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ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS AND REDUCING DROPOUT: A CASE STUDY FROM A PORTUGUESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

In the context of increasingly diverse student populations, this paper aims to contribute to the debate on the role and operational models of higher education institutions in enhancing student success and reducing dropout rates. To frame our discussion, we draw inspiration from Alain Coulon's model (2008), which identifies three key phases in the transition to higher education: initial estrangement from the academic environment, subsequent familiarisation, and eventual engagement. Using this framework, we present an initiative implemented at a Portuguese university, structured around five main objectives: (1) improving the student welcome experience through community-wide engagement activities, (2) fostering integration via mentoring programs, (3) promoting the dissemination of innovative pedagogical practices inside and outside the classroom, (4) encouraging self-learning and teamwork practices and tools and (5) developing mechanisms to identify and support at-risk students. The project provides for continuous monitoring of activities and evaluation of their impact. It also considers the ethical challenges associated with the use and sharing of student data—who should access this information and how it should be operated. While we acknowledge the potential of data sharing to mobilise stakeholders, including students themselves, we also recognise the risks, such as the possible stigmatisation of certain student profiles when segmenting data based on characteristics like age, gender, course, or socioeconomic status. Beyond reflecting on these challenges, we discuss the institutional responses developed through a collaborative approach involving services, departments, academic staff, and students. By aligning our work with Coulon's model, we seek to generate discussion on best practices for supporting students throughout their transition to university, fostering inclusion, and strengthening transversal skills essential for academic success. In addition, we reflect on the potential of these interventions in reinforcing the sense of belonging to the academic community, in creating active learning spaces and environments that promote well-being.

Keywords: Academic belonging, Student support mechanisms, Higher education governance.

1 INTRODUCTION

DIVERSIFICATION OF HIGHER-EDUCATION STUDENT PROFILES: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Over recent decades, Portuguese higher education has undergone both massification and democratisation, reflected in sustained growth in access rates and a profound reshaping of its student body [1–4]. The most recent *2023 Survey on the Socio-Economic and Academic Conditions of Higher-Education Students* confirms the sector's growing heterogeneity, revealing substantial variation in social background, residential situation, physical and mental health status, migration trajectories and levels of institutional internationalisation [5, 6]. Although the Portuguese student population remains, on average, one of the youngest in Europe [7], it now comprises a constellation of profiles that includes: students who have relocated from other parts of the country; first- and second-generation migrants; international students; those from socio-economically disadvantaged families and recipients of social support; working students; and students with special educational needs, among others.

Such diversity contrasts sharply with the elitist profile that prevailed until the end of the twentieth century—mid-1980s data show that, for every student from a working-class family, sixteen offspring of economic and intellectual elites entered higher education [8]. Alongside the achievements in access, however, important cleavages persist: segregation by social origin across study areas and subsystems (polytechnic vs. university) [5], and inequalities in the likelihood of academic success and completion [2]. Roughly one third of students report having experienced discrimination within the academy [7].

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified emerging challenges. On the one hand, it exposed attitudinal and behavioral shifts indicative of diminished engagement among post-pandemic cohorts; on the other, it underscored the need for higher education to adapt to new global dynamics [9-14]. Students report a widespread sense of disengagement and lack of empathy and display more instrumental orientations detached from future projects—effects partly attributable to the isolation endured during lockdowns and partly to a growing scepticism about the positive returns of schooling [9, 10, 13]. These behaviours strongly affect enrolment, integration and persistence. In the pandemic's aftermath, feelings of uncertainty concerning the social payoff of education have

heightened the urgency of rethinking policies for student integration, monitoring and support [11, 12, 14].

2 ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES: THE IN-Iscte PROJECT

The transition to higher education is a liminal moment that requires students to learn the "craft of studying", a process Alain Coulon divides into three stages: *estrangement*, where newcomers confront unfamiliar codes and routines; *learning*, a phase of gradual acculturation; and *affiliation*, when they master the rules and feel part of the academic community [15, 16]. First-year failure and dropout rates mirror the friction generated by this passage [17, 18]. To tackle it, Iscte designed IN-Iscte – A Space to Grow, a holistic institutional programme to foster success and curb dropout.

The initiative emerged from an internal diagnosis highlighting the increasing diversity of student profiles, persistent patterns of inequality and the pandemic's lingering effects on engagement [17, 18]. Implemented in two funding phases, it comprises six strands: (I) Welcome and integration; (II) Peer mentoring and staff tutoring; (III) Pedagogical innovation and staff development; (IV) Creation of an early-alert system using data from the Fenix+ platform [19]; (V) Digital tools for self-learning and engagement; and (VI) Governance, independent monitoring and impact assessment by Iscte's Office of Studies, Quality and Sustainability. Execution—co-ordinated by the paper's lead author—is co-managed by the Pedagogical Council, Academic Services and the Iscte Soft Skills Lab, with oversight panels that include representatives from all services and student bodies. Regarding quantifiable objectives, the project aimed to ensure an increase in the re-enrolment rate by two percentage points and the completion of an additional ECTS[1] credit, goals that were surpassed in its first year. Throughout this paper we show how whole-community engagement enables a university simultaneously to deploy *data-driven* solutions and cultivate human-centred pedagogies, thereby responding to student diversity and reinforcing institutional cohesion. Grounded in Coulon's transition phases, IN-Iscte demonstrates that combatting dropout means acting before, during and after entry, making vulnerabilities visible and turning them into opportunities for shared learning.

[1] ECTS - European Credit Transfer System.

2.1 Welcome and Integration of New Students

Under the first strand, the flagship achievement is the Student Services Centre—a one-stop, multifunctional service desk staffed by a dedicated team offering comprehensive support. Beyond guidance, it serves as an observation post for vulnerability signals that feed into holistic interventions. IN-Iscte also runs Welcome Weeks each September, mobilising student groups and services to familiarise newcomers with institutional routines, the campus and available resources, thus fostering early engagement.

Complementary actions include well-being workshops and awareness sessions on special educational needs (over one hundred individual consultations in 2023/24), plus open-air creative events (caricature drawing, jam sessions, art-and-inclusion workshops) that boost engagement [20]. A Student Welcome Guide—written by students for students and available in Portuguese, English and Guinean Creole—provides essential information [21]. Annual meetings with class representatives and in-class briefings maintain direct communication with entrants.

2.2 Mentoring Programme

Peer mentoring enhances academic and social integration, academic success and early risk detection [22–24]. The Iscte course Buddy Mentoring Skills (2 ECTS) trains mentors—intermediate-year undergraduates and finalists—equipping them with technical, relational and emotional competences to support newcomers, in coordination with staff tutoring and support services. Mentors are publicly honoured each year by the Rector. Social events (city tours, volunteering, networking sessions) strengthen bonds, and monthly reflective meetings fine-tune practice. A Good-Practice Manual is in preparation.

2.3 Pedagogical Innovation and Staff Development

The innovation strand links the Laboratory for Innovation in the Academy (LIA-Iscte), the Pedagogical Council and IN-Iscte. Since launch, more than twenty thematic sessions—on multiculturalism, active learning, sustainability, design thinking, AI in education, and recognising student stress signals, among others—have engaged hundreds of staff. LIA also offers short courses (≤ 12 h) in conflict management, clear writing, inclusion and diversity, and weekly English-conversation workshops. Open

resources include an *e-book* of innovative practices [25], while the Soft Skills Lab has expanded offerings in Stress Management, Teamwork, Gender Equality, Digital Literacy and Academic Portuguese for PALOP[2] students. In 2025, and in collaboration with LIA-Iscte, a new course for professors on empathic communication, creativity and active listening will commence.

Table 1. – Alignment between Coulon's transition stages and three strands of IN-Iscte

Transition stage (Coulon)	Strand 1 – Welcome & Integration	Strand 2 – Peer Mentoring	Strand 3 – Pedagogical Innovation & Soft Skills
Estrangement First contact with unfamiliar academic codes	• Welcome Week • *Student Hub* one-stop desk • Multilingual Welcome Guide (PT/EN/CRI) • Well-being workshops and SEN awareness sessions	• Senior mentors introduce services and routines • Ice-breaking events (city tours, team-building)	• Staff sessions on "The inclusive first lecture" • Open classes on Academic Literacy & Portuguese for PALOP students
Learning Gradual adaptation to rules and methods	• Academic coaching at the Student Hub • Referral to psychological/financial support	• Peer tutorials on study planning and time management • Monthly reflective meetings for mentors	• Training in active methodologies, AI in education, design thinking • Modules on Stress Management, Teamwork
Affiliation Mastery of rules and sense of belonging	• Campus-wide cultural and artistic events (music, caricature) • Class reps involved in service meetings	• Consolidated horizontal support network • Annual Mentor Awards & testimony sharing	• Communities of practice linking staff and students • E-book of innovative teaching practices • Micro-credentials in transversal skills

2.4 Early-Alert System for Dropout Prevention

Embedded in Fenix+ – the academic management system at the University, the alert system combines academic and socio-demographic data via machine-learning models, assigns risk levels and triggers alerts to teaching teams and services. The

[2] PALOP - Portuguese-speaking African countries.

pilot met all targets, flagging over 300 students in its first year; each received (or was offered) a tailored intervention plan validated by the student. Preliminary results were presented to the Rectorate and all Schools and disseminated nationally and at EDULEARN 2024 [19]. Current efforts (2024-26) focus on model calibration, inclusion of well-being indicators and consolidation of a student self-monitoring app developed in collaboration with the School of Applied Technologies.

2.5 Self-Learning and Teamwork Practices

The Soft Skills Lab has broadened its transversal-skills catalogue with modules in Digital Literacy, Excel, Academic Writing and Digital Finance. To bolster creativity, self-awareness and emotional regulation, IN-Iscte runs Slow Stage drama workshops and weekly open yoga and dance classes that bring together students, lecturers and staff. By 2026 a revamped online platform will offer a unified interface with interactive videos and resources for self-paced learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Our examination of IN-Iscte – A Space to Grow shows that combining data-driven solutions with human-centred pedagogies can markedly alleviate initial estrangement, foster mastery of the “student craft” and consolidate academic affiliation, in line with Coulon’s transition model [15, 16]. The Student Services Centre, Welcome Week and peer mentoring proved effective in easing entry shock and creating horizontal and vertical support networks; the early-alert system, fuelled by machine-learning models, enabled timely identification of risk trajectories and bespoke interventions [19]. Meanwhile, a robust programme of pedagogical innovation—encompassing staff training, open resources and reconfigured learning spaces—has contributed to an inclusive pedagogy capable of addressing an increasingly diverse student body.

Preliminary indicators—re-enrolment rates, credits earned and take-up of support services—suggest a positive impact on retention and sense of belonging, though longer time-series and inter-institutional benchmarks are required to confirm robustness. Ethical challenges regarding sensitive data and potential stigmatisation of risk profiles persist, demanding participatory governance and ongoing monitoring. Nonetheless, Phase 1 experience evidence that analytical intelligence and pedagogical humanism can coexist within a systemic approach that mobilises

students, staff and services, transforming vulnerabilities into shared-learning opportunities.

Phase 2 (2024-26) will deepen this improvement cycle by calibrating risk algorithms with well-being indicators, extending mentoring to advanced cycles and international students, converting transversal-skills units into digital micro-credentials and releasing the model under an open-source licence to other higher-education institutions. In short, the IN-Iscte case confirms that combating dropout requires action before, during and after entry, and that whole-community engagement—anchored in data yet guided by inclusive values—is the most promising route to reinforcing institutional cohesion and fostering the success of an increasingly diverse student population.

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