



THE BENEFITS OF THE USE OF INDUCTION VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN SUPPORTING NEW STUDENTS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION UNIVERSITIES

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Summary

The present paper aims to show evidence about the benefits of the use of induction virtual communities to support new students' integration and adaptation to a distance education university.

The Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED) offers a whole induction program to its new students, which covers three different phases. The second phase is mainly focused in the training of those competences that are required to be a higher distance education student. These goals are developed through several actions: Open Educational Resources and courses, face-to-face programmes and the so-called Induction Virtual Communities (Plan de Acogida Virtual, PAV).

This last action is very relevant, taking into account that the UNED is the largest university in Spain with more than 60.000 new students each year.

Each Faculty and Engineering School has its own community, summing up a total of 15. New students are registered in their own community. In the communities, students are guided towards the acquisition of knowledge and skills about the university, distance education methodology and self-regulated learning development. This is accomplished through the delivering of specific material in different formats, proposal of activities and the use of forums in order to guide their first steps at the university. Also, students are asked to give response to several questionnaires in order to analyze the perception of their own evolution through the first semester and their opinions about the usefulness of the community.

Main findings of the results obtained through the first three years of experience are presented

1. Introduction

The Spanish National Distance Education University (UNED) is a mega university with the largest number of students in the country (200.000 students registered in the current 2008-

2009 academic year). On the one hand, this is a clear evidence of the great acceptance that society provides to its academic offer; however, on the other hand, we cannot ignore its moderate number of graduates and high dropout rates, as well, especially in the first year of registration at the university.

As a quality indicator, The *Spanish National Agency of Quality* (ANECA) requires that all universities develop specific measures to help new students to be integrated at the university. In this sense, UNED has developed an ambitious Induction Plan which includes face-to-face and online actions for future and new students during their first year at the university. This plan is integrated by three main phases: 1) information and guidance to be provided to prospective and new students, 2) specific programs to train new students to become distance education learners; and 3) monitoring and guidance for those students with higher orientation needs and more academic difficulties (Sanchez-Elvira and Santamaría, 2007).

A main action of this plan is our Virtual Induction Communities. As soon as new students are enrolled in the university and the academic course begins, they are incorporated to the specific Induction Virtual Community they belong to (there is one for each of the 9 faculties and 2 Engineering Schools of the University). These e-communities constitute what has been nominated the *Virtual Induction Plan* (*Plan de Acogida Virtual*, PAV).

The objectives and functionalities of these e-communities have been specially designed to provide initial support for a good integration in the university and its methodology, and to generate a strong Faculty identity that could go beyond the links with the 61 UNED territorial centers around the country and the 15 centers abroad where students locally belong.

This paper presents the main features and uses of these communities, as well as some statistic data about UNED new students' characteristics and perceptions about their first year. These data are very relevant for the development of orientation measures.

2. Main body

In the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA), autonomous and self regulated learning are meant to be very relevant student characteristics to be promoted. UNED general Induction Plan and our e-induction communities have been developed under this main theoretical framework and proposals.

Our main objective is, thus, to aid new students to develop those competences that are necessary to become successful distance education learners in higher education. According to the models of self-regulated learning, this feature characterizes those individuals who are actively metacognitive, motivational and behavioral involved with their own learning process (Zimmerman, 1989, 2002). The use of appropriate self-regulated learning strategies is significantly associated with better academic results, while the opposite occurs in students with low self-regulated ones (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1998, Sánchez-Elvira, 2005, Sánchez-Elvira, Fernandez and Amor, 2005). These data are also consistent with what PISA reports indicate about the importance of self-regulation as a key variable in student learning in general and as a framework for learning throughout life (OECD report, 2001, 2004).

In the academic course 2002-2003, a longitudinal research was initiated at the *University Institute of Distance Education* (IUED) of the UNED, with the participation of over 50,000 students. This research shows that students can be classified in two very clear and consistent profiles corresponding to those who present efficient strategies for self-regulated learning and those characterized by poor ones (Sánchez-Elvira, Fernández and Amor, 2005).

Efficient strategies are the following ones: 1) Organization of information; b) Persistence; c) Surface Processing; d) Deep Processing; and e) Fixed Patterns of Study habits. On the other hand, inadequate or inefficient strategies are those that follows: 1) Anxiety (both while studying and performing exams); b) Difficulties with time management; c) Avoidance of difficulties / procrastination; and d) Surface Processing.

Taking into account these results, the IUED has proposed a map of generic competences for all the UNED new EHEA grades and masters, in which autonomous and self-regulated work is one of the four main key competency domains of the university (Sánchez-Elvira, 2008). In this sense, the university is firmly compromised with the development of this broad competency domain that should be promoted since the very beginning through the Induction Plan (Sanchez-Elvira y Santamaría, 2007). Self-regulation implies a set of worthwhile strategies for learning throughout life and being involved in the construction of the Knowledge Society. It involves a set of processes, organized in cycles consisting of phases of planning, implementation and evaluation, allowing conscious improvements and innovation actions (see Zimmerman and Schunk, 2001 for an extensive review of models of self-regulated learning).

In this context, E-induction Communities have been designed to promote autonomous and self-regulated learning; they are not courses, since more formal training programs for new students are delivered through other institutional actions. Its main objectives are, on the one hand, to help new students to achieve the best adaptation and integration in the university, becoming familiar with its particular methodology and the uses of UNED resources, as well as acquiring knowledge and skills that are necessary for the initial development of self-regulated learning. Also, students can create a strong group identity as members of the same Faculty.

In sum, the key objectives of our E- Induction Communities are the following ones:

- To provide general information about the university and its methodology.
- To provide specific information and guidance about the Faculty.
- To orientate towards the development of core competencies for distance education.
- To propose activities mainly directed to the development of self-regulated learning.
- To address specific concerns of new students of the same Faculty by detecting those issues remaining unclear in UNED documents or in the web and giving response to them through *forums*.
- To obtain relevant information about our students, trough on-line questionnaires, in order to develop better orientation and guidance measures.
- To promote the establishment of study groups.

To achieve these main goals, materials are delivered trough different formats (.pdf, avi, mp3, etc.); also, different activities are proposed, as well as interactive forums. Virtual Induction Communities are organized in five successive phases or content modules (presentation, knowing UNED, planning activities, using learning strategies and preparing exams) to help students with the different phases they have to go through.

Virtual Induction communities were opened at 2006-2007, although that first year it was only a first pilot project within two Faculties. At present it has been fully developed.

In the present academic course, 2008-2009, virtual induction communities are available for nearly 70,000 new students. The percentage of students that make use of these communities has remarkable increased compared with the past course.

By the end of the first semester, the mean percentage of use of the communities between students of pre-graduated courses was about the 39% of students, although with large differences between faculties and engineering schools. As can be appreciated in Figure 1, the percentage of students of the Faculty of Sciences and the Industrial Engineering School that had visited their communities is over the 50%, which is a high percentage compared with the small percentage of students of the Law Faculty that had visited their own one (about a 20%).

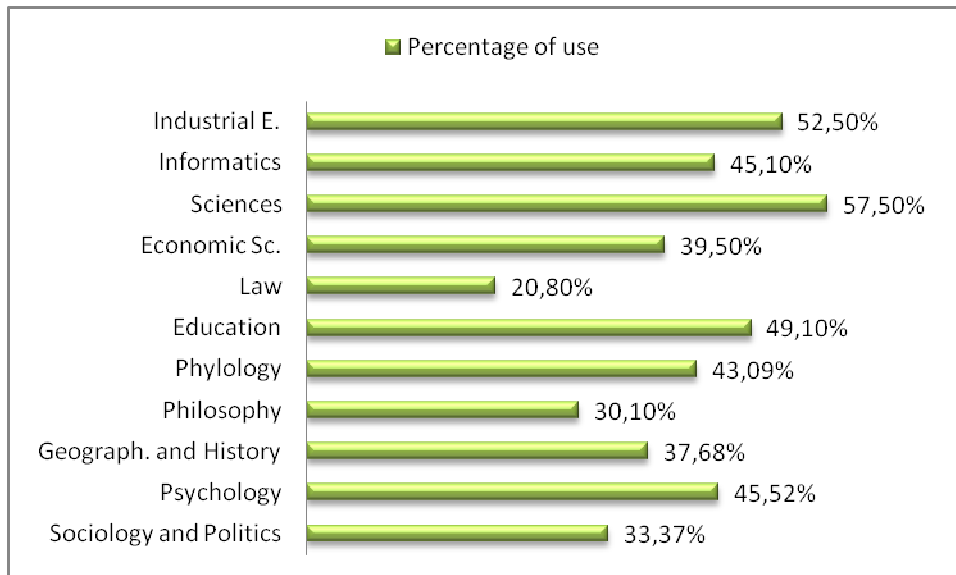


Figure 1: Percentage of students that use the Virtual Induction Communities

However, these percentages of use can increase if we take into account that during the past academic year, although the majority of students entered for the first time in November, there were a small number of students that visited the community for the first time by May or June, just before or after the final exams, probably looking for the last orientations.

Virtual Induction communities can also served as an interesting field of research about new students' characteristics, perceptions, necessities, opinions, etc. In this sense, four different questionnaires are successively administered in order to get further information about students' experiences during their first year in the university:

1. *Am I ready for distance education?* This questionnaire asks about students' perceptions about their own ICT skills, autonomy, self-regulation and teamwork competencies or prior motivation, at the beginning of the academic course.
2. *Am I prepared for the exams?* This survey is administered days before the examinations, and relates to sociodemographic characteristics, distribution of duties and time per week, number of subjects in which they are enrolled, main reasons for studying, perception of exams preparedness, perception of interfering variables with studies, frequent moods, uses of learning strategies and UNED resources, major difficulties encountered and general attitudes concerning studying.
3. The third period in which students answer a questionnaire is after their first exams. At that time, primarily, students rate their mood and causal attributions of their marks, distinguishing between positive and negatives outcomes attributions.

- Finally, students rate their experience in their Virtual Induction Community through several different indicators such as familiarity with the use of internet, starting date in the community, uses of the community, utility of the modules, attention of the tutor, help received from peers, overall rating or comments and suggestions.

Together with the statistic data about the uses of Virtual Induction Communities along the academic year, all these questionnaires yield very interesting results and information. However, it has to be said that, being voluntary, not many students completed the questionnaires. Due to space limitations, in this presentation we will only comment some of these results, referred to the past academic year, 2007-2008.

First, we will refer to the **general use of the e-Induction Communities**.

- In general, it was clear that students entered at the communities for the first time just at the very beginning, when communities were opened; however, as we said before, there were students that still entered for the first time by the end of the course (figure 2).

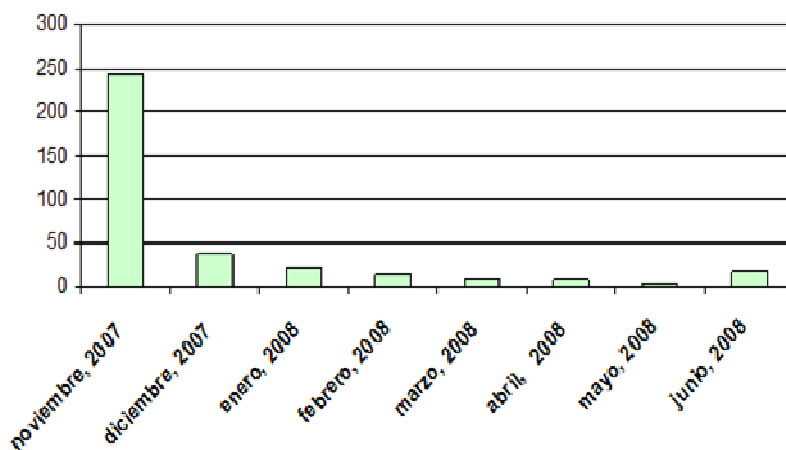


Figure 2: Date of the first visit at the Virtual Induction Community

- In general, students globally assessed the community very positively (under a 10-point Likhert Scake) with a mean overall score of 8, as can be appreciated in figure 3

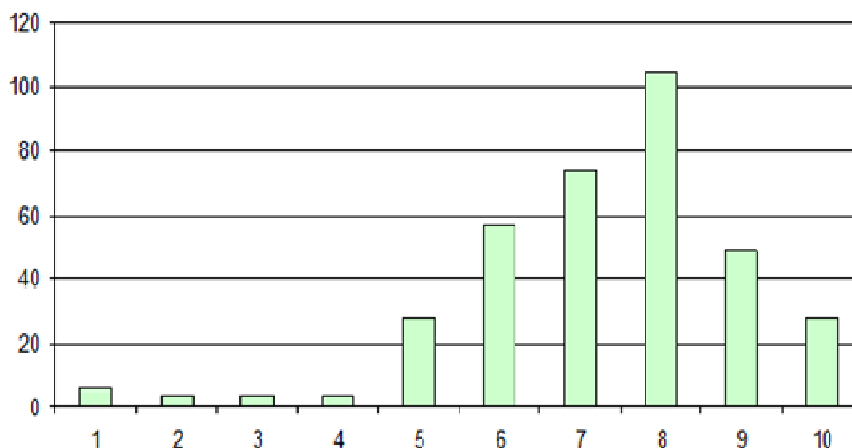


Figure 3: Students' global valuation of the Virtual Induction Communities

3. Perception of both, tutor and peer support, in the community, were considerable high among students, specially concerning the latest one, showing that this is a relevant source of help and social support for students (figures 4 and 5).

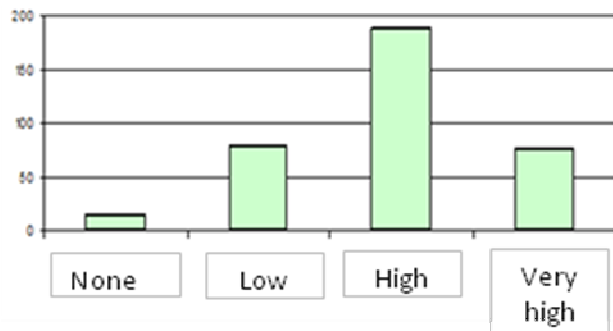


Figure 6: Perception of tutor support

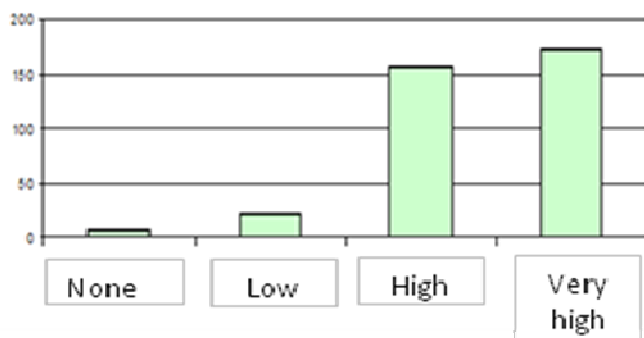


Figure 5: Perception of peers' support

Students were asked to rate the Virtual Induction Communities in terms of positive vs. negative characteristics in a bipolar 7-point likhert scale. Results showed communities are appreciated as an interesting and motivating source of information and resources (Figure 6), although rates are moderate and can be

improved.

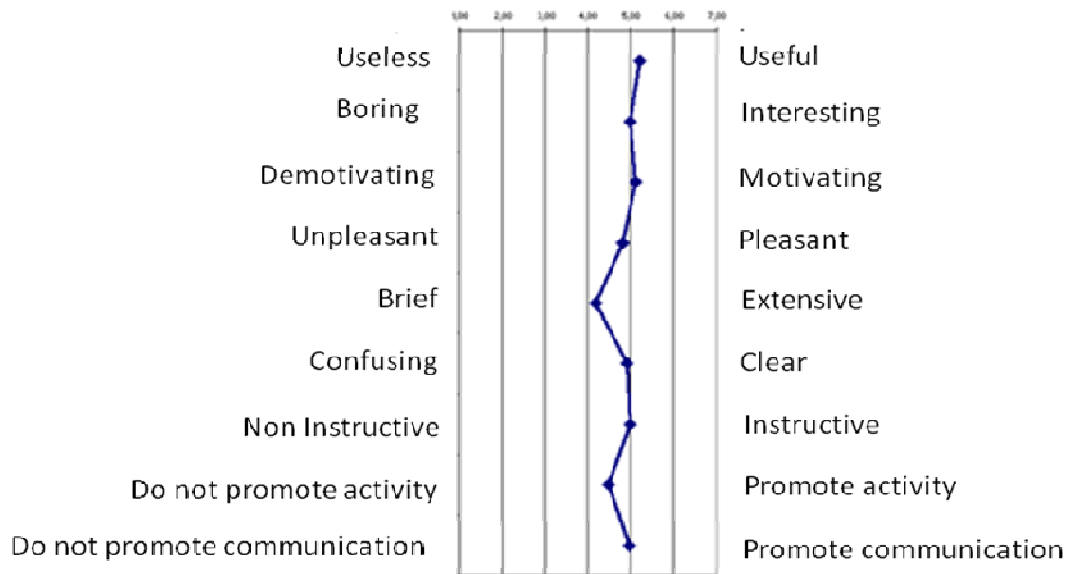
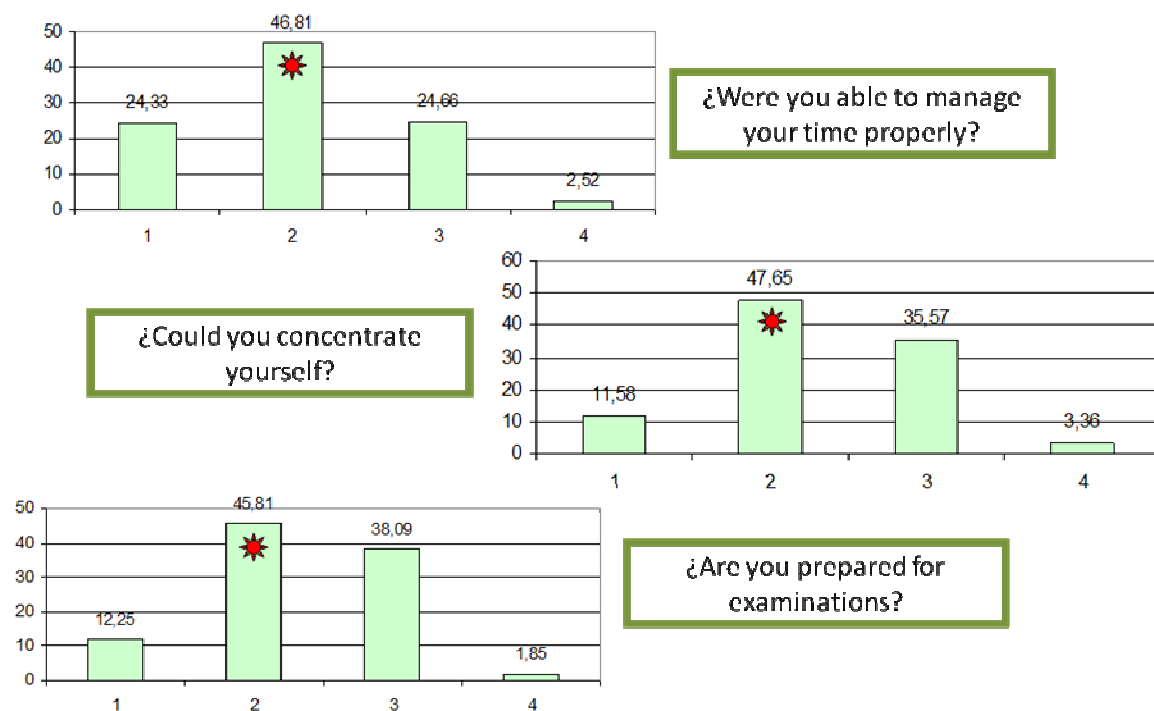


Figure 6: Students' valuation of Virtual Induction Communities characteristics

Finally, among all the relevant information we could register, we want to stress some of the **difficulties that our students informed**, that should be taken into account in order to develop more specific measures of help and orientation, specially for students with higher levels of difficulties (Figure 7). At least, more than the 50% of students that completed this questionnaire had found difficulties to manage their time, to concentrate and, finally, they reported they did not feel prepared for examinations.



Conclusions

The use of new technologies is helping to address new challenges directed to deliver strategic support to students, especially distance education students. Where once students of open and distance education universities had special difficulties in obtaining information and support from their institutions and a greater perception of solitude, as well, at present, thanks to the facilities that the Internet provides, they can receive help almost immediately from their institutions and teachers since the very beginning of enrolling in the University. Moreover, they can be trained to be successful distance education students.

In this vein, this paper shows how an Open and Distance Education University (such as UNED) addresses the welcome and preparation of its students through Virtual Induction Communities. Each Faculty and Engineering School welcomes, informs, guides and orientates students during their first year of studies, through the delivering of specific on-line materials, activities and tutorial support at its specific e-induction community.

The main objective is to provide students with the best knowledge of the university, its methodology and resources, and to offer them the opportunity to train self-regulated learning skills for learning at distance, at an on-line community in which they can also receive support from their tutor and peers.

The success of this action is undeniable and the university will continue its research to improve these measures directed to support new students, in order to prevent desertion and failure and to promote students' success and goals attainment.

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