Chapter # 17

SOCIAL COMPETENCES AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVICES IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS RETENTION: A STUDY AT UNCUYO

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ABSTRACT

This project –which has been included among the priorities of the University Policies Office – is the extension of a research programme developed by Aparicio (1995-2005). It includes three central projects: 1) An analysis of the factors that impact the university graduates' achievement (two universities, 1980-2014); 2) dropouts within the same period were considered; and 3) students who have been studying longer than expected participated. This project deals with the academic units that show results about retention and performance above the medium rate, including not only basic socio-cultural and psychosocial factors but also aspects related to the psycho sociology of the organizations which have an impact on their organizational quality. The methodology is quantitative and qualitative (semantic associations). A semi structured questionnaire and interviews were applied. It is expected, at a theoretical level, to contribute to the understanding of factors that have a positive impact on the students' achievement as well as on the academic units in which they are inserted. At an applied level, it is expected that this study allows us to know the distinctive profiles and common aspects of these micro institutions so that they are transferred to decision makers and can afterwards lead to programmes for ongoing improvement.

Keywords: academic career, university, quality, psychosocial factors, organizational devices.

1. INTRODUCTION

The basic problem considered here is University Quality, approached not from the system figures viewpoint (graduation rates, dropping out, etc.) but from the human processes underlying them (psychosocial, socio-cultural and organizational). The quality criterion giving insight to these studies is basically cultural relevance. This project continues previous work that implied the development of several complimentary studies and two doctoral theses (Aparicio, 1995, 2005). The current project thus extends such investigations – whose main focus was the analysis of the factors associated to achievement at University and its articulation to the labour market -; all of them conducted within the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (National Scientific and Technical Research Council). In this line, each project contributed with original perspectives from the theoretical and/or methodological viewpoint and enabled to go further into the issue. Regarding its justification at a theoretical level it is essential: a) to know the weight of the factors bearing more impact on achievement in order to develop university programmes leading to strengthen the "missing" competences as well as to include preventive measures; b) to acknowledge the deep factors underlying the

achievement of those students close to graduation; c) from the point of view of the education reform (considered in a broad sense), it is vital to know the organizational devices – distinctive of each academic unit and their impact on the students' achievement within a system whose dropout rates range 70%; d) to urgently know what competences the educational system believes to develop and to contrast them to the ones perceived by the students so as to readjust them. At the applied level, the knowledge of the aspects briefly described above will allow us to implement preventive and corrective measures to avoid individual frustration and to improve institutional quality.

2. BACKGROUND

Studies by Cabrera & Nora (1994), Braxton, Johnson and Shaw-Sullivan (1997), offer five broad categories to classify the approaches related to dropout and retention, considering whether the emphasis assigned to the core explanatory variables falls on personal, family, or institutional factors. We can identify five approaches: psychological, sociological, economic, organizational and interactionalist, which are supported by empirical research.

As regards the psychological approach, the pioneers Fishbeim & Ajzen (1974, 1975) put the emphasis on the role of attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural intentions with respect to achievement. Attneave (1954) includes students' self-perception of university life. Later on, Ethington (1990) add the role of perseverance, previous academic choice and performance as achievement predictive factors, along with self-concept, perception of obstacles during studies, goal relevance, their ambitions and expectations in view of the fulfilment of their objectives (Lévy-Leboyer, 1971). A Spanish view of the importance of these factors is presented by Huertas, Montero, & Alonso Tapia (1997). This widely developed approach has changed since the 90's, when more integrating perspectives started to become more important.

As regards the sociological approach of academic achievement, the French School has made important contributions since the 1970's, especially from cultural reproductivism (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) and hyperculturalisms with their wide range of perspectives (Bernstein, 1965; Aparicio, 2005). In the USA, Spady (1970) considers that inclusion, social affiliation, building of tight family bonds (related to the information of our research from the notion of resilience) are essential for achievement factors that are still applicable in research.

The economicist models put the emphasis on the cost-benefit ratio students observe between their investments on education and what they expect to obtain from it within the labour market (Becker, 1964; Mingat & Rasera, 1981, Lévy-Garboua, 1976; 1977; Aparicio, 2007a; 2007b).

Finally, the organizational approaches emphasize the opportunities provided by the institutions in terms of extra-curricular offers, sports, academic support, bibliography resources, laboratories, internships, tutoring, etc. The interesting thing is, in our opinion, that these are more easily controllable factors in the managing areas (intervention level) (Corman, Barr, & Caputo, 1992).

Along this line, different models show the impulse of adaptation to university life and acceptance of the fashion or "identity" each institution presents; the role of engagement and positive interactions among students and with teachers, as well as the role of perspective, which, as stated by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993)[1].exhibits an individual side and an academic one. Nevertheless, although Tinto is one of the principal writers about this subject, the studies performed along his model do not show stable results in terms of the influence and the sense of the factors put forward. Otherwise, the concept of academic and social inclusion has been objected by other researchers as inappropriate from the general point of view (Corman, Barr & Caputo, 1992), or as applied to specific groups such as racial or ethnic minorities (Biggs, Torres, & Washington, 1998), or applied to adult students (Spanard, 1990). Whereas Tierney (1992) holds that the model has major limitations; various studies carried out with Caucasians and racial minority show that academic and social inclusion works in the same way in order to account for retention (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). This relationship between socio-academic inclusion and retention has been also observed in studies with representative samples at the national level in the US (Astin, 1993; Leppel, 2002; Tinto, 1998) and in studies on a single institution (Eaton & Bean, 1995; Kelly, 1996). There is also some evidence suggesting that the earlier students start, the better their results are (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Berger & Milem, 1999).

Bean (1980) and Bean and Metzner (1985) adds the persistence factor to Tinto's model, thus, following Price's model (1977). Later Pascarella, and Terenzini (1991) suggests, in turn, a model that combines institutional and environmental features, distinguishing five groups: 1) personal features (aptitudes, performance, personality, ambitions, and ethnicity); 2) structural and organizational factors (admission systems, selectivity): 3) environment; 4) interactions within university life; and 5) the quality of students' effort. This last variable, effort, is the core of Pace's model (1988). On the other hand, Cabrera and Nora (1994) say that continuance at university rests on three mainstays: economic possibilities, perception of benefits, and a suitable academic and social inclusion.

A more recent approach, the psychosocial approach, claims that it is necessary to test the relationship among motivation, social and institutional constructs. This implies considering academic goals, institutional performance, social support, tight bonds (one of the most relevant indicators of resilience), decision-making processes, among others.

We observe that the constructs, despite some differences, describe a series of coincidences, experiences and academic and social forces that could influence on the individuals, globally favoring persistence and completion of studies. In the foregoing methods, the general framework comprising the different components lies in academic and social involvement, i.e., as long as the students feel engaged (Astin 1985) or included within the academic and social systems of their respective institutions (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Studies carried out in the US also show that the best predictors for graduation are academic training and student's motivation (Adelman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Compared with the foregoing methods, ours integrate a variety of these factors grouped in the last two approaches: psychological and organizational (see especially Aparicio 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2008a; 2008b). Some variables used in the afore mentioned models are incorporated and the impact of these variables on the subjective and objective

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[1]Tinto's theory on student dropout is, probably, the most broadly used theoretical framework in relation to retention at university. Braxton and Hirschy (1999-2004) consider the theory as an "almost paradigmatic dimension": 775 quotes on the sociologic interactive model. That model is similar to the Astin's I-E-O Model (1985, 1991)

achievement is analysed based on quantitative methodologies and predictive models (Aparicio, 2005); on the other hand, in the light of qualitative methodologies, we intend to account for the origin of this problem and the significance of dropout in the students' personal-professional experiences.

In this study, we discuss, from a qualitative point of view, the psychosocial aspects of the problem (processes leading to dropout and going against retention), and the institutional aspects, which have been observed in some typical practices identifying each course of study and, in a more global manner, the university. All this has an impact on the perseverance and success in studies and employability)[2]. Individuals, institutions and macro-social contexts interweave in this analysis (Aparicio 2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c). Here lies the uniqueness of our quantitative/qualitative sui generis model.

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1. General Objectives

To comprehend the deep-seated causes underlying relative achievement present throughout university life from a qualitative perspective.

3.2. Specific Objectives

To determine the influence of the "social competences", as we call them, as well as the specific organizational mechanisms implemented by each academic unit in academic performances.

To analyse the relevance of motivational factors and, especially, the attitudes of the individuals and teachers during the different stages of university life in relation to achievement (qualitative analysis).

To identify effective teaching practices which have a decisive impact on the continuance and graduation of students, with the purpose of designing a quasi-typology for each course of study.

4. HYPOTHESIS

As regards retention and achievement at university (objective, from the point of view of performance, and subjective, from the point of view of satisfaction), the following play a key role in comprehension: a) psychosocial variables (effort, motivation, engagement); b) social competences (resilience, coping styles, cooperation and inclusion capacity, problem-solving skills,…); and c) effective organizational-educational practices, regarded positively by students (shared social representations in relation to the training received and their effectiveness, etc.).

The hypothesis includes elements stemming from different theories, particularly motivational/socio-cognitive and organizational as well as the more thoroughly internationally studied factors in relation to achievement, as it has been shown by the recent state-of-the-art.

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[2]Other factors related to achievement, such as engagement and internality, measured through specific tests, have been the object of the quantitative analysis and are excluded from this work.

5. METHODS

The quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used in order to account for and thoroughly understand the phenomenon of achievement in individuals studying in the UNCuyo Academic Units which exhibit highest retention figures. Quantitative techniques: files and semi structured questionnaires in order to assess the psychosocial and organizational aspects. They are included to the research design as intervening/independent variables (conditioning).

Qualitative techniques: open questionnaires were included at the end of a semi structured questionnaire. Detailed interviews and interviews to key informants were also added. Afterwards, hierarchic evocations were analysed.

Their application allowed us to know, on the one hand, the social representation self-perception shared by the students about the efficient educational practices developed by the institution, and which may result in greater commitment and involvement as proxy of their university experience success. On the other hand, the application of such instruments enabled us to assess the level of development of the social skills competences which are associated to achievement.

Those instruments were applied individually.

Regarding the approach, it is cross-sectional. Further studies are expected to be done (longitudinal design) in order to analyse the impact of the already considered variables on the labour market. The pursuit of the research work will allow us to control the development of the educational system quality indicators included in the semi structured survey required by CONEAU (Comisión Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad, Argentina/ National Committee of Quality Evaluation, Argentina)

The population being studied includes samples of subjects studying at academic units which exhibit high performance results (according to statistics shown by UNCuyo) and who are attending the 4th year of their careers, that is, close to their graduation and who have overcome the critical drop out stage. The updated institutional data will complement the information already obtained within the central project on which the present work is supported.

Random start stratified and systematic sampling was used and it was done using the data provided by the Department of Statistics of the University President Office in agreement with the Representatives of each academic unit. Three-levelled analysis were made: descriptive, explicative (statistical), and particularly qualitative.

6. RESULTS

We discovered the factors which have an impact, especially, on academic achievement by courses of study and academic units, and then, transference was made to the institutional authorities. This transference will be extended to other Faculties and Universities (cooperative programs). We expect these findings to contribute, in the Faculties with less retention, to take measures aiming at a constant improvement of the system. Briefly:

a) At the psychosocial level, there appear dimensions, in the core of the shared representation, such as engagement and the ability to face difficulties (positive coping strategies). There also appears, in a significant manner, the sense of effort, the value given to the university degree as a positive tool for labour insertion, clear goals and well-defined life projects, entering University with the clear goal to conclude studies, previous

successful academic experiences, career choice based on vocation, prevalence of search for personal fulfillment over other factors.

b) At the organizational level, the students of each curse of study revealed the strengths and weaknesses regarding administrative staff support, organizational quality, mechanisms of support (especially, when into difficult situations with their teachers or peers, difficulties with some subjects or life situation), institutional consulting devices. Finally, reference was made to extra-curricular activities which strengthen the socio-emotional bonds and favor the consolidation of social competences (i.e., being able to act in specific "situations"). On the other hand, it was determined that business stages, "alternation" (i.e., early insertion into the labour market – not widely spread at this University), represent positive aspects which help determining the present working conditions.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

At present, work is being done on the basis of university students' achievement profiles in relation to the labour markets where other populations may perform: doctors and teachers. Models include core, sociocultural, psychosocial, structural and organizational variables. Methodology is quantitative and qualitative since we are interested in analysing the impact of diverse factors, differentiating those which are significant from those which may have negative effects and whose practices may be readjusted. Basically, we are interested in inquiring about the "sense" that the different actors give to their education and the importance it has in a world which aims at a greater saturation of graduates at the same time that university certificates are devaluing.

Besides, comparative studies with French universities are being done, bearing in mind that, in spite of the two contexts being different, the Argentine institutional culture considered, on many occasions, the French model as a reference. This work, which the author has developed for a long time (more than two decades), has made it possible to create a new theory that helps us to do a different reading of individual, organizational and macro levelled self-sustenance.

The essential inspiring objective is always the same: to know the factors that impact on achievement so as to transfer the information to the decision makers, aiming at changing inefficient practices. Without knowing such factors (quantitative) and dimensions (qualitative) it would be difficult to introduce changes based on empirical references rather than on ideological factors.

8. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

For decades, achievement has been a worldwide concern, mainly due to its consequences at different levels: personal (self-realization), institutional (a priority in many countries which undergo institutional evaluation), organizational (especially labour organizations), and even national level. Education goes hand in hand with development and falls in the international quality rankings (PISA Project) constitutes a challenging situation.

Therefore, it is important to: a) make sui generis systemic analyses (Aparicio, 2007a; 2007b) that consider different interacting factors without overlooking the "reasons" that enlighten the actions of the subjects and without which the understanding of the deeper roots of failure would not be feasible; b) conduct "contextualized" studies which unveil the actual weight in "located" settings (here, each School presents differentiated levels and factors of achievement on which courses of action must be taken); c) contribute to the

theoretical development of the problem, addressing the factors historically included in investigations conducted on achievement in the light of new integrative perspectives. Concerning the factors/dimensions here analysed, the hypotheses confirm the findings of models produced in the North hemisphere as to the incidence of the organizational practices. The answers to our studies guiding questions bring out "reasons" which despite being non-observable or non-measurable, underlie the globally considered achievement rates.

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