



Welcoming and integrating students in higher education institutions

**WELCOMING AND INTEGRATING STUDENTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**



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Project



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Consortium members



2.1. Preparing higher education institutions: policies, strategies, structures, and practices

Academic integration has been traditionally defined as the combination of academic progress, cognitive growth, and having positive learning experiences (Tinto, 2015). Given that the complete integration of students must satisfy numerous academic and administrative system requirements (Rienties et al., 2012), higher education institutions (HEI) can contribute positively by adopting appropriate admission criteria, academic standards, and organizational structure among others.

Receiving and integrating students with complex trajectories requires from HEI therefore that they adopt a comprehensive and friendly approach, involving policies, strategies, structures, and practices. These elements should result from a participated discussion amongst the institutional community and be designed to support the diverse needs, contexts and backgrounds of students. HEI must acknowledge that not all students follow or should follow a traditional path to higher education. In fact, HEI not only need to consider alternatives to their many systems geared towards full-time students, but they also must look outside of many conventional benchmarks which fail to capture the rich and diverse activities encompassed within the vision of an inclusive institution (Mark, 2018). Open universities have sophisticated structures for welcoming students and supporting their integration into the institution in order to combat early withdrawal (Morgado et al, 2016).

Effective student retention depends on the commitment from all in the institution to serving students; a commitment to educating all students and a commitment to integrating all students into the social and academic life of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Research found that students' sense of belonging is of high importance to HEI as it increases academic motivation and enjoyment, which can impact on student achievement and retention (Pedler et al, 2022). The factors that contribute to student success include an institutional commitment to student learning, management of student transition, treating learning as both an academic and social construct, and ensuring curricular structures are in place which support student success (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

By synthesising a range of elements from the literature, Roberts (2018) has designed a model for the student lifecycle to provide a holistic and cyclical approach necessary and beneficial when framing more student-centred strategies. This student lifecycle can be described as a lifelong learning approach that has five distinct stages, as follows:

Stage 1: Future students (preparation for tertiary education, including widening participation and pre-entry activities);

Stage 2: Commencing students (arrival, enrolment, orientation, induction, first-year experience);

Stage 3: Continuing students (transition, academic progression);

Stage 4: Graduating students (graduation and preparation for employment or future studies)

Stage 5: Alumni and returning students (continuing engagement, lifelong learning opportunities, industry and other relationships).

To enable a student-centred culture to flourish, it will be helpful to make visible and demonstrate within the five stages of the student lifecycle how and when the activity of advisors can make a difference that will have the most impact on student success (Roberts, 2018).

Literature suggest that institutional strategies are key to promoting academic integration of students (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2022). A foundational stone to this holistic approach is the implementation of appropriate admission policies. It is paramount that these consider a wide scope of student profiles and consequently offer various pathways to enter higher education. These might include validating such curricular elements as non-traditional educational backgrounds, work experience, and prior learning assessments.

Another significant contribution by HEI to widen access and participation in higher education is to promote the design of academic programs that are flexible and adaptable. It is possible for HEI to aim at equity, inclusion and educational excellence, offering courses and pedagogies which are responsive to all students and not just a few (Checkoway, 2018).

Nevertheless, a critical and decisive element for HEI to cater to the unique needs of individual students is to ensure a comprehensive provision of support services, including academic advising, counseling, and mentoring. Mamiseishvili (2012) found that academic counseling services improve significantly student academic persistence, thus recommending the reinforcement of frequent interactions between students and academic advisers.

At the center of this innovative approach there is a cultural attitude. In order to build a complexity-friendly learning environment, academic communities must embrace inclusion, equity and diversity. This means that HEI should become a reference for their commitment to openness and transparency. Although such an institutional culture takes time to consolidate in the academic world, it is instrumental for achieving the abovementioned goal. An example of that is the power of language for ensuring a student-centred institution. By changing the language and terminology from *attrition/failure/withdrawal* to *success*; from *support* to *empowerment*; from *welfare* to *wellbeing*, there is an immediately positive and uplifting effect. (Roberts, 2018).

In this same direction, HEI need to have a close connection with society. For that it is critical to ensure good communication. A dynamic and attractive web presence, combined with the action of specialised offices is most certainly the right approach.

2.2. Advising prospective students for enter or re-enter higher education

Students' ability to adapt to their academic environment influence their intentions to persist or dropout (Lakhal et al., 2020). Entering or re-entering higher education requires from prospective students a high level of readiness, both in practical and psychological terms. Undoubtedly, most have researched various HEI, academic programs, and potential career paths before choosing to enrol in a particular one. But many tend not to make informed decisions about what best fits their interests and goals. As a result, it must be the role of academic advisors at the institution which they plan to attend to help them reflect on their academic and career goals and to provide them valuable guidance on course selection and academic planning.

Depending on the individual's circumstances, it might be beneficial to upgrade certain skills or knowledge before starting higher education. Advisors must understand any personal challenges or barriers the prospective student might face in pursuing higher education. This could include family commitments, health issues, or other life circumstances. Identifying these challenges early can help find solutions and support systems. In the same way, advisors should help prospective students to develop strong time management skills. If students plan to work while studying, they should consider how to strike a balance between work commitments and academic responsibilities. This will help them juggle academic responsibilities, work, and personal life effectively.

As starting a higher education program may represent a significant life change, prospective students should be prepared for challenges and setbacks, emphasizing the importance of persistence and perseverance. Orientation is the first experience students gain when they enrol in university (Ganga and Masha, 2020). If possible, advisors should persuade students to attend orientation programs offered by the institution, as they promote academic integration (Morgan et al., 2020). These programs can indeed help new students become familiar with campus resources, facilities, and the overall university environment. Advisors should also encourage prospective students to build a support network of friends, family, and mentors who can offer encouragement and assistance throughout their educational journey. Students need to have personal and positive contact with members of other groups (Huger, 2011).

Prospective students should also be advised to create a financial plan to cover the costs of higher education. Financial stress has been reported to contribute to students' anxiety and negatively impact on their academic growth (Jones et al., 2018). This might involve exploring scholarship opportunities, financial aid options, and budgeting for expenses. It is also important to ensure that prospective students are aware of the admission requirements for their chosen program. Advisors may help them gather the necessary documents and complete the application process.

Being prepared both practically and emotionally allows prospective students to feel more confident and ready to take on the challenges of higher education, setting a strong foundation for their academic success.

2.3. Getting to know the higher education institutions

Getting to know higher education institutions is crucial for prospective students to make informed decisions about where to pursue their studies. Most higher education institutions organise tours to visit the institution, either onsite or virtually, schedule open house events, provide information sessions hosted by the admissions office and participate in fairs and other public events. But these are only some of the initiatives which can be taken.

An increasingly important resource is the institution's web presence. The information provided in the institution's portal or website and other online resources are very useful for the prospective students to gather information about the programs, faculty, campus facilities, extracurricular activities, and any notable achievements or accolades. Currently, this static information is complemented by a more dynamic and personalised approach through the use of multiple social media.

The provision of MOOC and OER plays also a very important role in opening up the higher education institutions to prospective students. They offer a glimpse on the topics explored by the institution, but also the teaching and learning methods applied and even allow for credits to be earned prior to the enrolment in a formal study program or degree.

Nevertheless, the best way to get to know a higher education institution is through a combination of approaches. By taking advantage of campus visits, online resources, interactions with students and faculty, and attending events, prospective students can gather valuable information to help them make informed decisions about their educational journey.

2.4. Training higher education students for using the institutional learning environment

The learning environments in higher education can be also quite diverse. They may include online, onsite, and hybrid learning settings. Each of these modalities requires using specific approaches. Online students must have a predisposition to learn, communicate and express oneself differently than in face-to-face contexts. They are expected to use digital technologies proficiently in a learning context which is unique and to assume a role which is also different from traditional onsite settings (Morgado et al, 2016). Overall, however, the key to advising students in differentiated learning contexts is to be adaptable, attentive, and empathetic.

Training higher education students to effectively use the learning environment is essential to ensure they can navigate the educational tools and resources available to them. For achieving that goal, it is helpful to conduct a comprehensive orientation program for new students, introducing them to the learning management system (LMS), campus website, library resources, and other relevant platforms. This should be offered at the beginning of their academic journey.

Tutorials and workshops can be organised with a focus on using different aspects of the learning environment, such as accessing course materials, submitting assignments, participating in discussions, and taking online assessments.

It is important to provide online resources, such as step-by-step guides, that students can access at any time to refresh their knowledge or learn new skills related to the learning environment.

The use of gamification elements can be helpful to make learning on how to use the learning environment more engaging. Practice assignments or activities can be incorporated within the learning environment to allow students to experiment and get hands-on experience with its features.

Advisors should encourage experienced students to mentor or assist new students in becoming familiar with the learning environment. Peer support can be invaluable in helping newcomers feel comfortable using the various tools.

Dedicated support services, such as a help desk or online chat support, should be offered. Students should be able to ask questions or seek assistance related to the learning environment. Accessibility of training materials and the learning environment itself should also be considered in its design, accommodating students with different learning needs.

2.5. Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring can be an effective approach for supporting students with complex trajectories, as it provides them with the opportunity to receive guidance, encouragement, and understanding from their peers who may have faced similar challenges. This type of practice should be implemented as a complement to existing support systems, such as academic advising, counseling services, and tutoring. It should not replace professional guidance.

The impact of this practice depends however on the level of preparation of mentors. As such, comprehensive training needs to be provided, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to support students with complex trajectories. The training needs to include major topics as problem-solving techniques, understanding diversity and inclusion, and identifying when to escalate issues to professionals. The personal and professional development of mentors rests partly though on their willingness to be continuous learners. A mentor's sense of interdependency

is likely to improve collegiality and, according to Tinto (1993), peer mentors achieve this interdependency by supporting the academic and social integration of mentees into the university system.

Although the need to respect ethical boundaries in mentoring relationships should always remain a primary concern, interdependency and ultimately friendship can facilitate a sense of connectedness between the mentor and mentee while still encouraging individual growth.

However, in order to conduct peer mentoring effectively, it is important also to ensure a thoughtful matching process between mentors and mentees. Maintaining a consistent communication between both (onsite or online) contributes also makes possible for the guidance to be timely provided.

Regarding how this good practice is conducted, advisors should promote a culture of support and inclusivity within the peer mentoring program. An online platform or system can be used for mentors to share helpful resources, tips, and strategies that have worked for them. Group activities and workshops involving both mentors and mentees can also be organised, fostering a sense of community.

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Additional external resources

Complex Trajectories project website: <https://web.fe.up.pt/~complex/index.html>

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