

INSTALL
Innovative Solutions To Acquire
Learning to Learn

OPERATIONAL MANUAL AND GUIDELINES
FOR THE NARRATIVE GROUP TRAINERS

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2. Introduction to the theoretical aspects of the phenomenon of Non-Traditional/Disadvantaged

INSTALL project target

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Terms like “disadvantaged” or “non-traditional” students are increasingly being used to refer to the new, non-conventional populations coming into higher education who might experience some difficulties adapting to the institution or successfully graduating from university. In the international literature Crosling and colleagues (2008) state that “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 the first member of their family to participate in higher education; mature students; people from minority groups and refugees.

Despite the increasing frequency of these student groups, there remain few studies which have delved into the characteristics of disadvantaged/non-traditional students. The first problem in studying the academic performance of underachieving students concerns the difficulty in defining what is meant by the term “underachieving student”. Underachievement is commonly seen as a discrepancy between the level of student’s performance and his or her academic potential. The underachievers are usually defined as gifted students, that is, students who have the skills and competencies to achieve 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 standardised achievement test scores or cog-

nitive 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 agreed that there is no single cause that explains this underachievement but that 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., parental attitudes to school and the role models that parents provide, the nature of home support, sibling rivalry and the loss of a “special” label), school/university curriculum and teaching methods (e.g., rote learning, rigid teaching styles and curriculum content, inexperienced and inflexible teachers) and personality traits (e.g., 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; Rimm, 2003; Siegle & McCoach, 2005; Carr et al., 1991). Generally, gifted underachieving students are more likely to be male and to come from conflicting families where there is an opposition between parents about educational style. Additionally, they are more likely to be influenced by the quality of their relationships with their peers (Matthews & McBee, 2007).

Regarding studies which focus on the reasons why students drop-out of university, 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, the research suggests that there is one particular factor affecting university incompleteness more than others, namely the educational background (Di Pietro, 2012). Cingano and Cipollone (2003; 2007), for

example, studied the determinants of drop-out probability using a representative sample of Italian upper secondary school graduates. They focused in particular on variables such as social-economic status, educational background and local conditions. 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 the educational path taken by the student to be important and highlighted how the socio-economic status of the family could influence the choice of secondary school education.

The narrative study carried out by González-Monteagudo and Ballesteros (2011) with non-traditional students in the University of Seville found that the academic success of these students was influenced by factors like the level of family support (especially in terms of a stable economic situation) and the previous academic background. However, many students had a lack of training in academic skills (e.g., to search for and filter information, to write essays, to study for examinations). Students did not seem to receive good preparation to master these academic skills in their secondary schools. However, it is important to point out that many universities do not usually have specific programmes designed to improve academic skills during the first year of a degree course or the initial semester. Lecturers who were contacted in the same study (González-Monteagudo & Ballesteros, 2011) also stressed the need of implementing short courses, seminars and other activities during the first and second semesters to overcome deficiencies in these domains.

In conclusion, the research conducted in this field shows the difficulty in defining the specific characteristics of disadvantaged/non-traditional 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 achieved in the high school diploma) the only variable to be consistently associated with poor academic performance is parental

background which is understood primarily in terms of educational and cultural level, rather than socio-economic level. Specifically, the higher the parents educational level, the more likely the students are to obtain good academic performance.

2.1 Common and differential patterns in the contexts and in the disadvantaged student profiles

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 universities are mega-universities such as UNFII with a great number of students and staff, and other institutions, like the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) are much smaller in size (e.g., total number of students). The cultural and economical context also seems to provide different starting points. While universities like the University of Aarhus (AU) are free of fees and award scholarships for some students, in comparison, the economical conditions in other universities 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 the ratio is over 33.

The number of students attending university has increased in recent years across all universities. This increase is parallel to the access of new student populations to higher education, the so called “non-traditional” students, especially mature students and students from lower socio-economic 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. The current economic crisis is also related to the increase in the number of university students. As the unemployment rates rise, acquiring further education appears to many people to be a means of potentially improving their career prospects.

There are important differences in the five institutions regarding the percentage of international students. In NUIM, approximately 12% of the total student body are international students compared to 2.3% in US and 0.5% in UNFII. It may be suggested that the language in which teaching is provided constitutes an important factor in attracting 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, in each of the five universities, the provisions and supports in place to attend to the needs of disadvantaged students are in different points of evolution. In some of the contexts, for example, Ireland, there is a long tradition of widening participation in higher education and this can be observed in the number and diversification of the student support services. Spanish universities are at a halfway point regarding widening participation. Presently, legal regulations are being implemented in Spanish universities but they are still in the very early stages of being introduced. The types and number of student 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 ranges from help with medical, financial and legal issues, to 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 (e.g., writing, mathematical skills).
- The way students access the support services is not completely clear. In most cases, it seems that students who are experiencing some kind of difficulty will seek or explicitly ask for help and will then receive attention to improve their situation. Help is given directly to the student but not always in the context that might be causing conflict. However, a mediator role can

be observed in NUIM. It can be noted that in some of the research analyzed, students pointed to their teachers as the main barriers to their learning (e.g., their inflexible attitudes or the non-inclusive methods teachers use). In this sense, the proactive, contextual intervention of the NUIM Academic Advisory Office appears to be of value. If we aim to improve learning, not only are the students the targeted population we have to work with but sometimes the difficulties are in the contexts and other significant barriers that need to be addressed.

- Other interesting initiatives are those directly targeted to specific groups of disadvantaged students: the Access 21 and Disability Office in NUIM; the Specialised 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 economic crisis in the five universities. There is a danger that the current crisis could put the recent advances on widening participation at risk. The constant financial cuts and the pressures for efficiency and effectiveness have resulted in reductions in staff numbers and cutbacks in financial grants for students with lower economic incomes. On the other hand, there is a positive effect of the crisis in that the number of non-traditional students is increasing. These students are increasingly acknowledging the important role played by universities in enabling them to acquire further education and enhance their employment prospects.

2.2 Profiles of underachieving, non-traditional and disadvantaged students

This topic is central for the INSTALL Project given that the project aims to improve the learning abilities of disadvantaged students.

Thus, one of the key initial steps to be taken in the project is to determine the characteristics of the students that the project will target.

The main problem that arises when analyzing the individual reports is the difficulty in the definition and identification of disadvantaged students, especially given that students from this population constitute a heterogeneous group. After reading the reports, two terms seem to be of particular interest for INSTALL:

- Drop-out students refers to those students who do not finish their degrees (although it is important to point out that many of them might change their degree and not necessarily abandon university).
- Underachieving students which in most cases can be characterized as those students who do not finish the programme in the scheduled time. They are sometimes referred to as “delayed” students (e.g., late graduates or inactive students in Federico II University) or in the case of NSPAS the term can also apply to students with marks that are below the average.

The so called non-traditional students (e.g., students with disabilities, with family burdens, students who need to combine employment and study, students from lower economic and social backgrounds) seem to be the most vulnerable to becoming drop-outs or underachievers, as previous research has shown the associations between these phenomena (drop-out and underachievement) and their personal characteristics. There is not comparable data on the number of non-traditional students in the five universities but non-traditional students may represent at least one third of the total student population taking into account that:

- Mature students represent 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, a substantial percentage of university students may be at risk of abandoning university or underachieving. Factors influencing drop-out or underachieving are not easy to delineate but many of the studies that have dealt with these factors have shown that the particular circumstances of non-traditional students might be at the core of poor academic performance. Research results are not conclusive but there do seem to be some factors that can influence a student's chances of academic success:

- Educational background appears to be repeatedly associated with graduation and success at 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 perform well academically at university.
- Family income is also important but not as influential as the educational background.
- Previous academic background and performance (e.g., the type of high school attended and previous examination 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 students who combine outside employment with university study are somewhat unclear. Some studies have revealed the association between work and studying with delay or even drop-out, while other studies have indicated a smaller probability of drop-out for students who also work because of strong motivations these students hold to make use of their time at university.
- The place of residence is also important. In some cases, students from rural and distant homes may be living in poorer conditions than urban students. Thus, the smaller and the far-

ther the locality in which the parents live, the higher the risk of university drop-out due to a lack of economic resources. However, in the UNFII report, there is some evidence of less delay in 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 inflexible attitudes and non-inclusive teaching methods.

For most of these factors, the possibility of intervention is small. The INSTALL project cannot address factors such as the educational background of the family, the economical situation or the student's previous academic experiences. However, the existing knowledge about the factors influencing university drop-out and underachievement provide key guidelines about the identity of the students who the project should be targeting. Therefore, the aforementioned variables (low educational background, low-income families, poor performance in previous educational stages, place of residence, etc.) are to be taken into account when selecting participants to take part in the INSTALL project from the five universities, although the definition of each factor should be adjusted to reflect local norms in each national context. For instance, the definition of "low-income background" might be adapted to the different economic situations of places like Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Spain and Romania. As was stated in the previous paragraph, there is great diversity among the five contexts which will demand a good deal of reflection in defining the specific parameters to be considered in each country and university.