



University Access and Academic Performance of Vulnerable Groups in Latin American Risk Environments

David Rodríguez-Gómez, Diego Castro, Joaquín Gairín

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)

david.rodriquez.gomez@uab.cat, diego.castro@uab.cat, joaquin.gairin@uab.cat

Abstract

Graduation rates and academic performance in higher education are social and cultural development indicators, clear evidence of the evolution and quality of life of modern societies and their citizens. There is no doubt that Latin American countries have strived to make primary and secondary education widespread, and to broaden access to higher education. These initiatives aimed at developing “quantitative” policies (education for the highest possible number of citizens) should be complemented with “qualitative” policies of positive discrimination and support for those social groups who, due to their economic, ethnic, geographical or cultural vulnerability, show more difficulties in accessing higher education. Social equity will not exist if there are barriers in the access systems to higher education and without support policies for the most disadvantaged. And without social equity there will be no social integration or economic development.

Through this contribution we present a project coordinated by the Organisational Development Team (<http://edo.uab.cat>) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona whose aim is to improve the inclusion levels within Latin American universities. This goal is achieved by carrying out the following three objectives: 1) Improve the university access and permanence of disadvantaged groups; 2) Contribute to inclusion development within higher education institutions; 3) Develop institutional networks focused on inclusion in higher education.

This project is conducted within the framework of ALFA III, a programme of cooperation between Higher Education Institutions of the European Union and Latin America, and promoted by the European Commission. In particular, 3 institutions from the European Union (Spain, France and Italy) and 18 organisations from Latin American countries take part.

1. Introduction

The broadening of the education process fostered the creation and development of training institutes and with it, organisational approaches. The incorporation of and attention towards groups of vulnerable people was an initial problem that has still not been fully resolved, since it involves combining the profitability of actions with looking after the training needs of people considered on an individual basis.

Once organisation proposals linked to an inclusive school have been developed, new actions are considered that make education for all a reality. In this regard, the current analysis and intervention focuses on the normalising activities aimed at vulnerable groups and on social justice.

In this contribution we would like to present the progress made in one of the lines of the project ACCEDES (access and academic success of vulnerable groups in risk environments in Latin America) financed by the EU through its programme ALFA-3 in 2011.

2. The ACCEDES project

The aim of the project is to improve the level of academic success of young people from vulnerable or excluded groups in higher education institutions in Latin America. To do so, three operational objectives are outlined: 1) Promote the access and permanence of disadvantaged groups in Higher Education Institutes (HEI); 2) Contribute to developing inclusion in HEI; 3) Promote institutional networks focused on university inclusion.

Objective 1, the backbone of the specific project activities, essentially seeks to develop a didactic-organisational methodology, based on educational guidance, which facilitates the access and permanence of vulnerable groups in Higher Education Institutes by reviewing the existing policies and experiences in Latin America and identifying these vulnerable groups. Objective 2, focused on the institutional sphere, aims to combine usual strategies of development and organisational improvement with the methodology developed for access and permanence, generating a model of intervention that is adapted to the reality of HEI. Lastly, objective 3 involves restricted experimentation, in theory, and



the subsequent generalisation of the model at the same time that it promotes a network or community of practice between those involved in the different activities carried out for inclusion and the fostering of the academic success of disadvantaged groups in Latin American universities.

Objective 1: Promote the access and permanence of disadvantaged groups in Higher Education Institutes (hereinafter, HEI)		
Actions	Activities	Results/Products
1. A: Define and analyse university access and permanence processes in HEI in Latin America.	INITIAL BRIEFING DATA COLLECTION CROSS-SECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPORTS GENERATED. SUMMARY	Report on the conceptualisation and comparative study of the different access systems, permanence standards, and strategies of tutorship and keeping university students.
1.B: Establish a system to identify, select and prioritise the disadvantaged strata and minority groups depending on the educational context and the reality of each country.	EXCLUSION INDICATORS INSTRUMENT TO IDENTIFY EXCLUSION RATE	An instrument that facilitates the identification, selection and prioritisation of less advantaged strata and minority groups.
1.C: Collect and design actions and programmes for access and permanence to university.	REPOSITORY DIGITALISATION OF DATABASE EXECUTION OF THE ACCEDES METHODOLOGY	Repository of actions and programmes for access and permanence in university in Latin America and Europe.
Objective 2: Contribute to the development of inclusion in HEI		
Actions	Activities	Results/Products
2.A: Establish institutional policies and plans that promote the application, dissemination and evaluation of the access and permanence programmes and actions of disadvantaged groups in HEI IN Latin America.	Organisational development MANUAL (O.D. Manual) STRATEGIES FOR THE O.D. OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES INTERNATIONAL PRESENTATION	Intervention model including the APRA methodology and a manual explaining the action plan, including the different phases of the innovation processes of institutional policies and plans.
Objective 3: Promote institutional networks focused on university inclusion.		
Actions	Activities	Results/Products
3.A: Apply the institutional strategies and the access and permanence actions and programmes in all the associated HEI (10) according to the methodology designed.	GENERATE KNOWLEDGE INCORPORATION OF IMPROVEMENTS	Evaluation report of the processes and results of each of the associated HEI. Review and adaptation of the ACCEDES model, especially affecting the access and permanence actions and programmes, depending on the evaluation performed.
3.B: Establish networks between HEI in Latin America (32) to bring about a regional dissemination of the experience.	FRACTAL APPLICATION	Creation of a network of Knowledge Creation and Management between HEI in Latin America on university access and permanence.
3.C:	INTERNATIONAL	International conference on



Institutionalisation and diffusion of the ACCEDES model in LA.	DISSEMINATION	access, permanence and academic performance in HEI in LA. Specialised course on the subject matter of the event (based on the minutes book).
--	---------------	---

Table 1. Objectives of the ACCEDES project

The work methodology will be participative and based on cultural concepts that highlight the importance of using the experiences, expectations and concerns of participants. Participation is established by an equitable and plural involvement of the institutions and organisations in the activities presented. Although the project encompasses practically all the countries of Latin America (LA), we do not use a generalised model or its institutional application as a proposal.

The work system of the replication phase guarantees the spread and presence of the project in all the countries in LA by means of a methodology called 'Twin'. Each institution associated with the project is linked with another in one of the unrepresented countries. In this way, the member countries become specialised in another field, both in the design phases (data collection, repository, etc.) and in the replication phase, becoming active nodes for the creation of professional practice networks. The participating institutions are divided into three different levels: applicant institutions, member institutions and collaborating institutions. This differentiation, proposed in the actual programme notification, differentiates between the roles and responsibilities of all the institutions involved, since the participative approach does not suggest the use of a very hierarchical operational model, although fields of decision and responsibility are established: technical, leadership and economic. In the following outline we shall observe the complete structure of the presented project.

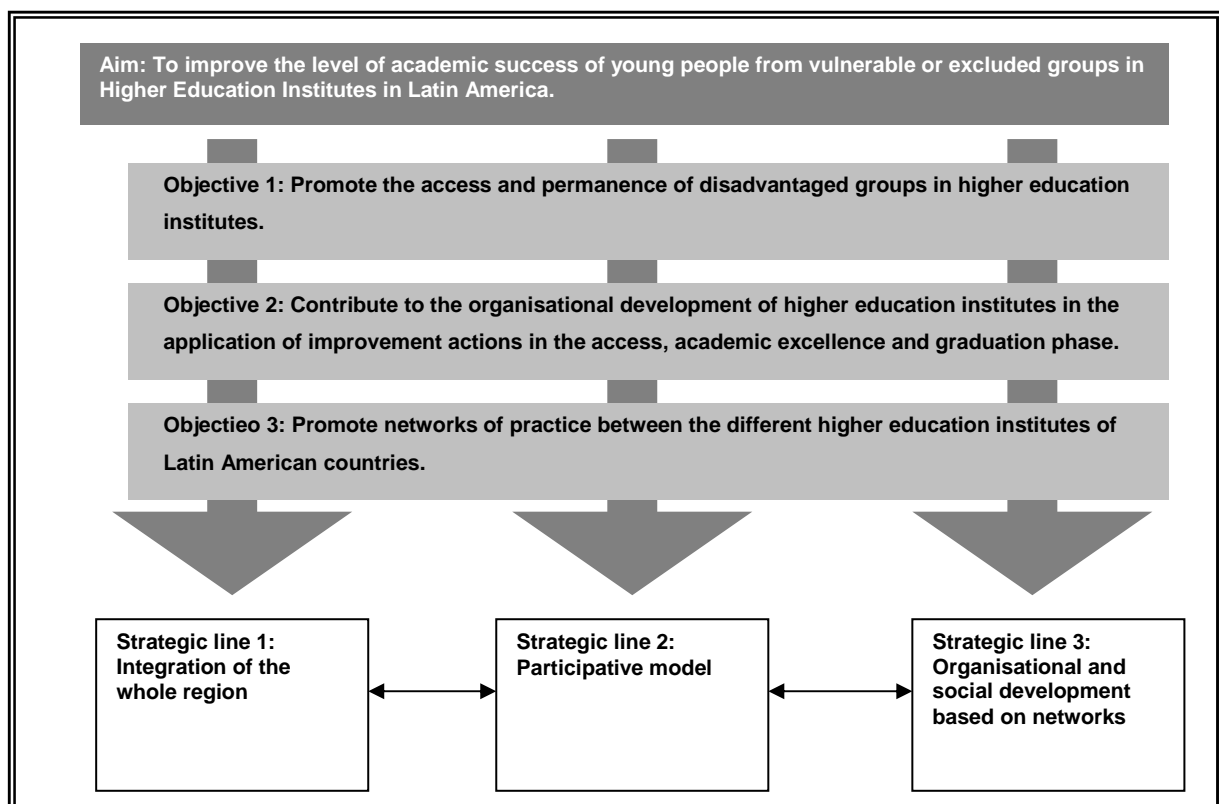


Fig. 1. Strategic lines of the ACCEDES project.



3. Vulnerable groups and related concepts

During the first year we have made progress, among other aspects, in the conceptual outlining of 'vulnerable groups'. Prior to this project social exclusion was defined as the impossibility of an individual to participate in the basic functioning of the political, social and economic reality of their social context. Thus, inequalities in training due to geographical or social reasons, in employment opportunities, salaries and income comprise critical aspects in social exclusion, which can be located, from some perspectives, on the same level. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), in its report '*¿Los de afuera? Patrones cambiantes de exclusión en América Latina? (Outsiders? Changing patterns of exclusion in Latin America.)*', portrays indigenous groups, women, physically disabled people and the population with a very low HDI as potential groups at risk of social exclusion. A 'vulnerable group' does not have a simple definition on account of the lack of harmony surrounding the term and the large number of concepts with similar semantic fields although with different nuances.

3.1. Vulnerability factors: seeking a comprehensive model

While the terminological specification is very important, it also helps to progress in the study of the causes and factors of vulnerability. The different studies conducted beforehand [1] as well as progress made in our research help to identify a combination of dimensions, factors and indicators that help to diagnose the causes of vulnerability and design diagnosis and intervention instruments for higher education institutes. Our model identifies four aspects: public education policies, the institution, the family and personal factors.

- *Public education policies*: the public policies of HE in the different states and countries must continue to insist on creating the living and academic conditions necessary to promote the access, permanence and graduation from HEIs of all citizens, including vulnerable groups in environments of risk. In this way, studying HE throughout life will be facilitated. All of these actions affect the vulnerability conditions of these groups.
- *Institutional factors*: the literature [2] maintains that a series of factors predict university drop-out. Among these there are institutional variables such as, the type of university, the reading load and work demand, the perception of attainability as regards the degree, difficulties in surrounding oneself with new people, being able to actively participate in group work experiences, becoming involved in extracurricular activities organised by the university, having the opportunity to work with other classmates, an adequate atmosphere, the relationship with professors, having institutional support during difficult periods, etc.
- *Family*: family settings may be a cause of vulnerability since as a primary socialisation space it can determine success in processes of entering, progressing in and leaving university. This work has included income, social and professional level, family typology and residential area as family factors. Moreover, assessing whether the student has family responsibilities is also very important when predicting the vulnerability index.
- *The person*: Lastly, each person may display a number of characteristics and traits that render their own personal circumstances a vulnerability factor. In this study, academic ability, psychological characteristics and working conditions as well as career orientation and the type of educational centre they attended prior to higher education are considered.

3.2. Moments of intervention

Moments of transition (during entry, moving between levels and academic years and during the move to the professional world) are very delicate and sensitive times of change in the academic development of university students, leading to, in some cases, more than 30% of enrolled students dropping out. Pedagogical guidelines have developed particular aspects in the sphere of guidance, organisation and didactical intervention to deal with these moments of transition and avoid their negative effects. This explains the growing interest of universities in taking in and guiding their students, facilitating the transition from secondary education, providing guidance and help during their studies and support in their transition to the labour market. In this way, they seek to strengthen the centrality of the students in the learning process, recognising their particularities and adopting the different supports needed depending on the characteristics of the target group.



4. Policies and strategies for inclusion in HEI in Latin America

A review of the strategies and policies developed by institutes participating in the ACCEDES project has enabled us to determine four core subjects to develop:

- Inclusion policies must form part of the higher education agenda in Latin America.

The first condition to bring the policy to fruition is the incorporation of the subject of inclusion into the public agenda. Although in the region this subject has a considerable presence in the agenda of basic education (preschool, primary and secondary education), it is much less present in the case of higher education.

- Promote the creation of interuniversity networks to consolidate actions and generate shared knowledge about inclusion, based on identifying and fostering good practices.

A strategy designed to highlight the subject and strengthen existing initiatives consists of promoting and consolidating interuniversity networks of national and regional inclusion. Promoting this type of network can help to boost academic events on a local and regional level, highlighting the relevance of the subject, revealing the progress made and identifying those matters that are pending solution.

- Foster inclusion programmes and initiatives which are adapted to the specific realities and needs of each university.

Something that should be borne in mind in the exchange of experiences both on a national and international level is that "success cases" are considered as models to be followed without acknowledging the differences and specificities specific to each institutional context.

- Promote and strengthen the information, follow-up and evaluation systems of inclusion policies in higher education in the region.

Latin America has a historical weakness regarding the production of information and the evaluation of the results of their public policies, and even more so in the education sector. Few cases have systematised information about the initiatives conducted, and less still of the evaluations of results and impacts obtained.

In short, the analysis conducted must be used to reveal the reality and problems on a regional level in Latin America, as well as to raise awareness among politicians, practices, countries and institutions about the existing reality, helping to promote and boost activities in this regard.

References

- [1] Tinto, V. (2008) Creating Condition for Student Success. Conference University of Maine System, March 10 (documento interno)
- [2] Arriaga, J. (2011). Reflexiones sobre los tipos de abandono en la enseñanza superior. En II Jornada sobre la Dimensión Social de la educación Universitaria en España. Valencia: U. de Valencia.