Graduation After Time and Peer Tutoring

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Abstract: The high number of irregular students is one of the most critical aspects in university careers. Currently, in Italy 40 students out of 100 complete their degrees after prescription time, with marked differences among the different areas. Several measures could be taken and a number of stakeholders should intervene. This paper analyses the results obtained through the intervention carried out on study groups supported by peer tutors at the Department of Political and Social Sciences (DISPeS) of the University of Calabria. This initiative highlights positive results in terms of soft skills acquisition and pro-active attitude towards individual resources and limits.

Keywords: peer tutoring, student retention, learning groups, intervention

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Introduction

University education has since long been considered as a crucial factor in the economic and social growth of a country. The ability to compete in advanced economies need investment in human capital and research. Cohesion in society, along with the promotion of some issues, such as gender equality, political and religious tolerance and democratic and civic values, are naturally nurtured in higher education institutions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Sarrico, McQueen & Samuelson, 2017; Viesti, 2016, 2018). Therefore, important objectives are, on one side, a support to the increase in the number of young and adult graduated citizens, and on the other, actions allowing to have an impact on the prevention or slowing down of the process of graduation attainment for university students. Both goals should be reached in Italy. Our study aim to cast light on the phenomenon of irregular students, i.e. students enrolled in degree courses well beyond the time set to the completion of studies and who attain this goal late (if they do not quit before). Therefore, we paid attention on secondary data of the phenomenon in Italy, highlighting its territorial distribution (Anvur, 2016). By having recourse to some contribution of social sciences, we have attempted to focus on university individual and institutional features (i.e. of the national university system and of single universities) and on the social and economic context. We then present our experience to support irregular students carried out by the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Calabria. We organized study groups inspired by the principle of peer tutoring. The final part focuses on the results obtained at a local level in the strengthening of the soft skills of the students participating in the study in terms of relationship development, learning method and time control. Finally, we assume that synergies among exogenous causes of the delay to university completion and individual causes of the phenomenon should be investigated.

Delays in degree completion

Italy has a particularly low percentage of graduates as compared to other developed countries, both for a lower entry rate and for the higher rate of dropouts. A measure of this delay of tertiary education is provided by the number of 30/34-year old graduates (24% in Italy) in comparison with the European average (38%) (Anvur, 2016; De Angelis et al., 2016). The Italian University System has long been dealing with a high number of students who complete their university career beyond prescribed time-to-graduation. This trend consolidated in Italy since the end of the 1960s, i.e. when univer-

sity became a real option for all school-leavers[1], and was not affected by the introduction, in more recent times, of the so-called '3+2'pattern[2]. In fact, although immediately after the reform, irregularities seemed to consistently reduce, after some time, they started to increase again, above all in the first cycle (from 76.2% of irregular students in 2002 to 56.3% in 2008)[3] (Aina et al., 2015; Benadusi & Giancola, 2015), the percentage subsequently, grows again. Even more recent figures showing improvement in terms of graduates in the due time should be carefully interpreted because one of the determining factors could be the 'selection effect', caused by the fact that the decrease in enrolments mainly affected students with lower opportunities of academic succes (Anvur, 2016).

The National Students Register MIUR-CINECA could provide a perspective of the national context of the incidence of delay in graduation times. It allows to have a clear picture of the outcomes of the more recent cohorts of students after N years from their enrolment. Anvur (2016) which processed data, highlights the higher rates of students who have not completed their university exams within set time period in three-year degree courses in comparison with second-level degree courses[4]. To prove this situation Table 1 reports the values of irregular students in first-level degree and second-level degree courses, differentiated in cohorts[5].

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[1] Law 910/1969 allowed all high school leavers the possibility to enroll in universities. This implied the Italian phenomenon of mass enrollment (in a sense never really accomplished) and an important cultural change: the democratization of education and the reinterpretation of the latter in terms of (individual or collective) investment in higher education (Benadusi, 1984).

[2] The Ministerial Decree D.M. 509/1999 actually reduced the length of university attendance, and re-organized it on different levels: the three-year degree course and masters' degree course (which were then named first-level degree course and second-level degree course with D.M. 270/2004). Although this is not the subject of our paper, it is important to highlight that the Bologna process, and thus the convergence among European university systems, is supported by social and cultural preconditions which are not exempt from criticism. Universities are at a crossroad and the answers provided so far are weak (Santos, 2016). At an international level, globalisation had a great impact on Higher Education such as the brain drain phenomenon and the role of English as the dominant language of scientific communication, while globalisation failed to provide an answer to the problem of access and fairness, on the contrary it increasingly highlights the difficulty of students in completing their studies (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Altbach, 2013).

[3] As some authors have pointed out (Aina et al., 2015), this tremendous decrease is explained by the passage of students from the old to the new system (from 4-year degree courses to three-year degree courses), that has lead them to completion of their course of studies.

[4] Moreover, we should take into account that three-year students have a lower inclination to complete their studies and thus, they are more incline to dropouts. The outlook is different in single-cycle degree courses, which last from 4 to 6 years, mainly in the areas of Education Science, Pharmacy, Medicine, and Law (single-cycle since 2006/2007). These courses in fact, are those with the lowest rates of dropouts, despite the high levels of irregular students. (Anvur, 2016).

[5] The outcomes of students careers can be of three different types: graduation, dropout and irregularity. Table 1 only reports the incidence of the last value on the total number of

Table 1. Outcomes of enrolled cohorts in First and Second Level Degree Courses at the beginning of the 2014/2015 academic year.

Cohort of enrolled students for academic year	Students (total)	Irregular First Level Students %			Students (total)	Irregular Second Level Students %		
		after 3 years	after 4 years	after 6 years		after 2 years	after 3 years	after 4 years
2003/2004	299.934	54.0	37.2	19.2	19.995	46.0	18.2	9.5
2004/2005	298.348	53.1	36.9	18.8	49.895	43.2	16.6	8.4
2005/2006	280.285	54.7	38.0	19.2	70.705	47.7	19.1	9.5
2006/2007	247.488	52.7	34.7	16.3	76.694	50.7	21.7	10.7
2007/2008	247.049	52.7	33.7	15.2	79.108	53.2	23.5	11.3
2008/2009	241.754	51.4	32.1	14.0	90.930	51.2	21.8	10.5
2009/2010	241.037	49.9	30.5		98.391	48.4	19.1	9.1
2010/2011	237.412	49.1	29.4		100.053	45.1	17.1	7.7
2011/2012	233.734	48.5			101.635	44.9	16.3	
2012/2013					102.090	44.4		

Source: our data processing based on Anvur data (2016).

More recent data highlights that the average length of university careers in Italy is in line with data from developed countries (Oecd, 2016), although some important differences at a sub-national level have been detected (Cersosimo, Ferrara, & Nisticò, 2016). In southern Italy universities, in fact, the number of students first level who regularly complete their university careers remains low, even in the 2011/2012 cohort (the last considered in the study by Anvur), (33% in the north of Italy, 27% in the center and only 16% of the total in the south). The gap among the different areas of the country is also confirmed if we boserve students who graduated 4 or 6 years after enrolment: 55-60% of the students in the north of Italy graduate after 6 years, the same is true for 47-54% of them in the center, while only 37-43% in the south (Anvur, 2016). Since new data about students that will enroll in the next few years is lacking, (in order to identify potentially different trends), graduation after completion time (*fuoricorsismo*) is still one of the main critical aspects of the system; it is almost a territorial division which substantially contributed to the decline of the Italian university system, above all

students enrolled in the corresponding cohort assessed in three different subsequent moments in comparison with regular completion of education and with reference to two levels of university education.

in terms of students careers (Viesti, 2016). In fact, the completion of studies long after their regular completion times implies important consequences in so far it causes an extension of the investment in human resources (and thus of specific resources) of students and families in the perspective of uncertain professional employment and/or non coherent with the educational qualification (Allen & De Weert, 2007).

The condition of irregular student, is often a sort of shelter to face an adverse context, lacking alternative opportunities of self-fulfillment. Excess time to completion has also negative implications for the Government both in terms of investment of greater resources in the provision of services to the students unable to attain their qualification in due time, and also in terms of failed public and social returns, i.e. university fees paid by adult workers with tertiary education and by citizens who have a better health level and dhow a higher level of social participation (Sarrico, McQueen & Samuelson, 2017).

More recently, this data arose the interest of politicians and researchers and the topic has become the focus of the public debate on the future of young generations. The term *fuoricorsismo* is a neologism that indicates a wound of the Italian higher education system and, at the same time, a non-virtuous trend of Italian university students (Aina, Baici & Casalone, 2011).

An outlook on the causes of Higher Education dropout

School dropout is a complex phenomenon at any level caused by several reasons; it questions the relationship between the right to access education, the working modalities of educational institutions and the policies to contrast inequalities and social stratification (Besozzi, 2009; Colombo, 2010; Fernández Enguita, 2016; Trivellato & Triventi, 2015; Parziale & Scotti, 2016). In the 20th century two sociological interpretations of the phenomenon were proposed: the functional theory by Parsons that considers education as a channel of social mobilization (Blau & Dancan, 1967; Collins, 1972), and identifies the reasons for this failure in personal, familiar or cultural aspects of the student; the second is the conflict theory reproposed by Althusser (1965), Bourdieu (1970) and by the theorists of deprivation (Halsey, Floud & Anderson, 1961) and of deficit (Bernestein, 1971), based on which those who come from disadvantaged social classes are pushed out from schools because of internal school mechanisms. Over the last decades, thanks to the contributions by Berger and Luckmann (1966), a research field was developed that analyses school dropouts as a result of a non-harmonious relationship between the student and the school or the lack of it. In this perspective, single experiences of dropouts are influenced by several variables. The quantitative analysis or the phenomenon implies the development of composite indicators that can interpret the action of each single factor. Qualitative studies

instead, analyze the biography of students who drop out schools and take into account the events and actors that have played a role in their school dropouts (Colombo, 2010). Moreover, as proposed by Archer (1995), we could try to develop an analytical approach that considers both micro and macro aspects and analyses their interaction *in fieri.*

Discontinuation in Higher Education can take the form of dropouts or delay to degree attainment. We have summarized some of these analytical elements of the latter in the previous paragraph. We could affirm that, despite the expansion of higher education, Italy still suffers from marked weaknesses as compared to other Developed Countries also in terms of public expenditure (Sarrico, McQueen & Samuelson, 2017). We believe that, just like dropout that is found in lower levels of education, also Higher Education needs a contextualized approach of the phenomenon (Besozzi, 2006).

This choice, in fact, allows us to detect the deep impact on discontinuation of environmental features that are learned in students' social context. In other words, it is a question of understanding the mutual influence of endogenous and exogenous factors. More recent studies (Viesti, 2018; Sarrico, McQueen & Samuelson, 2017; Trivellato & Triventi, 2015; Siri, 2015), have distinguished among at least three macro-groups of causes for university discontinuation: i) universities' organization in terms of course provision and organization; ii) individual causes, such as low or inadequate level of competence of enrolled students, full time employment, lack of awareness and motivation in the choice of the university course, and disadvantages originating from family background; iii) factors related to the context such as lack of job opportunities after graduation.

These complex aspects could be tackled by means of policies promoted at different institutional levels: course of study, Department, University, Higher education system (Larsen et al., 2013). Actions to counteract dropouts, moreover, cannot avoid monitoring changes of the phenomenon and assessing the specific aspects that could be detected on some targets of students or of universities (Siri, 2015). Finally, in higher education special attention is paid to the communication between students and universities and thus to the community features of university life (Tinto, 1975; Braxton & Hirschy, 2004; Heublein et al., 2010).

Irregular students' profiles in the experience carried out at the Department of Social and Political Sciences

Before dealing with the experience carried out at our department with irregular students, it is worth providing a synopsis of the regional context and of the University of Calabria.

Like other southern regions, Calabria has "very limited social cohesion" (Venturini & Graziano, 2018)[6], high levels of poverty and low resource investment (Istat 2016 and 2017). Juvenile poverty, in its material and non material components, is alarming. In Calabria, as well as in other regions of the South of Italy, the incidence of the rate of Severe Material Deprivation is 6%, higher than the national average (20.5 versus 14.2) (QES, 2018). Based on the IPE (Index of educational poverty) index, the evaluation of such educational index, both in terms of learning and skills and in terms of access to educational institution, Calabria ranks second preceded by Campania and Sicily (Save the Children, 2017). Also, the percentage of Calabrian children below the age of three having access to social and educational services is less than 10%, as against 23% of the national rate (Con I Bambini, 2018)[7]. Social inclusion and access to the employment market are more complex in the regions of the South of Italy: in Calabria over 36% of young people between the age of 15 and 29 fell within the category of Neet (Not in Employment, Education or Training) in 2017; the national average is lower, almost 25%, despite being alarming as compared to European rates.

If it is still true that the school system educates individuals able to consciously act within society, rather than passively accepting it in any aspect (Morin, 2000), the University of Calabria has its rationale in this mission. It was started in 1972 as a University Campus, and it has been, and still is, an educational institution, focusing on emancipation and social mobility generations after generations (Fantozzi & Licursi, 2011). It is currently facing the difficulties caused by the decrease in public investment in the field of Higher Education, which has greater impact on southern universities (Viesti, 2018). The University of Calabria is the largest university of the region with slightly less than 30thousand students and 75 degree courses (Anvur, 2016). Four first level degree courses of the Department of Political and Social Sciences Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali (DISPeS), will be mentioned later.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, the DISPeS of the University of Calabria started an investigation with the aim to increase knowledge on the issue and promote action targeted to the support of irregular students' (about one thousand overall).

It is a two-step process, whose aims and actions are summarized in Figure 1. It is important to highlight that the difficulties faced when starting contacts with irregular students[8] made it impossible to use any selection criteria

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[6] In the study indicated, the concept of social cohesion was evaluated based on several indicators belonging to the field of: politics, society, economics, gender, culture, social inclusion and non discrimination, as well as environment.

[7] A really low value if we consider that the Lisbon index sets 33% as a goal (initially within 2010 and now 2020).

[8] In a first stage, a series of instruments were used, such as the DISPeS website, information to students sent to their institutional email address and awareness raising campaigns with

for the second step, as well as it was impossible to set up a control group. Students with a positive attitude have been included in study groups. The majority of them were women students (in line with the gender composition of Dispes student population) and participants came from all degree courses (Political Sciences: 43, Social Services: 15, Administration Science: 32, Economics and Social Disciplines: 8).

Figure 1. A summary of the experience carried out at Dispes

	Aim	**Actions**
STEP I	*i)* Establish a contact *ii)* Knowledge increase	• 14 Training events (about 140 students) • 10 Focus groups (about 50 students) • Survey (n≈300; N≈1000)
STEP II	*i)* Flank students in their path to the degree completion *ii)* Acquire further knowledge	• 9 study groups (4 peer tutoring, 90 lessons with about 100 students) • coordination meeting (once a week on average) • interviews with some of the students participating in groups (17) • analysis of tutors' lookbooks (90)

Information in the first step, highlighted that students failing to complete their degree in the prescribed time constitute a specific aggregate within the students population at DISPeS. This was partly due to some specific features of the department itself and to the change of students' subjective conditions which, over the years, lead them to spend their time differently. In the framework of this specific aggregate, three different profiles of irregular students have been highlighted and it emerged that non-compliance with regular completion time is the consequence of several reasons and that it is also possible to detect clusters of common factors for each profile.

Unmotivated students

Irregular students display relevant motivational weakness and lack of self-esteem, and these two factors are closely intertwined. For slightly over 40% of irregular students, the problem is their lack of motivation in terms of choice of studies; for 20% of these students their choice was strongly influenced by external factors: very often it is impossible for them to afford studying at a university in another region or to access a specific study course because of the entry test selection. Overall, quite a high number of irregu-

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the support of students' associations, as well as students' representatives, and notice spread through fliers, leaflets and professors online notice boards. In a subsequent stage, given the lack of effectiveness of these instruments, we started contacting students through phone calls.

lar students are 'non-committed' (Mäkinen, Olkinour, & Lonka, 2004); they are rather seeking for their identity (the status of university student) in the external world and to find their dimension in a social context with very limited employment opportunities. Many university students that are inactive in educational terms could easily transit to the group of 'neets' (not engaged in education employment or training) if they formally decide to discontinue university.

Over 40% irregular students indicate the lack of motivational support among the causes of their delay, while the majority of them identify poor learning skills, lack of concentration and previous educational gaps, as the main reasons for their failure. Their lack of motivation is also evident in terms of future plans for their lives and in the high level of fear about what is going to happen after graduation. Almost 50% of the surveyed students declared their lack of interest in having children or getting married (30% of surveyed students is not even interested in a permanent relationship). Vice versa, 47% were extremely worried about their future after the completion of their studies (10 in a value scale from 0 to 10).

Disadvantaged students

As it is fairly common, not all students are in the same position when they start any cycle of studies. Although non-homogeneities in terms of educational and familiar background play a key role in high-school education, they are also important at a university level, thus entailing a number of consequences, such as the delay in degree completion. On the other hand, Italy is still the country where parents' level of education significantly impacts on their children's educational qualification, more than in any other developed country and this causes a problem of fairness, above all in higher education (Oecd, 2016).

In particular, pre-university educational experience of students who do not complete their university exams within set time period, is generally negatively marked. The phenomenon could be defined as a sort of 'continuous drop-out' (Cersosimo & Licursi, 2016) to indicate the situation of students that have previously experienced educational failure: 30% of them had to recuperate the educational debt of the previous years, 10% changed school at least once and slightly more than 4% missed at least one year school. This is also flanked by a negative assessment of the school environment: 25% of surveyed students report *hostile* teachers and about 10% were unable to establish lasting ties with their peers. Focus groups highlighted general mistrust towards schools. Access to university, moreover, disappointed students' expectations of living an experience that they expected to be considerably different from school.

Few students are able to find practical or motivational support in their family background to complete their course of studies. Only 5.3% of parents of students who do not complete their university exams within set time period holds a degree; 13% of these students have one parent with a degree and over one fifth of them has parents holding a secondary school leaving diploma or a lower grade diploma. In 60% of the cases none of the family members holds a degree.

Students who report: «life is not only university»

Less relevant in terms of figures is the profile of irregular students, who slowed down the learning pace because they were more interested in other issues. By analyzing some variables (i.e. marital status, work and accommodation, that are considered disadvantaged conditions), jobs and commuting negatively affect (or affected) students' performance. In the academic year under examination, 28% or irregular students at the DISPeS are worker students, as against 10% of enrolled students of the same department. In 50% of the cases students have unstable employment both in terms of temporal continuity and in terms of regular contracts. Students narratives highlight that the mixed uncertainty of these jobs makes it difficult for them to combine their working activity with their educational workload. These jobs contribute to relieve families from the economic burden of university costs rather than being an aspiration for professional fulfillment. However, working students are aware that their work commitment further contributes to their delay in attaining a degree.

Commuting is another feature commonly associated with irregular students. In many cases (over half of the surveyed students) it is a deeply-rooted condition, in the sense that these students have always travelled to/from university, thus spending a lot of hours in commuting. Others, on the other hand, decided to travel when they became irregular students, thus not attending their lessons any more, which further increased their distance from university facilities.

Peer tutoring and study groups

After learning more about this population of students, we have outlined and implemented measures aiming at the support of these students. It is important to highlight that the theoretical-methodological reference of this intervention is the socio-anthropological approach by Tinto (1975, 1997, 2006), whose theories pointed out that the ability of universities to foster social and academic integration of their students contributes to students' decision not to discontinue their studies. Students integration could be en-

couraged both through the ordinary process of the institution (relationships between students and professors and/or administrative offices) and through the enhancement of social events within the university context, which – in the case of DISPeS – overlaps with campus life and initiatives. Such a model should be implemented from the very beginning, from the first day of the first year of course[9]. At the DISPeS the main issues were counteracting poor or lack of inclusion, starting from students' direct involvement with the aim was to make them feel more involved in the life of the campus and their course of study. On one side, the Department focused both on its educational accountability, in taking inspiration from Milani (1967), and also on its role of *hospital treating patients*; on the other, it sought an approach with irregular students that could promote students' self-development (Montessori's approach) and encourage irregular students to play a key role and act within the perspective of a *banking* approach to education (Freire, 1971).

Among the potential measures, we considered that study groups with the support of peers were more coherent with these premises in the case of the first two profiles of irregular students, anticipated in the previous paragraphs, and in line with the implicit requests of students involved in focus groups. In fact, peer tutoring, that consists in helping students towards the acquisition of knowledge and skills that their tutors have already acquired (Topping, 1997), facilitates the strengthening of irregular students' self-esteem and promotes socialization and the sharing of experiences (Chiari, 2011), at the same time discouraging adaptive and self-sabotage attitudes (Alesi & Pepi, 2014). In order to implement a peer cooperative learning setting at university (Da Re, 2017), in our experience at DISPeS, tutors were not surrogate-professors, but peer students. In fact, three students from a second-level degree course of DISPeS and a PhD student selected through a public competition, were involved in a basic training course on peer education and worked with these groups.

In higher education, peer tutors are required to create an open and communicative environment and to answer questions of different types and importance asked by students. Moreover, as pointed out by Falchikov (2001), in many cases peer tutors play a Vygotskian function of cognitive scaffolding, thus encouraging learning in students' zones of proximal development. The adoption of peer tutoring in higher education, essentially fulfills the need to reinforce study skills and problem solving and to encourage self-study. That

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[9] Action at the beginning of the course could establish a system of monitoring/action in order to counteract educational failures. The results obtained in the first year, in fact, affect university careers and in this period the higher rate of drop-out is registered. Indication as to school leaving marks and the grades average in the first exam, among surveyed students, confirmed data found in other studies on the topic (Cersosimo, Ferrara, & Nisticò, 2016; Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010), i.e. a link between pre-university assessment and first exam grades and the connection between the latter and regular course attendance.

is why this method is often employed with irregular students or to limit the risk of drop-out (Colvin, 2007) and it is an approach that encourages the overall organization of more student-oriented and specific needs-oriented teaching (Saunders, 2006). The trend towards this approach was supported by reflections and experiences to help university students developed both at an international level (Rodrigo et al., 2014; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Àlvarez, 2005) and in Italy (Isfol, 2005; Bertagna & Puricelli, 2008; Freda et al. 2014; Clerici et al., 2012; Da Re & Zago, 2014).

Overall, as already shown in Figure 1, 9 study groups and 90 meeting were organized; about 100 students took part in this experience. Each group was organized under the form of an intentional space of peer-to-peer inter-action in order to work on students' learning styles and motivation, rather than on their disciplinary competence strictu sensu. The approach employed can be defined as metacognitive, insofar it includes both cognitive aspects and emotional ones (Mega, Meneghetti, & De Beni, 2008); at the same time, the impact we wanted to observe was on knowledge and metacognitive self-regulation (De Backer, Van Keer, & Valcke, 2011).

In order to provide students with an ad hoc area for group activities, meeting rooms of the department were used. Such a choice was a positive action of the intervention, since it encouraged peer interaction (classrooms would not have been ad-hoc setting because of their arrangement specifically devised for lectures) and because it fostered a more direct contact with the schedule, rhythms and quality of life at the department. Students also had the opportunity to develop greater familiarity with the areas that are generally used by professors to work and carry out their research activities.

Outcomes of the Experience at University of Calabria

Groups were not able to fulfill all the needs that were gradually openly expressed by irregular students or that had been detected by tutors. In some cases students formally entered the group, but were seeking a preferential relationship with tutors rather than developing social relations of mutual support with their colleagues. In other cases psychological professional support was necessary. In compliance with data in the literature (Chiari, 2011), in most situations, however, groups were able to promote peer social relations and to develop of positive and proactive social relations towards studying; these were able to re-activate and accelerate students' careers and – sometimes – supported them in the completion of their university course. Tutors have kept a diary of any meeting, they have also developed a final report and organized periodic coordination meetings with the professors involved in the project.

At the end of the experience 17 students participating in the study groups were interviewed by a peer. These materials and the steady monitoring of this experience led us to the considerations indicated below which propose a concise reconstruction of the skills acquired by the groups which could be ascribed to three macro-abilities: developing social relations, diagnosis and intervention. These are soft skills, i.e. general skills attaining the cognitive and behavioral dimension that could be employed when studying or working and also in the scheduling and planning of personal objectives (Poy, Rosina & Sirani, 2018).

Developing Relationships

Such macro-area of skills include several psycho-social abilities. The latter turned out to be essential in study groups to develop other kinds of competencies as well as in the implementation of the actions to support irregular students. *Developing relationships* meant: establishing relationships with other peers with whom students could be extroverted and tell about their experience; moderating the tensions generated among students and their families by educational failures; 'unearthing' negative experiences in the relationships with institutions (with administrative and teaching staff); bringing out feelings of mistrust towards themselves, third parties or the university itself; and sharing the most frequent problems such as anxiety and depression. More stable and permanent ties were developed; sometimes real friendships were developed.

The opportunities provided by study groups could be better understood if we consider what has emerged from the profile of students who complete their university career beyond prescribed time-to-graduation, in particular in terms of motivational vulnerability (at enrolment and *in itinere*) and their estrangement from university, which often overlaps with the discontinuation of the relationships with their colleagues and/or flat-mates, as well as the loss of a typical socialization space.

Diagnosis about the Learning Method

Within the framework of study groups another transversal macro-competence was developed, based on the ability to re-build students' own bio-educational progress and analyze the features of school and university system, by means of a diagnosis. Students involved in a peer-to-peer interaction developed a map of their personal features, skills and attitudes, as well as of their commitment patterns related to learning activities. Such a process implied continuous reference to middle and high-school experiences, where inefficient practices and approaches to text reading emerged and consolidated. In the groups students reflected on their learning approach

to learning, experimented new practices to understand exam subjects and de-constructed learning practices, which had become a habit, that – in their opinion – had proven to be useless or unproductive (such as highlighting whole pages of textbooks or replacing the passage with a summary written by other students). The experience was also useful to bring to surface fully-fledged self-sabotage strategies (such as postponing individual study) and self-regulation disability whose outcome was to confirm of the (self)-alleged personal inadequacy to university studies. Acting as Group Investigation (Sharan, 1994), peer-to-peer work helped students improve learning techniques, schedule learning and develop personalized learning methods.

Diagnosis was carried out on single courses and on other institutional management levels involved (departments and university). The comparison among several curricula, syllabuses and professors, provided an opportunity to develop a wider perspective of observation, thus going beyond students' self-centered perspective which sometimes leads them to a fatalistic interpretation of their own course of study. The group became an opportunity to share needs, desires and expectations with a double educational and training function: it increases knowledge and develops skills (Mandalà, 2006). Participants reinforced the power of control on their own *change* process and they learned what to study and how to study it. This action had, thus, an *enabling* function (Nussbaum, 2011; Boni & Gasper, 2012) and it tried to promote the potential of each single student.

Time control, Strategic action and responsible attitude

Peer-to-peer study required irregular students to adopt a constructive and responsible attitude and to comply with time-frames and schedules agreed upon with other participants[10]. Not all participants were able to respect rules and some students displayed unstable participation.

However, the work carried out in study groups fostered students' awareness that they could design their learning patterns and control learning levels and – as a consequence – their academic results. In this framework even the 'planning of their daily activities' was an important step[11] and it should

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[10] Studies on cooperative learning and peer education highlight that these approaches are able to promote a recovery of the ethical dimension of education (participation, responsibility, sharing and care for the others) (Chiari, 2011).

[11] The relationship of young people and time should be interpreted as a consequence of living in a fast-pace society (Rosa & Scheurman, 2009), where the present is all that is around (Harvey, 1990). The branch of research focusing on the effects that the passage from adolescence to adult life and the fragmentation of experiences have on young people (Cavalli, 1985; Cavalli & Galland, 1996; Cesareo, 2005; Merico, 2004; Leccardi, 2014, 2017) is useful in the interpretation of the condition of irregular students. By having recourse to the title of a book by Gallino (2014) students who attended peer groups initiatives initially joined as 'postponed entities'.

be considered as the adoption of an action strategy aiming at compliance with the planned schedule. It is a change that might have greater impact on the way students perceive education and on the re-design of their professional and biographical path (Besozzi, 2009). For some students, positive changes in exam results have triggered deeper changes which have affected their way of experiencing life within a university context. Exercise in study groups made students more aware of the needs for individual commitment and the possibility to reach good results through their commitment and the implementation of proactive roles, which – in turn – strengthened their self-esteem.

On one side, students acquired awareness of the importance of their commitment and, on the other, they became autonomous in learning. At least this is what emerged from the experiences of those irregular students who completed their course of study, sat for the final exam and enrolled in a second-level degree course.

Conclusive remarks

Actually, there are several, different reasons behind graduation after completion time. For decades researchers have agreed that the factors that have an impact on dropout and failure in training are not always a consequence exclusively ascribable to students (Tinto, 1975; Yorke & Longden, 2004). It is, rather, the result of several circumstances such as social and economic factors, family background, ethnicity, educational deficit when accessing university, poor learning in progress, wrong choice of studies and the psychological attitude of students. All these factors represent the multi-faceted dimension of the problem, thus calling for interventions through the development of strategies and the involvement of policy makers at different levels (degree course councils, departments, universities and the ministry of education).

Results of the experience have highlighted two positive results. First of all, questionnaires and focus groups allowed us to draw an up-to-date map of the profiles of irregular students and of the causes of their delay, thus challenging some stereotypes of the phenomenon common also among the professors at the DISPeS department. Students re-process their status of irregular students like a long wave, nurtured by students' lack of motivation, disadvantages perceived in terms of skills and competencies and by different needs that emerged over time, that highlight university drop-out and discontinuation of education. Exogenous causes of the delay are only marginally indicated in their stories. Research instead clearly pointed out, the some flaws of the system, such as the weakness of preventive strategies (in the first year) and the marked gap between students and institutions, the univer-

sity failure to update the contacts of enrolled students and the impossibility for them to establish immediate and effective communication with irregular students.

Secondly, the action, i.e. the adoption of peer tutoring strategies to organize small study groups, allowed the bottom down involvement of hundreds of irregular students. As we have already pointed out, not all of the students paricipated in the intervention as expected, but for many of them, interaction with colleagues and peer tutors allowed students to focus on some soft skills. In detail: out of less than 100 students participating in the groups, 65 of them regularly attended. They all sat for at least an exam in the two sessions overlapping with the action period. Six of them came closer to graduation, completing their exams and starting their work on the degree thesis. Two of them got their degree in the subsequent year and started a master degree course.

The time spent in groups was not so much useful to study single disciplines (although this aspect emerged as well), it was rather enough to stimulate students. Students were able to recover and develop relational abilities (story telling, sharing and listening); to analyze their course of study or their personal features and attitudes, on one side, and the educational system (school, university, teachers and professors) on the other; sustain their involvement, schedule a course of study and re-organize their personal learning method through new learning techniques and – above all to reach their goal (graduation) through their own commitment.

Peer tutoring was an effective approach which, however this should become an ordinary practice in university teaching. *Fuoricorsismo*, in fact, is one of the main criticalities of university education in Italy and at the DIS-PeS department.

Identifying the factors that cause the phenomenon is essential in order to plan and implement support to students' careers. Preventing measure at a local level may contribute to remedy some critical aspects and to organize workshops for specific interventions and good practices. However, methodologies need to be acknowledged and integrated within the framework of coherent educational policies.

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