Changes in university orientation since the pandemic

Amelia Díaz Álvarez

Eva Ferraz Comín

Universitat de Barcelona

Cómo citar este documento:

Index

1. Introduction

The role of educational counselors has become more important than ever since the pandemic. The three main areas of guidance—attention to diversity, academic and career guidance, and tutorial action—have been joined by a completely new component: COVID-19, which has caused significant changes in all areas of our personal and professional lives, including university guidance.

In response to the pandemic, some specialized institutions have considered how academic and career guidance should adapt to address people in the new social and economic context created by COVID-19 and what the new trends in guidance might be post-pandemic. Some answers to these questions are reflected in the report "International Trends and Innovation in Career Guidance" published in 2020 by the European Training Foundation.

On the other hand, the impact of COVID-19 on academic and career guidance has been analyzed by seven international organizations in the study "Career guidance policy and practice in the pandemic. Results of a joint international survey - June to August 2020."

2. Objectives

From the various and interesting conclusions of the aforementioned study, we focus on three to determine whether they align with the reality of Spanish universities during the pandemic:
- The need for guidance increased due to the health crisis and will be crucial for recovery.
- The use of new technologies in guidance accelerated due to the pandemic.
- The coronavirus crisis led to increased cooperation between guidance professionals and other experts.

3. Methodology

Our analysis covers the entire Spanish university system, although in some cases, examples will be specific to certain universities.

Based on the information specifically aimed at students from the beginning of the pandemic by all public Spanish universities (published on the Ministry of Universities'

website) and some private universities (through their websites), we compare each of the three conclusions mentioned, applying them to the three stages of guidance we analyze: the transition from secondary to university, the university stage, and the transition to the labor market. For the analysis of the third conclusion, we consulted not only university information but also that from other involved institutions such as the Ministry of Universities and the Conference of Spanish University Rectors (CRUE).

4. Results

As previously discussed, we will now analyze whether the three conclusions from the study "Career guidance policy and practice in the pandemic. Results of a joint international survey - June to August 2020" align with the reality of Spanish universities during the pandemic.

We will first examine if the need for guidance increased due to the health crisis.

From the onset of the pandemic, the concept of guidance has taken on a new dimension. The emergence of COVID-19 has presented both counselors and students with new situations, unprecedented in the past, and with a level of future uncertainty never before experienced.

While the most immediate impact on our students was the temporary cessation of in-person activities, their concerns also included social isolation, financial issues, internet connectivity, and the anxiety generated by the pandemic. This is reflected in the UNESCO Higher Education Section Survey on the Responses of Institutions with UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs or Networks to COVID-19, published in April 2020 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Student concerns in COVID times
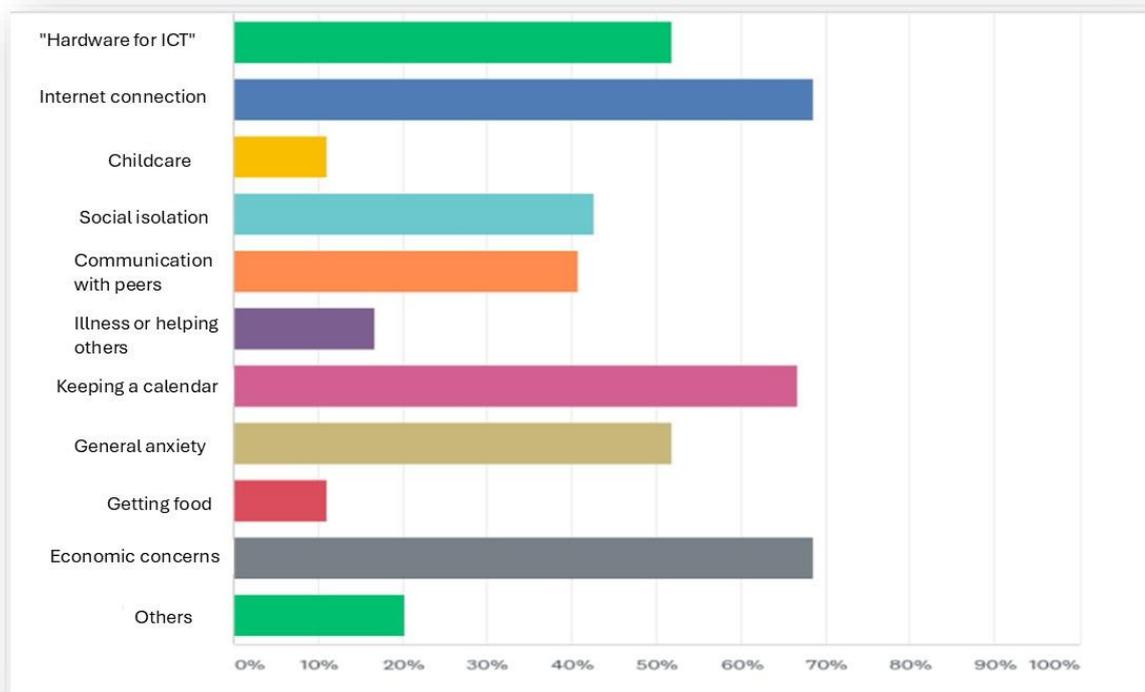
Source: UNESCO 2020

From this perspective, student guidance during the COVID era became more about providing support at all levels and facilitating their academic and personal experience.

In this regard, it can be stated without a doubt that the need for guidance grew during the pandemic, and all universities made an enormous effort to support students during these months. These efforts were primarily focused on helping students during their university stay, providing various types of support: academic, financial, and psychological.

All the universities analyzed implemented measures and efforts to prevent the exclusion of students whose economic situation or that of their families was affected by the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. This included direct or indirect economic aid mechanisms for students whose financial situation was compromised. Measures such as flexible payment of tuition fees, temporary suspension or cancellation of enrollment, accommodation in student residences, and extraordinary scholarships or aids were common practices among the analyzed universities. On the other hand, given the need for resources to continue remote teaching, aid focused on lending computers and distributing digital vouchers and internet connection cards to reduce or eliminate the digital divide that was highlighted from the beginning of the pandemic.

Some universities also placed special emphasis on supporting and guiding students with specific needs, providing not only direct help to this group but also offering faculty the necessary information and training to assist these students in remote teaching. Examples of many university initiatives include the document "Remote Teaching and Students with Specific Educational Needs" from the University of Barcelona, as well as the "Guide to Good Practices for the Transition, Access, and Reception of Students with Specific Educational Support Needs in University Studies," prepared by the Network of Support Services for People with Disabilities in the University (Red SAPDU), within the framework of the collaboration agreement between CRUE and the ONCE Foundation.

Another important issue was the guidance and support for students who were undertaking stays at international universities. In this context, CRUE's Internationalization and Cooperation sector and CRUE's Student Affairs sector focused on the return of students residing abroad. This management required collaboration with the Spanish Service for the Internationalization of Education (SEPIE) and an interministerial committee composed of universities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and CRUE Spanish Universities. Additionally, the Internationalization and Cooperation sector worked on planning for the 2020/21 academic year and its implications for international mobility.

Secondly, we will analyze whether the use of new technologies in guidance accelerated due to the pandemic.

Academic and career guidance through applications, chats, web platforms, etc., increased during the COVID-19 crisis, although some good online guidance practices already existed in Europe and other parts of the world before the pandemic, as shown in the report "International Trends and Innovation in Career Guidance," previously mentioned.

Regarding Spanish universities, our analysis of their websites shows that the use of new technologies also increased notably. Applying the broad concept of guidance mentioned earlier, we see that the enforced remote presence of students made it essential for communication and services to be virtualized. Examples include the use of QR code systems for appointment scheduling to facilitate student support at the Carlos III University, and the Complutense University of Madrid's implementation of a "Student Needs Mailbox" focusing on three areas: psychosocial health of students, coordination and referral of problems and queries to reference centers, units, or services, and channeling IT resources to students at risk of a digital divide.

Beyond the temporary virtualization of these services, the use of new technologies was common in all three stages of guidance: pre-university through virtual education fairs, university stage through specific web pages for student support and information, and preparation for labor market insertion through virtual job fairs.

For example, the University of Granada's COVID-19 Action Plan page dedicated a special section to students, going beyond essential academic and health information to include various sections such as: User Support Plan, Virtual Teaching, Announcements, Non-Presential Evaluation Guides, COVID Incident Protocol, and Preventive Measures for Exams. Similarly, the Francisco de Vitoria University's website features a small dossier with 10 tips for students on how to study during the coronavirus period.

Some faculties also developed their own support materials, such as the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Barcelona, which since the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year has provided a specific resource titled "Guidelines and Tools for Students for the 2020-2021 Academic Year" on its website under the "COVID-19 Faculty Information" section. This resource included sections on: What to consider when starting, what you need to know about the Virtual Campus to follow your classes, Virtual Campus Tools, BB Collaborate Platform Tools, Data Protection Information, Faculty Resources, Technology Resources, and the University of Barcelona's Learning and Research Center, and Psychological Support.

So far, we have addressed guidance during the academic course, but the virtualization of student support during COVID by universities was not limited to their study period; it also covered the pre-university stage and preparation for labor market insertion.

Regarding the pre-university stage, universities also quickly responded to the unforeseen situation where it was impossible to hold in-person university fairs and exhibitions by converting these long-standing events into virtual events that were highly accepted by students and their families. For example, the fairs held through CRUE's Uniferia platform, an initiative launched by the CRUE Student Affairs Working Group, involved over fifty institutions and provided information on: access systems, educational pathways, study plans, internationalization opportunities, and scholarship programs.

In the same vein, a large majority of faculties held their Open Days virtually in 2020 and 2021, an experience they highlight as very positive, often setting up virtual pavilions and video conferencing programs for pre-university audiences.

Similarly, the guidance for preparation for labor market insertion also transitioned to virtual formats. Most of our universities moved their in-person job fairs to virtual formats. For example, the University of Barcelona held its Virtual Job Fair UB in April of that year, which consolidated what had previously been organized by various faculties in-person.

Finally, we will analyze whether the coronavirus crisis led to increased cooperation between guidance professionals and other experts.

In this case, it is important to clarify the term "cooperation." While institutional responses from international organizations, national institutions, and universities

themselves varied, they all shared a common element: cooperation. The pandemic highlighted an unprecedented generosity in reaching consensus, sharing resources, and collaborating between companies and institutions in the educational field. The necessity turned into virtue, and collaborative and supportive work was paramount.

Cooperation was especially necessary to create a common reference framework that allowed universities to continue providing quality teaching. Among the ministerial provisions, we highlight three: first, the communication of March 26, 2020, which aimed to convey information about the various issues faced by the university community during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Second, the April document: "Reflections on General Criteria for Adapting the Spanish University System to the COVID-19 Pandemic during the 2019-2020 Academic Year," which referred to teaching activities, degree reports, internships, teaching guides, evaluation, and accreditation processes.

Third, in June 2020, the Ministry published "Recommendations to the University Community for Adapting the 2020-21 Academic Year to Adapted Presence and Measures for Universities' Actions in Case of a Suspected or Positive COVID-19 Case."

These three documents were key for organizing teaching by universities in the second part of the 2019-20 academic year and for planning the 2020-21 academic year.

Equally important were the collaborations established between the Ministry of Universities, the Autonomous Communities, Quality Agencies, and CRUE to carry out joint actions and create a common framework of action.

In the realm of teaching and students, CRUE Spanish Universities, as an association representing Spanish universities and their shared interests, played a crucial role in coordinating actions between universities, serving as a meeting point through joint initiatives. Its coordination with the Ministry of Universities and other ministries was essential in establishing dialogue between the government and national quality agencies on one side and universities on the other.

Thus, in addition to providing a shared resource web portal for the university community, an intersectoral working group on Teaching and Evaluation during COVID-19 was established, involving CRUE's Student Affairs, Teaching, General Secretariats, and ICT sectorial commissions. The result of this group's work was the publication in April 2020 of a detailed study on adaptations to distance evaluation, which has been very useful for Spanish universities.

One area where institutional cooperation, both university and non-university, was crucial was external internships for students, which were paralyzed or partially halted due

to their inherently in-person nature. As these agreements involve companies, institutions, and universities, where tutorial work by all parties is fundamental, collaboration was of utmost importance. In this regard, the Ministry, CRUE, Autonomous Communities, and Quality Agencies made an additional effort to coordinate with universities to ensure that all students could complete their internships during the 2019-2020 academic year or defer them to the following year. Alternative solutions were also sought for cases where in-person internships could be replaced by alternative formats.

In this sense, it is worth noting that, for example, the CRUE Teaching Sectorial Commission held multiple meetings with the Deans' Conferences to analyze the situation of internships in Health and Education Sciences and to develop CRUE recommendations for conducting these internships during the pandemic. The work with the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) and the CRUE Spanish Universities Presidency on distance teaching development and quality assurance was crucial in creating a legal framework covering universities and students.

5. Conclusions

1. From the onset of the pandemic, the concept of guidance acquired a new dimension. The emergence of COVID-19 exposed both counselors and students to new situations with no past references and a level of future uncertainty never experienced before.

2. The need for guidance grew during the pandemic, and all universities made a tremendous effort to support students during these months. While efforts were primarily focused on helping students during their university stay, no stage of guidance was neglected.

3. Some universities also placed special emphasis on supporting and guiding students with specific needs, not only providing direct help to this group but also offering faculty the necessary information and training to assist these students in remote teaching.

4. Another important issue was the guidance and support for students undertaking stays at international universities. In this context, CRUE's Internationalization and Cooperation sector and CRUE's Student Affairs sector focused on the return of students residing abroad. This required collaboration with SEPIE and an interministerial committee formed by universities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and CRUE Spanish Universities.

5. The use of new technologies increased significantly during the pandemic. Different units related to guidance expanded their online services and, in some cases, created new guidance lines.

6. Beyond the temporary virtualization of these services, the use of new technologies was common across all three stages of guidance: pre-university through virtual education fairs, university stage through specific web pages for student support and information, and preparation for labor market insertion through virtual job fairs.

7. Cooperation among different groups and universities reached unprecedented levels, sharing virtual spaces, resources, and services. While institutional responses varied, cooperation was a common factor.

8. In addition to various regulatory provisions or recommendations, the collaboration established between the Ministry of Universities, Autonomous Communities, Quality Agencies, and CRUE to carry out joint actions and create a common framework was noteworthy.

9. Cooperation between university and non-university institutions was particularly important for external internships, which were paralyzed or partially halted due to their in-person nature. Agreements involving companies, institutions, and universities, where tutorial work by all parties is essential, highlighted the importance of collaboration.

10. Guidance and support for students were more necessary than ever as students faced an uncertain period and a crisis-ridden future. Their situation involved uncertainty during decision-making, processes, and enrollments amid the health crisis, with concerns about potential job losses and changes in the labor market.

References

CEDEFOP (2020). *Career guidance policy and practice in the pandemic. Results of a joint international survey- June to August 2020*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Escamilla, A., & Martín, T. (2021). La nueva normalidad de los jóvenes universitarios españoles: vocación en tiempos de pandemia. *Diálogos Pedagógicos, 19*(38), 173-186. https://dx.doi.org/10.22529/dp.2021.19(38)12

European Training Foundation (2020). *International Trends and Innovation in Career Guidance*. Volume I: Thematic chapters. Volume II: Countries case studies. https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/international-trends-and-innovation-career-guidance-0

Hooley, T.; Sultana, R.; Thomsen, R. (2020). Why a social justice informed approach to career guidance matters in the time of coronavirus. Career guidance for social justice blog. https://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com/2020/03/23/why-a-social-justice-informed-approach-to-career-guidance-matters-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/

Jiménez, V. G. (2022). Estrés académico y educación hibrida en estudiantes universitarios en tiempos de la nueva normalidad educativa. *Dilemas contemporáneos: Educación, Política y Valores, 2*(30). https://doi.org/10.46377/dilemas.v9i2.3071

Red SAPDU (2021). *Guía de buenas prácticas para la transición, el acceso y la acogida del alumnado con necesidad específica de apoyo educativo en los estudios universitarios*. Madrid: Fundación ONCE.

Rodicio-García, M. L., Ríos-de-Deus, M. P., Mosquera-González, M. J., & Penado Abilleira, M. (2020). La brecha digital en estudiantes españoles ante la Crisis de la COVID-19. *Revista Internacional de Educación para la Justicia Social 9*(3), 103-125. https://doi.org/10.15366/riejs2020.9.3.006

Rujas, J., & Feito, R. (2021). La educación en tiempos de pandemia: una situación excepcional y cambiante. *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE*, *14*(1), 4-13. https://doi.org/10.7203/RASE.14.1.20273

UNESCO (2020). *Encuesta de la Sección de Educación Superior de la UNESCO sobre las respuestas de las instituciones con cátedras o redes del Programa UNITWIN/UNESCO al COVID-19*. https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/2020/05/10/respuestas-de-las-catedras-del-programa-unitwin-unesco-a-la-covid-19/#.YLnXKUztaUk.