, and the sparse existing data from

international studies does not consider socio-demographic characteristics. According to Eurostat (2009), the completion rate in Spain is 74 per cent. This figure decreases drastically in the case of students of 25 or more years whose parents have low educational background, only 20 per cent of whom have completed tertiary education. This percentage is somewhat higher than the average European Union (17 per cent for EU-25).

Some reports (Hernández Armentero, 2004) presented different drop-out rates for each Spanish university, fluctuating between 5 and 36.83%. In analyzing the national data, two factors appear (Cabrera et al., 2006a): Firstly, the greatest drop-out rates occurs in the first year (around the 60% of the total drop-out); and, secondly, the Humanities and the Technical degrees are the ones with the highest rates of failure. In the research of González Monteagudo and Ballesteros (2011b) with non-traditional students in US, the moment of entry into university appeared as crucial, as many students interviewed considered that at the moment of access to university there was a feeling of deep disorientation.

However, some studies (Cabrera et al., 2006b; Corominas, 2001) showed that an important percentage –around a 60%- of students who have dropped out, start a new degree or continue the same degree in other university. This suggests that the abandon phenomenon is not strictly a drop-out, but an academic failure derived from a low achievement.

As indicated before, no data on drop-out and retention are available regarding the US. Hernández Armentero's report (2004) showed a drop-out rate of 14% for our university, but these data are for the 2002/03 academic year and do not differentiate among courses nor degrees. Taking into account the last Academic Yearbook of the US (2011, covering date from the 2010/11 academic year), we can only know that the number of graduates in 2011 -which is 6.988- has varied only slightly since 2005-06.

1.3. NSPAS Baseline Report

1. National, cultural and institutional context

In the last years, education in Romania has become more dynamic and ready to open itself to the world. Reports issued by the European Union and other independent expert organizations confirm this. Moreover, the presence of more than 20,000 foreign students from over 100 countries in Romanian universities in the last years has enriched the academic community and has proved that it begins to gain back its prestige and cosmopolitan tradition.

Higher education institutions are both public and private and include universities, academies, polytechnic institutes, institutes and colleges. Public education is still at the core of the system, being recommended by quality standards.

The studying cycles have been changed to correspond to the structure outlined in the Bologna Declaration: undergraduate studies (3 years), graduate studies (2 years), doctoral studies (3 years), with an impact on the curricula offered to students. Transferable credits allow greater student mobility and efforts are constantly being made to ensure the quality of the teaching process. Flexibility and modern teaching systems striving to give qualifications increasingly relevant to the labor market are now key elements in universities.

Founded in 1990, the **National School of Political and Administrative Studies** (NSPAS) is a public institution of higher education located in Bucharest. The university educates and promotes tomorrow's leaders, scholars and professionals. NSPAS is a dynamic institution that generates creative energy, seeking to break down the traditional divide between academia and practical issues. It offers degrees in five major fields of study: Communication and Public Relations, Political Sciences, Public Administration, Management, and International Relations.

The National School of Political and Administrative Studies has defined itself as a trademark on the Romanian higher education market. The academic programs offered are accredited by the National Centre for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation, which is the certification body for higher education in Romania.

Currently, NSPAS prepares future specialists in the following major domains: Public Administration and European Administration (Faculty of Public Administration), Sociology and Political Sciences (Faculty of Political Sciences), International Relations and European Studies (Department of International Relations), Communication and Public Relations, Advertising and Psychology (Faculty of Communication and Public Relations) and Management (Faculty of Management).

Thus, the National School of Political and Administrative Studies seeks to equip future professionals in the fields of Political Sciences, Communication, International Relations, Management and Public Administration with the necessary theoretical and professional skills that will allow them to organize, coordinate, and manage specific activities. Also, NSPAS is centered on developing research-driven actions in its fields of expertise and promoting academic cooperation with prestigious national and international institutions.

NSPAS offers several undergraduate, graduate and professional programs in 5 major fields of study:

FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS (FC&PR)

1. 3-year undergraduate studies (BA)

2. 2-year graduate studies (MA and MSc)

3. 3-year doctoral studies (PhD)

FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

1. 3-year undergraduate studies (BA)

2. 2-year graduate studies (MA)

3. 3-year doctoral studies (PhD)

FACULTY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

1. 3-year undergraduate studies (BA)

2. 2-year graduate studies (MA)

3. 3-year doctoral studies (PhD)

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. 2-year graduate studies (MA)

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT

2. 3-year undergraduate studies (BA)

Undergraduate studies are offered to high-school graduates or college graduates wishing to obtain a second BA degree. In the case of FC&PR, the Bachelor of Arts degree allows students to pursue a career in the fields of: Public Relations, Advertising, and Image construction, Mass-media, Political Marketing, Managerial Communication, Commercial and Political Negotiations, Political Analysis, Crisis Management, Human Resources Management, International Public Relations, Project Management.

Being a public institution, the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences assumes its obligations and responsibilities accordingly to the values and efficiency criteria distinctive for the functioning in the public sector: assuring equal opportunities for education to all the students, by relating only to their motivation and abilities, increased sensibility towards the social and economic European and Romanian conditions and towards the interests of the students or alumnus towards acquiring the right competences in view of making them able to pursue competitive careers and enhance their economic and social status, the support and development of values that concern the quality, trust, responsibility and accountability towards the citizens and the direct beneficiaries-the students. The activity NSPAS is based on the principle of university autonomy, conceived as a specific manner of self-government and exercise of academic rights in

the frame established by the Romanian Constitution, the Law of Education, other national regulations and own regulations.

Thus, the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences shares the principles stipulated by the *Magna Chart of European University* (Bologna, 1988) and by *the Bologna Declaration* (1999) and, starting with the academic year of 2005-2006, the university instruction is organized according to the principles of the Bologna Process.

Through its activity, the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences set itself to promote an efficient and constructive link between the academic angle-representing the effective process of education-and the aspects that concern the scientific research activities, specific for its domains of activity. These two directions of involvement are based on the European vocation of NSPAS, identifiable to the level of assumed and promoted values, of the spirit in which the institution structures its programs, to the level of academic cooperation with other foreign universities, as well as at the level of aspirations towards an academic and scientific recognition which surpasses the boarders of the national space.

The academic mission of NSPAS is centered on assuring an educational demarche which is focused on obtaining performance at the level of all forms of education proposed and on forming elite of specialists in the areas of Political, Administrative, Social and Economic Sciences. Thus, the preparation of students accordingly to the formation and development of the core competencies established as standards of education at the national level, in the areas of Public Administration, Political Sciences and Communication Studies. In the same time, the assurance of a solid formation -considered to be an essential baseline of attaining competitiveness on the marketplace represents a priority. The fasten to the European practices are focused on integrating the main directions for action in the programs offered as well as the implementation of measures relied to the new forms of education which, together with the classical ones, will contribute to the enhancement of the level of preparation of those who are already engaged on the marketplace: continual formation and distance learning.

The mission regarding the academic research is focused on underlying a viable policy in the fields of study, in order to allow the affirmation of NSPAS as a redoubtable pole of investigating the processes and phenomenon observable at the level of the Romanian society from the perspective of the social sciences. From this angle, structures like the research centers and doctoral schools have been created, in order to consolidate a fundamental environment of developing in order to initiate and sustain these projects. Moreover, a constant of the scientific concernment is represented by the involvement of students in the research activities, fact that contributes essentially to their academic formation.

The Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (CC&PR) offers BA degrees in the following fields: Communication and Public Relations, Psychology and Advertising. CC&PR has become a leader in Communication Studies education with a strong commitment to advancing theoretical knowledge and building up employment-related skills. It is a young college striving to find its place in contemporary environment, where the pace of change makes flexibility, adaptability and openness mandatory. Education at CC&PR is pragmatically oriented allowing its students' careers to gain momentum in an increasingly competitive field. Collaborative projects between faculty and students, between faculty and alumni are evidence that this college not only attracts but also retains the best. Conceiving evolution as a series of successful projects and placing students

at the heart of all our endeavors define the College of Communication and Public Relations as a trademark on the Romanian educational market.

The Faculty of Communication and Public Relations offers 2-year graduate programs in the following fields: MA in Communication and Public Relations; MA in Advertising; MA in Broadcasting; MA in Political Communication; MA in Brand Management and Corporate Communication; MSc in Communication and Organizational Behavior; MSc in Project Management; MSc in Human Resources Management; MSc in Business Communication; MSc in Education Management and Institutional Communication; MSc in Project Management (taught in English); MA in Communication and Advertising (taught in English).

Also, the Faculty of Communication offers a 3-year doctoral program in Communication Studies. The program is designed to cover research in major areas of scientific interest in the field of Communication Studies, such as Media and Culture, Globalization and Communication, Mass media and Society, Multiculturalism and the Media, New media, Media and Education, Virtual communicational communities, Media, culture and Identity, Media and the Public Sphere, Communication and sustainable development, Communication and democracy, etc.

Beginning with 2008, students from EU countries may apply for a doctoral scholarship funded by the EC through the project "Doctoral scholarships supporting research: Competitiveness, quality, and cooperation in the European Higher Education Area". The project is currently implemented within the Doctoral School of NSPAS and has received funding from the SOP Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

The Romanian system of accumulating and transferring credits is based on the European system ECTS and is brought under regulation by the Ministry of Education and Research for the standardization at the national level of the implementation procedures. In this context, every institution of Higher Education has its autonomy in defining its own transfer credit system suited to the study programs.

The credits measure the workload, respectively the time of study necessary for a standard student in order to obtain at an average level the results specified for a discipline or a study program. The credits do not evaluate the teacher's activity (didactic activity), but the one of the student (learning activity). Workload necessary to obtain the expected results regards all the activities individually accomplished: participation to classes, seminars and tutorial classes, individual study, projects, exams and practical activities.

The standard student is the student who exempted from the previous educational cycle with average and hard upon the average general results at the disciplines that are relevant to further pursuing of studies.

The standard study duration of a discipline is the semester. The normal loading of a semester is conventionally quantified with 30 credits. The eventual exceptions must be compensated during the current year, so that an academic year must be composed of 60 credits. The option for quantifying a semester with 30 credits is based on the evaluation system conveyed in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which assigns to the student's workload a number of 60 credits. A credit corresponds to an intellectual workload equivalent to

approximately 25 hours, in which are included a student's course, seminar, or tutorial class hours, as well as independent study hours.

The credits are assigned on study disciplines or activities independently evaluated. The credit assignment represents the recognition of the time for study necessary for the advancement from the level of preliminary requirements to the level of the planned result. The recognized time includes as well as the participation at courses, seminaries, tutorial classes and other practical activities, the activities independently accomplished: documentation, projects, research papers, individual study.

The baseline for the credit allocation can start from the number of hours of didactic activity, but differentiated on types of activities (course, seminars, and tutorial classes), the necessary time for study being different for each activity. For example, it must be considered the fact that the disciplines which are finalized by an exam require a supplementary time for study in the examination session. The calculus is made by considering the whole workload necessary to be accomplished by the students.

The credits are allocated to the student only by passing the discipline or the activity which is independently evaluated. Assigning credits signified that for the obtained result at the evaluation a certain workload is required, the credits being inscribed alongside the marks in all documents during the term time.

Obtaining the compulsory credits (for advancement) can be delayed during one study cycle. The credits can be obtained in advance and can be reported during the next semesters (the mobility of the credits). The credits obtained during other programs can be integrated in the current program throughout the acceptance procedures (if the content differences are noticeable, but tolerable), throughout recognition (the differences of content are noticeable, but the finalities are identical), or throughout assimilation (the content is identical).

Under the same structure (NSPSPA) since 2007 is functioning the Centre for Counseling and Vocational Orientation. Its purpose to support the educational aims assumed by NSPSPA by mediating and maintaining efficient relations between the NSPSPA community and other academic communities both national and international, as well as between the NSPSPA community and different institutions or organizations for which it trains specialists.

The main objectives of the centre are:

1. Providing counseling and vocational orientation services (including academic guidance) for the NSPSPA students;

2. Improving employment opportunities within the specific market for the NSPSPA graduates;

3. Increasing academic performance and enabling a better integration in the national and international academic life;

4. Enabling the access of NSPSPA students to a series of internship or volunteering programs provided by different institutions or partner organizations and stakeholders;

5. Providing information to students regarding the activities of formal, non-formal and informal education conducted in country and abroad;

6. Promoting the academic programs and the image of NSPSPA to the general public, as well as to similar educational institutions.

Also, prior to every new academic year start, the Centre for Counseling and Vocational Orientation is training the senior students who want to be part of the tutorial program for the first year students. Beginning in 2007 with the students from the Political Sciences Faculty, this initiative extended up to now to all faculties from NSPSPA, so that every first year student can benefit from the tutors' support.

The tutors provide information regarding the courses, the seminars, different activities within the university and other administrative issues that may concern every first year student. In the same manner, the tutor helps the first year students to get to know each other better so that they will better integrate into the groups they belong to.

As the University provides the students the theoretical grounds, the Centre for Counseling and Vocational Orientation through the NSPSPA Internship Fair assists the students in their search of a place where they can put into practice the information and knowledge acquired, as well as develops abilities that will allow them to excel.

This project is addressed to all NSPSPA students and gathers organizations, companies and agencies that offer internships. In the same time, there are held a series of conferences and workshops that aim to prepare students for their future career.

The NSPSPA Student Start Up program is addressed to high school students. Since choosing a university raises a series of questions and curiosities, the NSPSPA Student Start Up is an event that allows high school students to experience student life within NSPSPA.

The NSPSPA Student Start Up or the NSPSPA Open Days is a four-day event – one day for each faculty, where students have the opportunity to participate in activities such as lectures, film screenings, workshops and debates on the matters approached by each faculty. Thus, students have the opportunity to interact with students and professors, in order to assure them that the opportunities offered by NSPSPA are the best for their development and for building a future career.

The Centre for Counseling and Vocational Orientation also conducts a series of trainings. The matters for the specific training sessions are determined each year in accordance with the interests of the students.

Up to now, the center held the following trainings:

a. Personal Branding;

b. Professional Development;

c. Public Speaking;

d. Project Management;

e. EU Funds;

f.   Public Relations.

In what regards the impact of the global economic crisis on the Romanian university educational system, which is included in the budgetary system, starting with the month of August 2010 the law regarding several measures applied in view of reestablishing the budgetary equilibrium was enforced, law which implies the reduction with 25% of the raw quantum of salaries and monthly indemnifications of teachers, including efficiency bonuses, compensations and other salary rights. Obviously, this major reduction of salaries had a strong impact over the Romanian educational system.

2. Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

1.   Underachieving students

As a consequence of the recognition of credits and grades received during the entire scholarship, the procedure of repetency is abolished. The minimum grade for obtaining credits assigned for each discipline in the curriculum is 5 (five). It is considered to be integralist the student which obtains credits at the mandatory disciplines and a minimum of 30 credits/ semester (a normal pace of study). In other words, underachiever is considered to be the student that doesn't respect this requisite. The student which at the end of the first 4 semesters (cycle I) is behind schedule in comparison to the normal pace of study, but obtains a minimum of 50% of the credits representing the normal pace of study, can benefit of the extension of the school period with 1-2 semesters of completion, and in the case of cumulating a lower number than 50% of the credits will be expelled.

The student which at the end of studies, after pursuing the number of semesters (years of study) scheduled in the curriculum has not finished totally its academic duties and has a number of maximum 5 arrears in the last 4 semesters can apply for the extension of the school period with 1-2 semesters. Also, there are considered to be underachievers the students which have obtained medium general results and under the average (grades of 5 or 6).

2.   Non-traditional and disadvantaged students

A study conducted by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth (2008) indicates that only 3.7% of the youths with ages ranging between 25-29 years old from the rural environment have graduated an institution of higher education, while as in the urban environment, this percent arises towards 27.2%.

In Romania there are not studies concerned with nontraditional students as such. One study is somehow linked with this subject, being concerned with predictors of underachievement and school abandon. The research was implemented in the POSDRU Project no. 414506: "Instruments and mechanisms of enhancing and facilitating the access to higher education based on the development of vertical and horizontal partnerships between education institutions, central and local structures of the educational system and the social and sectorial actors" - 2009-2012.

The sample deriving from the university environment was composed of 1.402 students from the first year of study of the public Romanian universities, 54, 6% being females and 45, 4% males. The study indicated that 19.2% of the students were in the case of abandoning school during the first year of study. The reasons that explain this situation are related principally to the financial problems (21.2%), the lack of utility of the topics studied (22.2%) and other family related problems (21.2%).

A negative correlation between the level of family incomes and the risk of abandoning school due to the difficult financial situation has been identified (ρ=-.306, p<.01, N=247). With other words, the lower the family income is, the higher the abandon risk due to the lack of financial resources is.

On a general view, the students that have reached at a specific moment the case of abandon have lower grades in the examination session (ρ=-.118, p<.01, N=1192) and parents with a lower level of education (mother's level of education: ρ=-.083, p<.01, N=1179; father's level of education: ρ=-.088, p<.01, N=1169), as well as a lower level of family income (ρ=-.133, p<.01, N=1213). To these factors, the parents' residentship (ρ=-.220, p<.01, N=258), is a variable significantly correlated with the poor financial situation. Thus, the smaller the locality in which the parents live, the higher the risk of abandon due to lack of economic resources is.

In the international literature, according with Crosling and colleagues (2008), 'non-

traditional' students are those appearing in international access and retention studies as being: low income or economic status groups; people with disabilities; students who are first in their family to participate in higher education; mature age students; people from minority groups and refugees.

3.   Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

In what regards our university, for 2010-2011 the academic year, the students' case recouped on the three specializations (Communication and Public Relations, Advertising and Psychology) is the following:

First year Communication and Public Relations: from the total of 249 students have advanced in the second year (integrality with 60 credits) 152 (61%).

Second year Communication and Public Relations: from the total of 280 students have advanced in the third year (integrality with 60 credits) 188 (67%).

First year Psychology: from the total of 49 students have advanced in the second year (integrality with 60 credits) 36 (73%).

Second year Psychology: from the total of 46 have advanced in the second year (integrality with 60 credits) 30 (65%).

First year Advertising: from the total of 92 students have advanced in the second year (integrality with 60 credits) 57 (62%).

Second year Advertising: from the total of 71 students have advanced in the second year (integrality with 60 credits) 55 (77%).

The case of the students' expelled (students who haven't obtained the minimum number of credits) is the following:

First year Communication and Public Relations – 19 expelled

Second year Communication and Public Relations – 8 expelled

First year Psychology – 7 expelled

Second year Psychology – 1 expelled

First year Advertising – 13 expelled

Second year Advertising – 1 expelled

Also, during 15.12.2011 and 15.01.2012 a survey has been carried out, which comprised students from all the three specializations – first and second year (communication and public relations, psychology and advertising), over 350 students answering to our call.

1.4. AU Baseline Report

1. National, cultural and institutional context

The Danish university system has been reformed in order to meet the objectives of the Bologna process and it is organized in 3 cycles:

1. Undergraduate studies: The Bachelors and Professional Bachelor degree (3-4 years)

2. Graduate studies: The Master and Candicatum degree (1-2 years)

3. Post-graduate studies: PhD and Doctor-degrees (3 years)

Higher education falls under the remit of the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support and the Danish Agency for Universities and Internationalisation that are under the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education.

In Denmark the Higher Education Institutions are all public and in recent years many institutions have merged, so that Denmark now has:

1. 8 universities

2. 9 university colleges, that provide professional education in nursing, teaching etc.

3. 12 maritime education institutions

4. 6 creative higher education institutions, that provide education in architecture, design etc.

In Denmark ordinary higher education is free whereas further higher education involves a fee. Students in ordinary higher education are granted a scholarship from the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support in an amount equal to €761 per month. Students with disabilities and students who are single parents receive an extra scholarship.

Regarding **Aarhus University:** The first step in the history of Aarhus University was taken on private initiative in hired premises on 11 September 1928, when "University Studies in Jutland" was inaugurated with 64 students enrolled. The combined staff consisted of one professor and four senior associate professors.

Aarhus University has since grown to become a leading public research university with international reach covering the entire research spectrum. In 2011, the entire Aarhus University had approximately 44.000 students in more than 200 degree programmes and 10.000 members of staff. 60 % of the students are enrolled in Masters and PhD programmes and in 2012 the university has 2.000 PhD students.

In 2007-2009 Aarhus University merged with several other Higher Education institutions and since then one unified Aarhus University has been established by reducing internal barriers and greatly cutting down on the number of organizational units. Aarhus University previously

consisted of nine independent faculties and schools, but has now reduced this to four close-knit main academic areas:

- Arts

- Science and Technology

- Health

- Business and Social Sciences

Where there used to be fifty-five departments at the university, there is now twenty-six. Research at Aarhus University is both organized in traditional departments under the four faculties and in interdisciplinary research centres.

In recent years, Aarhus University has been moving up in the most important international rankings. Among over 17,000 universities world-wide, Aarhus University is ranked in the top 100 by several influential rankings.

Aarhus University has four focus areas being talent development, excellent research, world class education and inspiring research-based consultancy. Its research activities cover all academic fields and address basic, applied and strategic research as well as research-based consultancy provided to public authorities and private business.

Aarhus University degree programmes are constantly assessed and revised to meet the requirements of society in general and the university's internal quality standards. Aarhus University is the only Danish university that has been awarded the ECTS label by the European Commission and it has also been FAFSA certified by the US Department of Education. Aarhus University shares the principles of the Magna Carte of European University and the Bologna Declaration, and the university education is organized according to the principles of the Bologna Process.

The university year is organized in semesters and the normal loading of a semester is usually quantified with 30 ECTS points.

Center for Teaching Development and Digital Medias (CuDiM)

At Aarhus University the activities aimed at counselling and supporting disadvantaged students is organized by the Center for Teaching Development and Digital Medias (CuDiM). Most of the services are financed by the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support

Special educational support services

The specialized educational services offers activities that aims at including students with disabilities in university life by granting them learning based help and support.

Special teaching services

The special teaching services offers reading- and learning supportive teaching and IT-support for students with dyslexia.

Educational counselling services

The educational counselling section handles students with mental and neurological disorders from an educational psychological perspective starting from a learning assessment of their personal experience their learning abilities and difficulties that might be resources or obstacles for the continuation and completion of their university studies.

In detail the services offered by the educational counselling section are:

- Psychological-educational counselling aimed at helping the student with a personal and existential development that might ease their learning abilities and abilities to participate in the learning environment. This practice of psychological-educational counselling draws on methods and insights from existential psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and cognitive-behavioral therapy that are modified and implemented in an educational learning directed context.

- Academic learning development as a service of academic mentoring aimed at helping the student proactively in the academic learning process by enhancing the students cognitive, organizational and academic-cultural learning abilities.

2.   Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

a) Underachieving students

Due to the implementation of the ECTS-system an underachieving student is considered to be a student who doesn't obtain a minimum of 30 ECTS credits per semester. However, most study programmes have no absolute time limits but in principle the underachieving students are to be expelled if they are inactive for 2 years.

The study programmes are free and most Danish students receive a scholarship from the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Educational Support. However, of their study programmes are delayed by more than 1 year their scholarship will terminate.

b) Non-traditional and disadvantaged students

In Denmark there is not many studies concerned with non-traditional students as such.

A study conducted by the Business Council of the Workers Movement indicates that almost 50 % of young people at the age of 25 with non-educated parents have not been enrolled in or finished education (AE 2011, ch. 5). Among immigrants the number is 55 %. Other factors that affect the risk of not getting an education is if the young people come from a background with a broken home and/or their parents are unemployed.

A study from the Faculty of Arts at Aarhus University indicates that older students, students who work part or full time, students with lower degrees from high school and students with mental problems or disabilities have an increased risk of dropping out or being underachievers (2005).

A study conducted by the Danish Students Council indicated that students with disabilities, dyslexia and mental disorders experience obstacles in their educational life due to their expectance and experience of prejudice, lack of proper study guidance, lack of interest in their needs from university employees and lack of accessibility (De studerendes Fællesråd 2009).

A study from the Danish Center for Equal treatment of people with disabilities indicates the level of education is much lower amongst people with disabilities than in the average population /Center for Ligebehandling af Handicappede 2006).

3. Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

Figures from the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education indicates that between 27 and 45 % of undergraduate students are underachievers:

- Arts   45 %
- Social science   36 %
- Health science   27 %
- Science/technology   40 %

The figures show that between 23 and 54 % of graduate students are underachievers:

- Arts   54 %
- Social science   41 %
- Health science   23 %
- Science/technology   27 %

The figures also show that between 17 and 39 % of undergraduate students drop out (MVTU 2011):

- Arts   34 %
- Social science   29 %
- Science/technology   29 %
- Health science   17 %

1.5. NUIM Baseline Report

1. National, cultural and institutional context

Ireland has a state funded dual higher education system comprised of the university sector (seven universities) and the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector (fourteen Institutes of Technology).

Dublin University (better known as Trinity College Dublin) was founded in 1592; Maynooth University (now called the National University of Ireland Maynooth) was formed in 1795; University College Cork was established as Queens College in 1845; University College Galway was set up in 1845 and University College Dublin, now Ireland's largest university, was founded in 1854. Most of Irelands Institutes of Technology (apart from the Dublin Institute of Technology and three new colleges founded in 1990s) were created in the 1970s and run under the Vocational Education Acts from 1970 until 1992. It was placed on an independent basis thereafter under the Regional Technical Colleges Acts in 1993. In the late 1990s, these institutions were upgraded to Institute of Technology status. They have been given delegated authority to confer their own awards up to Doctoral level (Fleming and Finnegan 2011: 2).

Ireland has been very successful in pursuing its ambitious goals 'to widen participation and increase graduate numbers' in higher education, moving from a system that was confined to a social elite to one of widespread participation (HEA 2006: 202, 2011). Participation in higher education in Ireland has risen steadily over recent decades and this is reflected in the percentage of Irish adults that have attained third level qualifications. In 2011, one third of Irish adults (aged 25-64) have a third level qualification—12% at NFQ level 6 or 7 and 22% at NFQ level 8 or above[3] (HEA 2010: 9). The expansion of opportunity for higher education in Ireland is reflected in the fact that 45% of young adults (25-34) have now acquired a higher education qualification (OECD 2010: 36). The proportion of 18 year olds entering higher education is now almost two thirds.

In 2011, Universities and IoTs combined, have an enrollment of 193,187 (114, 807 in the University sector and 78,380 in the IoT sector). This is up from a total of 164,072 students in 2004/5. Although the intake of full-time new entrants is now stabilising this does not by itself mean there will be an *overall* stabilisation in numbers in Higher Education.

Full-Time Undergraduate New Entrant Trends 08/09– 10/11 for the University Sector

	2008/9	2009/2010	2010/11
Total	21,728	21,906	22,030

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[3] NFQ refers to the National Framework of Qualifications. Level 8 of the NFQ refers to Bachelors' Honours degree and Higher Diplomas.

Undergraduate new entrant trends for the Institutes of Technology Sector 2008/9-2010/11

	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11
Total	17,000	18,910	18,719

The probability is that more students will decide to spend longer in Higher Education and that the demand for part-time flexible provision will increase (HEA 2011: 9). Current projections show that demand for access to HE will continue, driven by growth in school-leaver numbers, as well as by increasing demand from those in the work force to upgrade their existing skills or to develop new skills. The national participation rate stands now at 72%.

Ireland has also been very successful in pursuing its goal 'to widen participation' in higher education and there has been considerable progress in widening access to non-traditional students (HEA 2006: 202). This is partly due to the fact that enrollment of students from professional and managerial socio-economic background has reached saturation point. There has been a steady increase of students from skilled and semi-skilled occupations backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006 cited in Fleming and Finnegan (2011: 3). However, there has been a decline in participation of entrants from non-manual backgrounds - a heterogenous group which includes service and administrative workers along with police.

The Minister for Social Protection in reply to a Parliamentary Question in November 2010 (Ó Cúiv, 2010) stated that the number of participants on the back to education scheme (which supports low income families to gain access to HE) in the 2009-10 academic year was 20,808, which represented a 79% increase on the previous year. The number of participants in the 2008-09 academic year also represented an increase of 31% on the previous academic year. As of 22 October (2010), approximately 21,500 participants were approved for the Back To Education Allowance (BTEA). These increases are due to the number of parents losing their jobs (cited in Fleming and Finnegan (2011: 3).

There has also been a noticeable shift in the gender balance in higher education in Ireland. In recent years more women than men have enrolled in higher education courses. In 2011, of the 78,973 undergraduates in University 34,664 were male and 44,309 were female. In the IoT sector a small majority of students were male (33,569 male and 26,550 female).

The National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM**)** came into existence in its present form as a Constituent University of the National University of Ireland (NUI) following the enactment of the *Universities Act, 1997*. Prior to the Act it was, from 1910, a recognised college of NUI and a part of St. Patrick's College Maynooth, which was established in 1795, and with which NUI Maynooth continues to share a campus.

NUI Maynooth is a non-denominational, liberal arts and science University on a spacious campus of approximately 70 hectares located in Ireland's only University town, some 20 Kms west of Dublin city centre. Over recent years it has expanded very rapidly with an increase of 21% between 2004/05 and 2010/11 in the total number of students, and become one of the fastest growing Universities in Ireland with students from almost every county and over 50 countries worldwide. This trend is set to continue as it is the only University located in the region of most rapid population growth over the past two decades, a trend which is projected to continue over the next twenty years or more.

NUI Maynooth is the smallest of the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland when measured by the size of the student population, currently at approximately 8,800 and distributed over three Faculties: Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy; Science and Engineering; and Social Sciences. Approximately one quarter of the students come from non-traditional backgrounds and 10% are regarded as international students on the basis of their nationality. All graduate students account for 21% of the total.

NUI Maynooth is a national institution with a distinctive regional component that attracts students from a wide spectrum of geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. Cognisant of the broad objectives prescribed for universities in the Universities Act, 1997 and also of the priorities of government in relation to higher education, and more specifically of the traditional scholarly role of universities, the mission statement of NUI Maynooth is that:

NUI Maynooth will be recognised as a leading liberal arts and science University with an international reputation for teaching and research, that promotes access and inclusiveness, fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students and staff and supports the economic, social and cultural well-being of the communities it serves.

NUI Maynooth policy is shaped by its Strategic Plan (2009-2014). There are nine key strategic goals addressing all areas from core academic activities of teaching and research, specific strengths such as access and NUI Maynooth's regional profile to internal change relating to the University's academic and financial management and governance.

The NUI Maynooth Strategic Goals for 2009 - 2014 are:

1. SG1. Provide a teaching environment and a learning experience that will continue to attract high calibre undergraduates and support modest expansion,

2. SG2. Become a national leader in the provision of taught postgraduate programmes in targeted areas,

3. SG3. Provide graduate education programmes of international standing,

4. SG4. Develop research programmes and knowledge transfer initiatives to enable NUI Maynooth become a national leader, and an international centre of excellence, in targeted areas of liberal arts and science,

5. SG5. Further develop NUI Maynooth's reputation as the national leader in the provision of access programmes and in catering for part time students while also extending offerings in lifelong learning,

6. SG6. Develop further the potential of NUI Maynooth in teaching and research through participation in Inter-institutional collaborations especially in the Dublin city region,

7. SG7. Develop an influential role in social, economic and cultural issues of national, regional and local importance,

8. SG8. Implement strategies in relation to human resources, financial management, estates and other infrastructures to enable NUI Maynooth achieve its core objectives,

9. SG9. Develop governance, management and organisational structures to enable the University to implement the Strategic Plan and comply with its statutory and other obligations including risk management.

(NUI Maynooth Strategic Plan 2009-2014)

The Strategic Goals which are particularly relevant to this project are SG1, SG2 and especially SG5.

In relation to the above Strategic Goals, the focus of action for the period 2011-2014 has included:

10. Prioritising supports for, and continuing to improve, teaching and research activities.

11. Managing the growth in undergraduate student numbers, their distribution across disciplines, and improving retention and progression rates.

12. Continuing to diversify the student cohort by increasing the number of nonstandard students and also the number of international students.

13. Increasing the level of flexibility in design and delivery of programmes and other supports for both standard and nonstandard students.

14. Maintaining and enhancing the distinctive student experience provided by NUI Maynooth with more attention to the needs of part-time students' experience.

Directory of terms in NUI Maynooth:

Programme

The course of study leading to an award of the University.

Subject

These are the subjects, as listed in the University prospectus, which may be studied as part of a programme. Some programmes are single subject programmes; others are composed of multiple

subjects. Each subject is divided into subcomponents called modules and the mark obtained in the subject is compiled from an aggregate of the marks obtained in the modules of that discipline.

Module

A module is a subcomponent of a curriculum in a particular subject. Module descriptors include the mode of instruction, the number of contact and other hours involved, the content of the module, the mode of assessment and the credit weighting in ECTS. A typical academic year on an undergraduate programme will consist of 60credits.

Honours in the Qualification

Honours are awarded in the overall degree examination, according to the marks criteria:

First Class Honours	70-100%
Second Class Honours Grade I	60-69%
Second Class Honours Grade II	50-59%
Third Class Honours	45-49%
Pass	40-44%

Typically all degree programmes provided by NUI Maynooth are of either three (180 ECTS) or four years duration (240 ECTS, mostly Science and Engineering along with the BA International) and require the students to take modules from three disciplines in first year, followed by two disciplines in each of second and third year in Arts and Social Sciences, and in the case of Science and Engineering modules from four disciplines followed by three in second year, two disciplines in third year and one or two in fourth year for Honours students.

The NUIM services offered to non-traditional/disadvantaged students are the following:

The Academic Advisory Office

The Academic Advisory Office (AAO) provides high quality academic advice and guidance to enable student reach their full potential.The main objective of the Academic Advisory office is to improve retention and progression by acting as a convenient first point of contact for students who wish to seek advice or assistance with their general experience of University life. The office also provides an ombudsman-like role for students who may be encountering difficulties in their programme of study, or with any issue that affects their academic progression or focus.

Number of students who visited the Academic Advisory Office during term time (Sept – May):

2009/2010	1090
2010/2011	1275

Number of student who visited of the Academic Advisory Office between May and August:

2009/2010	400
2010/2011	370

Number of student who visited of the Academic Advisory Office who had post Autumn repeat exams:

2009/2010	105
2010/2011	152

Total number students using the Academic Advisory Office:

2009/2010	1595
2010/2011	1797

It is important to note that each student is counted only once. The above figures do not represent the frequency of each student's use of the Academic Advisory Office.

The Academic Advisory Office (AAO) dedicates a large share of its time engaging with students on a 1:1 basis where the student is experiencing difficulties relating to their academic progress. These difficulties are varied, even multiple and may involve; medical, mental health, financial, legal, career focus, interpersonal, social, accommodation or commuting issues. The AAO is positioned to allow students to discuss all their relevant issues in the one location.

This process can include speaking directly with the student, communicating with relevant academic or administrative staff in the University, or referring the student to a relevant student service (for example the Medical Centre, Counseling Centre, Residence Office, Local Grants Authority, Career Development Centre and so on). This function allows the AAO to identify why some students have trouble performing academically at university. AAO can then either recommend appropriate action

for the student to take; refer the student to another service, or, help solve the student's issue with

the relevant administrative or academic departments in the University.

The Academic Advisory Office holds an 'Exit Interview' with each undergraduate student who deregisters from their programme of study in NUI Maynooth, the purpose of which is to record student's stated reason(s) for why they are deregistering.

% of students who deregistered during their 1st year:

2006/2007	3.9%
2007/2008	6.2%
2008/2009	4%
2009/2010	3.5%
2010/2011	3.1%

The Learning Resource Centre:

The Writing Centre

The Writing Centre forms a key component of the service provided by the Academic Advisory

Office, and was set up in 2010 to 'support student academic writing'. It offers free, friendly, non-

judgmental writing help to any student, undergraduate or postgraduate, regardless of subject, degree programme or level of qualification. Students can drop in on their own or in groups to work with tutors on course work or material/topics with which they may be having trouble. Students may also book one-to-one appointments to discuss their writing with peer tutors. In addition, the Centre offers writing workshops, supports writing groups, engages in discipline specific work and carries out research.

Essay Writing and Exam Techniques workshops

The Academic Advisory Office organise 'Essay Writing and Exam Techniques' workshops a number of times per semester. These have been made available to any student who wishes to attend. Attendance has been high, reflecting a possible self-assessed need among students to improve their essay writing and/or exam techniques.

Number of students who made use of the 'Essay Writing and Exam Techniques' sponsored workshops:

| 2009/2010 | 250 |
| 2010/2011 | 380 |

In 2010/2011 the Academic Advisory Office facilitated an 8 week programme on 'Essay Writing Skills'. This was delivered via the LIST (Library Information Skills Tutorials) programme being run by the NUI Maynooth Library. This programme is an expansion on the 'Essay Writing and Exam Techniques' workshops, and has proven to be popular among students.

Week 1: Brainstorming

Week 2: The A-Z of Essay writing

Week 3: Making an Argument – The Paragraph

Week 4: Grammar + Sentencing

Week 5: Reading – Research Your Title

Week 6: Top 10 Errors in Essay Writing

Week 7: Conclusions + Introductions

Week 8: Bibliographies + Referencing

Maths Support Centre

Managed by the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, the Mathematics Support Centre (MSC) is a free service providing informal, friendly, additional support to all undergraduate NUI Maynooth students. Recent reviews of the service have highlighted excellent results, an enthusiastic uptake by students and a welcome presence on campus for students with mathematics in their course. As the service expands it is expected that this will have a positive effect on student's grades and retention figures.

Centre for Teaching and Learning

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) was established in 2009 and funded by the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF Cycle 2). The establishment of the Centre of Teaching and Learning highlights the University's continuing commitment to excellence in teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The chief aim of the Centre is to assist the University in its goal of enhancing the teaching environment and learning experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. CTL's remit encompasses not only the support and development of teaching staff (including tutors and demonstrators) but also more general responsibilities for the support of innovation and dissemination of good practice in teaching and learning.

CTL engages in activities deliberately designed to address the diverse challenges associated with 3rd and 4th level teaching and works to create formal and informal arenas within which teaching

staff can exchange teaching and learning related ideas and innovations. Through its work nationally, and particularly through its involvement with the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA), CTL draws on best practice to inform further development of learning and teaching at NUI Maynooth. Its international links, too, provide further channels for this ongoing development.

CTL runs a programme of workshops and courses for both new and experienced teaching staff:

a. Professional Certificate in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (PCTL)

b. Introduction to Teaching for new staff

c. Introduction to Teaching and Learning for Tutors and Demonstrators

d. Course design, assessment and teaching evaluation

e. A cross faculty large group teaching project

f. Workshops designed to help the integration of technology into the learning process.

g. Moodle Support & Training.

h. Blackboard Collaborate – a live collaboration platform for web conferencing and virtual classes.

Access Office, Disability Office, Mature Students Support

The following departments and programmes work to address the needs of non-traditional students and disadvantaged students in NUI Maynooth in line with the above Strategic Goals and expected outcomes.

The Access Office

The Access Office at NUI Maynooth runs the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) which provides a number of initiatives to increase the participation rate of those whose social, economic and educational experiences have prevented them from realising their full educational potential. A student beginning a programme in the university in any form of non-traditional route can be classified as an Access student. NUI Maynooth is a participating institution in the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR programme), an admissions route for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It offers places on courses on reduced leaving certificate point and extensive post entry supports for NUI Maynooth Access Students including financial, academic, social and personal supports. It is available to school leavers under the age of 23 as of January 1st 2012, who have completed an Irish Leaving Certificate.

Access 21 is an Access Course for School Leavers who wish to proceed to third level but are prevented from doing so due to socio-economic circumstances. (Reasons may include: long-term

unemployed, low income employment, lone parents, lack of tradition in the family of going to third level, limited study facilities, geographical location, large number of children in the family etc).

Students who have successfully completed an 'Access 21' course and received an offer of an NUI Maynooth Degree programme also receive post entry supports (financial, academic and personal) from the Access Office.

The Disability Office

The disability office works to provide academic, personal and learning assistance to full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students in NUI Maynooth.

Disability Access Route to Education (DARE): DARE is a national initiative for school leavers who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education but who may not be able to meet the points for their preferred course due to the impact of their disability. NUI Maynooth subscribes to this initiative.

Additionally, the Disability Office can organize smaller exam venues for students with disabilities, have examiners take a student's disability into account when marking exams, ensures Assistive Technology (software) is available campus wide, and can provide a scribe for students with disabilities during exams.

The Disability Learning Support Service is available in weekly sessions delivered in small groups and online to help students 'learn to learn'.

The Access Student Advisor is available to all students who may wish to discuss personal, academic, financial or any other issues that you might have while in college. This is a confidential support, which is friendly and approachable.

Map Academic Advisor: Each academic department has a designated academic advisor to liaise with the Access Office on any student supported via the Maynooth Access Programme.

Peer Mentor: All first year Access students will be given a Peer Mentor, who is a current

Access Student and leader on the Lanchpad Programme. The peer mentors use their skills, knowledge and experience of third level study to help first year Access students with their transition to university during their first year.

Mature Students Support

The NUI Maynooth Mature Student Officer acts as a support network for potential and current mature students in the university. The majority of the role involves acting as a contact for all mature students for whichever type of support they need during their application to, or time at the university. Also, Mature Student Information Seminars and social meetings are scheduled regularly.

Financial assistance / encouragement for Access Students:

NUI Maynooth Access Students receive financial assistance from the NUI Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) in addition to what they receive from their Student Maintenance Grant. Students receive a book token in Semester 1 to assist with purchasing text books and stationery for their course and receive a bursary. MAP decides on the amount and type of financial support depending on resources available.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (National fund) allocates funding to further and higher education colleges for the provision of services and supports to full-time students with disabilities. The Fund aims to ensure that students can participate fully in their academic programmes and are not disadvantaged by reason of a disability. A claim under the Fund is made on behalf of an eligible student by NUI Maynooth following an assessment of need. Applications cannot be made directly to the Fund by students. NUI Maynooth is also responsible for the management of the funding approved for eligible students. This fund is not available to students who are enrolling on part time, access, or foundation courses however.

European Social Fund - Student Assistant Fund

This Fund assists students who experience severe disadvantage and financial hardship. Currently the fund supports students who have entered NUI Maynooth through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and are now part of the NUI Maynooth Access Programme (MAP). "The Undergraduate Skills activity is funded by the Irish Government and part funded by the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007-2013".

Student Aid

The NUI Maynooth Student Aid Fund is an emergency fund which is available to assist students who encounter unforeseen and unexpected circumstances during their time in university at NUI Maynooth, particularly if it impacts their ability to focus on their programme of study. There are two types of assistance available from the fund, the short term emergency loan and the student aid grant.

Childcare Fund

This fund is allocated to the Students Union each year in capitation. Any full time or part time student with a child is entitled to apply.

Budgeting:

Maynooth Access Programme teaches NUI Maynooth Access Students how to manage their money through the 'Launchpad Orientation programme'.

A **Student Budgeting Advice Service** is available for all students one day per week on campus. The service is free, friendly, and confidential. The aim of the service is to provide advice to students on managing their finances: budgeting, checking entitlements, discussing your options, help / guidance / support with any financial issue.

Admissions Office

In common with all of Ireland's third level institutions, the majority of students enter through the traditional CAO route (approx 90%). NUI Maynooth defines a 'mature student' as a person who is at least 23 years of age on January 1st of year of entry, and most would apply through the CAO route. In cases where applicants don't apply through this route the university invites applicants to undertake either the NUI Certificate in Return to Learning, or the Certificate in Science or Engineering, in order to prepare the applicant for study at the required level. Additionally, the university will hold entrance interviews for many of its denominated programmes to gauge the applicant's skill level prior to entering 1st year.

1st Year Student Orientation

'Orientation' aims to provide new students with a wide range of information which will help them cope with the transition to university life and study. Orientation week takes place the week before lectures commence in September. It familiarises students with the campus and the Library, and provides information on finance, accessing support, some subject requirements, study skills, general rules and regulations of the university, student clubs and societies, an introduction to the students union, and, a chance to interact with other students. Students are given a tour of the campus and shown where academic departments and student support services are located. It is compulsory that all students attend orientation as they will gain vital information about the University and be introduced to a new situation and environment.

As regards to the **impact of economic crisis**, the role of education in helping Ireland back to a position of growth and prosperity is widely recognized. Policy and strategy statements, including publications such as Tomorrow's Skills, Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007);

Building Ireland's Smart Economy (2008); Innovation Ireland Report of the Innovation Taskforce (2010); and the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 all emphasize the importance of higher education for individuals, families, communities and our economy and society as a whole.

However, the development of the higher education system in the coming years will take place initially in an environment of severe economic and fiscal restraints. The financial agenda for Institutions of Higher Education has had to change dramatically over the last four years in response to the financial crisis and the 'austerity measures' put in place by the Government.

Inevitably this will have a huge impact on the number of staff in higher education and a move to part-time and contract staff to deliver teaching programmes. 'The impact on working class and other non-traditional students is as yet unclear but it is certain that the impact will be severe. If resources of all kinds are thus reduced and the number applying to access higher education is increasing steadily it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that difficult and challenging times are ahead for non-traditional applicants, students and the staff who support and encourage them." Fleming, Finnegan. (2011)

In addition there has been a significant reduction in staff numbers in the system.

University	**Academic Staff Only**	Student (WTE) Numbers	Ratio
2008-09	4795.56	89,650	18.7
2009-10	4543.98	95,061	20.9
2010-11	4426.31	106,448	24.0

IoTs	**Academic Staff Only**	Student (WTE) Numbers	Ratio
2008-09	4870.1	66,761	13.7
2009-10	4842.55	71,470	14.8
2010-11	4759.4	74,299	15.6

Source: HEA 2011: 10

2. Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

NUI Maynooth's 26 academic departments are organized into three Faculties: Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy; Science and Engineering, and Social Sciences. Approximately 800 staff work in the University.

The following information gives an indication of the environment in which standard, NTS / DS share at NUI Maynooth:

The total Number of registered students in 2010/11 was approximately 8500, a steady increase from just over 6000 in 2004/5. Distribution:

1. F/T Undergraduate students 2010/11: approx 5900.

2. F/T Postgraduate students 2010/11: approx 1350.

3. P/T Undergraduate students 2010/11: approx 650.

4. P/T Postgraduate students 2010/11: approx 600.

5. Number of international students 2010/11: approx 1000 (this represents 12% of the total number of student registered in the university), a steady annual increase from just over 500 in 2004/05.

6. Number of postgraduate students has increased each year since 2004/05.

7. Number of students on taught master programmes (approx 740 in 2010/11) has increased almost every year since and is now at its highest point since 2004/05.

8. Number of doctoral students (approx 430 in 2010/11) increased each year since 2004/05.

9. Percentage of students who deregister in 1st year; 2010/11 just over 3%. This is lower than a peak of just over 6% in 2007/08.

10. Percentage of undergraduate students who complete their course within 6 years of initial registration; 2010/11 83.8%. This is an increase of 80% in 2005/06.

11. Percentage of mature students has risen from approx 13% in 2004/05 to 19% in 2007/08 (latest figures available). Mature students as a percentage of intake in 2010/11 stands at 16%, and 18% over all. (Fleming, et al., 2011)

12. The numbers of nonstandard entrants (students on access programmes, mature students and students with a disability) increased by 26.3% to 436 between 2005/06 and 2008/09; they accounted for 21.3% of all new undergraduate entrants in 2008.

13. Number of mature students in 1st year:
    2008 / 2009: 271

    2009 / 2010: 310

    2010 / 2011: 389

    2011 / 2012: 396

14. Total number of supported Access students (HEAR undergrad students)
    2008 / 2009: 232

    2009 / 2010: 206

    2010 / 2011: 230

    2011 / 2012: 295

Current figures for students with disabilities are not available.

Additionally,

1. According to a recent study (Irish University Study, 2009), NUI Maynooth attracts more students whose parents did not go to higher education than other universities. Also, the percentage of students with parents who did not complete secondary education is significantly higher than "other colleges". On average, 38% of parents did not complete secondary school and the average for all other universities is 24%.

2. In 2009 NUI Maynooth had 220 access students in total – these are normal school leaving age but gained access to Maynooth through an Access Programme for disadvantaged schools and areas. There were also 270 students in total across all categories registered

as having a disability. There were approx 700 mature students in that year – later to rise to approx 800 in 2010. It is worth noting that 44 percent of the students with disabilities have registered as having a learning disability, most typically dyslexia.

(Fleming and Finnegan 2011)

3. Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

In 2010 the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published the first comprehensive study of retention and non-completion among first year students across the entire higher education system (Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor and Chantler, 2010). The rates vary according to the type of university or IoT and according to previous education attainment and the discipline being studied:

The rates of non-presence vary strongly according to the NFQ level, ranging from 25 percent/26percent at level 6/7 to between 4 percent and 16 percent at level 8. They also differ according to sector, ranging from 22 percent in an institute of technology to 9 percent in the university sector and 4 percent in teacher training colleges (Mooney et al 2010: 5)

The following highlights the main findings of the Report:

- There is a clear and strong link between prior education attainment and successful progression. Lower entry points indicate a lower chance of progression.

- Prior attainment in Mathematics is the clearest predictor of successful progression among higher education students. Attainment in English at Leaving Certificate is also a strong predictor of successful progression.

- Computer Science has the highest rate of non-presence (in the next year of study) across all sectors and levels, while students enrolled in education and healthcare courses have significantly lower non-progression rates (even taking account for gender, 'ability' and social class).

- At aggregate level females display higher rates of progression through higher education than males. Males have slightly lower leaving cert points and higher rates of entry into courses with higher dropout levels.

- Students are more likely to present for registration the following year the more advanced they are in their course of study. New entrants; 15% non-presence, 2nd year students; 7% non-presence, 3rd year students; 4% non-presence and 4th year students 5% non-presence.

Mooney, O., Patterson, V., O Connor, M. & Chantler, A. (2010)

There is a variation in non-presence rates (from year 1 into year 2 in university programmes) across socio-economic groups: The socio-economic groups with the highest entry

rates tend to display the highest rates of progression through higher education and the lowest rates of progression are found among the lower socio-economic groups.

Non-Presence rates by Socio-Economic Group:

Employers & Managers	10%
Higher Professionals	7%
Lower professionals	10%
Non-Manual	9%
Manual Skilled	9%
Semi-Skilled	13%
Un-Skilled	12%
Own Account	10%
Farmer	7%
Agricultural	6%
All other gainfully occupied & unknown	10%

2. COMMON AND DIFFERENTIAL PATTERNS IN THE CONTEXTS AND IN THE DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS PROFILES

1. National, cultural and institutional context

All universities are currently involved in the Bologna process and this implies that their programmes are very similar in their structures and conditions. However, some of them are mega-universities (like UNFII) with a great number of students and staff, and other institutions, like NUIM, are more reduced in size. The cultural and economical context also seems to provide different starting points. While universities like AU, are free of fees and even students are granted important scholarships, the economical conditions in others are not so favorable. In addition, the ratio of staff per student is also different for the five institutions analyzed. For instance, in NUIM this ratio is around 24 while in Italy is over 33.

The number of students is being increasing in recent years in all the universities. This increase is parallel to the access of new publics to Higher Education, the so called "non-traditional" students, especially mature students and students from lower socio-economical backgrounds. This seems to be an ever-increasing trend as the politics of widening participation in higher education are being implemented in all European countries. Anyway, the current economical crisis is also related to the increase in the number of university students: as the unemployment rates rise, the education more and more appears as a means to improve the career prospects.

There are important differences in the five institutions regarding the percentage of international students (the 10-12% of the total student body in NUIM, the 2.3% in US, and the 0.5% in UNFII). This leads us to the conclusion that the language in which the teaching is provided constitutes an important factor in the attraction of international audiences. Thus, the English-speaking universities are more likely to be chosen by foreign students. In the case of US, the Spanish language is an attraction for students from Latin-American.

Furthermore, the tradition on attending the needs of disadvantaged students are in different points of evolution in each of the five universities. In some of the contexts -for example, Ireland-there is a longer tradition on widening participation in Higher Education and this can be observed in the number and diversification of the students' support services. The Spanish university is in a medium point regarding widening participation: legal regulations are being implemented but they are still in an initial point that must be reinforced.

The types and number of the students' support services vary considerably among the five universities. However, some similarities can be found:

- All universities have one or more counselling services. The counselling provided ranged from issues like medical, financial and legal to more psychological and educational support.

- In most cases, these services include educational training to overcome learning difficulties and to promote the acquisition of the academic abilities that are central for good performance (writing, maths and so on).

- The way the students access to the support services is not completely clear. In most cases, it seems that students who are experiencing some kind of difficulty turn up for help and there they receive the attention to improve their situation. But the intervention is always made on the student him/herself, and not in the context that might be causing conflict. Only in NUIM, a mediator role can be observed. It can be noted that in some of the research analyzed, the students pointed to their teachers (their inflexible attitudes or the non-inclusive methods they use) as the main barriers to their learning. In this sense, this proactive, contextual intervention of the NUIM Academic Advisory Office appears to be of great value. If we aim to improve learning, not only are the students the targeted population we have to work with. Sometimes, the difficulties are in the contexts and other significant barriers have to be removed.

- Other interesting initiatives are those directly targeted to specific groups of disadvantaged students: the Access 21 and Disability Office in NUIM, the Specialized Tutoring Services in UNFII, the Special Educational Support Services in AU, and the Aid to Students with Disability and the Attention Services for Foreign Community in US.

To conclude, it is important to mention the effects of the economical crisis in the five universities. In general, the current crisis put the recent advances on widening participation at risk. The constant financial cuts and the pressures for efficiency and effectiveness are deriving in the reduction of the staff and the grants for students with lower economical incomes. In contrast, there is a positive effect of the crisis and the number of non-traditional students is increasing as they see the important role of university in the acquisition of education and employ prospects.

2. Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

This topic is central for the INSTALL Project. As it aims to improve the learning abilities of disadvantaged students, one first and key step is to determine which students are exactly the ones that the project must target to.

The main problem that arises when analyzing the individual reports, is the difficulty in definition and identification of disadvantaged students. There are not universal terms to represent a heterogeneous group not always visibilized under a specific name or category. After the reading of reports, two terms seem to be of especial interest for INSTALL:

- Drop-out students, which refers to those students that do not finish their degrees (many of them might change the degree and not necessarily abandon university).

- Underachieving students which in most cases can be characterized as those who do not finish the programme in the scheduled time and spend more semesters/years. They are "delayed" students (Late Graduates or Inactive Students in UNFII) or in the case of NSPAS the term also comprises the students with marks under the average.

The so called non-traditional students (students with disability, with family burdens, in need to combine work and study, from lower economic and social background) seem to be the most

vulnerable to become drop-out or underachievers, as previous research has shown the associations between those phenomena (drop-out and underachievement) and their personal characteristics. There are not comparable data on the number of non-traditional students in the five universities but they may represent at least one third of the total students' population, taking into account that:

- Mature students represents between 19-30% of students in some universities.

- Students whose parents did not have access to higher education are around 30-38%.

- There are lower but significant percentages of students who feel impaired (2%), or with dependent relatives (4%).

As a result, an important percentage of university students can be at risk of abandoning or underachieving. Factors influencing drop-out or underachieving are not easy to delimitate but many of the studies that have dealt with these factors showed that the particular circumstances of non-traditional students might be at the core of poor academic performance. Research results are not conclusive but there seems to be some factors of great influence in the academic success:

- The educational background appears repeatedly associated to failure/ success in university. Thus, those students whose parents have finished higher education are less likely to drop-out or underachieve. The higher the parents' education is, the more likely the students are to obtain a good academic performance.

- The family incomes are also important but not as influential as the educational background.

- The educational tracks and previous academic background (type of high school attended and marks).

- Some studies point to dissatisfaction with the degree or the lack of utility of it as another reason for drop-out or delay.

- Results related to the combining of work and study are somewhat confusing as some studies revealed its association with delay or even drop-out while others point to less probability of drop-out because of the strong motivations of the students who work.

- The place of residence is also important. In general, the students from rural, distant homes are at worse conditions than urban students. Thus, the smaller and the farther the locality in which the parents live, the higher the risk of abandon due to lack of economic resources. But, in the UNFII report, there is some evidence of less delay in the graduation for students who attend a university outside their home province.

Other factors to be added to this list are the following: the lack of academic abilities, possible disabilities or mental disorders as well as the inflexible attitudes and non-inclusive teaching methodologies.

There is not possibility of intervention in most of these factors. The INSTALL Project cannot change facts like the educational background of the family, nor the economical situation or the

educational tracks. But the existing knowledge about factors influencing drop-out and underachievement provides key guidelines about who are the students that the project should be targeted to. Therefore, the above mentioned variables (low educational background, low-incomes family, poor performance in previous educational stages, place of residence, etc.) are to be taken into account in the five universities, though they should be shaped according to each context.

Thus, the definition of "low-income background" might be adapted to the different economic situations of places like Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Spain and Romania. As we stated in the previous paragraph, there is a great diversity in the five contexts, which will demand a good deal of reflection in defining the specific parameters to be considered in each country/university.

3. Statistics on retention, drop-out, and underachievement

It is not possible to establish retention, drop-out or underachievement rates for the five universities as a whole because of the inexistence of official national statistics. In addition, the data presented in the individual reports are not comparable as they refer to different situations: sometimes, the data are referred to the university and sometimes they are referred to a specific degree; in some cases, there are also differences in the academic year from which data are valid. As a result, we cannot provide averages and we restrict our conclusions to the common patterns that can be found.

In general, the drop-out rates are around the 25-26% in Ireland and Spain, and between the 17-27% in Denmark. In Italy the rates are noticeably higher and only the 30% of the students enrolled finished their education. But it is important to note that most reports inform of great differences due to the type of degree, being Arts/Humanities and Science/Technology degrees the ones with the highest drop-out rates (reaching 35-40%).

Another common factor in all universities is the importance of the first year, which is the one with the highest rates of drop-outs. For instance, around the 60% of the abandon in Spain takes place in the first year, and a 19% of the students drop-out in this year in Romania. Some of the research studies reviewed highlight that it was in their first years when the students dealt with more problems and difficult situations, and consequently, it does not seem strange that drop-out rates are the highest in these initial moments.

As stated before, the statistics are scarce and they do not provide information about the profiles of the students who drop-out or underachieve. The NUIM report points out that drop-out rates are higher among semiskilled and unskilled backgrounds. Regarding gender, the reports show that women are as likely as men to graduate or, in the case of Ireland, their retention rate is slightly higher. Thus, gender does not seem to be a significant factor in drop-out.

Finally, we want to emphasize the difficulty when measuring the abandon phenomenon. As showed in some studies, around 60% of the students that drop-out re-enrolled again in another university or in another degree in the same university. This implies that the abandon phenomenon is in many cases either a low performance problem or a question of finding out the studies that fit with the student.

3. CRITERIA TO SELECT THE STUDENT TARGET GROUPS

The Criteria that students must meet to participate in the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) are listed below in order of importance. The Consortium identified 2 essential criteria (academic performance and personal factors), and 1 preferential criterion (high potential of the student) to be followed in order to select the students.

1) Essential Criteria of academic performance

1a) Students who are in a delay in making exams

This criterion is operationalized differently in the different universities involved in the project:

Italy Federico II	The course will be targeted at students who, at the end of the first year, have only obtained 50% or less of the total credits of the first year, that is 30 credits or less (the total of the credits of the first year are 60).
Spain US	The course will be targeted at students who, at the end of the first year, have only obtained 50% or less of the total credits of the first year, that is 30 credits or less (the total of the credits of the first year are 60).
Denmark AU	The course will be targeted at students who, at the end of the first year, have only obtained 50% or less of the total credits of the first year, that is 30 credits or less (the total of the credits of the first year are 60).
Ireland NUIM	The course will be targeted at students who: - Passed at least one module by compensation; - Failed at least one exam in January or May and repeated it in August (and then passed).
Romania NSPAS	The course will be targeted at students who, at the end of the first year, have only obtained 50% or less of the total credits of the first year, that is 30 credits or less (the total of the credits of the first year are 60).

1b) **And /or** students who have a low average mark

This criterion is operationalized differently in the different universities involved in the project:

Italy Federico II	Students who have a range of marks that goes from 18 to 22, that is a low average mark. (The minimum mark to pass an exam is 18. Taking less than 18, the student fails. The maximum possible mark is 30).

Spain US	Students who have a range of mark that goes from 5.0 to 6.9, that is a low average mark. (The minimum mark to pass an exam is 5. Taking less than 5, the student fails. The maximum possible mark is 10).
Denmark AU	Students who have a range of mark that goes from 2 .0 to 3.9 that is a low average mark. (The minimum mark to pass an exam is 2. Taking less than 2, the student fails. The maximum possible mark is 12).
Ireland NUIM	NUI Maynooth students are awarded according to the following scale: (1st) First Class Honours 70-100% (2:1) Second Class Honours Grade I 60-69% (2:2) Second Class Honours Grade II 50-59% (3rd) Third Class Honours 45-49% (Pass) Pass 40-44% Any mark below 40% is considered a 'Fail.' It is possible for a student to Pass by Compensation where they have scored less than 40% in a module, but have achieved higher grades in other modules within the same subject. A student who fails a subject (or subjects) must repeat and pass the failed components before they can progress into their next year of study. In order to pass a subject a student must: • Pass all required modules in the subject. • Obtain 40% on aggregate in the subject. • Pass modules to a credit value of at least half the credit value of the subject. • Not fall below 25% in any module.

Romania NSPAS	Students who have a range of mark that goes from 5.0 to 6.9, that is a low average mark. (The minimum mark to pass an exam is 5. Taking less than 5, the student fails. The maximum possible mark is 10).

2) **And/ or** essential Criteria related to the personal story of the student

The student must meet one or more characteristics of the non-traditional/disadvantaged student as described in the international literature:

Low income,

Living far from his/her parents' home,

Living in urban or rural places,

Low mark diploma

Ethnic minority,

Full time, part-time, occasionally worker,

With family responsibilities (single parent, supporting children, orphan)

Disabled,

Older than 25,

From a family with a low level of education,

First generation university student .

3) Preferential criterion (not essential): evidence of the high potential of the student

This criterion refers to the fact that the student should have good basic skills and good potentialities that will allow him/her to use the NMP in an effective manner.

This criterion is operationalized as follows:

• The student must have obtained at least one high mark at an exam, during his degree career;

• The student must have obtained a good mark at the Diploma, before enrolling in university.

• Each country involved in the project will adapt this criterion to own context.

In conclusion, the Consortium considers that the students to be selected must be left behind or have low average marks and, if possible, they have to be part of at least one of the categories of non traditional students identified.

4. COMBINATION OF THE FOUR MODULES FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIATION AND THE NMP / NARRATIVE MEDIATION PATH

The aim of INSTALL is the acquisition of key competence of Learning to Learn; such a competence, within the university context, represents a competence in studying, a being-able-to-study, based on a set of abilities and knowledge integrated in a knowing-how. Such a competence consists, therefore, in the acquisition of the awareness of one's own process of learning and one's own needs, identifying the available resources and the obstacles to overcome in order to learn in an effective way.

The INSTALL project assumes that, in order to develop such a competence in studying, is necessary for students to activate a process of mentalization of their own educative path (Fonagy, et al., 1997; 2002; Allen, Fonagy, 2006), that is, a process aimed at understanding the reasons for one's own and others' behaviours in order to act in the university context in a way which is instrumental in the academic success.

The mentalization, also known as reflexive competence or reflexive function (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Fonagy, 2002; Allen & Fonagy, 2008; Meehan, Levy, Reynoso, Hill, L.L. & Clarkin, 2009; Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Nelson, Dill, Little & Sargent, 2009), at a university level, allows students to become aware of their and others' mental state (thoughts, beliefs, emotions, wishes, motivations), to recognize, elaborate and modulate emotions throughout the learning process, to strategically use cognitive operations and to communicate with and relate to others effectively.

Scientific evidence (Hermans, 2001; Davidsen, 2008; Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011) demonstrates the key role of narration as instrumental in the reflecting process of mentalization. Narration, in fact, acts as an activator and a promoter of reflective competences when it is used in a continuous alternation between narrative and meta-narrative processes. This alternation promotes the transition from narrative sequences describing the events to reflective narrative sequences in which the subject uses narration to reflect about his own being in the experience. This happens through the "narrative group" who activates and improves the potentialities of reflection inherent in narration, the abilities to address complex problems, and to build knowledge through experience (Freda, 2008a; 2008b; 2011).

INSTALL proposes an innovative methodology based on Narration, the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP), with the aim to promote the Learning to Learn Key Competence, by developing and promoting mentalization/reflexive competence. Specifically, NMP consists in a group training process targeted to groups of disadvantaged students enrolled at the II year and who haven't passed all the exams they were requested to. NMP combines into one methodology four discursive

narrative modules: Metaphoric, Iconographic, Writing and Bodily. These four modules are implemented in a cycle of meetings conducted by Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs) who will be trained to use such methodology with disadvantaged students.

The training meetings will be minimum 4 maximum 8. Their number will be discussed and decided by Partners during the second International Meeting to be hold in Sevilla on March 2012. The training meetings' schedule will be part of Workpackage 2 "Modelling".

During the meetings, Narrative Group Trainers will use a set of narrative inputs which differently refer to the four discursive modules. Through the four modules the student can access to the possibility both of mentalizing the personal way of participating in the university education, and of developing a reflexive competence that allows him/her to learn to learn in a way which is strategic and adaptive in relationship with the context. Although the mentalization/reflexive competence is the final outcome of the training, in each module a reflexive register is activated about the educational experience of the student, at different levels of analysis, in relationship with different educational situations and according to the different narrative inputs proposed to the group of the trained students.

On the whole, the training is thought as a circularly reflexive process of mentalization about one's own educational experience, starting from an initial synchronic and thick representation of the educational experience (proposed in the first module), passing through a diachronic analysis of specific university situation and, finally, returning to the synchronic level in which the same experience is re-investigated in the light of the reflexive and meta-reflexive processes previously activated.

The choice of using four different communicative channels during the training stems from two different factors related to the characteristics, on the one hand, of the different inputs and, on the other hand, of the participating students:

- narrative inputs have a different 'invasiveness' according the different communicative channels chosen and, consequently, a different effectiveness in the different phases of the training path (e.g. visual-iconographic inputs are less invasive and, therefore, are preferably used in the beginning phase of the training (in comparison with the written inputs);

- students can be different for being more or less 'in tune' with the different communicative channels and, accordingly, they can tend to use their reflexive potentialities in a different way (e.g. for some subjects the speech channel is that through which they are able to express themselves with fewer inhibitions; for others, on the contrary, it is the visual channel to elicit more easily the expression of the educative Self)
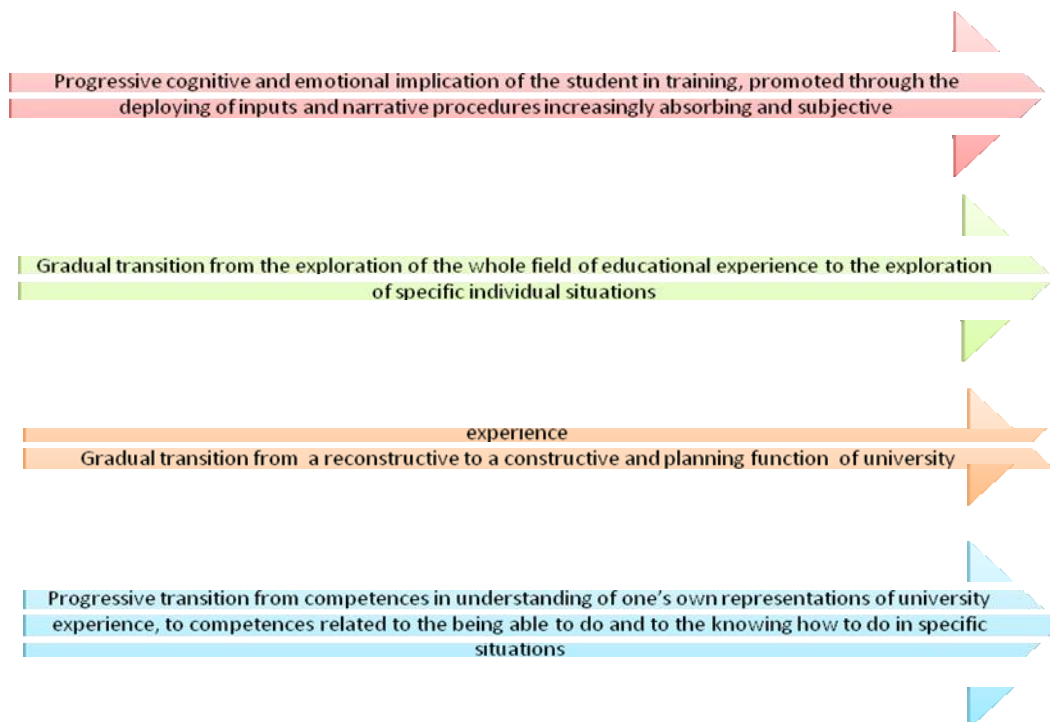
The sequence of the four communicative channels is also motivated by other factors:

- Fostering a progressive cognitive and emotional implication of the student in training, which is made possible through the use of inputs and narrative procedures increasingly absorbing and subjective;

- Promoting the transition on the part of the student from a global exploration of his/her university experience to the analysis of specific educational situations in which s/he was protagonist;

- Supporting the student in the reflection on such educational situations up to the recognition of the active role taken and to the acquisition of a higher sense of responsibility for the subjective construction of the meaning of his/her own educational experience.

In brief, the modules promote the development of the following dimensions (Fig n. 1):

Figure n. 1

Progressive cognitive and emotional implication of the student in training, promoted through the deploying of inputs and narrative procedures increasingly absorbing and subjective

Gradual transition from the exploration of the whole field of educational experience to the exploration of specific individual situations

experience
Gradual transition from a reconstructive to a constructive and planning function of university

Progressive transition from competences in understanding of one's own representations of university experience, to competences related to the being able to do and to the knowing how to do in specific situations

During each training meeting (and independently of the specific module) the same methodological sequence is used. This sequence can be summarized as follows (Fig. n. 2):

1) presentation of a narrative input;

2) narrative construction of the experience by means of different communicative codes (metaphorical, iconographic, writing, and bodily);

3) group narrative meta-discourse on the proposed narration;

4) narrative reconstruction of the experience.

Figure n.2
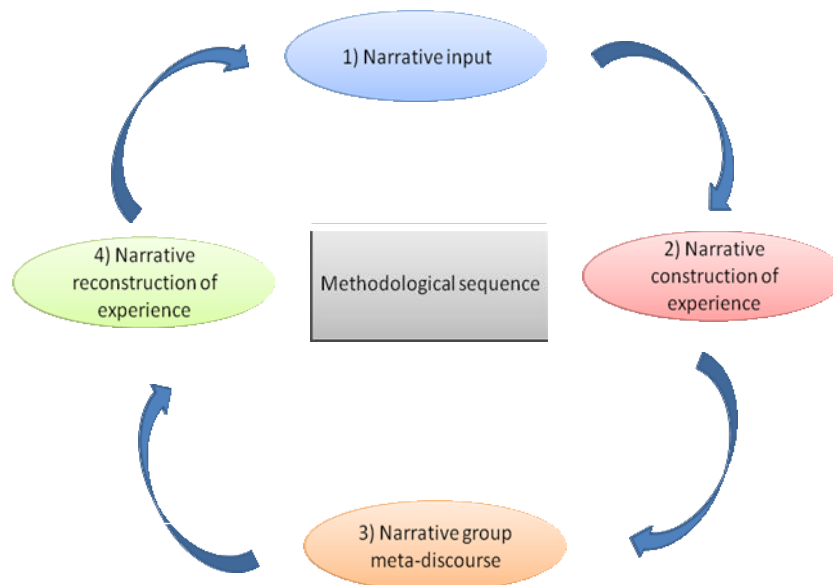
Specifically, the Metaphoric module proposes metaphors and proverbs, the Iconographic module a series of vignettes, the Writing module texts and narration, the Bodily module images of sculptures to be interpreted by the students.

What follows is the general schema of each module, articulated according to objectives, tools, and procedures of each training meeting:

Metaphorical Module (one or two meetings, two hours per meeting):

In such a beginning phase of the intervention, the metaphoric level is instrumental in fostering, in participants, a knowledge of their own representations of the Self in training/education and is more suitable in that it is a minimally invasive procedure: the members of the group are not requested to 'reveal themselves' by telling their own educative experience but to recognize such an experience in a metaphorical representation suggested by other people. In such a way, moreover, the sense of the shareability of experiences within the group of trained students is brought to the fore.

The objectives of this module consist in: gaining a synchronous and concise representation of the university experience from each participant; fostering knowledge and awareness of representations of the educational university experience in each participant.

The used tools consist in a metaphorical kit composed of five proverbs and five mottoes found in the local culture of the Partner Country. The proverbs suggest a transposition in general terms of the educational experience, while mottoes can be taken as the specific slogans for one's own university experience. Each student is asked to choose the proverbs and mottoes which express better his/her university experience.

Proverbs and mottoes represent different fields of the educational experience: failure and powerlessness, exclusion and feeling of inferiority, difficulty in managing time and commitments or in learning the contents of the disciplines in an adequate way, possibility of a change, confidence in the future and in one's own resources. For example, a motto to use in order to explore the area of the possibility of change is the famous "Yes, we can" by Obama.

Iconographic Module (one or two meetings, two hours per meeting):

Meetings use now the vignettes, a projective tool which allows the trained students to analyze the deeper meaning and the symbolical value attached to the objects or to the characters drawn in the vignette. Differently from the 'thick' and synchronic dimension proposed by the metaphorical inputs of the previous module, the vignettes introduce a more diachronic level by inviting students to imagine themselves in typical situations of the university life. Indeed, the vignettes propose to the participants short stories on hypothetical situations in which the student is invited to identify him/herself through a communicative modality which is still, however, perceived as little invasive and threatening.

The objectives of this module consist in: analysing the educational experience at the diachronic level; promoting reflection about one's own being-in-action within situations representing the university career.

Specifically, a kit of vignettes is delivered to each participant. It is made up of five vignettes depicting significant moments of one's own university experience. Participants are asked to 'wear vignette protagonist's shoes', and to fill in sentences expressing what the protagonist is telling or thinking on the blank balloons. Through the vignettes participants are situated in a context, insofar as the vignettes reproduce significant moments of participants' university experience, and encourage subjects to ask themselves questions about the "doing", that is, about the actions carried out by the protagonist in the different proposed situations. Indeed, the vignettes depict typical and significant situations in the university experience, such as the enrolment on and the attendance of university courses, the personal study at home, the university exams, the balance between studying and working, and the organization of life-times.

Narrative Module through writing (one or two meetings, two hours per meeting):

These meetings foresee the recourse to narrative tools activating the communicative channel of the written language. Indeed, in this phase of the training path, the members of the

group are deemed ready to reflect on how to use the acquired awareness of their own educational experience in order to operate in a strategic way, functional for university success. Writing, through the request of telling a story about one's own university experience, fosters a wider involvement of the student in the subjective construction of the meaning of the educational experience.

In particular, the objectives of this module consist in: analysing connections between the realized actions and the competences used to realize them in order to build and make explicit new meanings of experience; fostering awareness of how people know and how they know how to act in order to achieve more effective performances; supporting participants' strategic action, instrumental in their university success.

What is proposed in this module is the written narrative, focused on connections between different types of experience and the relevant competences. Among the possible narrative inputs that can be administered there are: the account of a *low point*, that is, a critical event occurred in one's own university experience; the account of *a high point*, that is, a positive event of one's own university experience; and the account of a *decisional turning point* of one's own university experience.

Such narrative tasks promote the activation of reflexive and meta-reflexive processes in the group of the trained students; indeed, students, by resorting to a form of counter-factual thinking, are involved in the analysis of the possible connections between the competences they have, the in-competences and the actions (either realized or realizable) within the university context. Participants are invited to explore and to re-think their own competences and in-competences in order to analyze and identify a possible turning point, starting from which it is possible to begin to set strategic objectives, instrumental in achieving one's own developmental goals. The tools, therefore, foster the passage from reflection on the weak and dysfunctional points of each member of the group to the strong points in one's own experience up to a representation of the Self in training/education as potentially competent in using what has been learnt to achieve university success and the future entry into the world of work.

Bodily Module (one or two meetings, two hours per meeting):

The module proposes, now, the technique of sculpture, a creative, dynamic, non-verbal modality through which the sculptor – either a single student or the whole group of students – can represent the most significant relationships connecting each other or linking them with the educational context.

Sculpture re-propose, in the final phase of the training, a synchronic and 'thick' level of analysis of one's own being-in-training/education; and, though, the student accesses to this level with a different awareness by virtue of the levels of diachronic analysis of experience activated in the previous modules. Furthermore, in order to do that, sculpture mobilizes the body, which is associated with the dimension of action and of the behaviour as an outcome of a reflexive process activated previously. The student can now pass from a level of representation of one's own being-in-education to the possibility of thinking of him/herself as operating strategically, of looking at him/herself as a subject able to act in a way functional and responsive to the context.

The sculpture allows us to reach the following objectives: conveying a symbolic and non-verbal representation concerning the future of the students' group and encouraging a synchronous, condensed, and shared representation of the end of the process, of the achieved objectives, and of the future goals to be achieved after the training.

The group is asked "to sculpt the future of the group, by shaping it as it will be at the end of the educational path...". This way it is the whole group that decides what and how to sculpt, and uses participants' bodies to sculpt their own future in the university context.

Here below a schematic summary of the sequence of the modules, of objectives, of procedures and of the used inputs

Figure n. 3

Metaphorical module

Iconographic module

Narrative module

Bodily module
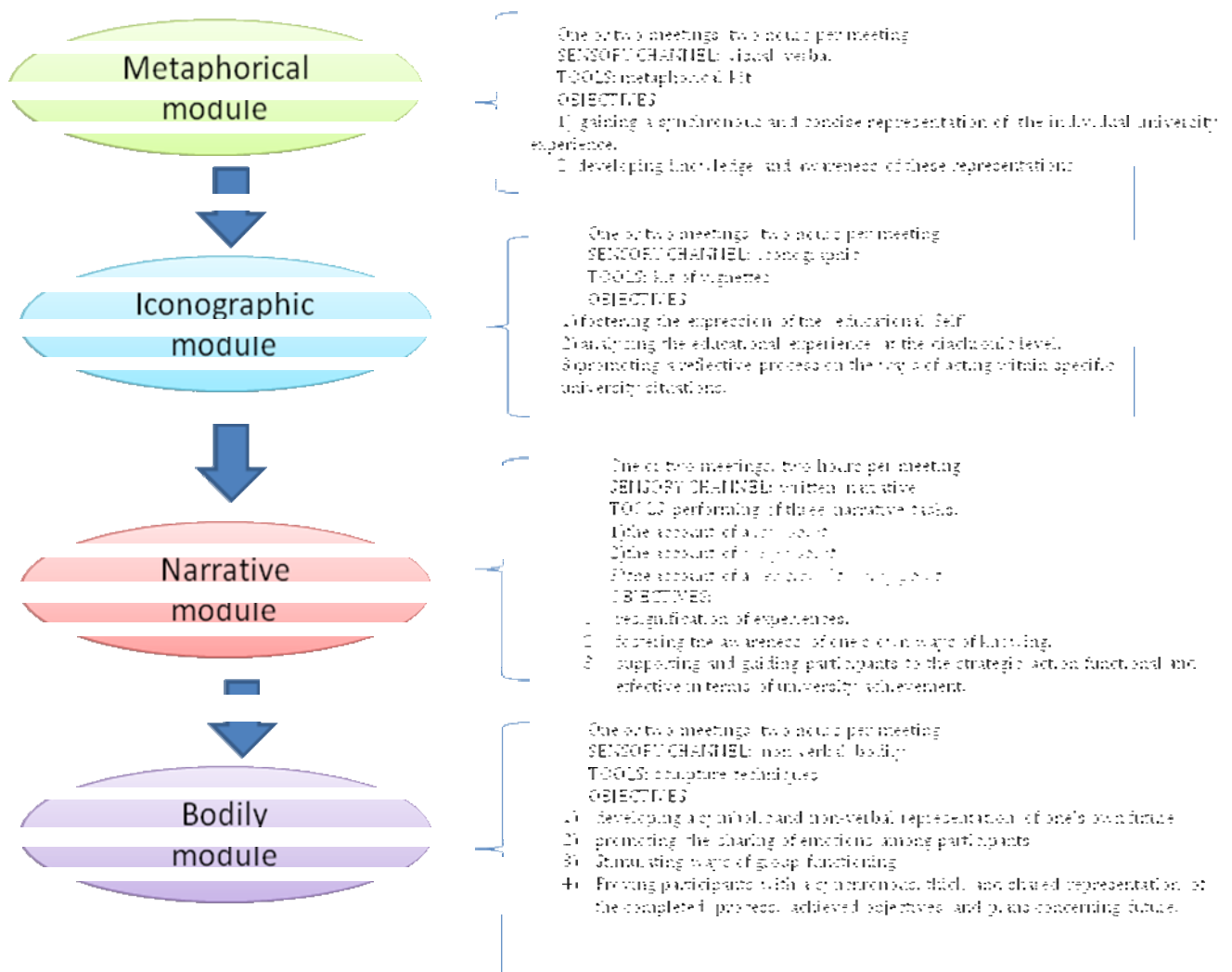
4.1. The connection between the abilities to learn and the modules of training

The Learn to Learn competence is widely considered as essential to foster adaptability to new contexts and participatory inclusion in education and work environment.

Such a competence consists, therefore, in the acquisition of the awareness of one's own process of learning and one's own needs, identifying the available resources and the obstacles to overcome in order to learn in an effective way.

Such a competence consists also in managing one's own time and academic career in an effective way, and in particular in reflecting on objectives and aims of the learning process.

Such a competence, within the university context, represents a competence in studying, a being-able-to-study, based on a set of abilities and knowledge integrated in a knowing.

Therefore, it is a reflective meta-competence or a high-order competence and consists in becoming aware of what one knows, how one knows, and why one knows.

The INSTALL project assumes that, in order to develop such a competence in studying, is necessary for students to activate a process of mentalization of their own educative path (Fonagy, et al., 1997; 2002; Allen, Fonagy, 2006), that is, a process aimed at understanding the reasons for one's own and others' behaviours in order to act in the university context in a way which is instrumental in the academic success.

In other words, mentalization/reflecive function allows the learning subject to see and recognize him/herself while acting, and it combines the emotional, cognitive and social dimensions, which go across the educational experience, in order to give them a strategical direction. Furthermore mentalization allows subject to recognize, elaborate on , and regulate mental states (emotions, intentions, desires, beliefs, etc.) which go across the learning process (Fonagy et al, 1997; Allen, Fonagy, 2006). In this sense, the student can activate a reflective process of mentalization about what and why he/she learns so that he/she can give a new and more functional direction to his/her academic performance.

In addition to what has already been mentioned in the methodological section of the Baseline Report, it is important to highlight that the metaphorical module allows students to identify the 'problem' in their academic career, by paying attention to what is "new", that is what has not spotlighted and focused on yet. That is why this module allows students to acquire a competence connected to the "what" dimension. By enabling students to reflect on their behaviours in different situations typical of university life the iconographic module, instead, assists students in constructing a competence connected to the "how" dimension, that is "how one learns".

Furthermore, the narrative module, through the use of a written narrative, allows students to reflect in order to investigate and express in words the reasons of their behaviours. This allows them to acquire a competence connected to the "why" dimension, that is "why did I behave like that?", and to the spotlighting of commitments and resources subjects have.

Finally, the bodily module, through the body, allows students the passage to action, by acquiring a competence connected to the strategic dimension of learning.

5. THE EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION: AN OVERVIEW

Different validation tools to control the effectiveness of the project (outputs) have been identified in order to test, fine-tune and validate the NMPs.

The validation tools are divided into tools of self-reporting, that are targeted at students, and hetero-evaluation tools targeted at the Narrative Group Trainers (NGTs).

In addition at the end of the NMP, the students will be monitored and their performance tracked in order to verify the efficacy of the NMP.

Self-reporting tools to be administered to students

Form to evaluate reflective/mentalization competence. Before and after the training: The first form aims at evaluating the reflective/mentalization competence of the students participating in the training course.

Semantic differential. Before and after the training: Four semantic differentials aiming at identifying and measuring the connotative meaning (emotional and symbolic) of some objects experienced by students, such as themselves, themselves as students, their university course, and the training course. These semantic differentials will be also administered at the end of the course to investigate possible changes in the connotative meaning (emotional and symbolic) due to participation in the course.

Questionnaire of Satisfaction. After the training: The level of satisfaction is investigated taking into consideration specific dimensions: the logistics (e.g. accessibility of the venue), the trainer (e.g. capability of the trainer), and the goals (e.g. evaluation of the efficiency of the course). The satisfaction questionnaire is followed by a short form evaluating the utility of the course, particularly, the acquisition of the Learning to Learn competence and the effects on university performance and the student's life. For this reason, an open question aims at evaluating the effectiveness of the training course modules.

Evaluation tools administered to trainers before and after the course

Form with the trainer's personal data. The form to be completed at the beginning or during the course; this aims at investigating the trainer's personal and social data.

Evaluation form. A form evaluating the outputs of the training course through open questions, to be completed at the end of the training course. This form aims at investigating what the trainers think about the whole process, the effectiveness of the methodology, the strengths weaknesses, and any factors that might influence the efficacy of the training route.

Log book, work in progress form:

A form evaluating the training process through open questions, to be completed at the end of each meeting. It will be used like a logbook for the NGTs. This form aims at investigating the efficacy of each meeting, the adopted methodology, any difficulties that may have been encountered, etc.

All these forms will be described in detail in the Operational Manual and guideline for trainers.

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