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First Year Students' Perceptions in Transition to University: The Students' Experience

Abstract: Studies about the transition to university emphasise the importance of the process of adaptation in the first year as a determining persistence factor. This article presents the results of the focus groups held with students of two undergraduate degree programmes, Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration, at the University of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain) that dealt with the more significant situations they experienced in the process of adapting to life at university. The results are based on the five main tasks in the process of transition to university: starting and developing new social relationships; adjusting expectations about the university and degree programme; adapting to new academic codes at university; coping with academic/exam results; and construction of the university identity. These five tasks are identified in three moments in the initial period of adaptation. This study forms part of a Research+Development project¹.

Keywords: transition to university, academic adaptation, persistence, higher education, university students.

¹ "Trayectorias de abandono, persistencia y graduación en Ciencias Sociales: validación de un modelo predictivo" (EDU2012-31568), an R&D project. Ministry of Education, Spain.

Introduction

Thousands of students gain admission to university every year. The majority enrol in first-choice degree courses although there are also students who ultimately have to enrol in courses that were not among their initial preferences. Nevertheless, for all new-entry students, admission to university represents an important personal and academic achievement.

According to Gairín, Figuera and Triadó (2010), student drop-out within the context of the public universities in Catalonia (Spain) is as high as 34.1%. The University of Barcelona is the university with the highest annual number of student enrolments (62.995 students in 2017–18). So, studies and surveys on retention and drop-out are of the highest priority.

There is a consolidated theoretical corpus in the current literature on the academic background of university students and its connection with persistence and drop-out (Pascarella, Terenzini, 2005; Habley, Bloom, Robbins, 2012; Tinto, 2012a; Braxton 2014). Various studies by the TRALS team –focusing on the study of the first-year transition of students at the University of Barcelona and analysis of the determining factors– show that persistence and drop-out are complex phenomena in which numerous personal and institutional factors play a role (Figuera, Torrado, 2014a, 2014b). They also highlight the importance of disciplines and study programmes as noteworthy factors (Dorio & Corti, 2014; Triado, Aparicio, Freixa, Torrado, 2015).

A contextual perspective at undergraduate level is essential for understanding the decisions made by students based on their experience at university and for the design and planning of courses of action. The experiences of students taking different degree courses show the importance of their being able to express their views.

The groundwork for this paper was the R&D project *Trayectorias de abandono, persistencia y graduación en Ciencias Sociales: validación de un modelo predictivo*, which looks at two degree programmes (Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration) at the University of Barcelona. Using mixed methods of research, the objective was to gain a better understanding of the process of academic and social integration

and to identify the personal and institutional factors for academic persistence and drop-out among first-year students.

This article presents the results and findings of the focus groups that looked at the more significant situations faced by students during adaptation to their first year at University of Barcelona. These situations are dealt with during three different stages in the process of personal, social and institutional adaptation and adjustment facilitates the transition to university and contributes to the building of their identity as university students.

Student transition

Despite the increased attention over the concept of student transition, “there is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a transition” (Ecclestone, Biesta, Hughes, 2010: 5). Gale and Parker (2014) identifies in the research literature three distinct ways in which student transition is conceived in higher education: as induction, as development, or as becoming.

Whether the period or stage, researchers agree that the first year may be difficult for students. According to Tinto (2012a), the way students experience their first year at university is decisive for continuance or university drop-out. Hussey and Smith (2010) argue that the positive or negative perception of their experiences, i.e. the quality of the students' experience during this transition period, later on determines whether they will persist or drop out of their studies and the system as a whole.

Transition as induction

The definition of transition as induction evokes metaphors such as 'journey' and 'pathway' (Furlong, 2009; Wyn, Dwyer, 2000; Pallas, 2003). This transition pathway or 'period' is conceived as a linear progression through a number of 'phases'.

Burnett (2007) describes different phases: pre-transition (or beginning to think about university), transition (or preparing for university),

orientation week, first year student induction programs, the middle years, and the capstone or final year experience. Buglear (2009) distinguishes four periods enrolment: early weeks of teaching; middle-to-end of teaching period; first/second assessments; and the final assessment period. Therefore, the student transition is understood as the first-year experience.

The first year of study at university is –in terms of the transition to higher education– the most convulsive, stressful and critical time that students experience (Krause, 2005) as young adults, particularly for non-conventional students (Kift, 2009). It is when occurs the highest percentage of drop-outs (Burnett, 2007).

The transition as induction draws attention to situational difficulties. Therefore, difficulties in adapting to a university context due to the lack of personal and social skills and in forming part of the institution or group may prove to be a barrier to successful transition (Morrow, Ackermann, 2012; Buote et al., 2007; Oswald, Clark, 2003). Finding themselves in an institutional context that is non-conducive to interpersonal relations, insensitive to the students' needs and/or that fails to stimulate them – intellectually speaking – also makes it difficult for students to integrate and adapt (Stieha, 2010). In addition to meeting the demands of academic life, the difficulty of finding meaning in what one is studying and of being motivated to get down to study compound a long list of obstacles that certain students have to face in their transition process during the first year in the university (Lent, Brown, Hackett, 2000; Terenzini, Reason, 2005).

Transition as development

Transition as development means "a shift from one identity to another" (Ecclestone, Biesta, Hughes, 2010: 6), "a time during which students develop their identity as a university student" (Krause, Coates, 2008: 500). In other words, transition is a development process from one life stage to another. The researchers employ metaphors like "trajectory" to describe transition as a way of signalling 'a series of stages linear, cumulative and non-reversible' (Baron, Riddell, Wilson, 1999: 484).

The transition as development draws attention to individuals' internal difficulties rather than external. Situations of risk and critical moments can arise during the first year and lead to students dropping out. These include academic difficulties stemming from deficits or gaps in student's previous studies; economic problems; difficulties with interpersonal relationships; and failing to understand how the university system works, as mentioned by Tinto (2012a). According to both Yorke and Longden (2008), socio-demographic variables such as age, sex, access issues (admission grade and entrance qualifications), in addition to student dedication to study, also play a significant role in student drop-out. They also show the influence of the choice of degree course in first-year student drop-out through the identification of students who are prone to drop-out, but who successfully transfer to another degree course.

Transition as becoming

The third concept of transition has come from the life transition literature and emphasise the complexities of life. In this sense, like the concepts of transition as induction and as development, transition as becoming is (Gale, Parker, 2014: 26):

- (1) a particular time of crisis;
- (2) part of a linear progression'; and
- (3) universally experienced and normalised.

However, it is a more dynamic view of student transition, since the crisis does not imply a negative experience for all students, but rather it may be a time of great challenges (Baron, Riddell, Wilson, 1999: 484). Also, the 'transition as becoming' concept does not present fixed identities or linear and normative pathways the student transition is not unique, there is as much transition types as the number of different students. So, the Student transition is 'a condition of our subjectivity' (Quinn, 2010: 123).

The research focuses attention on different students, on their difference, rather than on the changes to be made by institutions and systems in order to accommodate difference. The narrative research design (story-telling methodology) renders the voiceless student capable to speak ‘in one’s own name’ (Sellar, Gale, 2011).

There are therefore different factors of a personal, social and institutional nature (Lent et al., 2000; Lent, 2004; Barnett, 2007; Lent, Taveira, Sheu, Singley, 2008; Yazedijian, Toews, Sevinand, Purswell, 2008) that interlink during the first year of transition to university.

Materials and methods

Focus group interviews were used to obtain first-hand the views and perceptions of students on their experience during their first year at university.

For the monitoring process, two points in time were chosen: one at the end of the first semester in year one, just after the students received their exam grades, and the other at the start of the first semester in year two.

The focus group topic guide was based on the dimensions given in Tinto and Pusser’s transition model (2006), together with dimensions from Lent’s social cognitive model (2004). The major issues that the moderators had to cover during the focus groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions for analysis in the focus group interviews.

Dimensions for analysis	Indicators
Prior to admission to university	Prior experience and choice of degree course.Support from the student’s immediate surroundings (family, friends).
Starting at university, and continuing	Social and academic integration. Institutional support.Study behaviour.
At the end of the first year	Achievements.
Perception of self-efficacy and of the institutional context	Personal and institutional strengths and weaknesses.
Persistence and/or drop-out	Success and drop-out risk factors. Factors influencing the decision to persist and/or drop-out.

The prescribed number of focus group interviews in the research project was one group in the morning and one in the afternoon for each degree course on each of the two occasions they were organised. The aim was to obtain perceptions that were representative of the students' impressions, taking into account significant variables in their socio-demographic profile and identifying parameters, i.e. age, sex, job situation, entrance qualifications, the order in their choice of studies, and morning or afternoon focus group session. The focus groups thereby reflected the diversity of students who currently gain admission to the University of Barcelona.

A total number of 58 students voluntarily participated in the focus groups, 45 from the Pedagogy degree course and 13 from the Business Management and Administration degree, as shown in tables 2 and 3. Group size continues to be an open issue in the literature on the subject: groups of 6 to 10 subjects are ideal, but smaller groups – with just 3 or 4 subjects – also are considered acceptable (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, Robson, 2001; Wilkinson, 2008). At the end of the first semester, six focus groups were held (see Table 2). At the start of the second year, four focus group interviews were organised (see Table 3).

Table 2. Distribution of the focus group interviews (first session).

Focus group	Sex	Age	Path of admission	Order of the choice of course	Job situation
1st FG: Pedagogy, Morning n= 7	57% female 43% male	57% 19-22 43% 28-29	43% UEE 29% VT 28% already studying	86% 1st choice 14% other	57% not working 43% working
2nd FG: Pedagogy, morning n=5	60% female 40% male	60% 19-22 40% 28-29	60% UEE 20% VT 20% already studying	80% 1st choice 20% other	60% not working 40% working
3rd FG: Pedagogy, afternoon n=8	75% female 25% male	50% 20-23 50% 24-37	57% UEE 29% VT 14% already studying	43% 1st choice 57% other	57% not working 43% working

4th FG: Pedagogy, afternoon n=2	100% female	22-24	100% UEE	50% 1st choice 50% other	50% not working 50% working
5th FG: Business Management and Administration, morning n=3	100% female	19-22	67% UEE 33% already studying	100% 1st choice	67% not working 33% working
6th FG: Business Management and Administration, afternoon n=5	75% female 25% male	50% 20-23 50% 24-37	57% UEE 29% VT 14% already studying	43% 1st choice 57% other	57% not working 43% working
* In Spain, the main paths of admission to university are entrance exams (UEE, or <i>prueba de acceso a la universidad</i> , taken on completion of upper secondary school education) and vocational training (VT).					

Table 3. Distribution of the focus group interviews (second session).

Focus group	Sex	Age	Path of admission	Order of the choice of course	Job situation
1st FG: Pedagogy, morning n=10	90% female 10% male	50% 20-23 50% 24-37	57% UEE 29% VT 14% already studying	43% 1st choice 57% other	57% not working 43% working
2nd FG: Pedagogy, evening n=3	100% female	21-24	100% UEE	67% 1st choice 33% other	33% not working 67% working
3rd FG: Pedagogy, evening n=10	100% female	30% 19-22 30% 23-25 40% 26-29	30% UEE 40% VT 10% already studying 10% second degree 10% > 25	30% 1st choice 70% other	60% not working 40% working
4th FG: Business Management and Administration, morning n=5	80% female 20% male	80% 19-20 20% 25	100% UEE	100% 1st choice	60% not working 40% working

All the focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed, including features of oral expression and intonation through the use of symbols. ATLAS.TI, the qualitative data analysis programme, was used for the content analysis that provided the initial categories and links. Once these categories and links were identified, the transcriptions were re-examined and five main issues identified, named and defined that were finally considered in the final analysis. In order to guarantee the credibility of the data, procedures like those used in research with qualitative data, for example, by Gullifer and Tyson (2010), were employed. In our study, an initial coding was carried out by several members of the TRALS group, which was then assessed by other members of the group and students who were collaborating.

Results

The analysis of the data showed that there were five tasks and challenges that the students had to deal with in their first-year university. These tasks were grouped in three sequential stages from the start to the end of the academic year. These five tasks and challenges can be summarised as being:

- Starting and consolidating new social relationships;
- Adjusting expectations about the university and degree course;
- Adapting to new academic codes in the university;
- Coping with academic/exam results;
- Construction of the university identity.

Figure 1 shows the sequence of stages with the corresponding tasks and challenges. A description is given below of the stages with the corresponding tasks and challenges as perceived by the students.

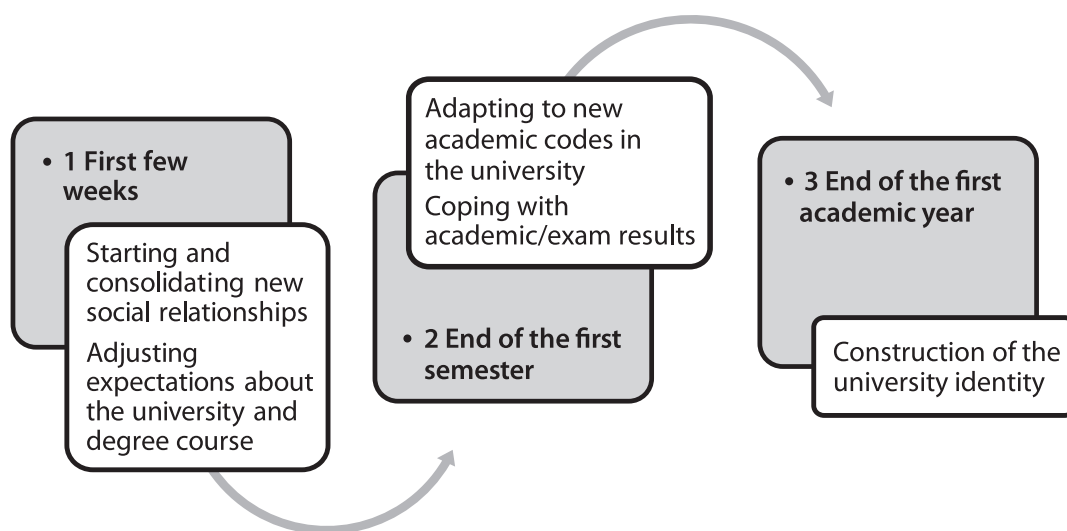


Figure 1. Stages, tasks and challenges in the first year at university.

First few weeks

During the first few weeks, the students in our study were faced with the two important tasks of starting and developing new social relationships and adjusting their expectations about the university and their degree course.

Starting and developing new social relationships.

The clearest memory that the student participants had of their first week at university was feeling nervous about starting new relationships with their classmates. Going on from what is, generally secondary school, where friendships are already consolidated, to university, where they find themselves surrounded by people who are totally unknown, can lead to fear and anxiety in some students, and they have to apply their skills and abilities to establish new social relationships (Oswald, Clark, 2003). In order to fit in socially, students need to be able to create a new network of friendships that is strong enough to become a solid support network, both personally and academically speaking, during the rest of their time at university (Buote et al., 2007).

I was worried about finding friends who I could connect with and also get support from if I was feeling down or if I needed to talk to someone about things like that. (Student in Pedagogy)

If by the end of the semester the student participants had become aware of the importance of establishing a support network, this group provided a protective shield that prevented individuals from dropping out, which is one aspect that was mentioned much more by the Pedagogy students in both focus groups.

I feel that having a good relationship with the group also helps one to continue. For example, there were times when I was on my own and the thought 'I can't go on, I just can't go on' would go round and round in my head, but there are moments when your friends say, 'come on, you can do it', 'I'll give you a hand' or 'you can borrow this'; which is a real help. (Student in Pedagogy)

This experience of companionship, however, was not so common among students of Business Management and Administration, who had to deal with much more individualism right from the start, which only increased after they received their first exam results.

Everybody does their own thing here. I thought it would be more of a group thing, and for study as well, but no. They all go to class, take notes and then leave. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

Research (for example, Lent et al., 2008; Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, Purswell, 2008) has shown that social adjustment plays a significant role during the process of transition. This process depends mainly on the student's personality and their ability and skill in establishing positive social relationships with their peers. As the student participants themselves explained, an extrovert personality was an advantage in establishing relationships with classmates and overcoming this initial stage of communication.

I'm very open as a person, so it's not hard for me to talk to other people. I always chat to people and likely as not I'll be the first to start up a conversation. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

The process of social adjustment depends not just on personal factors however but also on the context (Lent et al., 2000). In this regard, these authors point out that students feel less stressed when they perceive that they fit into a context where they feel accompanied and where there is a structure and organisation that facilitates the process of socialisation and adaptation. An awareness and understanding of the new context is therefore the first step, or link, to mitigating the stress factors. For the students in Pedagogy, the new context was difficult, probably because the faculty is located on a big campus where the buildings house various faculties and non-university institutions, unlike the setting of the Faculty of Economics and Business Studies.

The second link is the teaching staff, who play an important role as facilitator in the socialisation process of students at university (Zabalza, 2003; Johnston, 2013). In this regard, the students in Pedagogy described cooperative learning strategies, such as team work, which encouraged the start of relationships and promoted student participation and involvement in learning and study activities.

Adjusting expectations about the university and degree course.

Before actually going to university, the student participants had an imaginary idea of what it was like. From day one, however, the students in both Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration realised that reality was a world apart.

My best friends are older than me and when they went to university they told me a lot. Then you see things like tiered lecture theatres in American movies, but then when you get here it's almost worse than secondary school because hardly anything fits in the desk you've been given. (Student in Pedagogy)

Of course, I imagined it to be like they portray it in films, didn't I? You see universities being like that... That was what I expected. And when you experience it yourself, it's nowhere near so 'yuppy' as they make out. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

Once they had redefined the university and their place in it, the student participants then had to come to terms with their initial expectations about their degree course and deal with two elements in the situation they found themselves in, namely, their choice of degree course and the academic requirements and demands.

The findings of Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy (2011) show that the awareness of the career opportunities of a degree is associated with a lower probability of drop-out. Many students enrolled in Pedagogy because they had been unsuccessful with their first choices of course at university. They were often unaware of the profession (professional profile) associated with the degree although they did associate it with the field of Education. In such circumstances, a student may decide to drop out, as illustrated by the following comment:

Lots of fellow students dropped out because they didn't like their degree course (...) there are lots of students who took Pedagogy because their grades were only good enough for this subject. (Student in Pedagogy)

The students in Business Management and Administration already knew about the academic context and career opportunities of their degree, mostly through the experience of family members or relatives working in business and corporate contexts.

My mother's an accountant and my father has run different businesses, so it kind of runs in the family and right from the start it was fairly clear to me that I was going to take some degree in the Social Sciences. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

A wrong choice therefore emerged as one of the causes for a student dropping out.

There was also a difference between the students in Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration in relation to their expectations of the academic requirements and demands of their respective degree course.

In general, there was a lack of motivation among students in Pedagogy. Some referred to the degree course as being unchallenging right from the outset. This perception was affirmed for the students by their exam results, where they did well despite their admission of not committing much time or effort.

The students in Business Management and Administration had to deal with certain unexpected situations. One of the first was the competitiveness and aloofness when trying to establish and consolidate social relationships.

We all got into university and here we are, sixty of us, all equal. If there was any competitiveness at the beginning, now there's more. I mean, we're all equal, but I'm better than you because I get higher marks, I'm going to finish before you will. And this creates anxiety in everyone. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

Another was not gauging the level of difficulty of different courses in terms of study time and personal effort.

I never used to study anywhere near as much as I do now, I would look at it one or two days beforehand, but now, I need one or two weeks for the exam and, well, what I do is organise what I have to do (...) so now I study every day, and yes, I study quite a lot more. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

End of the first semester

In the second stage, student participants had to deal with two tasks and challenges: adapting to new academic codes in the university and coping with academic outcomes.

Adapting to new academic codes in the university.

With the start of classes, students become aware that university is different to their previous learning contexts and that they need to learn or discover new codes as previous ones do not work within the context of the faculty or university.

The student participants became aware of the size of their class group on entering the classroom for the first time. In their previous learning experiences, the number of students made it possible to have one-to-one relationships with classmates and the teacher, whereas at university they are scared of just being one more unknown face for the teachers.

You're new, you're anxious about things, you're a university student. People had told you things like, you're off to university, it'll all be difficult, complicated, the lecturers won't talk to you, they'll make it hard'. (Student in Pedagogy)

The students' perception of depersonalisation at university can be alleviated by the institution itself, more specifically by the teachers. This was confirmed by one student in Business Management and Administration and another in Pedagogy when describing their amazement when a teacher called them by their name.

I don't have any contact with the teachers, at school I did, all of them, but I guess it's partly because there are so many of us and how can the teachers be expected to know all of our names. (...) The teachers don't often speak to you much. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

I have a friend who studies Law and when I told her that there's a teacher who says, 'right, Mireia?', she replied 'How come she said "right, Mireia"?'. I said, 'well, there are no more than sixty of us and she knows all of our names', to which she replied, 'well, there are sixty of us, but the teachers don't know any of our names'. I guess Law is more impersonal, everyone does their own thing. (Student in Pedagogy)

In this regard, Barnett (2007) has shown that the fact that students are known and valued contributes to their intent to persist at university.

Students also have to learn new learning behaviour codes. As with the study by Willcoxson et al. (2011), the students in our research, in particular those in Pedagogy, perceived that their learning skills were inadequate.

Now there's so much material, which is something we didn't have in Bachillerato (A levels/UK, High school/US). There they wouldn't say get this book, this one and that one and read up on the info. You have so much to read that you can't squeeze everything into one day and learn it all. For me, this was the most important change. (Student in Pedagogy)

In Business Management and Administration, the students were very clear about feeling ill-prepared by their previous studies to cope with the academic demands of study at university, a variable also described by Yorke and Longden (2008).

Accountancy was very difficult because we didn't know anything at all and had no idea, because we were lacking the basics, so you could say that it was the hardest course to pass. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

Teaching and learning activities in the classroom during the first semester provide the students with an experience that enables them to acquire the codes to relate with the class group and teachers. How one acts

and behaves in the presence of teaching staff, together with how one acts and behaves with the class group, constitutes the classroom atmosphere, a factor highlighted in recent research (Tinto, 2012b).

The student participants found there were different kinds of teachers. In some cases, the teachers were motivating and their classes fascinating whereas other teachers were devoid of empathy. Nevertheless, all the students in the focus group interviews however drew attention to the teaching staff's command of the course content.

In relation to their peer groups, both groups of student participants identified the types of behaviour that were inappropriate student conduct: indifference, lack of academic motivation, childish behaviour, and a lack of respect towards the teacher.

Things like someone comes to give a talk, and half the class is chattering away. Things like that annoy me a lot and as a result I don't share so much with my class group. (Student in Pedagogy)

The student participants also commented on certain forms of behaviour by the teachers that they viewed as being inappropriate within the university, such as, for example, taking a role call, or to quote a student in Business Management and Administration, 'they treat us like kids'.

The educational relationship between the teachers and students is what creates the atmosphere in the classroom and is regarded as being one of the explanatory factors for persistence. Tinto (2012b), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Braxton (2000) have shown the importance of student experiences in the classroom and their intention to persist. Active and collaborative approaches to teaching and teachers who are skilled in these approaches encourage the academic integration of students. This is evident from comments made by both groups of students.

I think they should encourage more workgroups, presentations in public, things like that... It's really important to know how to speak and communicate. There should be more group activities

and not so much individualism. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

A teacher of a more theoretical course doesn't need to just stick to the rules and not say anything, whereas they do need to be particular about gaining people's attention and respect. Whereas a teacher of a course that's more practical needs to know how to engage and spur the dynamics of the group and, as far as possible, be demanding. (Student in Pedagogy)

Coping with academic/exam results.

Academic achievement is a predictive factor of the decision to drop out or persist, and it marks a tipping point where the student's beliefs of academic self-efficacy are put to the test. For this reason, participant students thought of either dropping out if their exam results fell below their expectations or persisting if their expectations were fulfilled.

During exam period, you feel overwhelmed, tired, your exam results aren't what you really expected or for your classmates it's sometimes an uphill climb. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

The student participants mainly attributed their academic success to self-discipline, hard work and dedication to study. This was acknowledged much more by students in Business Management and Administration, where the perception that the degree course was difficult was more widespread than in Pedagogy, as mentioned above.

For me, for example, this had me wondering whether I should drop out of Business Management and Administration at a time when I felt that all the effort I'd put into study hadn't been rewarded. (Student in Business Management and Administration)

When their academic results fell below their expectations, in general they attributed this to not having enough time to combine the demands

of having to study with other responsibilities (work, family, etc.) and a lack of motivation.

A negative experience in the first semester was often a cause for student participants to consider dropping out, especially when they were not motivated. Some students however gave themselves a second opportunity, either because they managed to connect with their studies in the second semester, or because they needed a university degree for professional purposes.

When the students' academic experience resulted in a negative academic performance, however, the idea of dropping out became more acute. In such critical moments, the social support provided by fellow students becomes a key factor in handling negative exam results and thereby reinforcing the idea of persistence (Tinto, 2012a). In addition to the emotional support, learning strategies for mutual assistance were created with fellow students, for example, preparing for courses as a group and sharing class notes. This conversation between students in Business Management and Administration shows how they were organised:

- What you're doing now is to share notes, one person does one topic and the other does another, but of course if you haven't read up on the subject at all even though she does topic one and I do topic two, if I haven't read up anything on topic one it's going to be any use to me at all, that's not the way to go about things.
- Instead of doing five different sets of notes, there's one for everybody, get it, and we divide it up.
- Maybe individually we each work on a different topic, but then all together we cover the subject. (Students of Business Management and Administration)

Students who include teaching staff in their support network have a higher probability of persisting. Different studies (Tinto, 2012b; Stieha, 2010) have shown the importance of teacher-student relationships in academic success. The students on both degree courses assessed, on the one hand, the quality of teaching aids and material in tutorials and, two,

a good relationship with the teachers and the degree to which they were accessible and willing to help.

The students themselves also need to individually plan and develop adaptation strategies, however. Their experience stimulates them to either improve on strategies that they have already used or look for new ones in order to achieve the success they are seeking. Students on both degree courses said that the best and most common used strategies for passing courses were: attending classes; attentiveness in the classroom; asking questions to the teacher and fellow students; keeping up-to-date with study work; and attending tutorials.

Final academic year

The student participants reported the different tasks and challenges that they had to face during their transition to university and their perceptions on this. All of this experience served them to build their identity as university students. As they themselves pointed out, some felt that they fitted into the role of being at university, whereas others had difficulties.

Construction of the university identity.

On completion of the first academic year, student participants who persisted had acquired skills and experience for the following year. A few of them still had the idea of university being elitist and that it was difficult for them to fit in.

I don't think of myself so much as a university student, because the way I study is very simple and basic, like in vocational studies. My idea of a university student is someone who is very intellectual, with a vast amount of knowledge, maybe I'm just not there yet. (Student in Pedagogy)

For such non-conventional students, persistence at university and constructing an identity for themselves at university is more compli-

cated. Over the course of their studies, they have to combine various tasks, with the consequent difficulties that this entails, of different roles, such as the employee, the mother with a family, etc., along with those of being a student.

In building their identity at university, on the one hand, they acquire and/or improve certain skills, such as adapting to the context of university, dedication to study and effort put into both individual and group study. On the other, they construct their role as students.

The student participants began their studies at university with the idea that the teacher was the point of reference for, or source of, knowledge, and even by the end of the first year some continued to have this as the only way of relating to what they were learning. Given the teacher's passive role, they would ask for his or her involvement and put the full responsibility of their learning to bear on the teacher.

I think it's up to the teacher to provide the basics for how we have to do it and how he wants it done. If he has a way of doing things, but he sees that the students don't get it, then he should do something to change things a bit. (Student in Pedagogy)

Other students however began to learn that, in the new teaching-learning paradigm, they themselves were the protagonists.

You give me a stack of notes and I don't know where to begin. On the other hand, with the vast amount of information in my mind, I think about all these ideas, reflect on them, they go round and round in my head and things begin to fit. (Student in Pedagogy)

As they took on this new role, they would criticise teachers who did not follow this rationale.

For me, the involvement of the teachers at university is also very important for the students and especially for assessment and

the Bologna plan, don't you think? But what the teachers do is say, 'Right then, I'm off, class is finished, bye'. That was how things used to be, but not now, now they have to get involved with the students. (Student in Pedagogy)

In building this "university identity", the students learned the importance of certain factors that encourage persistence. Group support was mentioned the most in all the focus groups, followed by the motivation to continue, especially if their results fell below their expectations.

Some students faced obstacles that made it difficult or even impossible to become a university student. The main reasons according to the students in both Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration were family problems, in particular issues concerning the health and illness of either their parents or the student concerned, and economic problems.

Discussion

The students demonstrate in their assertions that the five tasks analyzed form a continuum that favour the adaptation to the new university context and help it to become a university student at the end of the first course. Therefore, from the results obtained on this study emerges the concept of the transition as a personal process lived by each student in accordance with their own possibilities and limitations (Quinn, 2010).

In this sense, understanding the transition as becoming, the student participants identified, throughout the first year, three points in time (three stages) that were critical according to their experience: the first few weeks, the end of the first semester, and at the end of the first academic year, when they had to deal with certain tasks and challenges (Tinto, 2012).

These tasks and stages need to be dealt with successfully in order for the transition to university to be positive and thereby help forge the student's university identity, which is a new identity that has to be constructed in many cases with no family reference to refer to, as in this case of a student in Business Management and Administration "I had no idea of

what life was like here because I'm the eldest sister, my parents didn't go to university. I had no experience". Their ability to overcome times like this is determined by different factors, as shown in the Figure 2. These factors of a personal, social and institutional nature emerged in conversation with the students. They described different actions, situations, experiences, etc., that either facilitated or hindered their adaptation to university. The diagram shows these factors in their whole process of transition to university.

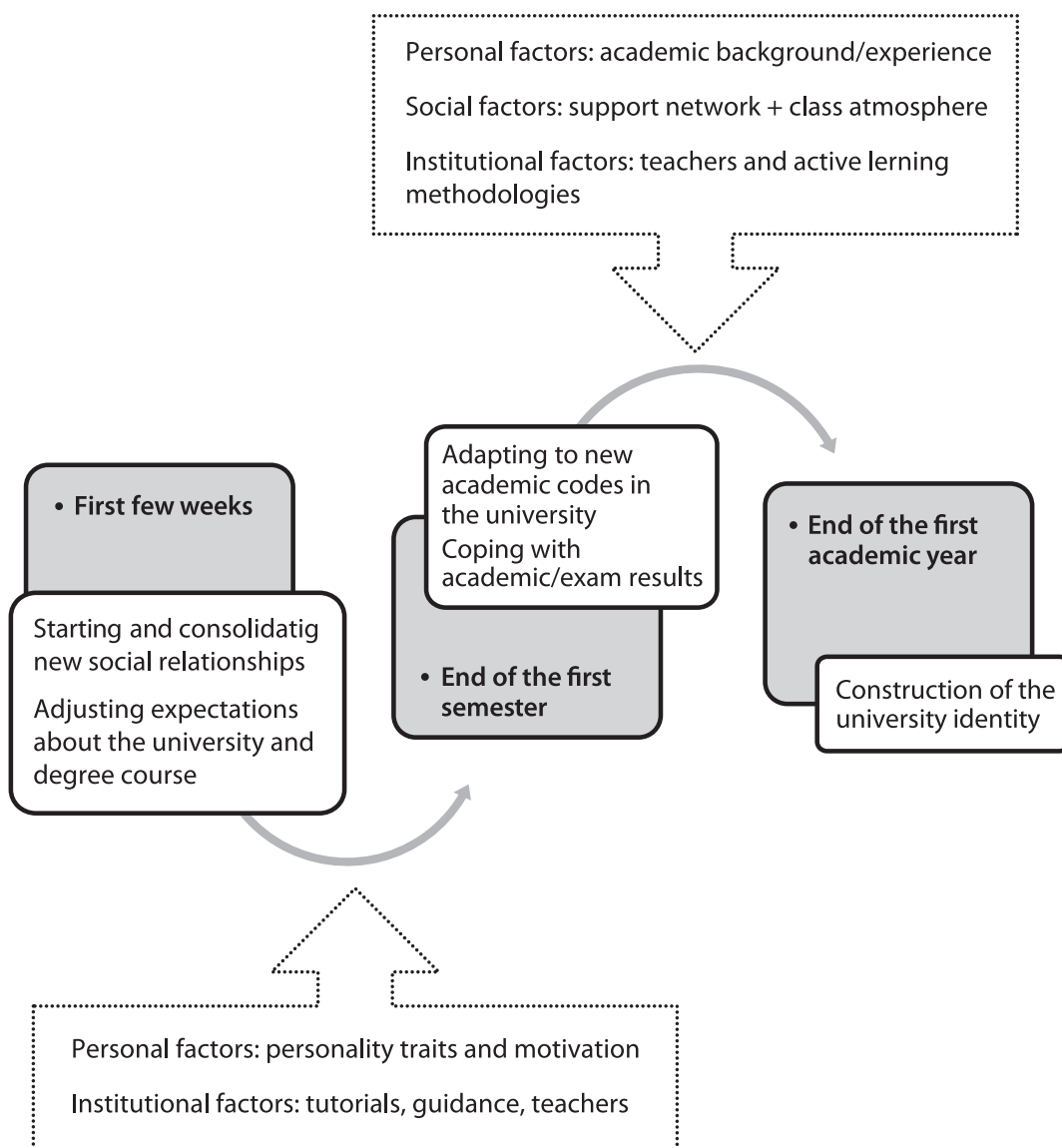


Figure 2. Model for adapting to the first year at university.

The students in the focus groups talked about their experience and the factors that facilitated their academic and social integration. In this study, the social factor of family support was not taken as an element for discussion. Nevertheless, various studies have shown that the family context is associated with the process of transition and with the student's ability to adapt and establish relations with new classmates and fellow students, as the family atmosphere contributes to the way of interacting (Schnuck, Handal, 2011), together with the type of support that the student receives from their family (Figuera, Dorio, Forner, 2003). In our focus groups, only the non-conventional students mentioned their own family (children) as a difficulty in combining both roles.

The impressions of these students in Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration show the importance of institutional factors in persistence in the first year at university, which supports the literature on the subject (Yaun, 2010; Tinto, 2012b). Among these institutional factors, consideration should be given to the context, as mentioned by the students, since the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Economics and Business Studies are different, especially in terms of academic codes. For example, according to the students' perceptions, the Faculty of Education was less demanding in academic terms and teaching was based more on collaborative work, whereas teaching in the Faculty of Economics and Business Studies was, according to the students, more conventional and the demands for academic achievement were higher.

A direct deduction of all this is the importance that the student's previous life has in his success while university student and in his future professional career. Thus, according to Quinn (2010), the transition periods described in the Figure 2 should not be generalized as problematic periods –since each student gives to them a specific signification and importance within his/her unique life.

The value of this study lies in the perceptions and opinions of students of Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration at the University of Barcelona being put into words. Based on their comments, it has been possible to mark out various stages in their process of transition during their first year at university.

With these stages the authors have been able to propose a model for student adaptation to university within the context, on the one hand, of the University of Barcelona and, on the other, of two undergraduate degree programmes, Pedagogy and Business Management and Administration. The research work and models on the first year of students at university point to academic and social integration as being the main indicators of a good transition to university because they (indicators) transcend any cultural and geographical differences (Strydom, Metntz, 2010; Tinto, 2012b). Nevertheless, Tinto (2012a) as well as Cabrera, Pérez and López (2014) point out that the complexity of the factors that are involved in transition call for in-depth study of the organisational contexts.

The words and comments of the students of these two undergraduate degree programmes show where the milestones are located within the context of each degree programme. The path to be followed and the stages are similar, or even the same, but the milestones that show the student what to do in each stage are of different colours and hues according to the degree programme, as they themselves have described. It is up to each student to look through the tools in his or her backpack and find the factors that will give them to successfully pass through these stages of their first year at university.

If we want to go in direction of transition as becoming, we should to move forward to an institutional model that embrace the whole diversity of students pathways. Consequently, the adaptation model to be offered must start from the consensus of the students themselves and adapted to the academic and organizational context.

The challenge faced by the University of Barcelona nowadays is how to guide the students preserving their idiosyncrasies. The model of transition of becoming need to know more thoroughly the organizational characteristics of this university context and of its each degree. This knowledge would allow to address the transition of first-year students from their microcontext by providing the support and guidance mechanisms contextualized in each grade and in each student. But this task can be difficult without the complicity of the teachers, one of the

primary agents for adaptation as the students have commented. Therefore, it would be necessary to triangulate this study with the voices of the university professors as well as of the administrators and staff.

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