Given that the Europe 2020 strategy includes the goal of at least 40% of 30-34-year olds completing higher education, improving student retention should be an integral part of this strategy (CHEPS/NIFU, 2015a). It is unsurprising then, that student retention is very high on the policy agenda for 17 out of 35 countries across Europe (CHEPS/NIFU, 2015b). For educational institutions, student retention raises a range of profound concerns ranging from the financial sustainability of higher education to competition between institutions to the moral imperative for universities to enable people to be the best they can be (Thomas et al., 2017). For students of course, drop out can have significant emotional and financial implications for them and their families. Understanding and improving student retention is becoming a priority for researchers and educational practitioners.

The seminal work in this area was carried out by Tinto in 1975 whose Student Integration Model has since achieved what Davidson and Wilson (2013) call an almost paradigmatic status in the field (see for example, Rovai, 2003). Certainly, the concept that student retention rests on a foundation of successful social and academic integration brings to the fore a range of issues for practitioners and educators to attend to – goal commitment, student ability, transition and adaptation, supportiveness, interpersonal relationships, inclusivity and belonging, quality of teaching, for example.

While an overarching framework has appeal, context matters when trying to address and understand retention. Institution, discipline, organization of learning, year of study all influence student retention (Thomas et al., 2017). Davidson and Wilson’s (2013) reassessment of the Student Integration Model argues that the complex and multifaceted nature of student retention should be recognized when theorizing and acting to improve retention. They place importance on building an expanded understanding of student retention which takes into account the various circumstances of study and student: non-residential or residential study, part time or full time, non-traditional or traditional, distance learning or on-campus, age, family or work commitments, minority or mainstream. This range of influences requires an expanded theorization of the basis of retention which is sensitive to context. Educators working to improve retention would benefit from a more refined understanding of retention which takes into the varying outcomes across a range of student groups as well as teaching and learning contexts.
This symposium aims to build a contextually sensitive understanding of student retention by examining retention across a range of national, disciplinary and educational contexts. The symposium draws together eight papers from 7 nations, in subject areas spanning science, mathematics, engineering, health and social care, teacher training and engineering. Face-to-face education with more traditional students is examined as well as non-traditional students in distance learning contexts. The symposium will focus on three broad areas of interest to researchers and educator: understanding student drop out and retention, predicting student drop out and interventions to improve retention.

References


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Presentations of the Symposium

Papers in Symposium: 4
National Perspectives: 4
Limitations in Conceptualizing and Predicting Student Dropout: A Mixed-Methods Case Study

Jan Frederiksen (University of Copenhagen)

National perspective: Denmark

The present study explores the possibilities for predicting student dropout from enrollment application data. A reliable way of predicting drop-out would be of great interest for a number of reasons both political, institutional and pedagogic, especially if such a model could qualify enrollment procedures and priorities, and indicate feasible avenues of intervention, that might improve student retention. Yet such models have, in the case of the humanities at least, so far proven elusive. This paper demonstrates that this elusiveness may be due to the differences between the operational demands a statistical model imposes on measuring drop-out, and the subjective nature of the process leading to dropout. The first part of this paper tries to test nine current hypotheses that guide Danish educational policies, to see to what extent they enable such prediction. The data for the first part of the paper are register data on four complete cohorts (2012-2015) of students enrolled at five different bachelor programs in a humanities department (n=1401). The hypotheses are tested in both bivariate and multivariate configurations and this reveals very few significant correlations, with very limited effects, when dropouts are modelled for each of the examined programs. The second part of this paper explores how students come to decide that they are dropping out. From the same population of students examined in the first part of the study, 44 students who dropped out were interviewed biographically about their application, enrollment, study years, the process ending with their decision to drop-out, and their subsequent work- and study lives. The analysis of the students’ dropout-narratives reveals highly complicated deliberations by the students, connecting their previous social and educational trajectories with a number of educational, social and cultural features specific to the program from which they dropped out. Thus, expanding the operationalization of dropout from a statistical event to a subjective process reveals complexities within that process, locally within programs and related to student trajectories, that hamper or prevent statistical prediction of dropouts. This means dropouts must be understood locally, and related to each specific program. In addition, the interview analysis reveals that political and cultural narratives about the program, about student identities and about future employment encapsulates and shapes student narratives, and inform strategical decisions and deliberations along the way.

References:

Student Retention and Dropout in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Systematic Review.

Felipe Munizaga (University of Chile), M. Beatriz Cifuentes (University of Chile), Andrés Beltrán (University of Chile)

National perspective: Chile

The phenomena of retention and student dropout in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has important social and economic effects both for students, and society itself (ALFA-GUIA Project, 2013; CINDA, 2006). Even though student retention is regarded as a significant issue (CHEPS/NIFU. 2015b; Ferreyra et al., 2017, OECD, 2016), there has not been a systematic review of research from across the LAC. There is a need for a review focusing on systematic and replicable empirical studies (Higgins & Green, 2011).

To meet this need, this study aims to describe variables and factors related to retention and student dropout in Higher Education in LAC. Two independent researchers found and analyzed 81 articles in Spanish and Portuguese, published between 1990 and 2016, from 10 different countries and indexed in seven databases. The articles described 111 different variables related to retention. These variables were organized under the five factors suggested by the ALFA-GUIA Project (2013): Individual, Academic, Economic, Institutional and Cultural. The main conclusions are that concerns about retention have only recently emerged across the region. The recent increase in attention has resulted from the work of international organisations and their advancement of international rankings, quality measures, accreditation and so on. The review found that there is no consensus in the definition of retention/drop out, mainly due to the lack of theorized research, and the multi-causality, complexity and dynamism of the phenomenon. Consequentially, there are few homogeneous and comparable measurements between studies. Only 11% of the studies are “interventions” or “evaluation of interventions”. 42% of studies focused on “characterization of students”. Of the ALFA-GUIA Project factors, the most important was “Individual”, though the studies highlight the need to improve the quality of such measures especially when considering latent variables, adaptation and psychosocial factors. Academic and Institutional factors also emerged as significant and reveal the fundamental role that University Institutions have in decreasing dropout. Economic factors demand changes in the focus of the State and the financial support of the students. The paper concludes by emphasizing that improving retention requires action across all five ALFA-GUIA Project factors. Further research work is needed in understanding retention. In particular, even though cultural factors are theoretically well understood, they are very difficult to measure. Also, the relationship between factors could be better understood as Individual and Academic factors have several correlated variables.

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This paper examines the link between temporal factors, social-spatial inequalities, institutional features and student dropout in Hungary. In order to do this, a novel mixed methods research methodology is adopted. Investigation connects two large-scale comprehensive statistical databases, supplemented by a joint analysis of interviews and questionnaire survey data. The use of mixed and multiple data methods provides a better approach to understanding a widespread and complex phenomenon in education. Our purpose is to identify those programs where the risk of attrition is high and to make a comparison between persistent and non-persistent students in terms of social and demographical status, as well as territorial and regional characteristics. By investigating the main milestones and difficulties of the higher education career (requirements and success, changing majors, procrastination and inconsistency, employment, typical dropout periods etc.) we plan to identify the typical dropout scenario. Particular attention will be given to temporality. Although in Hungary there is no agreement in how to measure the number of students who drop out, a figure of 30-40% is often given (Varga, 2010). According to the 2014 data from the Admission Information System, the drop out is higher in courses that offer bachelor degrees (36-38% in 2014) while in courses that offer master degrees, the figure is half that (14-17%) (Derényi, 2015). However, time to complete is often not taken into account in this measurement. Consequently, the number who attain a qualification (50-80%) will be considerably lower if we only count those who complete within a specific time frame. The nature of the higher education experience is also related to student disengagement. In particular, negative student experiences can result from institutions which are ill-prepared for the range of student types, including those from non-traditional groups, high student/teacher ratio, relatively high tuition costs and student expenses (Tinto, 1993, Barefoot, 2004). The interrelationship between the individual risk of dropout, students’ attitudes and characteristics, activity structures and institutional environment will also be analysed. By investigating the main milestones and difficulties of the higher education career (requirements and success, changing majors, procrastination and inconsistency, employment, typical dropout periods etc.) we plan to identify the typical dropout scenario.

References:
Narratives of Teacher Training Students who Postponed their Studies

Carina Carlhed (University of Stockholm)

National perspective: Sweden

In relation to the ideal visions of successful student trajectories found in current educational policy and debates, it can be questioned whether the opportunities to access higher education, to be mobile, efficient and successful are the same for all students. The student has to move in and out of financial systems (labour market, student finance) as well as managing time, hitting deadlines, keeping up, and making the timing of important events work throughout their educational career. Lately, there has been an increased political focus on student enrolment, efficiency and completion in higher education which in turn, increases the pressure for HEIs to be more efficient and ensure student success. However, this case study focuses on the situations in which students (for a range of different reasons) do not follow the same study pace as “normal performing” students do. In the administrative HE discourse, the situation is framed in terms of ‘at-risk students’ in danger of dropping out. Students who do not register for the next semester of study are measured as ‘dropped out’ in the administrative follow up statistics. But, what kind of existence do dropouts experience and what are the reasons for not continuing their studies? The current study contrasts the results from an analysis based on administrative HE discourse and other policy discourses, with a critical sociological analysis of the lived experienced from 31 ‘at risk’ dropout students from the Swedish teacher programme at a Swedish university, (21 female students and 10 male students). The interviews of the group of students were both analysed in line with the administrative HE discourse and different policy discourses. The analysis generated a typology of ‘stragglers’ based on two dimensions; commitment to and ability to pursue the studies on the outskirts of the normal study pace. The typology and its’ dimensions were then contrasted and analysed through the student biographies in which the educational choices, crossroads, success and failures in their studies, encounters with the style of education (Alheit, 2009, Alheit & Dausien 2002) were reflected on and were narrated into their daily life and future horizons of their careers, teacher careers or other career paths. In the analysis a central theme has been how the students have been able to mobilise resources, i.e. from inherited educational capital. Two thirds of the students had low levels of inherited educational capital (Bourdieu, 1984) while one third had high levels of inherited educational capital.

References: