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Integrating Academic Skills and Employability - Revisiting the Learning Journal

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Abstract: Across the world, universities are more numerous today than at any other time in history, yet at the same time there is unparalleled confusion about their purpose and skepticism about their value. Based on an extensive literature review, a survey of the academic landscape and discussions with academics as well as employers, this reflective piece highlights the importance of academic skills development with regard to students' success at university, and illustrates the link between academic skills, employability and professional success. The article was prompted by the current discussion around universities' struggle to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed after graduation. The article argues that the differentiation between academic skills on the one hand and employability skills on the other is no longer relevant or appropriate in the 21st century knowledge economy, and invites universities to enhance their curricula with additional, mandatory skills development modules. It provides an innovative suggestion on how to link academic skills and employability in curriculum development, based on the existing academic literature around the scholarship of teaching and learning, as well as research into employability skills. The importance of academic skills on students' professional success can never be overstated. The article offers an innovative approach to linking academic skills, employability and professional success. It adds fuel to the discussion around employability from the perspective of industry practitioners. While this paper has been written specifically with undergraduate business degrees in mind, the principles and practices it outlines can also be applied to other academic disciplines.

Keywords: academic skills, employability, student development, curriculum development, learning journals.

Introduction

Across the world, universities are more numerous today than at any other time in history; yet at the same time there is unparalleled confusion about their purpose and scepticism about their value (see, for example Roberts, 2016; Sodha, 2018; Tse and Esposito, 2014). Political, economic and socio-cultural developments over the last half-century have made the discussion more complex (Scott et al, 2017).

The challenges faced by universities globally have been discussed at lengths in academic literature – see, for example, Biggs and Tang (2011) for a detailed discussion on the topic. In addition to these issues, universities continue to face increasing criticism for not doing enough to enable students to meet the needs and expectations of employers. Employability, as Poladashvili (2018) has pointed out, is one of the most researched subjects in microeconomic studies today. The drive to increase students' employability may be rooted in different social and political agendas. In the UK for example, it is based on government policies and targeted preparation for employment, while in the USA it appears to be grounded in institutional vision and a social inclusion agenda (Chadha and Toner, 2017). However, research has shown that there is a clear mismatch between what university graduates are able to do, and what employers expect (see CMI, 2018a; Poladashvili, 2018, and Blom and Saeki, 2016).

Many people outside academia still perceive universities as overly theoretical, removed from reality, and hidden away in the 'ivory tower of intellectual superiority' (Bond and Paterson, 2005). Although enhancing employability was one of the main aims of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 2016), recent research carried out by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, 2018a) shows that 20 years on, only 52% of graduates are perceived to be able to solve problems effectively or engage in critical analysis, and only 48% are seen as able to work effectively as part of a team. According to the same research, 86% of graduates do not have adequate communication and interpersonal skills, and 84% are not able to manage projects. According to the same research, graduates often overestimate what they are able to do, or may need extensive guidance to complete simple tasks, and often deliver mediocre quality work even after a number of years in employment.

Many of the issues highlighted in the CMI's research in particular, and in the wider academic literature in general, are related to students not being able to think critically or express themselves clearly, either verbally or in writing. While the CMI's research has focused on the UK, similar issues have been found in the Asia-Pacific region, across Europe and the Americas (Batko and Szopa, 2016), as well as Africa (Sow, 2017). The world of work is changing, and with it the needs of employers (Dellot et al, 2019). After three to four years at university, and often also with a master's degree in their pockets - which is developing into a necessary advantage to secure a graduate job (Halman, 2016) - many students are not able to meet the demands of the professional business environment. While some academics argue that it is not necessarily their responsibility to improve the employability of graduates (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017), the link between education and economic development has been widely researched and proven according to Poladashvili (2018). This article first critically evaluates the higher education landscape around academic skills development, before providing an innovative suggestion on what universities can do to enhance students' performance, employability and professional success.

Academic Skills Development

Students come to university from a variety of backgrounds, with different learning experiences and often under-developed self-learning skills (Oliver, 2008). While students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, undertake independent research and communicate their ideas in a concise way (Kitching and Hulme, 2013), these capabilities still need to be learned and developed at the early stages of their experience with higher education.

The Complete University Guide (2018) lists 131 universities currently active in the UK. A survey of the courses offered by these universities was conducted, and information was gathered by reviewing course catalogues and course descriptions on each university's website. The survey found that 94% (n=123) offer business degrees, but only 38% (n=47) offer mandatory skills development modules to first year undergraduate students. Such modules may include self-leadership and

academic skills, personal development and leadership, project management and professional development, or personal and professional development planning. The extent and quality of such courses, however, appears to vary.

While some universities appear to focus on critical thinking courses and unlocking individual potential, assessments appear to be based on simple exercises, such as 50 minute Excel exams and summative reports at the end of the module. Of the 62% (n=76) of universities who do not offer any mandatory courses, most still claim that students will emerge from university with developed management skills. Some are also highly ranked in 'academic support' in the National Student Survey.

All universities, however, offer optional skills development tutorials, lectures, courses or workshops at no extra cost and often for no extra credits. The extent of this support appears to vary significantly across the academic landscape. More often than not, academic skills development is not embedded into the curriculum to the extent that it could be.

The move from secondary into higher education is a stressful experience for most students (Oliver, 2008; Baik and Greig, 2009). Learning to live as independent adults, managing their own time and money, building new relationships, combined with the need to modify existing ones with family and friends, and adjusting to academic life can lead to emotional and mental stress (Parker et al, 2004).

While all universities have academic skills tutors and courses that students can attend if they feel they need to do so, it is ambitious to believe that students are likely to use these resources if they are not required to do so; the need to express themselves unsupervised by parents and guardians and to find their own identity may outweigh the desire to take additional non-mandatory courses during their first year. Students' expectations and motivations for studying at university also vary (Briggs and Tang, 2011).

This survey indicates that universities still focus their curriculum on subject knowledge, rather than skills development. The observation by Harvey et al (1997) that employers tended to value generic skills more than subject knowledge seems to have gone largely unnoticed. Whereas this is clearly not the case for all academic disciplines - graduates of medicine and law, for example, need extensive knowledge

of their respective subjects to succeed - generic, or 'soft' skills are still at the top of employers' wish lists.

The term 'academic skills' itself invokes the idea of something that is predominantly concerned with and mainly useful in the context of university, but this could not be further from the truth. A closer examination of the nature of academic skills shows that these skills - properly developed and deployed - provide the basis for professional success. Cottrell (2013), for example, has provided a detailed list of academic skills that students need to develop to succeed at university. Most, if not all, of these skills can easily be translated into what is often referred to as 'employability skills' - see Holmes (2017) for a discussion on the latter.

Teaching academic skills only during the summer months, in preparation for dissertations or projects or before students even begin their study, may be useful, but research indicates that longer skills modules could be more beneficial for students' development (Pryjmachuk et al, 2012).

Academic skills go beyond the idea of 'how to use the library'. Academic skills in the context of this article refers to the abilities to think critically and independently, find information, draw comparisons and develop solutions to problems. They include self-reflection, a desire for personal and professional development, and the ability to communicate ideas in a clear, effective and concise way. In the 21st century knowledge economy, these are the skills that employers want and universities should aim to teach (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

Bridging First and Third Year Skills Development and Employability

The importance of stand-alone academic skills modules on first year students' development has been highlighted extensively in the academic literature - see, for example, Bovill et al (2011), Brandt (2008), and Austin et al (2010). Academic skills modules not only benefit students but can help universities deal with issues around increased student numbers, student participation and engagement, flexible learning, as well as student attendance and performance, and can mitigate the risk

of financial loss and penalties from student dropouts (Pryjmachuk et al, 2012).

Briggs and Tang, (2011) suggest engaging students in describing, explaining, relating, applying and theorising as activities to stimulate cognitive abilities and achieve intended learning outcomes. This in turn helps students develop problem solving and communication skills. The link between academic skills and employers' expectations about what students should be able to do is undeniable.

To address the skills gaps highlighted above, universities could implement a stand-alone academic skills model that bridges first and third year students' skills development, and supports critical thinking, communication and self-management, as well as management and leadership skills. This could allow first year students to develop the necessary academic skills from the outset of their time at university, and could enhance third year students' skills and abilities by revisiting the material they encountered during their first year through mentoring (and managing) first year students on the module.

Research shows that skills development modules should use an Assessment for Learning (AfL) as well as Assessment as Learning (AsL) approach by utilising a learning journal (McGuire, Lay & Peters, 2009). Moon (2006) has noted that learning can only be assessed through the representation of learning – either in written, spoken, graphic form etc., and that learning journals aim to capture this “presentation of learning”. The use of a learning journal therefore allows students to present their learning in different forms and enables them (through reflection and feedback) to ascertain which presentation style needs to be enhanced. Many professional bodies require their members to engage to some extent in reflective practice (see, for example, CMI, 2018b). Using a learning journal can lay the foundation for future professional development and reflective practice, which should not stop after graduation but should become an integral part of any professional (Eraut, 1994).

As a component of skills development modules, feedback could be provided by using the 5Rs framework developed by Bain et al (2002). This framework leads students from report (R1) to responding (R2) and relating (R3), and then further to reasoning (R4) and reconstructing (R5) a situation, issue or incident. At the beginning of the learning journal, it could be expected that students simply report minimal

description of a situation, event or issue, or at best provide sufficient detail to allow anyone who reads their entry to draw their own conclusions about a particulate situation, event or issue.

Over time, however, as cognitive abilities develop, and students understand that they are expected to form their own opinion, they learn to respond to situations by drawing attention to important aspects or expressing their feelings and opinions. As they develop further, Bain et al (2002) argue that students learn to express how they relate or make a connection between a situation, event or issue and their own skills, experiences learning or understanding. Once students begin to fine-tune their ability to reason, they highlight in detail important factors underlying the event or issue and show why these factors aid understanding of the event or issue. The students start to express why certain details are important under certain circumstances, how they affect the situation, and what questions this raises for the future.

Eventually students develop their skills further in reframing or reconstructing events, issues and situations by coming to their own conclusions or by developing a plan for future action, which is based on a reasoned understanding of the event or issue on which they are reflecting. Self-assessment guidance could be provided to students in line with the 5Rs framework as well, which can provide significant assistance to students in evaluating their own journal entries, even without formal feedback from academic staff (Bain et al, 1999). While first year students could work from a core text designed for undergraduate skills development, third year students should be provided with more challenging and stimulating material, such as coaching or mentoring literature. Academic journal articles may be useful, but a concise handbook that can still support them once they enter the workforce might be more appropriate.

First year students journal entries could be assessed by third year students, who could revisit academic skills and engage in 'learning by teaching and mentoring' (Royce Sadler, 2009). Gosling (2009, p. 121) for example has highlighted that peer mentoring schemes can work well if students are motivated to support other students and if they have structures available within which they can work. It also helps if student mentors receive credit or recognition for this type of work. By revisiting material previously learned, being required to assess the quality of first year students and providing guidance on how to improve their

performance, third year students could develop a deeper understanding of the material which would lend support for their own major projects.

Employing academic skills development modules can also benefit third year students, who are preparing for their dissertation or major project. Considering the emphasis on subject knowledge and the continuing resourcing restraints at many universities, one way of addressing this issue is to roll out a module that provides academic skills development for first year students, and uses third year students to mentor them.

One module leader could supervise the module, and guide third year students on how to mentor first year students and provide feedback to them. Third year students could develop management and mentoring skills, and could revisit critical material related to academic skills. This is likely to increase their employability prospects (Fallows and Steven, 2000) and may also increase the standing of those universities who apply this model.

If employers know that students who have completed their degrees at certain universities have the skills they need, over time such universities are likely to establish themselves as 'centres of employability'. To have a lasting impact, academic skills development should not be a one-off exercise, but has to continue throughout the first to final year.

To bridge the gap between first year and third year students' skills development, reflective practice and journaling should also form part of the second-year curriculum. Review of and feedback on journal entries made by second year students should ideally be provided by module leaders.

Conclusion

Simple answers are hardly ever possible when discussing any topic that is worth our attention (Cane, 2010). What remains to be said is that universities should aim to do better when it comes to enabling students to be successful during their time at university as well as post-graduation. The debate around the purpose and nature of university has created much noise and division (Collini, 2012). A close look at the CMI's (2018a) research shows that expectations in both camps may

require adjustment. To expect students to come out of university with management experience might be desirable, but it is not always realistic; however, to expect students to be able to communicate effectively in writing and verbally is clearly not unreasonable.

As more and more academic research about the lack of employability skills emerges, universities would be well advised to reflect and ask themselves if they have conceded academic skills in favour of subject knowledge, student satisfaction surveys and technology. While universities need to continue to foster an entrepreneurial environment and use technology and innovation to remain relevant, only a small margin of students will go on to become successful entrepreneurs. To prevent the great majority of students from falling short of employers' expectations, universities should do better in delivering and developing core skills development.

Although the approach discussed in this paper is not entirely novel and innovative, evidence suggests that it can work well. Continual innovation in education is commendable, but if the pace of innovation no longer enables people to measure the impact of their practices in the mid or long-term, then the approach has clearly become short-term. This short-termism can be detrimental to professionalism and mental health, as well as to the development of students. Sometimes a reminder that there are 'tried and tested' methods can help to improve and refocus practice.

There is sufficient research in the academic literature to show that mandatory academic skills development modules benefit students and universities alike. It is time to put this knowledge into practice and make academic skills development modules mandatory for all students.

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***Assessing Situational Awareness of Universities
Concerning Student Dropout: A Web-Based Content
Analysis of Romanian Universities' Agenda***

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Abstract: Universities have a strong internet presence where they publish large amounts of documents available for analysis. The relevance of these documents has been rarely put to scrutiny in a policy analysis context. In our paper we use data from Romanian universities to achieve two objectives: 1) to assess the actual presence of the issue of student dropout at the level of universities' agenda in Romania as it is apparent in their web pages; 2) to evaluate the degree to which the agenda of Romanian universities reflects the actual issue of student retention as reflected in factual data. The results show a significant correlation between the presence of the topic in documents and the actual dropout rate, but there are some limitations, though: the correlation is not linear, universities seem to be inertial in their public acknowledgement of the problem, web-scraping and web based content-analytic procedures still have numerous reliability issues.

Keywords: situational awareness, higher education agenda, web-based content analysis, student dropout

Introduction

Massification and the abundance of non-traditional students enrolling in universities, the increase in financial constraints upon tertiary education institutions, and the dominance of managerialism have put significant pressure on universities worldwide to focus on student success and to fight against dropout in higher education. Romania is one of the countries in Eastern and Central Europe that went through one of the most dramatic cycles of massification followed by a contraction in enrollment numbers (Hatos & Pop, 2015), and where retention should be an issue as well. However, as the article will illustrate further, it is hard to find any reliable measure of success rates in Romanian higher education to support evidence-based policies nor policy documents or strategies designed to decrease dropout at the tertiary level. As the dropout phenomenon is directly affecting the universities functioning through access to financing, it is expected to see the universities themselves are the most aware of the situation, and they are the first to put the topic on the agenda and devise plans and instruments to fight dropout.

We have, then, two objectives in our research paper:

1. To assess the actual salience of the issue of student dropout at the level of universities' agenda in Romania.
2. To evaluate the degree in which the public agenda of Romanian universities reflects the actual issue of student retention as reflected in factual data.

One further reaching off-shoot of our research is a practical and methodological one and pertains to the validity of assessing the university policy agenda using their own produced documents published online. To fulfill these objectives, we employ a content analytic approach to quantitatively describe the agenda of universities in Romania. At a second stage we statistically correlate the results of the content analysis with factual data on the dropout rate for the case of Romanian public universities to complete our second objective.

Student retention as a global educational issue.

Increased dependence of the university budgets on the increasingly unstable student intake should have made university managers aware of the topic of dropout. As higher education became massified, it enrolled more and more non-traditional students or students from underprivileged categories whose success rate is lower than that of the elite for which the university system was previously designed. Since university funding is almost everywhere in the public sector a result of the number of enrolled students, it is clear that for universities not only the marketing activities are economically important but also the ones dedicated to decreasing dropout rates. In Europe, in the EHEA, this shift in agenda became visible at the same time with the focus on increasing completion rates in the Bucharest Communiqué (European Commission, 2012) and once again in the Yerevan Communiqué (European Commission, 2015). Relevant in this context is that a well-established publisher has been publishing at least one academic journal devoted to the issue of student success in higher education: *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*.

Massification was also accompanied by the introduction of managerialism in university across the world, as the funders - both public and private - demanded in exchange for autonomy better results and more accountable leadership. All around the globe, universities are expected to be managed based on strategic planning principles and are expected to set higher targets for enrolment as well as to tackle the issue of student retention or dropout (Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994; Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Increased competition and market orientation of universities require new structures and a different agenda, adapted to a more entrepreneurial university (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Liu & Dubinsky, 2000). Linking relevant objectives to planning and delivering actions requires, among other things, an increased capacity - including the use of instruments, competencies, and structures to be aware of the needs, opportunities or the threats against the organization (Bloodgood & Morrow Jr, 2003; Amrollahi & Ghapnchi, 2016).

Student success as a policy topic in the EU and Romania.

At the EU level, lately, students' success is an indicator to be measured by higher education policies as this is justified by the Union's strategic goal of achieving a 40% rate of tertiary education graduation for the age group 30-34 yrs. This also comes in the context of current demographic projections showing a sharp decline in the number of Romanian students and having immediate and long-term implications for Romania's human capital and macroeconomic agenda. Such trends might reverse through measures that provide support for a constant enrollment rate at a high success rate as well (EU Commission, Europe 2020 Strategy).

However, at the level of strategies, institutions, programs, and practices, HE systems in the EU are mostly unprepared to tackle the issue of students' success.

On the one hand, there is a general lack of situational awareness concerning students' success. According to Vossensteyn, J. J. et al. (2015), there are difficulties at the level of strategic information / needs assessment both at country and institutional levels. Many countries lack operational definitions of success, indicators for measurement, and, consequently, monitoring and evaluation systems in place, which, in addition, makes difficult any effort to make international comparisons. Given the graduation rates reported in 2013, which were around 60-70 % at bachelor level, where data is available, there is no surprise seeing the issue of student success in 2015 ranked high and very high on the policy agenda in almost half of the European countries investigated in the Vossensteyn, J. J., Kottmann, A., Jongbloed B.W.A. et al. (2015) report while for the other countries it was either merely present or had no or little relevance (p. 7).

Romania is among the countries listed in Vossensteyn, J. J., Kottmann, A., Jongbloed B.W.A. et al. (2015) for merely having the topic of student success on the agenda without any special consideration. This mismatch in the policies is present although Romania is among the countries with the greatest concern regarding enrollment and graduation rates in tertiary education (the EU2020 targets for Romania

are among the lowest, yet there is a very slight chance of achieving them¹).

In this context, Romania initiated a national program named "Support for the Baccalaureate, Access to University," which was approved through a Government Decision in April 2015. Since October 2015, a flagship project - the Romanian Secondary Education Project (ROSE) has been implemented. It has three components: School-based and Systemic Interventions, University-level Interventions and Project Management, Monitoring and Evaluation. With 243.10 million USD, it is the largest project financed by the World Bank in education in the Europe and Central Asia region, aimed at improving the transition of disadvantaged Romanian students from upper secondary into higher education and increasing retention in the first year of higher education by 2022. The ROSE project has provided support to address both academic and personal factors that lead to student drop out from school through a variety of activities such as remedial activities, tutoring, counseling, extracurricular activities, internships, summer bridge programs, and learning centers. Under the component for university grants launched in 2017², 59 summer bridge programs were funded, offering campus-based summer courses for high-school students along with multi-year 202 non-competitive grants supporting students at risk of dropping out in their first year of study, and 38 learning centers aimed at increasing the academic support activities.

However, similarly to most other countries in the EU or OECD, no reliable estimations have been available regarding project enrollment, public data on student success, retention, or attrition in Romanian universities. An attempt at measuring dropout rates at university and field of study levels was revised in 2016³ by the National Alliance of Romanian Students' Association using data reported by universities, but due to the incompleteness of reported data, the report of the research was released as an activity report. Therefore, the first step in the

¹<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators/europe-2020-strategy/headline-indicators-scoreboard> accessed on June 16, 2019.

²<https://www.edu.ro/proiect-rose-lansarea-apelului-pentru-propuneri-de-proiecte-%C3%AEn-cadrul-schemei-de-granturi-pentru> accessed on June 16 2019.

³https://www.anosr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Raport_Tab_%C4%83ra-ANOSR-pentru-studen%C8%9Bi-2015-v2.pdf accessed November 1st 2019.

implementation of the ROSE project was a thorough measurement of retention after first year of bachelor level at faculty level in all public civil universities (48 in total) during the academic year 2015-2016, which produced the primary comprehensive data set concerning student retention in Romanian public universities which we are going to use in this research⁴.

The lack of proper data on student retention in Romania comes in stark contrast with the known problems of student enrollment and graduation rates mentioned above, which raises questions about the situational awareness, reflexivity, and the capacity to respond to environmental pressures on behalf of the Romanian public universities. However, although country-wide policies and programs other than the ROSE program (through its university grants component) are missing, more localized concerns, reflections, and interventions on the topic may have emerged in the absence of state-level intervention. As such, some universities issued documents that are indicators of institutional reflexivity and responsiveness to external pressures. Moreover, the more capable a higher education institution (HEI) is to react concerning its own problems, by recognizing, assessing and intervening upon them, the more such reflections should be correlated with the actual severity of the issues and should be visible in the documents, reports and outputs produced and published at the institutional level.

Managerialism and situational awareness in Romanian universities.

Within the last two decades, managerialism has been deployed in the governance of Romanian universities. According to the provisions of the National Education Law 1/2011, any managerial position is filled according to a management plan; any structure is required to publish annually or periodically such a management plan and to account for its achievements in a report presented yearly. Moreover, student records from the National Students Registry can be used by the ministry and

⁴Access to the ROSE project's needs assessment research results by courtesy of Alina Sava (education specialist at the World Bank).

universities to monitor efficiency at levels of various granularity and help universities to provide statistical data on enrollments and progression. The data provided by HEIs to the national overseeing bodies allow for linking performance to financing, for public HEIs, and supporting the accreditation process. In 1996, the per capita financing for public HEIs was introduced together with fee-based paying places triggering new challenges related to the increase of student dropout. At the time, there were high expectations that this issue would be considered a top priority on the agenda of universities and included in their policies. Data on student enrollments at bachelor and master levels in public universities in Romania (Figure 1) shows a sharp decline in the total enrollment figure which is mostly at the expense of tuition-paying enrollments.

However, there is no evidence of particular policy concern, except the ROSE project itself, whose implementation, via projects financed through grants, started in 2017. This is the first national project managed by the Romanian Ministry of Education, that links transition from upper secondary to higher education, looking at increased access and progression while retaining students in their first years of academic studies. Fighting dropout in universities is a signal that finally the national educational policies acknowledge that there is an issue concerning student success.

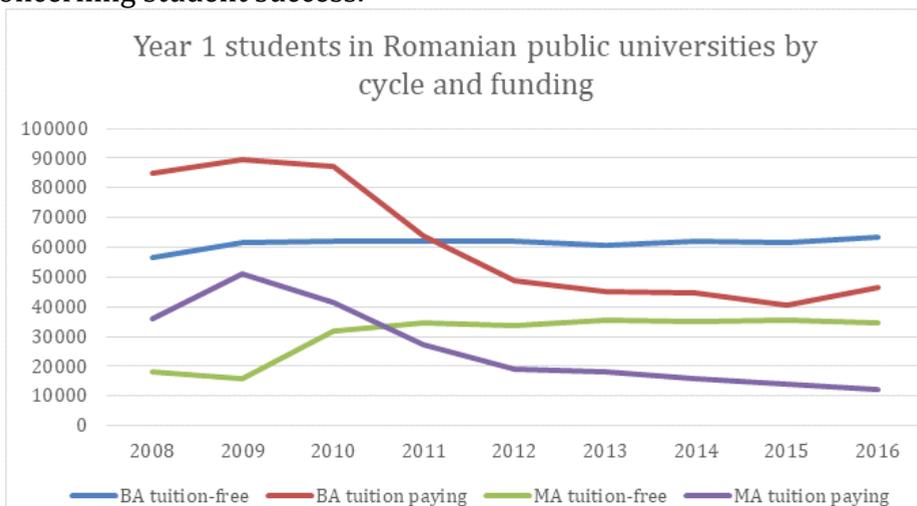


Figure 1. Year 1 students in Romanian public universities by cycle and funding (source of data: 2017 CNFIS report)

Given this situation, we aim to assess the situational awareness of Romanian universities concerning the student dropout topic, including measuring the position of the issue of student dropout in the Romanian higher education agenda at the level of universities. At the same time, we aim to evaluate the correlation between the importance of the topic in the university policy and the severity of the topic, as evidenced by the factual data.

Data and methodology

The position of the topic of student dropout on university agenda was assessed using a rather complex online text analysis procedure which involved several steps. We assumed that the university's web interface (page, presence) is an accurate reflection of its overt agenda.

In the first stage, we parsed data from the available official web pages - as of November 2017 - of 98 public and private universities, down to a depth of 8 directory levels from their homepages, and identified all web text files (HTML, PHP, ASP, PDF) containing the string "*abandon*" [*dropout*] and any of its variations, in Romanian. The string was extracted together with its context measuring 50 characters left and 50 characters right of the targeted word and the output was cleaned of special markup symbols with the aid of Linux BASH scripts.

In the second stage, we have manually curated all the documents making sure that the ones remaining refer to student success/dropout. Duplicate documents were also eliminated. This second stage was mandatory as many occurrences of the string "*abandon*" refer to dropout from the pre-tertiary education - the universities being involved rather often in activities concerning this issue, or not having any relation to the topic at hand ("*abandon*" being used in a literary context, or regarding sporting activities, for example).

Finally, we have identified 212 (189) online documents referring to student dropout in higher education, published by 35 universities, out of which 5 are private universities, and 4 are non-civil (military) public universities. Almost two-thirds of the documents found meeting

the inclusion criteria are PDF-files (63%), and the rest are web documents (37%).

Besides identifying properly the references to the university dropout, we measured the importance of the document, and consequently its reference, by using the depth index of the web page as a proxy of importance (files found on deeper levels are considered of lower importance compared to those published closer to the index).

For the second objective, the results obtained in the first stage on the public universities except for the military ones were correlated with the data collected from universities for the initial needs assessment in preparation for the ROSE project. The data were collected from 47 public (non-military) universities, disaggregated at the faculty level (356 faculties) on several measures, including the number of students expelled at the end of the first bachelor year in the 2015-2016 academic year. The rate of expelled students to the total number of students enrolled in their first of studies is a good measure of retention and a proxy for dropout, available at faculty level.

Results

Incidence and depth

A web page including documents related to the dropout from university studies was found in the case of 35 universities out of a total of 89 universities whose web pages were parsed. It means that only 39.2% of university web pages have references to dropout. Another relevant finding is the absence of reference in the case of the majority of universities, including the largest comprehensive universities in Romania. The breakdown of data at university level displays large differences across types of universities: while around half of public universities, both civil and military have documents referring to the issue of dropout, the incidence of such documents is much scarce in the case of private universities.

Type of university	N	Presence of topic of dropout
civil state	48	24 (50%)
military state	7	4 (57%)
private	34	7 (20%)
Total	89	35 (39.2%)

The depth of the web documents, which refers to the issue of dropout also varies significantly across universities. Of course, this measure depends not only on the importance attributed to the topic but also on the structure of web pages, too. There are only two universities with the topic present right on the top level.

Most frequently, documents related to dropout are at a depth of 4 levels (38.6%). The average depth is 3,74 and the median of the indicator is 4. Still there are relevant documents that can be found right on the index (level 1) or at a depth of 8 levels.

The content of documents

There is a vast diversity of content in the documents which relate to the issue of student dropout. Although it is not our intention to deliver a systematic account, using content analytic instruments, a short description with examples is necessary.

One can identify four/five broad categories of documents containing relevant references to the issue of dropout:

1. Mission statements and strategic documents of the universities, including reports of the rectors or strategic plans of the universities. For example, the Declaration of the National Council of Rectors adopted in Târgu-Mureş in October 2016, for the first time, stated clearly the fight against student dropout as a necessary objective of higher education policies right in the first statement of the communique. At the levels of universities, we can highlight the case of the University of Petroşani that constantly indicated in all its strategic documents the objective of

fighting against student dropout. A similarly permanent concern can be found in the documents issued by the Petru Maior University in Târgu-Mureş (which merged in the meantime with the local University of Medicine and Pharmacy). On the other hand, the report of the rectors of universities such as the Academy of Economic Studies or the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca include references to the issue of student dropout.

2. Documents of the universities' counseling centers, including their mission statements – which, according to the Ministry of Education regulations (OM 650 of Nov. 19, 2014), includes combatting student dropout. For example, the Career Counselling Center of the University of Transylvania has implemented a broad project that also monitored the fight against university dropout and produced several outputs - instruments, reports, strategy proposals.
3. Other documents that are by-products of activities related to the topic of students dropout - debates, trainings, projects - research-oriented or intervention focused a.s.o. For instance, "Valachia" University of Târgovişte has implemented a project (ISOSTUD) financed by international and national funds that supported 180 students from underprivileged categories (poor, Roma, rural) in order to mitigate the risks of dropout.
4. Management plans of candidates to various elected or appointed offices in the universities. For example, numerous Management Plans published by candidates for positions of Deans and Rectors across the country state in various ways that the future manager - if elected or appointed - would implement activities aimed at increasing student retention.

Dropout from higher education

Data on student success from the ROSE program's initial assessment represents the rate of which students enrolled in the first year transitioned successfully to the second year of bachelor studies (or vice versa, the rate of failure). It is a measure of success (or retention) that synthesizes the topic at hand. However, the ROSE program collected data only from 48 civil public universities.

For the academic year considered (2015-2016), the pooled dropout rate after the first year in the 48 universities considered was 15,9%. It varies quite widely, from 0,00% to 33%. The lowest (i.e., null) dropout rates can be found primarily at the medical universities while the most substantial dropout rates are recorded in comprehensive universities, classified by the Ministry of Education in the tier of 'universities focused on education', located usually in smaller urban settlements (as contrasted to the other types, focused on research, or research and education, or arts and vocational universities).

Does the occurrence of dropout-related documents correlate with the rate of student retention?

The number of relevant documents in the population of civil public universities has already been described: for 28 of the 48 (58%), we did not find any relevant documents while the average is of 3.22 documents per university. Three outlier universities inflate the average with a very large number of relevant documents found (23, 32 and 35, respectively).

In order to control according to the size of the university, we have computed an additional indicator of the incidence of relevant documents by reporting the number of relevant documents to the size of the university measured in the number of students enrolled in the first year. The rationale for controlling the number of students is that larger universities are more complex, have more activities and structures and, therefore, the likelihood of publishing documents on dropout should increase by a certain degree because of size and complexity alone.

The dropout rate weakly predicts the number of relevant documents ($r=0.258$, $p(r)<0.1$) but has a much stronger correlation with the number of relevant documents normalized with the number of students ($r=0.442$, $p(r)<0,01$). The strength of the relationship becomes even more apparent on a scatterplot where a quadratic function linking the two variables explains 44.3% of the variation of the rate of relevant documents (the explanatory power increases to more than 60% using a

cubic function but that is a less reliable model of our data given the small number of data points.

The quadratic model shows that up to a dropout rate of around 20%, the incidence of relevant documents is indifferent to variations in dropout rates. However, above this point, the likelihood that university web pages contain documents referring to student dropout increases exponentially with the increase of dropout rate. One cannot ignore, though, that there are still universities that ignore the topic even if they suffer losses of more than 20% of their year 1 of enrollment.

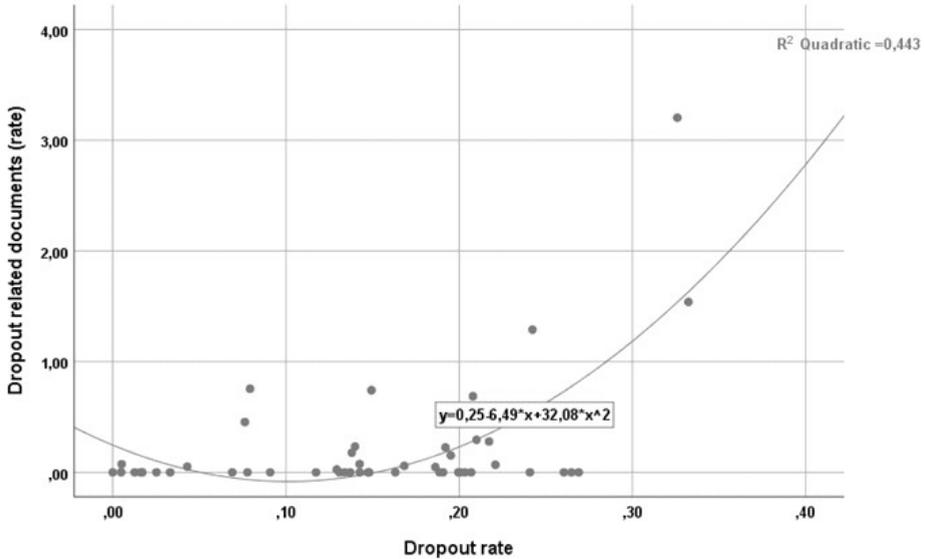
Table 2. Corelations of main variables (N=48)

	No of documents	Dropout rate	Dropout related documents rate (No of documents/Number of students)
No of documents (related to dropout)	1	0,258 (p=0,077)	0,610***
Dropout rate		1	0,442**
Dropout related documents rate (No of documents/Number of students)			1

** p<0,01

*** p<0,001

Figure 2. Correlation of dropout rate and rate of dropout related documents per university



The graph above illustrates that the answer to the second question is a positive one starting from a certain level of student dropout. Moreover, the correlations support our assumption that the production of online documents by universities is partially dependent on the size and/or complexity of the higher education organization. On the aggregate, though, we can say that the relationship of measures of occurrence of documents mentioning student dropout and the dropout rate provides a proof that universities display awareness of their problems and are sensitive to the problems that affect their functioning.

Conclusions

We have investigated the position and relevance of the issue of student dropout on the Romanian higher education agenda in the context of pressures entailed by declining enrollment numbers and a policy narrative increasingly focused on efficiency.

Our web-based content analytic survey of 98 Romanian universities' internet interface as of November 2017 shows that less than half of them mention dropout ("*abandon*") in the documents uploaded on their web pages. While the incidence is higher for the civil-public universities (50%), these figures still show large inertia on behalf of these tertiary education institutions in including the topic of dropout in their policy and strategy discourse. In this regard, the inclusion of this topic in mission statements and management plans is especially encouraging.

Moreover, this presence in the online published textual materials of the topic of dropout is correlated with the actual severity of the problem at university level. The rate of student dropout after the first year of bachelor studies has a significant correlation with the rate of relevant documents/number of students. Our analysis shows, on the one hand, that the document production of universities is dependent on their size, which makes the normalization by university size mandatory. The relation of the rate of dropout-related documents to the number of students to the rate of dropout appears to be non-linear; documentary evidence of institutional concern about dropout skyrockets after the dropout rate after the first year of bachelor studies exceeds a threshold situated around 20%.

Although the pressure of numbers and funding is intense, Romanian universities have been slow in including the topic of dropout in their institutional discourse. As of 2017 less than half of them had references to this issue in the HTML and PDF documents published on their official web pages. However, for the case of public civil universities, the incidence of these documents is correlated with the factual dropout rate. This highlights the fact that the official discourses of the universities reflect their actual problems, proving that universities - at least the public ones - are aware of their own challenges and reacting to them.

Limits of the research

The main limits of the current research are related to the validity and reliability of the web content analysis. On the validity side, restriction of the analyzed documents to those referring to the notion of dropout (Romanian “*abandon*”) may have induced some biases as it excluded textual references to strings like “student success” or “graduation rate”. Our research could be replicated using a broader dictionary of strings to be retained during the content analysis.

Reliability issues are though more worrisome. First, we have limited the parsing of the documents to those available on pages published using the university official domain name. This excluded the documents that have been published on pages with other domain names, which are also of the universities or structures within the university. Situations of this kind might be quite frequent; depending on the internal regulations of universities, some faculties or other structures might have their web presence on different domains than the official web domain of the university. Another reliability issue comes from the impossibility to analyze the contents of the non-searchable PDF files which may have artificially reduced the number of relevant documents. All in all, these issues may have affected significantly our results if they were correlated with the investigated phenomena, including the rate of dropout.

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Career Mentoring in Higher Education: Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract: Nowadays, the process of building the career of emerging adults is embedded in the need for meaningful paths, connection, creativity and autonomy. Thus, the support services universities offer for students should incorporate subjective aspects of individual experiences such as targeting relevant goals, building meaningful learning experiences, promoting personal resources of adaptability. One of the most effective mechanism for positively influencing students' career paths is mentoring, by helping them to successfully face the academic and life challenges and to build meaningful careers. The current study aims to investigate perceptions and experiences of seven undergraduate students, in order to understand the mentoring role in the development of a calling orientation in their career trajectory. Data was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was conducted. The findings revealed a mentoring approach that includes a career construction theory and calling-infused elements has positive effects on self-reflection, self-knowledge, proactive experiences and behaviours that maintain and strengthens the perception of the presence of calling. In other words, the support of a mentor facilitates the activation of personal resources and values the self-directed career oriented towards individualized results in the context of an uncertain and dynamic work environment.

Keywords: calling, mentoring, higher-education, qualitative design, thematic analysis.

1 Theoretical framework

1.1. Introduction

The contemporary career is characterized by an emphasis on the individual experience, on self-reflection, global connection, relationships, but also unpredictability, the need for immediacy, emotion, creativity and innovation. Thus, the counselling services, coaching or career mentoring should incorporate subjective aspects of individual experiences such as targeting relevant goals, building meaningful experiences, promoting resources of intentionality and adaptability (Hartung, 2011). In this process, universities should focus on providing important information for encouraging and supporting students to identify and express their motivations, interests, skills, deep values that lead them to build the meaning of their own career (Maree, 2014). Mentoring can provide important support in academic and career trajectory. There are many studies showing the positive impact of mentoring in higher education in students integration in social groups, academic performance, finding meaningful career experiences etc. (Barnett, 2011; Eby and Dolan, 2015; Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016). Moreover, seeing the mentor as a role model, help the student perceive the higher education institution as being more inclusive and promoting academic connectedness (Castellanos et al., 2016). The mentor-mentee relationship has also an important impact on reducing dropout rates among students through increasing self-efficacy, improving self-awareness and building meaningful opportunities (Baier et al., 2016).

A series of research on career attitudes and passion have highlighted the importance of others, especially family, colleagues and mentors in developing a meaningful career (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng and DuBois, 2008; Ragins et al. 2000). Therefore, the social environment can influence the attitude of individuals towards work and can help them live their calling (Cardador, Dane, Pratt, 2011; Guo et al. 2014; Harzer and Ruch, 2012). Reliable information sources as well as experienced people can play an important role in the development of calling by providing a role and attitude model (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

1.2. Mentoring and calling

An important field of study is the influence of mentoring on the development of calling defined as a multi-dimensional construct describing cognitive, emotional, motivational, spiritual, and vocational identity-related aspects. (Dalla Rossa, Vianello & Barbieri, 2017). The scientific literature suggests that mentoring experience has a positive influence on the discovery of meaning in work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010) and may support the development of spirituality in relation to one's profession (Buzzanell, 2009; Reave, 2005; Weinberg & Locander, 2014). Career mentoring fulfils multiple functions, including the development of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and vocational identity (Eby et al., 2010). Other authors suggest other areas of impact of mentoring as: emotional and psychological support, setting goals and career decision-making strategies, academic support, identifying and providing opportunities (networking), activating internal resources to meet career challenges (Crisp, 2009; Haggard and Turban, 2012). Among the desirable characteristics of the mentor listed by scholars are: the ability to provide constructive feedback, openness, availability, proactivity, compassion, ability to inspire, passion for one's profession (mentoring as a central part of one's personal calling), trust, mutual respect, the ability to share knowledge. Regarding the mechanisms that explain the mentor's influence, it seems that the mentor's trust, emotional security and unconditional acceptance are aspects that contribute significantly to greater career and professional satisfaction, career commitment and involvement, positive attitude and motivation (Ragins et al., 2000; Payne, Huffmann 2005; Chao 1997; Eby et al., 2008). It also appears that mentoring relationships with a strong informal component are more effective in influencing a student's attitude toward work compared to a formal mentorship relation (Ragins et al., 2000; Kram 1985). In addition, the extent in which an individual views their mentor as a role model may explain the association between the mentor's and protégé's calling and work orientation. Basically, these elements of the mentoring relationship are responsible for a large part of the effect of mentoring in the development of a calling orientation.

So far, there are relatively few studies that have investigated the role of other people in the development of calling and they have provided various results (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2012; Dobrow,

2006, 2013). For example, Dobrow (2006) concluded that the involvement of parents in the development of calling in the field of arts had a positive effect on the students' calling. In another study, which investigated the relationship between calling and students' receptivity to negative recommendations given by a mentor, the researchers pointed out that the presence of calling reduces the effect of discouraging recommendations (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). In other words, students with a strong calling orientation are more determined to follow their calling, despite the recommendations of their teachers or mentors to choose a different vocational path. This result was replicated in a cross-sectional study involving a sample of students from entrepreneurial faculties. At the same time, Rosa, Vianello, and Anselmi (2019) found out that the social support provided by friends, family or a counsellor can help students develop effective career development strategies.

The most extensive study investigating the social effects on the development of students' calling was conducted by Dalla Rossa, Vianello and Barbieri in 2017 on a sample of 5886 students. The study lasted over three years, investigated three different moments and aimed to analyse the effects of mentoring on calling. The results were conclusive, showing that the students who benefited from mentoring demonstrated a stronger calling orientation compared to the students without a mentor, in each of the three moments investigated. At the same time, the presence of the mentor had a stronger effect for the students who were already proactive in the development of their calling. Regarding the characteristics of the mentor, the conclusions argued that a mentor with a lived calling in their profession positively predicts the students' calling, while the presence of a mentor interested in financial gain and career advancement can inhibit students in building meaning in profession. Therefore, a mentor's calling orientation is associated with an increase in students' identification with their chosen field and passion for it.

Taken together, these results suggest that calling is not just an individual phenomenon, but one with strong social influences. In our study we are going to address the issue of calling development through the mentoring process, emphasising a social-constructivist perspective, a career construction theory approach (Savickas, 2005, 2014). More specifically, these socio-constructivist approaches explain career

development as an individual and social process, with personal meanings, past and present experiences and future goals, all of which are integrated into life themes that evolve throughout one's existence. Thus, the significant relations of therapeutic relationship, coaching or mentoring contributes to students' career construction (Guichard, 2010). Moreover, calling is deeply related to self, well-being and a number of other positive factors in the career effects, such as adaptability, the ability to explore career opportunities, self-efficacy, etc. (Rosa, Vianello and Galliani, 2017). Therefore, the positive attitude towards one's own career, the meaning and values involved, are all theoretically related to the calling. Thus, we expect the subjective perspective on the development of calling in the mentoring process will reveal valuable conclusions already studied in quantitative designs.

1.3. The aim of the study and research questions

In this study we used a deductive qualitative approach, trying to understand the role of mentoring in the development of calling among undergraduate students, emphasizing their personal perspective and experience. The underlying framework of our mentoring program was the career construction theory, incorporating career adaptability techniques and enhancing calling components to increase students' commitment to the career building process and to facilitate change. The career mentoring program was implemented as a pilot one for the students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University through the University Counselling Centre "Student Expert".

Building on previous research on calling, we generated a series of questions to explore the experience of the participants in the mentoring process. More specifically, the research questions focused on the way in which the mentoring process and mentor-mentee relationship influenced the development of the calling. The research questions were:

- What is the role of mentoring in the development of the calling of emerging adults in Babeş-Bolyai University?

- What are the characteristics of the mentor that facilitate living calling and career development, as seen by Babeş-Bolyai University students?
- To what extent does the perception of career as a calling contribute to professional development?

2 Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were seven emerging adults (four males and three females), age 20 and 21, undergraduate students at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (Psychology major), at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. The seven participants were chosen from those who participated in at least 25 hours of mentoring meetings during an academic year and who showed an interest in self-knowledge and building their own career according their own values, interests, significant goals. During the meetings, the mentor used career facilitation techniques derived from career construction theory (Savickas, 2011), and calling discovery techniques. The data was collected individually, and participation was voluntary.

2.2. Procedure and instruments

In order to accomplish the aim of the study, we conducted individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted by one researcher, following an interview guide. The interview guide had 12 main questions and was developed based on the central objective and research questions, including the following dimensions:

- the meaning of the vocation for each participant;
- the role of mentoring in the development of the participant's vocation;
- the participant's perspective on the mentor's impact on career development.

Second, the interviews were transcribed and coded by the authors of this paper. The in-depth analysis was based on the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and carried out by one author of the study, together with a researcher unfamiliar with the data and the topic.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of this study, the confidentiality of the data and gave their informed consent. Each interview was audio recorded, then later transcribed in verbatim format.

3 Data analysis and findings

In order to accomplish our study objective, the thematic analysis model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. With a deductive approach, and a thematic analysis, we were able to report participants' experiences, meanings and realities (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data collected and the verbatim transcript were repeatedly read, including an active reading that involves a search for meanings and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the next step, initial codes were extracted, representing "the most basic segment or element of data or information that can be evaluated in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63, apud. Braun and Clarke, 2006). The next step was to search and identify the main topics. We extracted the topics following the existing information in the literature, but we partially kept the inductive nature of the process, considering the specificity of the data. The codes were thus analysed and similarities and differences between the codes were established.

Thus began the search for major themes and sub-themes, some initial codes becoming major themes or sub-themes, while some were eliminated or incorporated into themes and / or sub-themes:

I. *Calling - congruence between self and experience* (sub-themes: Intrinsic meaning and significance, Contribution, Self-matching).

II. *Mentoring-catalyst in the development of calling* (sub-themes: Self-reflection, Exploration, Self-efficacy and motivation, Concern and Curiosity for opportunities to live calling).

III. *Mentoring relationship - the basis of calling development* (sub-themes: empathic communication and openness, mutual respect, modelling).

Furthermore, we are going to present, define and exemplify the above-mentioned themes and subthemes, through relevant extracts from the data set:

I. Major theme: Calling - congruence between self and experience

This theme represents the participants' belief that calling is a balance between aspects of vocational identity and the characteristics of professional experiences. In other words, the calling involves knowing one's own values, interests, motivations, goals, etc. and identifying those areas that allow their manifestation in the context of work, in a way that provides meaning and personal significance, but also social contribution. This topic also captures the different conceptualizations of calling (Burdenson and Thomson, 2018). Within this major theme, we identified three major sub-themes: Intrinsic meaning and significance, Contribution, Self-matching, to differentiate the nuances of the calling experienced by the participants.

Sub-theme 1.1 Intrinsic meaning and significance

This sub-theme emphasizes the participants' need to identify a deep meaning and motivation for the chosen field of study, which means a strong connection with their own self.

"I believe that having a career that is a calling means doing a type of work that gives me meaning, that serves a purpose I set myself and is in line with my values." (Participant 3)

"... I discovered that in the process of calling you need an intrinsic motivation for that field and perseverance in the face of obstacles and uncertainty ... and to have perseverance it must make sense what you do" (Participant 5)

Sub-theme 1.2- Contribution

This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of a prosocial impact of personal career, the positive effects that participants expect their professional activity will have on the community.

"However, for me to become better is not a major goal in itself, but a way in which I could better help a wide range of people from different backgrounds. Thus, a calling would motivate me both to learn theoretically and to persevere despite the obstacles I

will encounter in practice and to learn how to manage them ... in order to contribute to something important.” (Participant 3)

Sub-theme 1.3 Self-matching

This sub-theme highlights the relation between vocational identity and professional experiences, so that a calling attitude implies a dynamic balance between internal factors and the work environment.

“The calling is something that gives me the opportunity to manifest my values, motivations and personal interests. Only in this way can authenticity be obtained - by transposing one’s self into the context of work.” (Participant 6)

“... I would say that you come to feel you are made for something or you have a calling if you can be authentic, to express yourself in what you work, in your career” (Participant 1)

II. Major theme - Mentoring - catalyst in the development of calling

This theme reflects the fact that the mentoring process is a factor that contributes to the discovery of ones’ calling by facilitating self-knowledge, reflection, self-exploration and external opportunities, but also by identifying relevant personal motivations. All these mechanisms are closely related to the calling attitude that leads to a high level of searching for meaningful professional experiences.

Sub-theme 2.1 Self-reflection and self-knowledge

This sub-theme describes the processes of self-knowledge, facilitating the development of identity and reflection on personal dimensions of calling sources connected to external factors.

“I think that mentoring was for me as a catalyst in the process of calling development. Thus, it had a regulatory role, helping me to deeply explore career opportunities, respectively, to build a vocational identity. Personally, I perceived the mentoring period as a period in which I managed to create a connection between my value system and career choices.” (Participant 2)

“Through mentoring, I adopted a more integrative career vision. I can say that we have taken into account both interests, skills, motivation and values, as well as aspects related to the external environment, such as the labour market.” (Participant 3)

Sub-theme 2.2.-Exploration

This sub-theme captures the potential of mentoring to facilitate the career exploration in order to gain a more accurate picture of living the calling.

“First of all, exploring the mentoring process allowed me to have many professional experiences. Moreover, I have learned to invest my resources in as diverse career opportunities as possible, thus increasing my degree of adaptability in my career.” (Participant 2)

“The fact that I was able to explore different practical activities helped me the most. My mentor gave me the chance to get involved and see exactly what it was all about, so I ran into different situations and even difficulties ... but they all made me better understand how to do what I want.” (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 2.3 Self-efficacy and motivation

This sub-theme illustrates the relevance of mentoring in motivating participants to develop their own careers. An important mechanism in motivation is career process self-efficacy (managing career opportunities and difficulties).

“The mentoring process helped me increase my motivation to find a career, respectively to build a vocational identity. Also, the mentoring process affected my career adaptability, making me more open to various opportunities.” (Participant 7)

“Knowing, in particular, about the steps to follow in the process of building a career has made me confident that I can build one according to my needs, abilities and aspirations.” (Participant 3)

“... I feel more confident that I will succeed, because now I understand better what it means.” (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 2.4 Concern and curiosity for opportunities to manifest calling

Sub-theme 4 reflects a major effect of conceptualizing career as a calling in the mentoring process, increasing the level of concern and curiosity in the direction of actions where the calling can be experienced.

“... I have learned to convert failures into learning experiences and to keep alive my curiosity about the type of career that best fits my values and allows me to do what I feel as a calling ...” (Participant 3)

"I can say that during all this time I have learned to look for opportunities and not be afraid of them ... that is, somehow mentoring helped me to ask more questions about how to live my values and motivations in the activities in my career ..."
(Participant 2)

III. Major theme- Mentoring relationship - the basis of calling development

This topic is an essential dimension of mentoring, with high relevance for calling development. In all the interviews conducted, the importance of the mentoring relationship was obvious with rich descriptions of the characteristics that define an effective mentor-mentee bond. The answers can be grouped into three major sub-themes: empathic communication and openness; mutual respect; modelling.

Sub-theme 3.1- Empathic communication and openness

This sub-theme reflects the importance that participants attach to the mentor's ability to build an authentic, empathetic relationship based on professional honesty, in which the mentee feels psychologically safe in order to effectively address the challenges.

"The mentor's empathy for the difficulties and challenges I had to face played an important role in the whole process. Moreover, the mentor's willingness to help and guide us, as well as his constant encouragement, mattered enormously in developing a career direction." (Participant 3)

"...the mentoring process was characterized by an authentic and constant communication, which contributed to the development of a mutual trust between me and the mentor. As a result of this foundation of trust, I was able to integrate failures much more easily, turning them into learning opportunities that led to the consolidation of my career." (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 3.2 Mutual respect

This sub-theme describes the need of the participants to feel understood and to feel unconditionally accepted by the mentor; to respect their options, etc. On the other hand, respect implies the

mentor's ability to earn the respect of those mentored, by being a role model and having a calling orientation.

"... well.... there should be openness between the two parties, so that both the mentor and the mentee feel accepted, respected and can express themselves freely from the formal constraints. I think this is a prerequisite for a learning and training process that can really work." (Participant 4)

Sub-theme 3.3 Modelling

This sub-theme describes the importance of the mentor's perception as a role-model, similarity to the model, their perception as being successful in the field, passion for the field, being the main factors in building the relationship etc.

"For me, the quality of the interpersonal relationship with the mentor is the aspect that leads to the increase of the effect it has in relation to the development of the career and, implicitly, of the calling. That is - the more authentic and real the connection, the more strongly perceived the role of the mentor model." (Participant 4)

"I perceived the mentor as a model because he is in a similar way to me, I can resonate with him, as well as because I consider that he has many achievements for which I admire him (he managed to take advantage of the opportunities offered to him and worked constantly to his own personal and professional development, which I consider an example worth following)." (Participant 5)

4 Discussions and conclusions

The thematic analysis was used in this study to identify participants' narratives about the development of calling and the role of mentoring in this process. Given the nature of the theme, one deeply subjective- personal meaning of professional experience, a qualitative analysis was most appropriate method to understand the participants' perception and experiences (Blustein, Saliha Kozan & Connors-Kellgren, 2013).

The participants' answers revealed the perception of a calling relating to the mentoring process and mentoring relationship. More specific, the mentoring program facilitated the development of career

decisions self-efficacy and gave them a sense of control over their own vocational path. All of these are essential for building a sustainable career meaning and integrating it into the wider meaning of life (Savickas et al., 2009; Hartung, 2013).

According to the main themes, the presence of calling implies self-knowledge and discovery of personal interests, values, motivations, which is a dynamic process and strongly influenced by the presence of a mentor, coach or counsellor. In fact, preparation for career choices is a skill that requires a process of self-reflection directed towards relevant goals, which usually occurs in a career intervention (Leontiev, Rasskazova, Fam & Ovchinnikova, 2016).

As previously mentioned, we included in the intervention, and then in the mentoring process, those students who previously showed interest in the relevance of the idea of personal calling. Thus, the process was focused on reflection on vocational identity and on some exercises useful for discovering meaning, values, motivations, interests, strengths and experiences that give them positive emotions and a sense of fulfilment and contribution. Participants were also encouraged to experience different volunteering opportunities, with the mentor also involving them in several activities relevant to different fields of applied psychology. These were discussed and analysed, emphasizing the connecting elements of personal attributes with experience, but also on how to address the challenges.

Our study shows that a mentoring approach including a career construction theory and calling development approach contributes to self-reflection, self-knowledge, exploration and equipping with adaptability skills, future vocational planning and proactive experiences and behaviours that maintain and strengthen the perception of the presence of calling. In other words, the support of a mentor facilitates the activation of personal resources and values the self-directed career oriented towards individualized results in the context of an uncertain and dynamic work environment (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton and Murphy, 2012).

The main objective of this research was to understand the role of mentoring in the development of calling among emerging adults, from their personal perspective. Thus, we aimed to identify the deep and subjective mechanisms underlying the mentoring process and the way relationship influenced calling development. As a result of the thematic

analysis, three major themes resulted: I. *Calling- congruence between self and experience* (sub-themes: Meaning and intrinsic significance, Contribution, Self-matching); II. *Mentoring-catalyst in the development of calling* (Self-reflection, Exploration, Self-efficacy and motivation, Concern and curiosity for opportunities to manifest calling) and III. *Mentoring relationship* - the basis of calling development (empathic communication and openness, mutual respect, modelling).

Qualitative research is often a way to contribute, by stimulating reflection, to the development of social, educational, organizational interventions and changes (Ditrano and Silverstein, 2006; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Kidd and Kral, 2005; Morrow, 2007). The practical implications of this nuanced understanding of career development as a calling and the contribution of mentoring in this process may be especially relevant for specialists in the field of education, mental health, organizational development. Beliefs about calling, the impact of a mentoring relationship in relation to it influence interventions in the field. Thus, a nuanced approach to assessment, which explores how the problem presented is influenced by the personal characteristics of individuals, the interconnected and fluid nature of development and the multiple overlapping contexts, allows the mentor or counsellor to contextualize the problem to the specific characteristics of the individual's life. . Consequently, it is recommended that practitioners expand their assessment and strategies by including questions that address the development of the calling. Such an intervention could be useful to help the student discover and clarify their personal values and beliefs about the career. An important recommendation is for higher-education institutions to improve students' skills in order to reduce dropout and increase employability by implementing career development strategies in the curriculum and also by helping them identify meaningful development opportunities (Weng and McElroy, 2010).

It is possible that the aspects we investigated might require more in-depth detail. Future studies could further these topics and investigate more specific nuances that shed light on this, especially due to the implications they may have in practice (more specific dimensions of individual life – such as religiosity – mentoring relationship, should be included). Moreover, the meaning in career, as perceived by young

people, could represent an aspect worthy of research in relation to the meaning of life.

Mentoring in higher education can be an effective strategy to increase academic and career engagement and to boost motivation for developing meaningful vocational trajectories.

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Andragogy: A Theory in Practice in Higher Education

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Abstract: Adult learning principles develop through an analysis and synthesis of adult education, andragogy, teaching, and learning in higher education. This research investigates foundational assumptions relevant to the field of adult education with a focus on andragogy in higher education. Characteristics of adult learners and principles of adult learning in higher education bear focus through the lens of andragogy. As such, andragogy as the preferred learning style of adults, andragogy vs. pedagogy, and cognitive learning develop relational significance to adult learners in higher education. As a result, the implications of linking learning styles and reflections of andragogy as a learning style are considered.

Keywords: adult learning, andragogy, learning theories, cognitive learning styles, learners' motivation.

Andragogy learning style is the instruction technique adult learners prefer in higher education settings (MacKeracher, 2004; Pratt, 1988). Knowles' theory of andragogy sought to highlight the distinctiveness of adult learning. Knowles (1984a) contended that adults are self-motivated and tend to assume responsibility for their role in the learning process. Thus, adult learning programs must accommodate this significant perspective. Andragogy influences accompanying trepidation about learning outcomes. For instance, adults need to know why they must learn specific learning material; adults need to learn experientially; adults approach learning as critical thinking, and adults learn best when the subject of instruction encourages confidence. In viable terms, andragogy implies that adults concentrate more on the process and less on assessment. Strategies such as contextual analyses, role-playing, simulations, and self-assessment are generally valuable to adult learners. Given the learning inclination of andragogy; educators and students should embrace their role as co-facilitators instead of lecturers or solely as students (Knowles, 1984a).

MacKeracher (2004), indicated several critical adult learning theories regarding making sense of adult learning in higher education. For instance, several principles exist to define adult learning, such as the learning-centered approach, learning as a natural process, and of course, the various dialectical processes of learning, such as the interactive, constructive, and transformative dimensions of learning (Muneja, 2015). Moreover, the learning process is cyclical. Learners have various styles of learning and exhibit extremes of gaps in learning on an individual basis (MacKeracher, 2004). Training and teaching professionals must be aware of adult learners' preferred strategies for learning. The concept that learning as non-normative is a vital addition; whereas, learning means different things to different people based on the content provided. Moreover, what is normal for one person may not

be typical for someone else even while working on the same activity, through experiential learning practices, or even reading the same text. Finally, learning takes place within the context when a carefully designed teaching strategy in higher education ensures the adult learner gets the most from the learning experience.

1 How Andragogy is Implemented in Higher Education

Currently, higher educational organizations understand the need in changing themselves from a pedagogy level of instructing to andragogical level instructing. As a result of technological influences, educators are challenged to blend the underpinnings of both styles to meet the situational demands of curriculum and student needs. Indeed, Joshi (2017) found that higher education organizations thrive upon a culture where students are seen as adults who take more responsibility for their learning than those in compulsory institutions. Adults bring intuitiveness and experience to the classroom in way that pedagogical education does not. For instance, andragogy engages both the instructor and the student in a symbiotic relationship where the success of both is tied to their ability to collaborate, share experiences, provide contextual investigations, engage in meaningful conversations, and critical thinking. Andragogy requires students to provide deeper levels of connection to the theory provided by linking the context to the workplace. Innovative learning practice engages students by inspiring them to think beyond traditional careers and explore the range of possibilities that exists in one field or many. As a result, objectives and purposes for andragogical learning and the utilization of learning is dynamic.

Furthermore, andragogy is applicable to the needs of higher education students. Sufirmansya (2019) found that adults have a desire, capacity, intention, and requirement to learn because of the importance

of learning for one's career. Therefore, the importance of andragogy to the students in higher education is extremely synergistic with providing students with autonomy in their learning. Therefore, course developers, designers, and instructors must consider how assignments are structured for higher education students. Students need assignments they can complete independently. The presumptions that underlie andragogical learning methodologies in tertiary institutions is that students must comprehend their learning direction, have a focused outlook, gain proficiency with their background, understand their capabilities in the learning process, and reinforce their natural inspiration. Online courses must be structured so as they are easy to navigate, accessible to those with limited ability, requirement and assignment documentation must be clearly communicated. At the same time, instructors must create an environment that engages the learning community by utilizing announcements, discussion boards, blogs, video conferencing, group project interactions, simulations, and gaming.

Moving forward, andragogical methods can be applied to well-coordinated self-assessment and peer-assessment (Machera, 2017). Utilizing self-assessments provides several advantages when constructed by students, instructors, higher learning organizations, and university stakeholders. Machera (2017) indicated the outcomes elevate the organization with regards to receiving authentic feedback. The impact of self-assessment and peer-assessment to all educational stakeholders create a spirit of innovation and community in that the process engages students to become part of educational development process. Moreover, stakeholders indicated that self-assessment and peer-assessment improve learning in higher education thus the need to incorporate self-assessment and peer-assessment is a promising practice.

2 *Theme 1 – Andragogy is the Preferred Learning Style of Adults*

The andragogical learning and instructional method demonstrate it remains a focal model for adult learning in higher education (Holton, Swanson, and Naquin, 2001). Merriam (2001) contended andragogy and self-directed learning is an essential aspect to modern conceptualizations and understanding of adult learning. Arguments regarding the discrepancy between child and adult learning styles have existed for decades. Pedagogy has a long practice of providing educational guidance in which there is little differentiation between child and adult education. In the past, both groups learned in the same manner. Alternately, andragogy, promoted by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s, is a well-developed modality to address the unique needs of adult students in higher education. Knowles' idea of andragogy has been generally well received by instructors from different backgrounds, so far. Andragogy includes six assumptions: (a) self-directedness, (b) need to know, (c) use of experience in learning, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation towards learning, and (f) internal motivation (Chan, 2010; MacKeracher, 2004; Merriam, 2007).

Andragogy is a significant learning style to achieve performance improvement for adult learners in higher education (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001). More specifically, performance improvement objectives clarify the current state of the andragogical principles. Andragogy also addresses specific issues of adult learners and offers a more explicit framework for adapting andragogy to different learning styles. Andragogy, in practice, indicates that more specific factors develop when adapting andragogy to the learning environment. An analytic framework expressed as andragogical learner analysis demonstrates the andragogy model in practice during needs

assessment and curriculum development (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001).

3 *Theme 2 – Andragogy vs. Pedagogy*

McGrath (2009) purported there are similarities between adults and children in how they learn in context to language, interaction, and communication. Conversely, adult learners exhibit different learning behavior from that of children. In comparison, andragogical learning comprises two conflicting learning theories, andragogy, and pedagogy which are significant to adult educators. A learning theory that has attempted to overcome some of the negative aspects of pedagogy to the adult learner is a theory, which was introduced by Malcolm Knowles known as andragogy. Andragogy, as defined, is a scientific discipline that studies everything related to learning and instructional methods to develop adults to their full potential (McGrath, 2009). Unlike pedagogy, andragogy's premise is that the instructor does not possess all knowledge; therefore, adult learners are encouraged to take part in the classroom by incorporating their own experiences. In doing so, the instructional environment is much more engaging, supportive, and dynamic (Lawson, 2009). Moreover, the theory of andragogy, as developed by Malcolm Knowles, remains an essential theoretical framework for adult education practitioners and higher education students.

The main point of andragogy indicated that instructional professionals apply andragogy in adult learning practice. Knowles (1984a) described andragogy as a learning theory specific to the needs of adult learners. The concepts of andragogy are different from pedagogy, which is indicative of learning in childhood. Consequently, there is an emphasis placed on adults who thrive in self-directed learning environments, whereas adults often take responsibility for

their learning and decisions throughout the learning process. Knowles (1984a) suggested that adult learning programs consider the specific needs of adults to accommodate this fundamental aspect. The precise attributes of andragogy are that learners demonstrate self-directedness, and as learners, they are multifaceted resources for learning. Likewise, developmental tasks of social roles are present, the application is immediate, learning hinges on being problem-centered, instead of theoretical, there is mutuality, respectful, and collaborative interactions (Davenport & Davenport, 1985). Likewise, often communication and collaboration are informal. Adult learners tend to accept mutual self-diagnosis and negotiation. A focus on sequencing learning materials encourages preparedness and readiness. The importance of inquiry-based learning underscores mutual surveillance of the learner's needs and measurement of a learning program. Finally, the role of andragogy is an essential departure from pedagogy in adult learning in that maturity of the adult learner assists them in moving towards dependency on being self-directed. As a result, their experiences develop knowledge, readiness to learn is predicated on social roles, and the focus of the material is less on theoretical knowledge as much as it is focused on problem-centered materials (Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Knowles, 1984a).

4 *Theme 3 – Cognitive Learning*

Learning styles conceptualized as a cognitive, affective, social, and psychological behavior indicate what the learner perceives in response to the learning environment. Interestingly, the notion of cognitive style and cognitive ability are different from one another. Cognitive ability refers to the concept of that which one knows, whereas cognitive ability can be associated with the level of intelligence the learner achieves for a given goal. The best instruction happens when the in higher education

instructors creates a classroom environment or a training environment in which there are measures of cognitive, affective, psychological, and interpersonal styles of learning, regardless of learner preference (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

MacKeracher (2004) explored factors which affect adults' learning styles; whereas these factors may also affect adults' learning styles. These styles are cognitive, affective, physiological and interpersonal. Of these styles, the interpersonal style links to the ability of an instructor in higher education to connect with their audiences. Interpersonal learning style focuses on relational connections versus autonomous learning and connected versus separate procedural knowing. This learning behavior is related to social or relational factors. Interpersonal learning style includes the capacity to discern and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and desires of other people.

MacKeracher (2004) discussed features of the following thinking strategies: analytic cognitive style, holistic cognitive style, narrative, and paradigmatic thinking styles. What follows are examples to correlate each of the thinking strategies. In developing the course curriculum and material, it is vital to understand how learners think. An analytic cognitive style characterized by logical reasoning, a narrow focus on conspicuous objects in the foreground, and a belief that aspects of knowledge are the products of individuals and their attributes are noteworthy. Analytic thinkers tend to "disentangle phenomena from the contexts in which are embedded." (White, 2012). The holistic cognitive style involves understanding a system by sensing its large-scale patterns and reacting to them (Dewey, 2011). Narrative cognitive style is a way to conceptualize the learning process and is concerned with the context ascribed to experiences through stories (Adler, 2008). The essential features of narrative learning allow for reflection, thus an effective way to teach adults (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Paradigmatic cognitive style is the mode of educational theory concerned with logically categorizing the world (Adler, 2008; Brookfield, 1995;

MacKeracher, 2004). An example of the complexity of individual learning preferences and styles, there are some areas where one is right-brained, and others left brain. For example, some learners who ask questions appreciate closed-ended questions and answers, yet enjoy analytics that focuses on time, economic resources, and variables.

Theme 4 – Relational Significance to Adult Learners

MacKeracher (2004) discussed adult learning theories, such as the relational-centered approach, focusing on establishing and strengthening relationships with learners and helping learners know the ways of learning. As the learning process is cyclical, learners have different styles of learning and gaps in learning, so the best way to help learners is to engage with them. Unlike in pedagogy, adult learners are more apt to tell the instructor what is needed to gain achievement in the learning process because they are personally engaged. Andragogy promotes critical thinking in connection to pedagogy, andragogy, and their relationships to student motivation (Pew, 2007). As training and teaching professionals in higher education, one must be aware of adult learners' preferred strategies for learning. The concept that learning is relational is a vital addition; whereas, the term 'relationship' means different things to different people based on the context of the topical matter (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Therefore, what is relational for one person may not be relational with another in the same way. Finally, learning takes place when a carefully designed teaching strategy institutes learning where adult learners can interact and build relationships in the classroom environment.

Given the relational aspect of the learning environment, emotions, and stress affect learning and information processing; therefore, instructors can help adult learners deal with emotions and stress in learning in higher education. According to Lawson (2009), design principles are necessary to develop an instructor's planned activities and materials. Instructional principles required for exceptional design are providing an icebreaker to build group cohesiveness and assess group needs. Further, the utilization of a similar design for each class

uses different purposes and published designs should be modified to adapt to the purpose of the course or training. Lawson indicated the instructor should think of lectures that can be stretched, compressed, or eliminated, instead of the time available and the expertise of the participants.

Like experiential learning, cognitive apprenticeship is an excellent way to assist a student in practicing their craft. Simulations provide an alternative type of learning opportunity than traditional lectures do. Lectures in higher education have the potential to provide a larger volume of material to students, and thus, are usually necessary to provide the background and set the stage for more interactive techniques. On the other hand, students' greater involvement in a simulation can make a student's learning experience applicable to career development. For example, a skilled personal trainer achieves the certification, which exhibits skills and knowledge. It is the combination of theory, simulation, and exhibition that cognitive apprenticeship helps as students model skill (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

5 Implications: Linking Learning Styles

Experiential learning styles are popular despite critique about their legitimacy and usefulness (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2014). Likewise, there are fractured conceptualizations of understanding regarding the benefits of experiential learning. Bergsteiner and Avery (2014) presented a twin-cycle experiential learning model to eliminate confusion about experiential learning benefits in the field of education, which analyzed both Kolb's and Taylor's learning cycles. In both models, there is an increase in learning, which happens at the intersection of a concrete/active/primary learning cycle and an abstract/passive/secondary cycle. It is critical to observe that models

based upon factors depict six basic learning derivatives (participate in, expound on, watch, hear/see, read, hear). Moreover, learners use all their senses to connect to learning materials via (kinesthetic, visual, aural) modes and stages, which are concrete, active, primary, abstract, passive, secondary (MacKeracher, 2004).

6 *Practical Application*

From a practical perspective, people learn best by doing, seeing, and researching. When instructors in higher education teach content, they should use not only texts, but other resources as well, such as the library, technology, and community resources, and activities to convey content areas. An instructor should be passionate about linking students to community-based organizations and projects, so they may experience how processes work. Collegiate courses are designed to introduce participants to significant issues, learning strategies, and career resources about their respective fields create beneficial learning outcomes. As a result, in higher education instructors must focus on fostering student learning through inquiry-based curriculum design.

Moreover, the importance of instructional plan development lies in well-written learning objectives. To encourage collaborative learning in the classroom, students typically understand and retain an idea more effectively when they have had a part in developing information (Lawson, 2009). For instance, by dividing classes into small groups and assigning class members an essay question to answer as a way of reviewing for an exam allows for greater engagement—for instance, the assigned question written as an essay and required on the next assessment. Students write individual responses to the question for five minutes. Students then debrief within their group of three or so to discuss a topic. Finally, each group reports its conclusions. If the class is substantial, randomly selected groups report summary and substantive

outcomes. The reporting requirement encourages students to discuss the task at hand, rather than distracting topics. Further, the reports help the instructor to ferret out gaps in the students' understanding of the material.

7 *Analysis*

Conclusively, Knowles (1984b) purported that andragogy is the paramount study in higher education, indicating that adults learn differently from youth. Also, Knowles (1984b) specified six indications and reservations for effective andragogy in higher education. Adult learners must convey their life experiences and understanding to learning experiences, goal oriented, relevancy oriented, practical, and require respect (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Additionally, problem-centered focus allows adults immediate application of learning to career. Nonetheless, andragogy is not as connected with learning as the suppositions assume. St Clair (2002) determined that a humanist perspective was needed to ascertain if students indeed increased comprehension when andragogy was utilized as a teaching method. While andragogy has the potential for academic development, improved instructional techniques, various determinants analyzing social ways of critical thinking, and human connectivity make andragogy a novel instructional mode. Also, andragogy is viewed as a way to understand the education and development of adults. However, the most central critique is there is little knowledge of adult learner satisfaction with andragogy in multiple disciplines, so there is not a one-size-fits-all theory for the many variations possible and the needs of different disciplines.

Nevertheless, Knowles' theory laid the groundwork to apply andragogy to any adult educational setting (Knowles, 1984a). However, andragogy can no longer exist as the only theory in the adult education

field to express the needs of adult learners because it does not offer a distinct demarcation between the educational delivery for youth and for that of adults. As a result, andragogy will endure as the paramount in higher education adult learning theory when trying to understand how to best train adults. Conversely, andragogy is not adequate to clarify or shape the future needs of adults within various disciplines.

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