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**EMERGING ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IMPROVING STUDENT'S TRANSITION INTO ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES**

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**Abstract**

The stage of emerging adulthood reflects the levels of independence exhibited by young people and the action of personal development and “finding oneself”. The purpose of this study is to explore the following questions: a. What is the profile of the emerging adult, in terms of age and individual characteristics? b. What is the support provided by universities to ensure the participation of young adults in studies? Starting from these questions we aim at discussing the role of higher education institutions in facilitating the transition of future adults towards higher education, by considering the following assumptions: a. a good knowledge of age-related particularities represents a condition for the successful individualization of educational paths, whereas the interaction with the group of peers and the inclusion of young adults in learning communities are mandatory during this stage of identity exploration; b. the beginning stages in education require systematic support from universities, which should incorporate a pedagogy of transition aimed at facilitating the participation to studies of emerging adults. Activities such as: first year seminars, community-based learning and intensive course in writing are meant to ensure efficient ways to internalize social and educational expectations and provide full integration into the college environment.

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## **1. Introduction**

One of the central topics of contemporary educational systems is represented by the way in which an individual can evolve according to the interests defining him/her. In higher education, learning interests can be identified, first of all, in terms of students' option for a certain academic specialization, the attendance of which contributes to the translation of one's own learning needs into action. Aspects such as students' access and participation in education are topics of high interest, frequently approached in the contemporary higher education environment (Harper et al., 2009; McPherson et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In recent decades, as the participation of young adults in higher education has gradually increased, it has become increasingly necessary to develop formalized services, centred on the student's personal development in a university context. Inspired by contemporary theoretical contributions, the departments responsible for organizing student activities within higher education institutions often retort to adult learning and development theories, in order to consolidate the services they design and implement for emerging adults. The study aims at identifying the challenges faced by higher education institutions in their effort to encourage the participation in the learning process of students aged between 18 and 25 years, the prevalent age segment in universities, in the light of recent theoretical contributions that analyse the profile of emerging adults and also of those that prioritize the individual particularities that condition the participation to studies.

## **2. Research methods**

Considering the purpose of the study – discussing the role of higher education institutions in facilitating the transition of future adults towards higher education – our analysis aims at exploring the following questions: a. What is the profile of the emerging adult, in terms of age and individual characteristics? b. What is the support provided by universities to ensure the participation of young adults in studies? The paper starts by identifying the main research issues related to the profile of the emerging adult. The second research idea focuses on the educational practices which increase the participation of emerging adults in higher education. The study reports on a qualitative research, consisting in a thematic analysis of a total of 54 papers from Web of Science (WoS), Scopus and other International Datab Bases (IDB). The selection criteria were established according to the research questions.

## **3. Emerging adulthood. Theoretical background and characteristics**

For the young adult, the choice of an educational pathway represents an act of autonomy at the educational level, regardless of any future option related to the attendance or completion of the studies. In recent years, higher education institutions have made great efforts to adapt their offer so that it meets the various learning needs of young students. In response to the recent demographic and socio-economic changes, it has been noted that young people tend to endlessly postpone the moment when they have to take responsibility for the most important stages of their transition to adulthood: leaving their parents' home, getting a job and starting a family (Furstenberg, 2010; Momanu et al., 2018; Piumatti & Rabaglietti, 2015). Transition towards adulthood thus becomes longer, marked by doubt and more individualized (Iacovou, 2002; Piumatti & Rabaglietti, 2015).

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2016) defines this stage by proposing the concept of *emerging adulthood*, which describes the extended transition from adolescence to adulthood, characteristic for young people living in developed societies. This specific stage covers the age range between adolescence and adulthood proper (18-25 years of age), describing young adults who have the following profile: a. live in economically developed countries; b. postpone the commitment to marital life; c. do not earn their own income which would allow them to make an independent living; d. explore multiple educational and relational opportunities.

The development of this new theoretical paradigm is rooted in the research of a series of pioneers in developmental psychology, such as Stanley Hall (1904), Erik Erikson (1950) or Arthur Chickering (1993). Stanley Hall was the founder of the prestigious American Journal of Psychology and the first chairman of American Psychological Association (Haggbloom et al., 2002), with notable preoccupations and systematic contributions in the field of education psychology. Influenced by his contemporaries, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, Hall investigated the effects of the identity changes occurring in adolescence upon young people's educational options, developing a theory founded on genetic, psychological and physiological determinants, as well as individual experiences that explain anti-social behaviours and frequent conflicts with parents in this stage. In *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erik Erikson, famous for his theory on the psychological evolution of identity and his interest in explaining identity crises specific to young ages, claimed that an individual's development is strongly influenced by the environment in which the individual lives. According to Erikson, the first stage of development in adulthood, namely the *love, intimacy vs. isolation* stage, is marked by one's need to know his/her identity, with a special focus on the relational, family and parental dimensions. Arthur Chickering developed a theory of identity evolution in adolescents and young adults aimed at providing an answer to the question: *What types of learning experiences do young adults have in universities?* Chickering's theory points to the following stages in the evolution of young adults who attend higher education programmes: a. the stage in which intellectual, social and emotional competences develop actively; b. relatively stable emotional relations are built; emotions are acknowledged, accepted and controlled in a responsible manner. c. the transition from autonomy towards independence, by becoming aware of the role of social interactions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993); this is the stage in which the students often get involved in volunteering, in various activities organized by students' associations, as they need to become aware of how their own actions may condition the actions of others d. mature interpersonal relations are developed. In the university context, heterogeneous interactions between students coming from various social and cultural backgrounds, equipped with different experience and learning resources, contribute to the development of their interpersonal and intercultural skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). e. the stabilization of one's identity is correlated with feelings of comfort and security, self-acceptance, stable self-esteem, usually experimented outside one's family. f. a variety of personal goals is asserted.

Based on the relevant theoretical contributions on the topic of adulthood, Jeffrey Arnett (2011) proposes an intermediate stage, situated between adolescence and adulthood proper, namely *emerging adulthood*, characterized by the young individual's preference for the most diverse multiple choices aimed at identifying the priorities for the next stage of life. Arnett identifies a series of characteristics that differentiates *emerging adulthood* from the other age stages: a. *identity exploring*, at the work place and in social relationships (*the age of identity explorations*); b. *experimenting feelings of instability and pessimism* caused by multiple changes of residence and professional options (*the age of instability*). Most young people leave their family environment when they

opt for higher education (Samoilă, 2014; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998). c. *focusing on one's self in view of self-knowledge (the self-focused age)*; Focusing on oneself correlates with the stage in which young people accumulate new knowledge, develop their skills and become aware of their own resources and limitations. The prioritization of the self should not be labelled as an act of selfishness, as it is rather a necessary stage that subsequently allows the adult to opt for the appropriate long-term professional, educational or romantic relationships (Arnett, 2016, p. 11). d. the feeling of being trapped in-between two ages, adolescence and adulthood (*the age of feeling in-between*). More than 90% of the young respondents claim that they do not see themselves as adults, and neither do their parents, even if the question was addressed to people aged over 20. e. the age of multiple possibilities, the age of optimism (*the age of possibilities*). Young adults are animated by feelings of hope and high expectations because some of their plans have already been achieved. In a national study conducted in the United States that targeted young people aged between 18 and 24 years, almost 96% of the respondents agreed to the statement: *I am positive that one day I'll get where I want in life* (Žukauskienė et al., 2020).

Although most young adults who come from developed cultural contexts and cross a stage of transition towards adulthood opt for higher education, they tend to postpone their commitment to the social responsibilities correlated with marriage, getting a stable job or even leaving their family environment.

#### **4. Individualization of educational pathways – a student-centred pedagogy**

Besides the dominant characteristics of this specific stage, within the age segment that makes the object of our analysis (18-24 years of age), there is a certain heterogeneity regarding these paths, as some young people develop and evolve fast, while others make consistent efforts to discover and assert themselves. Research on the topic claims that 30% of the young adults leave their family home in order to attend university, 40% motivated by professional responsibility and 60% in order to experiment co-habitation with a prospective life partner, postponing professional responsibilities (Arnett, 2016; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). Besides the indisputable contribution of the theoretical model proposed by Jeffrey Arnett, more recent research pleads for considering, first and foremost, the individual characteristics that condition young people's evolution towards adulthood.

The literature of the past decade includes a series of notable theoretical contributions that analyse the educational practices which contribute to the individualization of service in order to increase the participation of emerging adults in higher education. There are authors who believe that, in order to secure the pathway followed by these individuals, a new approach is needed which studies the transition towards adulthood and which should consider a psychological perspective centred on the individual and the way in which s/he envisages his/her course of life (Elder, 2008; Salmela-Aro, 2009). According to these theories, individual differences in terms of wellbeing and construction of identity seem to depend both on each individual's characteristics and on the manner in which the individual responds to real-life situations, by managing to capitalize on external resources (family support, peer support) and equally by being influenced by their way of thinking and acting (Nurmi et al., 1995). Such strategies may differ according to a series of psychological components: the ability to anticipate failure or success (Cantor, 1990), avoidance of tasks or involvement in irrelevant behaviour (Martin et al., 2003) and constantly relying on social support (Nurmi et al., 1995; Samoilă, 2018).

On the other hand, when leaving an education institution, even if temporarily, and entering the work market at a young age, the patterns regarding the participation in higher education undergo certain changes (Bowles & Brindle, 2017). Young people want to work and become financially independent and, at the same time to attend higher education in order to have access to better paid jobs. These goals can only be corroborated by rescheduling or making new arrangements which eventually means that they will only be able to complete their higher education at an older age (Tinto, 2017).

Some individuals seem to deliberately avoid challenging situations rather than making consistent efforts to deal with them, especially when they might fail. This type of self-sabotage strategy and postponement of the confrontation is often used as an excuse for the anticipated failure and for reducing the anxiety level (Martin et al., 2003). Other young adults tend, on the contrary, to nourish more optimistic task-centred expectations and strategies (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru et al., 2009) that are correlated with favourable academic achievements and high learning satisfaction. The outcome indicators such as academic achievements and learning satisfaction can be influenced by the emerging adults' response to various academic situations (Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen et al., 2009), and also by their personality traits (Piumatti & Rabaglietti, 2015; Shahar et al., 2006). Awareness with regard to the coordinates of the new educational environment, the available opportunities, and the individual resources of students considerably influences the options for attending higher education. However, the individualization of educational pathways does not represent the sole indicator of participatory behaviour.

## **5. Emerging adults in learning communities, context for the exploration of the self**

An individual's evolution is achieved in the dynamic context of interactions that play a part in the establishment of his/her cognitive and social identity, conditioning the transition from adolescence to adulthood, but also the non-formal and informal determinants involved in the individual's participation in the learning process. Recent studies show that the way students relate to these vectors depends on the characteristics of the university environment, the type of institutional objectives and values, the specifics of the curricula, the educational policies and practices, and particularly on the characteristics of the learning communities (Ortiz & Waterman, 2016). In a study on the analysis of the learning communities' role in upper education, Anne Goodsell (2012) claims that they bring to the fore a series of important components for students' learning. At UCLA, Alexander Astin (1993) studied the role of the environment on learning for more than a decade and the conclusion they reached indicates that there are three determinant factors of learning in this stage: the peer group, the frequency of the interactions with the faculty and the degree of students' active involvement and willingness to invest time and effort in the learning process (Astin, 1993; Gilbert & Heller, 2013).

Literature on the topic of *learning community* originates from the 1920's, with the notable contributions of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn (Goodsell, 2012; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 1998). The two authors are the founders of the first experimental schools (John Dewey founded a primary school and Meiklejohn an experimental high-school) where they applied theories of social learning in the relation with the beneficiaries of the educational act. Both authors incorporated active learning in the curriculum, believing that the interaction between students, between students and teachers, as well as the interaction established within the community as a whole are essential for placing education in a democratic context (Tinto, 1998). The semantic sphere of the

learning community concept has gradually diversified, once the policies that encouraged greater access of the population to higher education started to gain popularity.

More recent research suggests that an important attribute of learning communities is the manner in which groups share the same goals and attitudes in learning, through interaction and collaboration, investing effort in order to achieve goals (Hugo, 2002). Belonging to a community, being able to influence and be influenced, exchanging educational practices and the emotional connection of participants are attributes of learning communities that can either encourage participation in learning or, on the contrary, lead to failure (Dodge & Kendall, 2010; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). However, the role of learning communities extends beyond the idea of encouraging a student to participate in a class or a topic of study, as they seem to bring considerable change in the way students learn and experiment the proposed curriculum socially and cognitively. Furthermore, teamwork and collaboration are mandatory conditions for improving participation and critical thinking, helping the student establish connections between the newly acquired knowledge and previous information (Biggs 1999). Such activities require organization, facilitation and support (Biggs & Tang 2007), that should be the responsibility of higher education institutions, based on the mutual cooperation between the participants. Heterogeneous interactions between students from different social and cultural backgrounds, with different experiential and learning resources, contribute to the development of interpersonal and intercultural skills, whereas awareness of the quality of their social interactions plays an important part in defining personal goals and responsibilities (Kuh, 2008).

The community is important both in terms of education and in carrying out social activities specific to the student period. Students often tend to learn and establish new friendships or romantic relationships. When learning together, each student's knowledge is enriched by relating to the knowledge of community members. Although educational content may vary, learning communities seem to have three things in common: a. mutual knowledge; participating together in the same class, debating and analysing the same topic contributes to accessing levels of knowledge that are different from those targeted by the trainer when conveying the information; b relating to the same way of acquiring knowledge. By asking the students to access a certain level of knowledge together, to discover or build it, the teacher/professor manages to get the students involved both socially and cognitively; c. accountability in relation to the distribution of learning tasks and also to the existing affinities between community members. Community learning requires that the student is mutually dependent of his/her classmates or group in order to progress in the learning process (Holdsworth et al., 2018).

In light of the theoretical contributions that emphasize the dimension of identity evolution from adolescence to emerging adulthood, higher education institutions should relate to learning communities by considering the development of practice contexts that contribute to the exploration of identity, both in the context of education and in the relation with others, by supporting the individual's ongoing efforts to adjust his/her behaviour to the diversity of academic contexts. The development of social and emotional skills and the responsible control and acceptance of emotions are important stages in establishing future relatively stable and mature relationships. The students who belong to a learning community spend time together both formally and outside classes, and the importance of these groups seem to influence their decision to continue their study or, on the contrary, to abandon them (Otto et al., 2015).

## 6. Educational transitions for emerging adults

In the past few decades, it has become increasingly obvious that larger access to higher education requires much more than minimal relating to “non-traditional” cohorts (students coming from disadvantaged background, students with special education needs, students who carry out professional or volunteering activities throughout their studies etc.), requiring thus investments in significant resources to ensure that a more and more diverse student community is enrolled in this educational stage.

Successful transition towards higher education has been one of the explicit objectives on the agenda of universities in recent decades, representing both a challenge and an expensive approach, especially with regard to the first year of study (Kift, 2015). A 2010 study of the Australian university sector indicated that the total costs allocated to supporting the transition of students in the first year of study exceeded \$ 20-30 million for each public institution involved (Adams et al., 2010; DET, 2017). Support sessions for emerging adults who seem unable to overcome stressful situations on their own, provided by specialists who assist young people throughout the difficult times of the transition to the new form of education have become part of the offer of higher education institutions. Recent studies suggest that students with low scores in the tertiary admission process are less likely to complete their studies (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Furthermore, students in this category are more likely to feel “insufficiently academically prepared for universities” (Baik et al., 2015, p. 69). A transition pedagogy is “a support philosophy for the compulsory curriculum in the first year of study and requires sustained stages of design, support and attention in the first academic year for emerging belonging to heterogeneous cohorts” (Kift, 2009, p. 2). Activities such as organizing first-year seminars, community-based learning and intensive writing courses, ensure important resources to expand the opportunities for obtaining tertiary education and efficient ways to internalize social and cultural expectations and becoming fully integrated into the college environment.

### 6.1. First-Year Seminars

The first academic year is fundamental, as this is the time when the students establish (or fail to establish) their self-efficacy and positive role models that will guide their behaviour and learning habits (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Brooker, 2017). Young people are aware that they must acquire the necessary knowledge and academic skills to become successful and independent with regard to learning and future professional activity (Baik et al., 2019). Small groups that include no more than 20 students enrolled in their first academic year participate in meetings with the most important members of the university community (representatives of the faculty, teaching and administrative staff and students’ representatives) (Naylor et al., 2018). These meetings aim at increasing their chances of integration in the academic and social life (Kuh, 2008). The activities listed in this category can be classified according to several thematic fields (Padget et al., 2013):

1. Activities aimed at helping students understand the university values and resources and introducing them to the general issues regarding university curricula. Students become aware of the university functions and resources, as these courses are designed to help first-year students adjust their behaviour to academic life, understand learning processes in the university context and develop a holistic understanding of the existing resources and the values and traditions specific to a higher education institution.

2. Self-knowledge and inter-knowledge activities, assessment and awareness of learning motivation, of one's own skills, strengths, values and the ways in which these can be used in order to achieve one's goals. The fact that these activities are coordinated by a tutor or by older students helps establish a stable, deep connection between participants.

3. Remedial activities, development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, which ensure academic success (such as: development of critical thinking, time management, networking skills) aimed at helping students achieve their academic goals, acquire effective learning techniques, leadership opportunities, and academic integrity.

4. Activities aimed at getting young students actively involved in university life (students' symposiums, conferences, workshops etc) by practicing their interpersonal communication skills, becoming responsible within the group and contributing to the overall wellbeing of the learning community.

## **6.2. Intensive writing courses**

Intensive writing courses allow students to relate to transdisciplinary pedagogical objectives, which contribute to the development of compositional skills and the consolidation of learning through frequent writing exercises and timely response to concrete learning tasks. First-year students need significant help to develop diverse and meaningful knowledge structures, mandatory for authentic learning. Compared to experts, fresh students have access to less complex and unstructured knowledge which renders the process of organizing and understand academic content difficult (Budwig & Alexander, 2020). Kuh claims (2008) that each higher education institution should have a Committee on Writing and Speaking that would guide students in intensive writing courses in order to develop a pedagogy of writing that would capitalize on transdisciplinary knowledge. Intensive writing courses contribute to the development of oral and written communication skills, research and teamwork skills, time planning and organization skills and public speaking abilities. A series of requirements facilitate the establishment of active learning communities and increase the efficiency of an intensive writing course: students should receive both written and oral feedback, provided in thematic conferences with numerous series of participants; the revision of the written paper, by rethinking certain drafts or re-writing exercises should be part of the course; the intensive course should be organized sequentially and should include writing tasks distributed throughout the semester, according to well-defined sections.

## **6.3. Service Learning, Community-Based Learning**

Service-learning pedagogy determines universities to reconsider not just their curricula, but also the role of the professor. Within these programmes, experiential learning, "on site", in relation to the community partners, represents a training strategy and often a necessary stage in the formation of active learning communities. The objectives of such sessions are analysed in detail in numerous recent studies, with the following ideas standing out (Tijmsma et al., 2021): obtaining accurate perceptions on the complexity of social issues (Allison, 2008; Ming, 2009; Sánchez-López, 2013; Welch, 2010); developing social skills and problem-solving skills (Allison, 2008; Ming, 2009; Sánchez-López, 2013; Welch, 2010); knowledge transfer from the classroom into the real world by means of interaction and dialogue (Allison, 2008; Ming, 2009; Straus & Eckenrode, 2014); reflecting on own's values and abilities. The aim is to provide students with a direct experience regarding the topics they



study as part of the formal curriculum and to allow them to invest continuous efforts in solving community issues. A key element of these programmes is represented by the students' opportunity to apply what they learn to the real-world context and the opportunity to reflect upon their concrete experiences in the classroom. These programmes emphasize the belief that students should become resources and partners at the community level.

## 7. Findings

This paper provides insight into the role of higher education institutions in facilitating the transition of emerging adults towards tertiary education. The results reveal that emerging adults who attend university are simultaneously involved in new learning activities, engage in a dialogue with their peers, build perspectives that allow them to acquire a vision of the world and have the opportunity to practice abilities that enrol them in a lifelong learning process. In this regard, there are two main ideas that might be interesting to explore, considering the results previously presented. Course attendance is a period of incubation for emerging adults, necessary for accessing a variety of contents, specializations, workplaces, friends and romantic partners, before making stable decisions (Arnett, 2016). Universities that understand the theoretical contributions which focus on emerging adulthood become learning spaces where students, by capitalizing on their cognitive skills, correlated with abstract thinking skills, can build multiple hypostases of their present self and can convey new meanings to their future career choices.

## 8. Conclusions

The status of participant to higher education represents for emerging adults an opportunity to explore their identity. The university provides young adults with ideal contexts for exploration before making long-term commitments in terms of career, relationships and perspective upon the world (Arnett, 2016; Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2015). Moreover, university life provides the most appropriate context for exploring and developing the skills and abilities required for decision-making, of which the exploration of the self is a priority (Budwig & Alexander, 2020). Young people belonging to this age segment are challenged with questions such as: "Who am I?", "How do I relate to others?" and "Who do I want to become?" while seeking the meaning of life and considering various perspectives on the world, often through discussions with fellow students, professors, counselors and other members of the staff responsible with student relations (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2015; McAdams, 2013). An essential aspect in terms of the exploration of the self involves the search for the meaning of the self. Interacting within the university context and addressing ethical and intellectual issues provide the students with the opportunity to learn and select as many social roles as possible (life authorship), by internalizing meaningful structures that represent the basis for the structuring of autonomous identity (self authorship). Both hypostases – life authorship and self authorship – are regarded as fundamental for this stage of evolution towards adulthood (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2015; McAdams, 2013). Universities can facilitate three types of exploratory processes for the students: increased autonomy in relation to the previous stages of life, superior cognitive development (e.g. critical analysis, integration, reflection, meta-cognition) and the identification of a professional pathway on which the meaning assigned to the self is based (Budwig & Alexander, 2020). Ensuring the transition in this stage of a student community defined by diversity, by means of activities designed to support first-

year students, by encouraging intensive academic writing courses and students' participation in extra-curricular activities are just some of the options available for higher education institutions which aim at increasing the enrolling of emerging adults in upper education.

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