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FOSTERING RETENTION IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AN INTERVENTION ADDRESSING THEIR FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

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Context

• Dropout and Retention in Online Higher Education (OHE)
  • higher rates of dropout (from course and degree)
  • especially during first semester and year
  • main factors:
    • time-related conflicts, time management, misconceptions

• important: first and second semester enrolments
Intervention and Research

- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)
  - high rates of dropout
  - non-traditional students (adults with jobs/family)
  - flexible model
  - learning design: continuous assessment (CA) activities
    - best predictor for retention and dropout
Intervention and Research

• *Intervention* to foster retention, persistence, and satisfaction
• institutional support addressing
  • first and second semester enrolments (courses and pathways)
  • academic advising (students’ time availability, expectations)
  • flexibility in the continuous assessment process
Research aims

- present the institutional intervention
- characterize the participant students
- explore their perception of intervention measures and their possible advantages or risks
The ESPRIA Intervention

- *First-year Students (ESPRIA, in Catalan)*
- maximize the impact of course design and institutional support on retention
- trained academic advising for first enrolments
- help students adhere to and be successful in the CA process

- Measures:
- flexible enrolment *packages*: three courses with non-overlapping submission deadlines and adjusted syllabus and workload
- provide flexibility measures in the CA process
  - making up for a failed or non-submitted CA activity; creating a first, not graded CA activity to induce a smoother entry in the course; allowing delayed submission of assessments
Method

• Qualitative, exploratory method
• Participants: 8 first-year, fully online undergraduate UOC students
  • Persisters (students who enroll for three consecutive semesters)
  • Sample: age (traditional or non-traditional [<25 y-o]; full- or part-time; gender
• Data collection: semi-structured in-depth interviews
• Data analysis: content analysis
Preliminary Results

• *Focusing on:*
  • students’ characteristics (profiles)
  • their perceptions about ESPRIA measures

• usually no significant gender differences
Preliminary Results

Profiles:

- *Traditional part-time persisters*: 30h work week; good time management skills; value UOC system; some time conflict, especially in the first semester
  - value course workload adjustment
  - and flexibilizing submission deadlines
Preliminary Results

- **Traditional full-time persisters**: no work; 30 credits; procrastination problems (women); succeed; stress at end of semester (conflict)
  - value more personal support
  - value flexibilizing submission deadlines - but not for themselves, for they fear it would increase their procrastination
  - more information on the degree and online system before starting their studies
  - not having group assignments
Preliminary Results

• *Non-traditional part-time persisters:* 12 credits, full-time jobs; difficulties when they start their studies; realistic expectations, time-related problems when they enroll in more than 2-3 courses; value flexibility and self-regulation
  • flexibilizing submission deadlines has positive and negative sides (procrastination)
  • value non-overlapping schedules and workload adjustment
  • want measures to give them a sense of community (synchronous interaction)
Preliminary Results

- *Non-traditional full-time persisters*: 30 credits, no work; good time management skills; value flexibility; expected to work more; no procrastination
  - value more personalized support
  - making up for failed submissions: good, but not for themselves
  - value flexibilizing submission dates
Conclusions

- Each student profile experiences time in different manners, and has dissimilar time management skills, demands, and perceptions of needed support.
- Treating the different profiles in the same way is not adequate, for they display different behaviors, demands, experiences, and strategies to succeed.
- Time-related factors represent the major issue for persistence and continuance.
- Students value online flexibility, but for some it also represents conflicting demands.
- Thus some measures would be good for some, but not for others (procrastinators).
- Common demands: more personalized feedback and mentorship and the possibility of making up for CA graded activities.
Thank you