

ANALYZING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTIONS IN THE GENERAL CONTEXT OF RECORDING OF A HIGH DROPOUT RATE

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ABSTRACT

It is generally admitted that one of the actual realities of the Romanian academic education is represented by the major decreasing of the number of students who are finalizing their studies. Analyzing that situation, there can be stipulated multiple causes like: difficult adaptation of students to the requirements of the academic environment, wrong orientation of students to specializations that do not match the student's personal interests and vocational profile, assumption of professions which need proper and sustainable development, social and financial issues, lack of motivation for learning, various aspects related to the specificity of the educational process in the academic environment etc. Anyway, the dynamics and incidence of such factors is little known. Studies on this phenomenon indicate that the percentage of those who do not complete university studies remains very high, the dropping out being more frequently among the first-year students. Since the starting moments of their studies, each student has particular personal views and expectations of what this new stage means - the degree of consistency between their expectations and the existing reality contributes to create a strong motivation for personal and professional learning and development. But a consistent knowledge concerning the students' first-year profile and what are their specific educational needs represent a requirement of a clear quality approach.

The paper targets to express what are the students' expectations engaged in the first year of their studies towards the essential aspects of academic education, in order to identify, at an early stage, the factors that have an important influence on deciding to break their studies and to actively optimize the connection with the university environment. The survey sample consisted of 245 students enrolled in their first year of studies, coming from various specializations of Valahia University of Targoviste. It is obvious that higher education institutions should be interested on developing tools for enabling the assessment and management of the students' needs, in order to attract and motivate them in their study-time and to meet their expectations at a proper level.

Keywords:

university students, university dropout; students' expectations; students' satisfactions; higher education; ROSE project;

INTRODUCTION

The start in the academia represents a significant stage for university students, a stage when they become mature, discover their potential, as well as their limits, but also when they set medium and long-term targets and objectives, important for their future. It is a long-awaited moment with regard to which students have both perceptions and expectations relating to factors that contribute to acquisition of special skills, facilitation of learning, creation of some career prospects etc.

There are multiple typologies of students, who have different needs, expectations, skills, resources, motivation, personality and vision, ranging from those who know precisely what they want and can do, who have a vocation for certain careers and who become sure about what must they know (which any professor would be glad to have in class), to students who do not have a clear perspective on their educational route, but who are eager to discover, grow and be motivated and guided toward success; nevertheless, there are also students with unrealistic expectations, who (unfortunately) make a wrong choice in the respect to their training, who lose their interest and, sooner or later, have to dropout.

The university dropout represents a stressful issue in Romania as well as in some European countries. According to a survey conducted by the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR), between 2015-2018, centralizing the data received from universities across the country, the average dropout rate at national level tends to more than 40%, being also universities whose drop-out rate before completion of studies slightly exceeds 50%. (<https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/problema-abandonului-universitar-reflectata-in-numarul-de-studenti-exmatriculati-la-o-universitate-din-romania-circa-2-600-pe-an-3192695>).

A Eurostat study - carried out at European level - indicates that Romania is situated on the third place in the top of the countries facing high dropout rates. As example, in 2016, Romania recorded a dropout rate of 18.5% of the school population, being surpassed only by Spain - 19%, and Malta - 19.6% (<https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-school-dropout-rate-2016-eurostat/>). Beside the figures recorded in 2016, starting with 2017 - when the recorded dropout rate was 18.1% among aged 18-24 -, it was expected to reach (in 2020) a rate of 11.3%, but it is difficult to say how such target was possible to be met (Lungu, 2021). However, a rate of 15.6% was illustrated for Romania (early leavers from education and training aged 18-24) in a recent official document ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early leavers from education and training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training)).

Taking into consideration a *Diagnosis Report* designed in the phase of writing the proposal of the project *The "Pro Academica" Learning Center - Services and Logistic Support for Students* (financed in the period 2017-2022 under the ROSE Grant Agreement no. 81/SGU/CILI/18.12.2017), in "Valahia" University of Târgoviște, prior to implementing the project, in the academic year 2015-2016, from 1342 registered students in the first year of study, 281 abandoned their studies till the end of the first academic year (a dropout rate of 20.93%). During the implementation of the project - that is exclusively dedicated to students enrolled in the first year of study -, the dropout rate recorded slight decreases: 17.32% (2017-2018), 18.40% (2018-2019) and 18.10% (2019-2020), the students being involved (in the frame of the project) in specific activities related to remedial programs, coaching and personal development activities, mentoring and tutoring activities, career guidance activities, and various workshops and meeting with university successful graduates of professionals who have major experience in several economic areas.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The *hopes or expectations* represent *beliefs* as how things are happening in the future. They emerge as a consequence of combining the cognitive processes and the previous experiences of the individual. As expectations are extremely important for organising the cognitive field, they determine the individual to undertake some actions, to discover his/her motivation toward performing some activities which generate satisfaction (Dafinoiu, & Boncu, 2014).

In the academic environment, the student's projections and hopes or even his/her expectations, in the beginning of the first academic year, may be an important factor toward creating and maintaining an intrinsic motivation which should support the optimal effort in the learning process. Adapting to this new status may be difficult or problematic for students, especially for those who are introvert, being harder to relate, communicate and integrate in the students' community. Therefore, such students are the most exposed to the risk of early school dropout. The education-related requirements - in terms of level of difficulty and workload -, compared to the ones met in the previous school stage, demand students to develop new skills: analysis, critical thinking, ability to synthesize, problematization, team work, research projects, metacognitive skills, learning style, scientific work, creativity, communication, argumentation, taking notes, efficient time management etc. Some students may find all those demands as difficult.

However, mentally, that threshold represents a threshold of maturity. The student has to become aware of responsibility in relation to his/her own training, find the cognitive and emotional resources which should facilitate adaptation, time and stress management in an efficient way, setting goals and objectives related to their own personal and professional development, overcoming their self-imposed fears, prejudices and limits, outlining their own universe of values. All those explain why students expect to be guided, counselled, informed, and helped, in the way that their commitment should be real, supported and motivated, taking into discussion the transition from high-school/college to university, with all related rigors, and ensuring a smoother adaptation for each of them.

There is sometimes a significant gap between the students' expectations and the possibilities and experiences that the academic institutions are ready (and able) to provide. This is the case when students forge unrealistic expectations from their future academic studies or due to the incomplete or incorrect information collected from unrealistic sources (Crisp et al., 2009).

Their expectations concerning the educational community (professors, colleagues, auxiliary staff etc.), didactic process (teaching and assessing methods), challenges and opportunities that students come across, and even other aspects such as infrastructure, didactic materials, equipment, environment and study conditions, represent essential variables for the students' success or failure.

The experts consider that several stages must be met in the student's process of adaptation to the academic environment (Țărnă, 2012):

- *adjustment stage* - when fear and obedience, feelings of abandonment and inability prevail;
- *adaptation stage* - when earning benevolence and rewards are pursued; students observe, assess people, norms and values and adopt a specific behavior;

- *participation stage* - when the student no longer feels a stranger in relation to the others and adopts an active behavior in interpersonal relations, to the extent to which he/she feels as being accepted;
- *integration stage* - when the group dependence is developed.

The *transition stage* and its related issues represent a major cause of students' anxiety (Lowe, & Cook, 2003), due to their inability to adapt, poor academic performances and exposure to dropout risk (Yorke, & Longden, 2004).

A quality education focuses on the students' needs; it is flexible, open, receptive. It turns the students' potential into good account. Getting to know the problems which the students are forced to cope, involves a holistic and complex approach; there are social, economic, family or health-related factors which may lead to school dropout, more accentuated in the first year of study. In addition, there are individual, psychological factors, which require an early intervention.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research seeks to identify the students' expectations (in their first year of study) and to create opportunities for reflection which should determine actions and endeavors through which students' expectations may be reasonably fulfilled, in line with the available resources. It is the authors' intention to put the accent on a deeper understanding of the students' needs, specific to the transition stage, in order to help students overcoming the encountered issues, and therefore reducing the risk of dropout.

The students' educational expectations are vital as they may have an impact on their current expectations, and may influence their motivation, behavior and achievements.

The research sample was made of 245 students registered in the first year of university studies, all of them being enrolled in various specializations of "Valahia" University of Targoviste. The research was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire applied to students, at approximately two months after they started the academic year.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In relation to the question "*To what extent do you consider that the specialization you have chosen suits your expectations?*", most of the students (42.86%) consider that their choice represents the right one *to a great extent*. The percentage of the students who believe that they have made a *very good* choice, in line with their cognitive profile, their skills and interests (31.02%) is also very important, and we may state that such students are the most motivated to complete their studies and to practice their profession in the field for which they have opted. However, the options *not at all* and *in a small measure* are present - students considering they have made an inappropriate choice (4 subjects) or quite inappropriate (11 subjects) - 6.12%. In their case, the risk of dropout, even in the first university year of study, being very high.

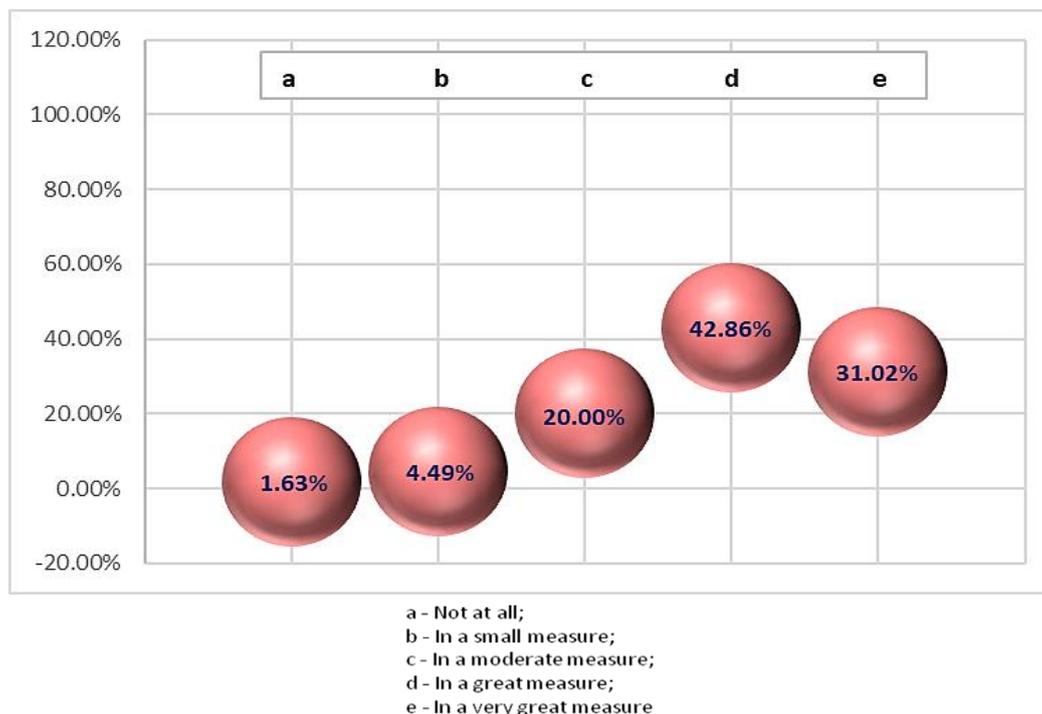


Figure no. 1. The extent to which students consider that their specialization suits their expectations

One should not fail to notice the percentage of the students who stated that the chosen specialization suits them *to a moderate extent* - 20%, as they demonstrate the fact that their choice was not the best, and in the context of various emerging issues, they are susceptible to dropout, sooner or later. It is obvious that one should seek vocational counselling as an important issue, trying to get to know in time and better all the aspects related to choosing their profession.

Related to the following question (“*Have you found it easy to integrate/adapt to the new student status?*”), the students’ responses confirm the previous conclusions: there is a significant number of students (80.41%) who believe that their integration and adaptation to the specificity of the academic environment were unproblematic. Nevertheless, there are students who, after two months of frequenting the university activities, failed to adapt (7.35%), or adapted in a way, but not without difficulties (12.24%).

E. Țărnă (2012) recommends to students who encounter adaptation difficulties seeking integration in an *individual preventive-recovering program*. The persons in charge of such demarche should collect data on the student’s previous social and cultural education climate, his/her personality profile, motivation related to the choice of faculty, degree of satisfaction related to the academia, as well as other significant data for the academic activity. Moreover, we consider that it is appropriate for the tutor/counsellor and other teaching staff to get involved in conducting some activities intended to help the members of the group to get acquainted and closer to each other, to provide some support in solving the issues faced by the students. The psychologist from the higher education institution may have an essential role in managing such situations.



Figure no. 2. Students' opinions related to the integration/adaptation to the student status, after two months in their first university year

In our attempt to diagnose the main issues/difficulties encountered by students - when starting their first year of study -, as to intervene ahead of time and to reduce the dropout risk, it was found that only 30.20% of students do not associate the first two months to problematic issues or difficulties.

Following the ranking of the issues identified by students, we have the following results: 16.73% of the students consider that the timetable/schedule is too tight; 13.47% of them encounter difficulties in understanding the content of the school subjects - which shows a significantly higher level in comparison to high-school subjects; 9.80% of the students have problems adapting to the university environment and lack of information which may help them - they do not know who they should relate to for support, when such support is required.

There is also a number of students (8.57%) for whom the main issues are related to transport. They depend on a form of public transport and this dependence prevents them from attending all the academic activities. 5.71% of the questioned students consider that their main difficulties are connected to the teachers' methods and attitudes.

Other problems encountered by the students are linked to inappropriate temperature in academic halls (5.31%), high volume of information to be acquired (4.49%), timeframe between high school graduation and admission to college (1.22%), bureaucracy (1.22%), activities carried out in various locations (0.82%), separation from family and friends (0.82%), presence (and problems) with new colleagues (0.82%), lack of practice (0.41%).

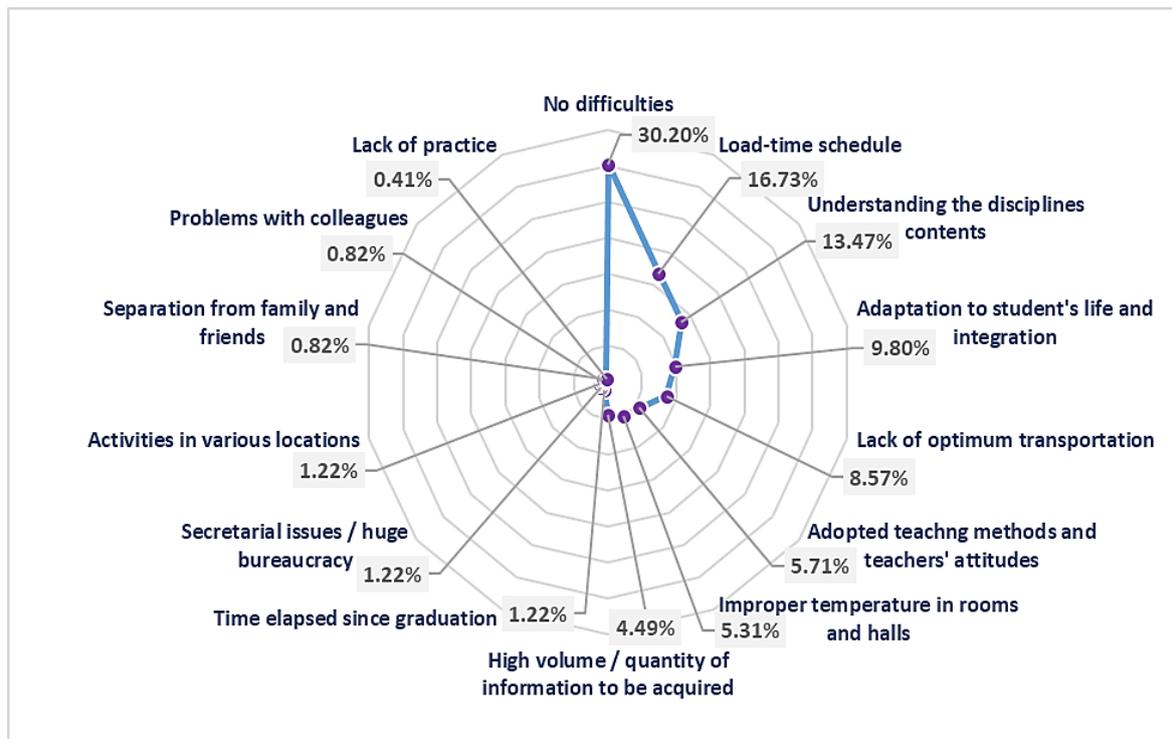


Figure no. 3. Main difficulties/issues faced by students in the first two months of their academic year

CONCLUSION

The transition to a new stage, from high school to university, is an important event and a major turning point in any student's life. For some students, changes may be great and unexpected, overwhelming, and they may influence their performances, their relationships, and may therefore generate negative feelings, anxiety, stress.

A first conclusion of this research would be that there are students who ignored or were guided wrongly when choosing their academic specialisation. They are the ones exposed to dropout as early as their first university year.

We have identified a series of issues which students must struggle: some issues relate to internal variables - students' perceptions and expectations, motivation, capacity to make optimal decisions regarding their own training and professional route, knowledge, cognitive skills, adaptive possibilities, networking and social skills; nevertheless, there are also difficulties related to the external environment - organisation of courses and timetable, specificity of university teaching, applied didactic strategies and teaching style. All those variables may be modified with an appropriate, timely intervention.

We consider that it is necessary to have a holistic approach - an approach which acknowledges all factors leading to the school dropout (on the one side), and their interrelations (on the other side). The factors which generate abandonment of higher education are various and should be tackled in an incipient stage. The students need further support and guidance, particularly in their first year of study.

To prevent the university dropout and to facilitate adaptation to the student's status, considering related rights and obligations, the examples of good practices refer to (European Commission, 2013):

- preparing students for higher education through preliminary training activities;
- following up on their evolution;
- providing a relevant, supportive syllabus;
- promoting positive approaches on learning;
- providing financial support intended to students;
- providing counselling and support services of personal nature;
- supporting the students (socialization, interfering with social media etc.);
- providing support in relation to the school subjects exposed to a high rate of dropout etc.

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