

Supporting 'vulnerable' Students to Complete Their Studies During the Economic Crisis in Greece: The Umbrella Program of International Hellenic University

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Abstract : During the last decade, Greece has faced an unprecedented financial crisis, affecting various aspects and functionalities of Higher Education. Besides the restricted funding of academic institutions, the students and their families encountered economical difficulties that undoubtedly influenced the effective completion of their studies. In this context, a fairly large number of students in Alexander campus of International Hellenic University (IHU) delay, interrupt, or even abandon their studies, especially when they come from low-income families, belong to sensitive social or special needs groups, they have different cultural origins, etc. For this reason, a European project, named "Umbrella", was initiated aiming at providing the necessary psychological support and counseling, especially to disadvantaged students, towards the completion of their studies. To this end, a network of various academic members (academic staff and students) from IHU, namely iMentor, were implicated in different roles. Specifically, experienced academic staff trained students to serve as intermediate links for the integration and educational support of students that fall into the aforementioned sensitive social groups and face problems for the completion of their studies. The main idea of the project is held upon its person-centered character, which facilitates direct student-to-student communication without the intervention of the teaching staff. The backbone of the iMentors network are senior students that face no problem in their academic life and volunteered for this project. It should be noted that there is a provision from the Umbrella structure for substantial and ethical rewards for their engagement. In this context, a well-defined, stringent methodology was implemented for the evaluation of the extent of the problem in IHU and the detection of the profile of the "candidate" disadvantaged students. The first phase included two steps, (a) data collection and (b) data cleansing/ preprocessing. The first step involved the data collection process from the Secretary Services of all Schools in IHU, from 1980 to 2019, which resulted in 96.418 records. The data set included the School name, the semester of studies, a student enrolling criteria, the nationality, the graduation year or the current, up-to-date academic state (still studying, delayed, dropped off, etc.). The second step of the employed methodology involved the data cleansing/preprocessing because of the existence of "noisy" data, missing and erroneous values, etc. Furthermore, several assumptions and grouping actions were imposed to achieve data homogeneity and an easy-to-interpret subsequent statistical analysis. Specifically, the duration of 40 years recording was limited to the last 15 years (2004-2019). In 2004 the Greek Technological Institutions were evolved into Higher Education Universities, leading into a stable and unified frame of graduate studies. In addition, the data concerning active students were excluded from the analysis since the initial processing effort was focused on the detection of factors/variables that differentiated graduate and deleted students. The final working dataset included 21.432 records with only two categories of students, those that have a degree and those who abandoned their studies. Findings of the first phase are presented across faculties and further discussed.

Keywords : higher education, students support, economic crisis, mentoring

Conference Title : ICISS 2021 : International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : January 25-26, 2021