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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