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Knowing our Students - Different Approaches to Student Retention

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The issue of retention in institutions of higher education may be viewed from a wide variety of perspectives. Also the information needs and actions taking place vary among different stakeholders. Generally, we can divide different actors into three major strands, which represent the different approaches and perspectives. Societal macro level represents the educational system and global alliances approach focusing on ideology, social context and policy-making. Meso level represents the organisational and institutional conditions: plans, policies and everyday management. Micro level deals with cognitive and emotional aspects of learning and teaching including individual's learning history, learning styles, etc. taking place in classrooms and peer interactions.

In this paper we provide three different perspectives towards information and actions based on the work done in the ATTRACT project working group "Student Retention". ATTRACT (Enhance the Attractiveness of Studies in Science and Technology) is a European Commission supported project aiming to increase knowledge and inform practice about student recruitment and retention in engineering and technology education. The project compares situations in partner countries and broadens national discussion on European level.

As Becher [1] has demonstrated, comparative studies in higher education tend to focus on macro-level contrasts between the structures of one system and another. In the ATTRACT project, however, we wanted to explore deeper the different practices carried out by the participating universities. In the last year of the project several trials took place and provided different approaches to information and actions:

- Footprint
- Working with questionnaires
- Interaction, academic integration and tutoring

The first trial aimed to test and evaluate a method of visualising and monitoring student retention in a so-called footprint in selected fields of programs. This trial typically represents the organisational and societal level of information gathering and visualisation.

The purpose of the second trial was to benchmark practices in gathering information from large groups of students on their perceptions of studies, orientation, study choices and academic integration. This trial focused on serving the meso level, but also provided background information for actions on the micro level.

Finally, the third trial focused on the issue of interaction between students and staff with special emphasis on the interaction supporting academic integration of students and student progression, and the early identification of students at risk. The third trial, thus, focused on the institutional factors of educational persistence, but on micro level. Within this trial, good practices in different universities were collected. ■

REFERENCE

- [1] Becher, T (1994), The Significance of Disciplinary Differences, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1994, pp. 151–161