

# Strategies for an Efficient Participation of Women Students in Higher Education in Argentina

María Gabriela Giornelli

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of students entering university in Argentina has increased until the percentage of female students is about 60%.

For years, however, the number of graduates has been around 20% lower than the number of entrants and the reason for this discrepancy has remained unexplained. Evidently, a large number of those starting university study give it up. In addition, among the group that finally graduates, an important percentage of students stay at the university longer than the normal time provided for in the program of study. In the case of female students, the percentage increases. Among other causes, one apparent one is that female students often have to face early maternity and, in most such cases, the responsibility of a one-parent family.

The lack of satisfactory completion rates of students in higher education is a problem that affects both the university and the educational system in general. There is no difference between public or private universities and in both cases it causes important social, human and economic losses.

To identify the causes that hinder efficient completion and develop strategies that meet them by favoring students' support and academic backing would lower the usual dropout figures, a benefit to the students, the institution and also the whole university system.

This project presents several strategies proposed in the context of the present-day university. It aims to establish a culture that values dedication, study and effort as a way of life. These tend to lower dropout rates, by modifying the processes that favor it.

## 2. A Project to Address the Problem

The existence of the university has historically been linked to the need for an institution with space for study, reflection and argument, within which, separated from the institutional circumstances of the State and away from powers and influences of any kind, contributions can be made to knowledge and the progress of society.

This Project intends to propose strategies that allow the student to participate effectively at the higher level and tries to explain the need to focus on the importance of analyzing what is happening with those students who quit the system or cannot finish their courses.

Its aim is to generate and promote guidance and support from the university management for the maintenance of the female student within the university system, that is, within the University, considered as a *Universitas magistrorum et studiorum*: an entity that devotes itself to studying and to reflection about the meaning of human life, and is conceived as a community of teachers and students.

### 3. Current Knowledge about the Problem

Abandonment of study is a complex matter and the causes that provoke it can originate from several aspects. The different causative factors can be classified into exogenous and endogenous (García Fanelli, 2002).

Among the **exogenous** factors, age, gender, place of residence, socio-economic level, the parents' educational level, the student's civil status and, nowadays, the need to work to pay for their studies can be mentioned. Other personal factors of influence are the academic background, the level of acquired knowledge, the success or failure at high school, the personal aims, motivation and abilities, the level of satisfaction with the course, the relation between the course and the job market, personal problems of integration and adaptation to the university environment, the student's experiences in class and the support and guidance offered by the teachers. If we acknowledge poor background standards at high school as one of the factors involved, it is necessary to carry out a deep analysis of the articulation between high school and higher education and to propose actions to improve it.

Among the **endogenous** or institutional factors, we can identify the existence or lack of a restricted admission program, vocational guidance services, the type of course and its relation to the student's previous educational background, the duration of the course, the curricula, the teaching staff quality, the equipment and the direction offered by the staff in charge of the management of each academic unit and the institution in its context.

At this point, there appear to be problems that arise from the diverse tasks that make up academic staff activity, such as teaching, study management, research, and participation in the institutional management or extension activities.

In relation to this, one needs to mention the absence, in some cases, of the acknowledgement that should be given to the demands of such activities and the politics and strategies for further teacher training and development, matters that are part of the politics of higher education in the institution or in the national context. (Mora Ruiz, 1991)

The duration of the courses is another factor that influences student drop out. In general, the theoretical duration, the one established in the curricula, is shorter than the real duration, the years demanded of the student to complete her studies. As regards the theoretical duration of the courses, the current curriculum frequently extends from four to six years. The real duration increases that theoretical duration between two to three years, which may present considerable financial and life difficulties for the student.

Another element to consider is the student's dedication to studying. In general, those students who study fewer hours are the ones that give up, or to put it the other way round, the ones that give up have devoted fewer hours to studying. The student who enters the Facultad de Farmacia y Bioquímica can hardly attain an adequate completion if she must divide her time between studying and working, at least during the first two years of her career.

## **4. Formulation and Foundation of the Project**

To formulate the Project, an analysis was made of the data provided by different units of the Universidad Juan Agustín Maza.

In addition, to give it a sound basis, account was taken of the process of Institutional Auto-evaluation of the Universidad Juan Agustín Maza, with the intention that it be evaluated by the CONEAU (Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria). Two lines of analysis were taken as reference: on one hand, the 2004 – 2008 Management Plan, and on the other, the analysis of strengths and weaknesses prepared by each academic unit and in general throughout all the University. These analyses were first applied by the University J. A. Maza during 2003, using a workshop methodology with the guarantee of wide institutional participation.

### **4.1 Objectives of the Project**

With the theoretical background presented as a reference, the following General Objective is proposed:

- To generate strategies that give information and to generate instruments that allow identification both of the causes of discontinuation and of those female students who may possibly drop their studies early so that lines of action can be proposed that favor student retention and promotion in her career.

As Specific Objectives, the following actions are intended:

- To detect potential drop-outs before they abandon the institution;
- To establish preventive and supportive actions intended to ensure the female student's successful participation at University.

### **4.2 Methodology**

The design of the research is both qualitative and quantitative.

This methodology introduces analysis of statistics given by the University from the quantitative point of view. Then, complete interviews given to all the entering students during two consecutive teaching cycles as well as with other persons of the university such as teachers and non teachers (authorities and administrative staff) make up the qualitative aspect of the study.

- The study will be carried out with the documents and data of the files of the Facultad de Farmacia y Bioquímica de la Universidad Juan Agustín Maza as well as files provided by the Tutorship Program of the University Educative Counseling, a process which depends on the Academic Vice-Rectorship.
- We will work on the construction of Educational Biographies, taking into account the previous variables of the student: secondary education, parent's educational level, family context, subjects taken and passed, the date of the release application (if applicable), and in this case, statement of the reason for it. The student must assist the interview process to obtain the definitive release. This will be registered at the University Educative Counseling.

- The variables of analysis considered will be: economic and social factors, place of origin (emphasizing this in case it implies living away from home), age, civil status, working conditions, vocation.
- The data is cross-referenced with semi-structured interviews with teachers, non teachers (authorities and administrative staff) and female students.
- A Supporting Program to female students via e-mail will be promoted.
- Proposals for policies and strategies to help lower student dropout in courses of the Facultad de Farmacia y Bioquímica de la Universidad Juan Agustín Maza will be issued: campus childcare for those who need to bring their children with them, as well as free birth control advice.

The execution of the Project was planned in four stages:

1. STAGE OF DATA COLLECTION: Early detection of female students in risk situation.
2. OPERATIVE STAGE: Use of strategies and actions provided (Program of Teacher–Tutor; Program of Student-Tutor, Supporting Program via e-mail, Transversal Multidisciplinary Project). Semi-structured interviews with teachers, non teachers (authorities and administrative staff) and students.
3. EVALUATIVE STAGE: Analysis of the information related to the factors that prevented satisfactory participation and analyses of the causes of actual dropout. Analysis of the results obtained (percentage of students that achieved promotion to the next academic course).
4. TRANSFERENCE STAGE: Presentation of the results obtained to the other academic units of the University.

## **5. Expected Results**

Reflecting upon the causes that provoke female student dropout and the measures that favor their participation, so as to understand the reasons therefore means reviewing not only institutional aspects but also ones related to the student's life style: her education, the secondary school she comes from, the value that families give to the title, her personal abilities.

The causes of dropping out are in many cases related to lack of previous knowledge of basic subjects of the course, difficulties with organizing time, lack of relations with the teachers, difficulties with relating to her classmates, but the great majority of those giving up their studies blame economic problems. Nowadays a significant number of students need to work many hours to pay for their studies; therefore to study is a significant personal effort.

The aim of this project is to favor completion by means of support, advice and guidance offering the student elements and tools she does not have when entering the university and making a more individual personal follow up.

The intention is to identify groups at risk, such as the low performance students, students who lack their family advice because they have left their place of origin, or the students with a level of family and job responsibilities that prevent them from finishing their studies.

The reasons for the slow loss of students can be many, but one of the most influential factors is the lack of articulation between high school and university, and the lack of strategies to coordinate the two levels. The deficiencies of high school are known by the university, but it is useless to blame either, it is necessary to design pedagogical strategies and mechanisms that allow the balance between both stages of education, secondary and higher education.

The study and adequate follow up will give results within years, at the same time favoring student completions at the higher level, increasing the number of graduates.

As the Rector of the Universidad Juan Agustín Maza, Engineer Carlos Villarreal says in the prologue of the Report of Institutional Self-Evaluation:

Without doubt an evaluative experience cannot go further than its own limits. It cannot solve the problems nor get an improvement per se nor change the people. But it can offer clues, open new ways, detect difficulties. The people interested in it will be the ones who will have to follow this way and put into practice the solutions to the conflicts discovered in it. (Santos Guerra, Miguel Ángel. 1998).

One cannot get to the essence of the things from outside. For that reason we have full certainty that this project will generate positive actions, changes of attitude and consciousness.

Some look at the things as they are and ask themselves "Why?": maybe it is better to look at things as they could be and ask "Why not?"

To conclude, I want to recall the words the Sovereign Pontiff Benedict XVI said, in January 2008, to the Rome Diocese in his message "About the urgent duty of Education":

*Do not be afraid! None of these difficulties, in fact, are insurmountable . . . However, when the foundations are shaken and essential certainties are lacking, the need for those values returns to make itself felt in a compelling way: Thus, concretely, today the demand grows for a true education. Parents, who are concerned and often anxious about their children's future, ask for it; many teachers, who have the sad experience of the deterioration of their schools, ask for it; society as a whole, which sees the basis of its communal life threatened, asks for it; deep in themselves children and young people, who do not want to face life's challenges all alone, ask for it.*

## Bibliography

- Benedicto XVI (2008). Mensaje a la diócesis de Roma sobre la tarea urgente de la educación
- Boulet, Patrick (2005). "La Universidad y los otros". *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación (OEI) N° 36/10*. En línea 14/12/2006 <http://www.rieoei.org/1017.htm>
- García de Fanelli, Ana M (2002). *Indicadores y estrategias en relación con el abandono universitario. La Agenda Universitaria*
- Giovagnoli, Paula Inés (2002). *Determinantes de la deserción y graduación universitaria: Una aplicación utilizando modelos de duración*. En línea 10/06/2006 [www.depeco.econo.unlp.edu.ar](http://www.depeco.econo.unlp.edu.ar)
- Jolis, M. Dolores and Grupo Gisea (2000): *Los adolescentes en la escuela y en la universidad. Qué se dice y qué se hace*. Buenos Aires : Ed. Lumen Humanitas
- Kisilevsky, Marta and Veleda, Cecilia (2002). "Condiciones Sociales y Pedagógicas de Ingreso a la Educación Superior", Publicación digital en la página web de la SPU del Ministerio de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología
- Kisilevsky, Marta y Veleda, C. (2002). *Dos estudios sobre el acceso a la Educación Superior en la Argentina*.
- Llano, Alejandro. (2003) *Repensar la Universidad. La Universidad ante lo nuevo*. Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias
- Mora Ruiz, José Gines (1991). *Calidad y rendimiento en las instituciones universitarias*. España: Consejo de Universidades.
- Morín, Edgar (2001). *Los siete saberes necesarios para la educación del futuro*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión.
- Santos Guerra, Miguel Ángel. (1998): *Evaluar es comprender*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Magisterio del Río de la Plata.
- Trombetta, Augusto (1999). *El ingreso en las universidades nacionales argentinas. Sistemas de Admisión a la Universidad*. Buenos Aires: Ministerio de cultura y Educación. Secretaría de Políticas universitarias. Serie Nuevas Tendencias.  
[www.connmed.com.ar/instituciones2/aafhospitalaria.org.ar/capacitacion/4congreso/presentaciones/congreso\\_fh.pps](http://www.connmed.com.ar/instituciones2/aafhospitalaria.org.ar/capacitacion/4congreso/presentaciones/congreso_fh.pps) Resumen del Proyecto Multidisciplinario Transversal (Slipak, Giornelli, Sainz).

**About the Author:** María Gabriela Giornelli of the Federación Argentina de Mujeres Universitarias (FAMU), holds postgraduate qualifications in Higher Education Teaching and Management. She is Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry at the Universidad Juan Agustín Maza, Mendoza, Argentina. Contact her at: [ggiornelli@famumza.org.ar](mailto:ggiornelli@famumza.org.ar)