SUPPORTING STUDENTS THROUGHOUT UNIVERSITY CAREER: THE STAY IN PROJECT

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Introduction

The paper presents the findings of research and design activities carried out during the first year of the STAY IN project[1], aimed at establishing an e-guidance and e-support system throughout the study career for the benefit of higher education students. Starting from a brief introduction on the main issues in educational attainment and drop-out phenomena in Europe, the proposed contribution from the project is given, and first findings from research, as well as the consequent design choices, are described.

Guidance for retention in higher education

Educational attainment and drop-out in European Universities

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, adopted in 2009[2], sets specific benchmarks for tertiary education, namely that by 2020 the proportion of 30 to 34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%. According to Eurostat figures 2012, while the EU average (37.5%) is increasing, some countries show a different trend: in particular, where Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden and the United Kingdom, the proportion of 30 to 34 year-old men and women with tertiary educational attainment was already 40% or more in 2011, less than 25% of citizens in this range of age have a tertiary education in the Czech Republic (25.6%), Slovakia (23.7%), Romania (21.8), Malta (22.4%) and Italy (21.7%), as was also the case in Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey.

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[1] STAY IN Student Guidance at University for Inclusion is a project co-funded by the European Commission, under the Lifelong Learning Programme. For further details: http://stay-in.org
[2] Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'): http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:en:PDF

Alongside with the achievement figures, retention figures should be also taken into consideration to draft the overall picture: according to the recent study of the NESET network of experts for the European Commission (Quinn, 2013):

> *"The most successful countries in terms of completion are Denmark, United Kingdom and Germany and the least successful are Italy, Hungary and Poland. However even Denmark as most successful only has around 80% completion and Italy's rates are as low as 46%. Therefore completion appears to be a significant problem across the EU"*

Literature states that there are several factors affecting retention, mostly depending on institution, and some not directly depending from institutions, such as socio cultural factors, i.e. access to educational opportunities, financial support, perceived utility of universities' degrees etc.

Tinto and Pusser (2006, pp.6-16) argued that the conditions for student success are: Commitment; Expectations; Support; Feedback; Involvement – and they relates to institutional integration. The NESET network argued that the socio-cultural factors extrinsic to the institution and to higher education, such as access to educational opportunities/attainment at school level, also play a role – therefore institutional measures alone cannot fully address the issue (NESET, 2011).

However, institutions in their autonomy can effectively act to improve retention rates: the NESET network of experts identified 14 types of initiatives, carried out at institutional level that turned to being effective in reducing drop-out, namely:

- Type 1: Preparing students for higher education;
- Type 2: Supporting students into higher education;
- Type 3: Tracking student engagement with higher education;
- Type 4: Creating a more relevant and supportive curriculum;
- Type 5: Creating more responsive pedagogies;
- Type 6: Fostering positive approaches to learning;
- Type 7: Improving formative assessment;
- Type 8: Improving student study skills;
- Type 9: Offering financial support to students;
- Type 10: Offering counselling and personal support to students;
- Type 11: Fostering student personal networks;
- Type 12: Targeting support for specific disciplines;
- Type 13: Targeting support at specific groups of students;
- Type 14: Demonstrating the future utility of higher education (Quinn, 2013).

The level of action is thus comprehensive of measures related to access, ongoing support, and career (exit) support, with a strong focus on personal needs of individual students, and encompasses pedagogical and didactical arrangements, as well as support services development and deployment. The interlocked goals of widening participation and promote

retention will require a range of adjustments and modifications in higher education across countries – structural, functional, organisational changes. Higher education institutions have been in past few years challenged by a number of issues, such as, in example, a different students' body, that requires adjustments to address the needs of students at risk of exclusion, including older adults, less affluent and well-educated people, women with dependent children, ethnic minorities and rural population; the embedded use of ICTs in learning, that required new competences for teachers and tutors; a stronger link between business and academia; and generally an improved contribution to society (Third Mission of the university).

Some of these dimensions, such as new pedagogies and didactics, a greater distance learning offer, and generally flexible provisions for students, are already in place, or anyway increasing and improving amongst universities in Europe. Other dimensions, like guidance and counselling services, are less developed.

According to policy and research papers (EUA, 2009; ESU, 2006; Osborne, 2006), in facts, guidance and counselling services at the university are still focused on the initial-ending phases (Katzensteir et al., 2007). Public (policy) goals with regard to guidance services fall into three main categories: (1) learning guidance; (2) career (labour) guidance; (3) social guidance. About all European Universities offer access guidance (educational guidance) and career guidance (labour guidance). Between the enter and the exit moments, the support offered by the institutions is less clear and in any case not structurally implemented. This element can be very relevant when considering that, even if there are only a few studies investigating the timing of drop-out, it is clear that drop-out is most likely during the first year of study (Larsen et al., 2013), therefore after the access moment.

An ongoing support in terms of guidance and early detection of students at-risk, should be put in place in a structural way, and should include a comprehensive information offer, the access to services both in situ and online, and a greater awareness by the teachers and tutors on how to approach and support and engage students.

Support students throughout the university career: a proposal

The STAY IN project, started in October 2012, is aimed at providing a comprehensive support to students focusing on the ongoing study career, both in presence (student offices) and especially at a distance, by means of a multi-level channel of communication and a continuous dialogue with the student.

The hypothesis of the project were mainly:

- The focus on "disadvantaged students", more than on "students with disadvantaged background": it is a fact, widely recognized, that students from disadvantaged background might have more problems in tertiary education attainment, however it is also a fact that many students with no-disadvantaged background anyway drop out from higher education;

- The importance of online services: while e-learning is already in place in many universities, there is little evidence of e-services;
- The emphasis on continuous guidance, in particularly for students at the first year of higher education, to support them in the period of transition;
- The cooperation among all services available at the universities, and the direct involvement of staff, aimed both at raising awareness about the retention issue and at fostering active participation from the academic and technical staff in supporting students. This means an improved communication of the entire university community, which of course includes students.

STAY IN was planned in order to investigate about the factors leading to drop out, and to design, develop and pilot, on the basis of these findings, a possible proposal to offer an improved support to students.

First findings

Between January and May 2013 a research analysis was carried out, in order to identify the students' needs, and act to fill in the gap between support needs and support provision. The overall methodology adopted combined three methods of data collection and analysis: a set of Key Informant Interviews; a Literature Review of theory, research and practice on student guidance and counselling; a Student Survey. In all three sets of data there was a clear consensus that (Cullen, 2013):

- students should not be homogenised into static target profiles. Their needs are shaped by a process that is continually evolving, as they progress through the study life cycle, and as their circumstances change;
- guidance services need to reflect this process, addressing a spectrum of needs that begin with the transition between school and university, and end with the transition between university and the external world, particularly the world of work

The survey (546 completed questionnaires[3]) in particular offered some interesting data, by making explicit:

- a general gap between support needs and support provision;
- a gap between the supply of support and perceptions of the utility and usefulness of the support provided;
- an inadequate basic information.

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[3] The majority of questionnaires were completed by students from Italy (38%), Spain (36%) and Hungary (19%), where the STAY IN model will be piloted. 7% of the questionnaires were completed by students from outside these three countries, covering a wide spread of institutions in Greece, Montenegro, the UK, Portugal, France, Ukraine, Romania, Germany, Sweden, USA, Canada.

Further elements have to be taken into consideration, such as the problems experienced while studying:
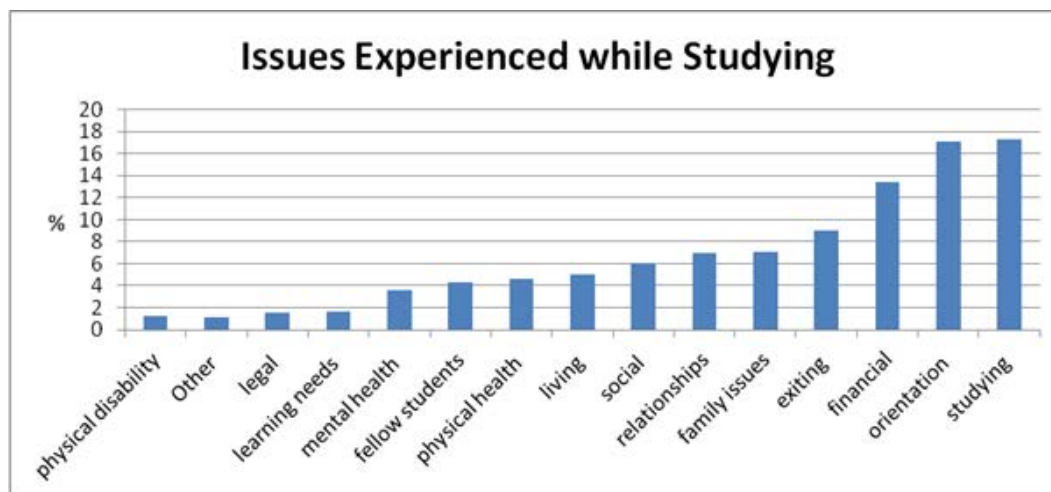

Figure 1. Data from students survey (Cullen, 2013, p.28)

Problems related to studying (like timetable issues and examination issues) are cited by 17% of the sample, 'orientation' problems (like issues around finding information on first arrival) are cited by 17% of the sample, and financial issues (for example paying tuition fees and paying for books) affected 13% of the sample. Other significant issues cited were issues around 'exiting' study (lack of careers advice, for example); family issues; relationship issues and social problems (for example feeling isolated). This has been confirmed in answers to open question "In your student experience, what would you say are the three biggest problems and issue students face whilst studying?". While the need of an improved and rational information system was already identified at the proposal stage, some new elements required attention, such as the provision of study skills learning events.

Summarising, the set of elements of the service design includes at least (Cullen, 2013):

> *"Information and advice elements aimed at the whole student community (for example website; Handbook); face-to-face advice and support elements (for example one-to-one counselling); group elements (for example student 'buddying'); on-line elements (for example an on-line Forum)."*

and

> *"The optimum benchmark the service design should aim at would provide: an on-line information service; a Student Handbook; one-to-one consultation; personal guidance tutors; 'one stop shop' in which services are integrated; 24 hour access to services"*

As a consequence, the institutions should act in order to:

- redesign of the basic information system, aiming at providing a coherent orientation across working units of the university, and a consistent information across sub-websites of different departments and faculties;
- develop a single point of access for information and services (one shop stop);
- improve or develop online based services, based on a blended model;
- design and develop devoted services to answer to specific needs (e.g. study skills);
- focus on the student needs, and be supportive at all levels (teaching, administrative, professional and technical staff);
- develop ancillary services aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of service provision, like awareness-raising actions; a Student Charter; training for students and staff; regular workshops for students in study skills; continuing professional development for professional counselling and guidance staff; a monitoring system to continuously assess the level and nature of student issues and potential problems, and to assess the performance of the counselling and guidance services provided (Cullen, 2013, p.5).

The development of a comprehensive support system thus requires a strong commitment from the university staff at all levels: this is in line with the strategy for the modernisation of higher education as mentioned above, and necessary to promote integration of the new tools and on a new vision of the university community.

The STAY IN model

STAY IN seeks to propose a model contributing to the development of e-services in the field of guidance and counselling, although a more general concept of e-support underlines the project approach. As a starting point for the technical development, the WISP platform was adopted. WISP – Web-based Integrated Services Platform is a multi-channel open source platform developed in the frame of the ICT-PSP project eGos for e-guidance for employability and e-government purposes, that at present enables e-guidance practitioners to deliver their information, advice and help services to final beneficiaries by using different ICT-based tools such as video-conferencing, phone calls, e-mail, chat-rooms, forum, etc. The platform has been adapted to the STAY IN needs by adding profiles consistently with the level of access to the services, i.e. student has direct access to all available services, users (that can be in example secondary schools students looking for information) can access information, but cannot ask for specific (face-to-face or group) services.

Taking into due consideration the outcomes of research work, the STAY IN framework has been therefore drafted as follows:
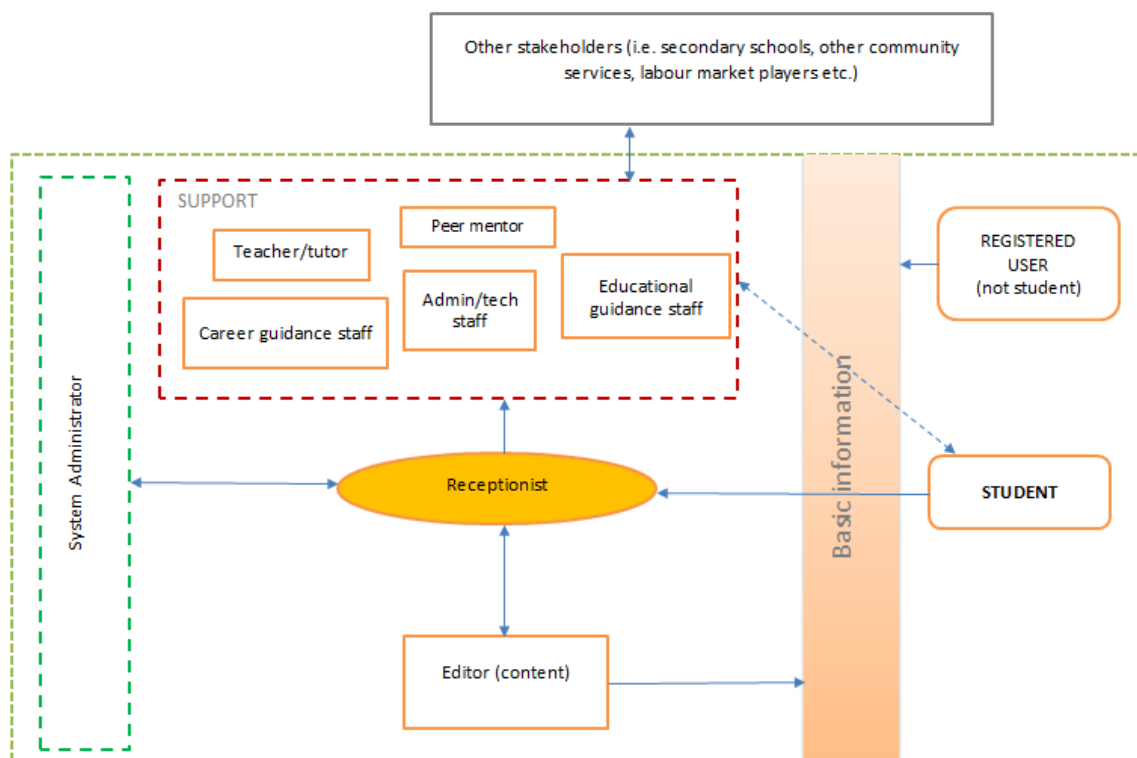
Figure 2. The STAY IN system (STAY IN consortium, 2013)

The green line encompasses the players acting within the online environment, and the rows draft the communication flows between them. A key role is played by the Receptionist, who receives all instances and requests from the students and switches them to the appropriate service. Once the person/service is appointed, communication will take place directly between the student and the reference person.

The platform allows the full process being carried out online, from the first contact, to virtual meetings and asynchronous communication. However, even if the first contact is established online, when applicable and/or preferable, meetings can be organised at the services premises or at the telephone, in order to meet as much as preferences possible. The support persons, who can be, as outlined above, teachers, for didactic support, guidance practitioner, for guidance and orientation, counsellors or even administrative staff (taking care of the study plans modifications, in example), are committed anyway to track the ongoing process within the platform: this will allow a monitoring on how the system is able to answer requests, and will also allow the organisation to identify frequency of problems and potential weaknesses, then to act in order to enhance quality of services.

In January 2013 the platform is ready as beta version and pre-piloting activities have begun in three organisations, namely the Budapest University of Technology and Economics in Hungary, the University of Seville in Spain, and the University of Macerata in Italy. According to specific needs, some of the e-services will differ from a piloting organisation to another; this will allow also assessing the adaptability of the proposed tool and system to different contexts in Europe.

Beyond the technical development, a great effort has been made to involve concerned people since the design phase, by organising focus groups, workshops, and consultations. We believe that, even if the tool plays a relevant role in the future adoption, the key element for the success of any initiative is the commitment of people and shared vision and goals: awareness about the not-neutral role of each of the players in providing improved guidance and support services to higher education students, should be therefore amongst the main objectives of the action.

Conclusions

The STAY IN project seeks to contribute to an improved guidance and counselling provision for higher education students, focusing on online support services. The action is aimed at enhancing the quality of educational services and at improving retention rates. Research and design activities carried out so far, including literature review, interviews to key informants, a student survey and a series of events to raise awareness and involve university staff, made evident at least: a) the need of students to be effectively supported and engaged during the study years, especially in the first year of the university (managing transition), and "minor issues", such as e.g. study skills development, can be "major issues" in the decision of dropping out; b) the need of conceiving the institution as a community, where all players, from teachers to students, from administrative staff to guidance practitioners, should share the same vision and be committed toward a common goal; c) the need of further research on e-services and e-support: while flexible learning provisions, especially for distance education, have been put in place, e-services at the university are less developed.

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