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**Linking research to support practices to improve first-year transition and experience:
the importance of evaluating our support initiatives**
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Pre-Workshop - 26-05-2025
European First-Year Experience – Leuven

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Take-home message

- If one proposes first-year support activities or initiatives, it is of the main importance of **integrating research** both to choose, plan, deliver and assess our initiatives and the relevance of the chosen approaches, in an evolving environment and student population.
- Therefore, it is important to **share materials** that help to empower support actors (student counsellors, educational developers and teaching staff) and first-year students.
- It also helps to anticipate the future and the needs of the students.



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Structure of the workshop

1. Discussion from selected samples of research results with first-year students, and what does it tell us about the **expectations and needs of students?**
2. Discussion and exchanges to describe and question the kind of **support activities and practices**, the participants are familiar with
3. Sharing of practices that help to document and assess our support activities, in relation with students' needs and expectations



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As support professionals, it is important to prepare the first-year students as well as possible for the transition to university studies, but also for their future.

- How the data collected from students and support staff can inform our decision, about the relevance of our activities and programmes?
- Why and how those data will help us questioning and documenting our practices?

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My own experience in the field of First-Year Experience

As a University teacher

- In charge of coordinating the support activities within the Bachelor of psychology (from 500 to 800 students, in the first-year), from the mid-nineties
- Coordinating educational reform to integrate the activities within the Bachelor program (10 years ago)

As a Researcher

- Research on the transition to higher education and on the support activities
- Coordinator of the "Chaire de pédagogie universitaire", since 20 years

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1. Expectations and needs from students: what the research tells us?

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A synthesis of empirical research done in UCLouvain, on the transition to higher education

CPU Chaire UNESCO
de Pédagogie
Universitaire



Six main issues:

- The determinants of academic success and persistence,
- The theoretical models of the transition to higher education,
- The temporal and dynamic unfolding of this transition,
- The different forms of student diversity,
- The role of the institutional and pedagogical context on the transition to higher education
- The support practices in use for students on the journey to success.

De Clercq, M., Roland, N., Dangoisse, F. & Frenay, M. (2023). *La transition vers l'enseignement supérieur : comprendre pour mieux agir sur l'adaptation des étudiants en 1^{ère} année*. Peter Lang

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1. Expectations and needs from students: what the research tells us?

In terms of research, the last **decades of research** have seen a shift

- from the study of dropping out and failure to that of perseverance and success;
- from explanations based on isolated factors to integrated models;

There has been also evolution on the effects measured and the methods: mixed research, quantitative and qualitative, to triangulate the sources of data.

=> Success-supporting activities have gradually come to be understood in terms of their contribution to the student transition experience, so that they should be described and evaluated.

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Recent data collection on students' FYE

- QR with students enrolled in Summer courses, before the start of the academic year (August 2024)
- Longitudinal study, from August 2023 to February 2024 : focus groups
 - In August, students enrolled in Summer/preparatory courses
 - At the end of October (6 weeks after the start of the academic year) – same students + students not enrolled in summer courses
 - In February (start of the 2nd semester, after the examination period)
- Analysis of main strengths and difficulties at those 3 periods
- Evolution of motivation (curves), from September till February

The QR data were collected by Martin Rouard and analysed by Emilie Jacobs
The longitudinal study was conducted by Bénédicte Chevalier, in her Master thesis - with the help of Eloïse Jérôme, for the focus groups of August.

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Students' expectations of the preparatory courses, in August – N=364

I hope that the preparatory courses will enable me to....	Descriptive Data			
	min	max	M	ET
Facilitate the change of <u>environment</u> that comes with going to university	1	5	4,29	0,764
Develop <u>knowledge</u>	1	5	4,25	0,747
Become <u>integrated</u> into the university	1	5	4,20	0,720
Meet new people	1	5	4,16	0,918
Develop my working methods	1	5	4,13	0,860
Confirm my choice of study	1	5	3,98	0,985
Help me gain independence	1	5	3,91	0,989
Exploring new perspectives	1	5	3,82	0,937
Develop my critical thinking skills	1	5	3,68	0,964
Make the link between study content and career prospects	1	5	3,56	1,005

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Benefits perceived by students at the end of the summer courses

After attending the summer courses, students indicate that they want to continue their studies with a 98% probability.

The preparatory courses have enabled me to ...	Descriptive data			
	min	max	M	ET
Facilitate the change of <u>environment</u> that comes with going to university	3	5	4,22	0,670
Confirm my <u>choice of study</u>	2	5	4,13	0,815
Develop <u>knowledge</u>	3	5	4,11	0,647
Meet new people	1	5	4,09	0,996
Become <u>integrated</u> into the university	2	5	4,00	0,707
Help me gain independence	2	5	3,98	0,753
Exploring new perspectives	2	5	3,73	0,837
Develop my critical thinking skills	2	5	3,60	0,863
Make the link between study content and career prospects	1	5	3,38	0,960
Develop my working methods	1	5	3,38	1,029

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Focus Group - August



L Why did you choose these studies?



What difficulties do you foresee?

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Focus Group - August



L What kind of mindset do you think it takes to succeed at university? Does it suit you?

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Before the start of the academic year...

- According to the students, **studying, working and learning** seem to be the life at university.
- When asked what would help them to adapt to university, the students' **studying methods and organization** are highlighted.
- With regard to the possible difficulties they foresee :
 - firstly, the changes to be made in terms of **logistics**;
 - secondly, more personal dimensions such as the **fear of failing or doubting one's direction**;
 - and finally, the need to consider **social life**.



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Focus Group - October



How do you feel about ...
your studies?
your commitment to your studies?



Can you choose an image that illustrates something you
have found difficult since you started university?

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[illegible]

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Extracts from the focus group of October

« After the start of the university year, I had a **big shock** because I was changing my life a bit. And it was complicated for me to be away from the things I knew about my friends and family »

« For the first three weeks, I felt an immense and inexplicable fatigue, but I think it was due to **not knowing how to organize myself** nor... due to all the stress, et cetera »

« I was euphoric. I made **friends** straight away. The roommates were super nice. »

« I found myself **hesitating again about the choices** I'd made, because I'd hesitated a lot before. »

« I have **so many fears** that sometimes I put on the brakes. Instead of persevering and moving forward, I put on the brakes and tend to stop. [...] I stop, I don't run away. Like I'm [...] like **paralyzed**. »

« I know that my **parents** have expectations of me because they pay for my room, they pay for my studies, so it stresses me out a bit to think that if I don't succeed, they **might be disappointed** in me. »

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Key elements from the focus group of October

Opinions are unanimous on the pleasure students derive from **meeting new people** and forging links from their very first days at university.

While some students feel a great **sense of fulfillment** in their new life, others report the **shock** of entering the world of higher education and the separation from their loved ones.

Despite the lucid words spoken in August about the need to be committed and up to date with courses, we can see that the reality is quite different as exams gently approach: **difficulties in getting down to work and understanding what is expected** are also present.

There is also testimony to the reparative effect that studying can have on self-esteem.

Last but not least, a number of students express **doubts about their career choices**.



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In February, after the first semester ...

In February, we explored the contrast between

- what they told in October (first weeks of the transition) and
- the actual experience of the all semester, including first university assessments (examination session).



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Focus Group - February



L Have you experienced an event that marked a break or a change in your determination to go on with your studies or not?



Choose from the cards the assets that have enabled you to face up to the difficulties so far

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In February, after the first semester ...

- In February, the most striking experience is that of the « blocus » and the exam session, and the many challenges this period invites:
 - the need to discipline oneself to get down to work,
 - bounce back from stressful episodes,
 - solve problems or
 - deal with low self-esteem.

The clear variations seen on the graphs indicate the rollercoaster ride the students have been through, and the extent to which it has impacted on their motivation.



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Mon niveau de motivation au premier quadri

Y-axis: 0, 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, 0.6, 0.7, 0.8, 0.9, 1

X-axis labels (from left to right):

- 1re année - rentrée
- 2e année - rentrée
- 3e année - rentrée
- 4e année - rentrée
- 5e année - rentrée
- 6e année - rentrée
- 7e année - rentrée
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- 100e année - rentrée

Phases:

- Découverte
- Examen 3e po
- Rentrée en 4e année

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[illegible]

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In February, after the first semester ...

- When students are asked what has kept them going, many tell us that they are in a course of study that they love and want to succeed.
- Others, who were already doubting their direction at the start of the year, experienced even more intense episodes of questioning and second-guessing during the study period.
- We also noted that some students were more or less able to identify what enabled them to get through their « *blocus* », while others attributed their failures to simple causes such as lack of study or difficulty in finding a good working method.
- The feeling of integration with others is present and clearly plays a role in the students' well-being.

In February, after the first semester ...

- An analysis of the results of our study reveals that emotions are of paramount importance. The emotional dimension is transversal in our study.
- The **need to manage emotions** is not one of the obstacles feared in August, whereas it proves to be the main challenge during the academic year.
- The intensity of feelings is conveyed through an extensive vocabulary: anxiety, the feeling of being miserable, alone, isolated, living through an ordeal, a shock, under pressure, horrible, euphoria, being fulfilled, etc.

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Faculté des sciences de l'éducation

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**Motivation curves, from
September to February**





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2. Support activities and practices: what are your experiences?





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Support activities and practices: what are your experiences?

Some guiding questions to exchange:

- What are the objectives of the support activities?
- How do you support the students for their transition to university?
- Who are the target groups of students?
- How do you choose and plan your activities?
- How do you know that you reach what you expect?



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Support activities and practices: how to describe and document?

- An example of a template we used for describing the support activities
- What could be the possible uses?



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A template for describing support activities

The image shows a multi-page template for describing support activities. The pages are numbered 1 through 7. The template includes sections for:

- Nom du dispositif**: Name of the device.
- Fonction(s)**: Function(s).
- Intervenant(s)**: Intervenor(s).
- Mise en œuvre**: Implementation.
- Population cible**: Target population.
- ET APRÈS...**: And after...
- Objectif(s)**: Objective(s).
- Description**: Description.

The form is designed to be filled out by researchers and practitioners, providing a structured way to document support activities.

Dony, M., De Clercq, M., Frenay, M. & Parmentier, P. (2015). *Recherche-action du CEFO: construction d'un outil pour l'évaluation des dispositifs d'aide à la réussite de l'UCL. LLN : Chaire de pédagogie universitaire*

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7 dimensions to describe the support activity

- Which activity?
- By whom?
- For whom (scale and target population)
- Why (functions and purposes)
- When (timing, recurrence, integration into the timetable and integration into the programme)
- How (teaching support, methods, participation and attendance)
- And after... (feedback on proposed activity)

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3. How these activities support the students' experience of transitioning?

- Why to document and assess?
- How to document and assess?



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Assessment of Support activities and practices: what for? How?

- Sharing of your experiences

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Support activities and practices: how to assess?

A range of tools adapted to the objectives being pursued, available to the support advisors

I. Participation and attendance

II. Satisfaction

III. Conceptions, behavioral intentions and representations of success

1. Nature of the personal project: choice of studies; information about careers and related competences
2. Social affiliation: social integration in relation to peers; social integration in relation to the institution and the feeling of institutional belonging
3. Academic integration
4. Support for motivation : Self-efficacy, persistence intention, task value
5. Emotional management: emotional regulation; stress management strategies

IV. « Behaviors » in terms of knowledge, competences and participation

1. Appropriation of content/knowledge
2. Studying methods: Cognitive strategies; Metacognitive strategies, cognitives; Resource management strategies
3. Behavioral engagement
4. Health and life balance

V. Transfer of skills and knowledge

Dony, M., De Clercq, M., Frenay, M. & Parmentier, P. (2015). *Recherche-action du CEFO: construction d'un outil pour l'évaluation des dispositifs d'aide à la réussite de l'UCL LLN* : Chaire de pédagogie universitaire



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Penser son évaluation
Quel est mon objectif d'évaluation ?

La dernière étape pour penser son évaluation est d'en définir les objectifs en se positionnant sur les éléments ci-dessous.

But de l'évaluation

- Les objectifs d'analyse des effets
- Les objectifs d'évaluation du processus

L'objet de l'évaluation

- Eléments sur lesquels on veut recueillir des informations
- Dépend de la visée même du dispositif
- Réleve du niveau d'évaluation

La temporalité de l'évaluation

Prise de mesure de la pratique :

- Avant/ à l'entrée
- Pendant/ juste en fin
- Plusieurs semaines après
- Plusieurs mois après

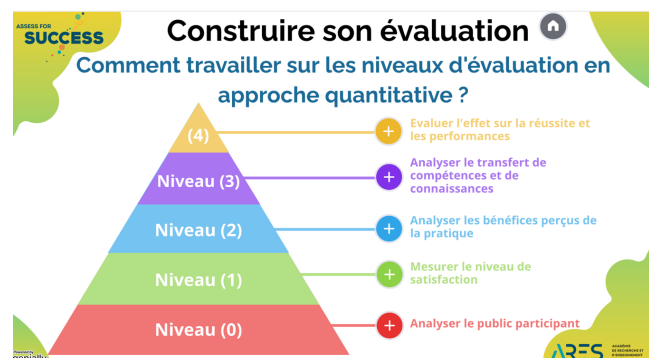
Designing the assessment: What is my objective?

- Aim of the assessment?
- Object of the assessment?
- When to assess?

ACADÉMIE DE RECHERCHE ET D'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR, AssessForSuccess. Faciliter l'évaluation des pratiques d'accompagnement à la réussite. Bruxelles: ARES, mai 2024. WWW.ARES-AC.BE/AAS

Building my assessment: how to work on different levels?

- Level 0: to analyse who is participating?
- Level1: to measure satisfaction
- Level 2: to analyse the perceived benefits
- Level 3: to analyse transfer of skills and knowledge
- Level 4: to assess the effect on achievement and success



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SUPÉRIEUR, *AssessForSuccess*. *Faciliter l'évaluation
des pratiques d'accompagnement à la réussite. Bruxelles:
ARES, mai 2024. WWW.ARES-AC.BE/A4S*



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Take-home message

- If one proposes first-year support activities or initiatives, it is of the main importance of **integrating research** both to choose, plan, deliver and assess our initiatives and the relevance of the chosen approaches, in an evolving environment and student population.
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