

University dropout. Causes and solution

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Abstract. The phenomenon of university dropout is met in all universities in the world and its effects are felt both at the economic level, at the level of society and at the personal level of students who abandon the university. Factors leading to university dropout may be of a social nature (student background, income level, so on.), psycho-pedagogical (inadequate academic training, inconsistency between prior training and university studies, lack of counseling services, so on) and personal (poor adaptability to the university, low levels of socio-emotional intelligence, so on). Universities need to cope with this phenomenon and adapt and develop prevention and intervention services so that students' retention rate rises. The paper analyzes this phenomenon in The Bucharest University of Economic Studies and identifies possible solutions for diminishing the phenomenon.

Keywords. university dropout, retention, causes of university dropout, prevention of university dropout.

1. Introduction.

In today's society, the superior training of human resources is a necessity. From this perspective, Romania has some gaps in European evolution. The Report on the state of higher education in Romania 2015 shows that at the level of the academic year 2014–2015, the average duration of higher education attendance was 1.2 years, which shows the extent of the phenomenon of leaving the university studies of those who were enrolled in this tuition level. By reference to the total population of 21 years, only one-third of them managed to obtain a bachelor's degree (35.5% in the academic year 2013/2014).

One of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy is that at least 40% of the population aged 30-34 have completed a tertiary education, ie they have obtained a university degree or a similar qualification.

In 17 EU countries, the 40% has already been reached, and in 5 countries (including Lithuania and Luxembourg) the proportion of graduates has exceeded 50% of the 30-34-year-old population. At the opposite end, there are 8 EU countries – including Romania, along with Italy and Malta – where the share of graduates in the 30-34 age group is less than 30% (see fig.1).

In this context, it is important not only the procent of young population that is included in the university education, but also the retention rate of those who are already enrolled in higher education.

Table 1. Key indicators provided by the European Commission, available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor_en

| Reference years | Romania | | Media UE | |
|---|---------|--------|----------|--------|
| | 2013 | 2016 | 2013 | 2016 |
| Early school dropout in education and training systems (aged 18-24) | 17.3 % | 18.5 % | 11.9 % | 10.7 % |

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|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Bachelor degree graduates (30-34 years of age) | 22.9 % | 25.6 % | 37.1 % | 39.1 % |
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In all higher education systems, we see the phenomenon of academic dropout as a withdrawal of a person in the form of education in which he / she was enrolled before obtaining a diploma or qualification. The university dropout is an extreme form of school failure and the necessity of diminishing it is imposed by at least four reasons (Stăiculescu, 2012):

- *economic* – economic yield is low due to the professional incompetence of individuals. There is also an unprofitable growth in education spending;
- *social* – poor workforce induces social effects such as: marginalization, unemployment, social exclusion, delinquency, dependence on social protection services so on;
- *individually* – school failure also has psychological effects, such as: adaptability difficulties, distrust in their own forces, anxiety, stress, so on.;
- *pedagogical* – school failure is the indicator of the lack of pedagogical performance, of the inadequacies encountered in the educational system.

At the level of the Academy of Economic Studies the highest rate of university dropout is registered at the level of the first year. The statistical situation of the last years shows us that:

- In the academic year 2013-2014, there were 4527 registered students at the beginning of the first year, out of which 737 students were withdrawn / expelled at the end of the year, which corresponds to a dropout rate of 16.28%;
- For the academic year 2014-2015, the same indicators are: 5525 students, 801 students withdrawn / expelled, and 15,50% dropout rate;
- For the academic year 2015 – 2016 the statistics highlight the following values: 6144 students, out of which 880 students were withdrawn or expelled and 14.32% dropout rate respectively;
- For the academic year 2016-2017 of the 5211 enrolled students, only 787 were withdrawn / expelled and the abandonment rate was 15.10%.

Among the causes of expulsion, the most frequently cited are objective causes such as: withdrawal, non-payment of taxes, non-accumulation of ECTS credits, non-signing of study contracts, not meeting the standards at more than 3 subjects after the first exam session.

The analysis of the subjects at which the students register failures in the first year of university studies reveals that they are diverse, but there are subjects such as mathematics, microeconomics, macroeconomics, informatics, accounting, so on. These are in fact basic disciplines for training specialists in economic domain.

2. Causes of university dropout.

Studies on the causes of university dropout are diverse.

Robbins et al. (2004), in a meta-analysis of 109 studies that aimed at identifying if there is a relationship between the educational outcomes of students and psychological and academic factors took into account a number of explanatory factors of university dropout as follows: motivation for student success, academic goals (for example, the desire to obtain a bachelor's degree), institutional commitment (the level of satisfaction of the student, how attached they are to the university), perceived social support (existence of a university-level network for support or family support); social involvement (how involved in activities with other colleagues or organized by the university), self-assessment ability (how students relate to their academic abilities), self-perception (the way students relate to oneself), academic abilities (behavioral and cognitive skills required for academic success), contextual influences (aggregate indicator from three other indicators: financial support from the institution, institutional size and institutional selectivity).

Bean (1982) indicates 10 determinants that can cause variations in student wearing out and may lead to dropout. These are: the intention to give up, the practical value of the field chosen on the labor market, security of choice (the university in which he studies is the best choice for the student), loyalty to the institution they are studying (how important it is to graduate at that university and not at the other), average grade, perception of courses (if the student considers them appropriate), the importance given to university studies, the certainty of graduating a particular specialization or career plans, the opportunity to transfer to another university, family approval of the institution in which the student learns.

Robbins et al. (2004) show that the most important factors influencing university dropout are: students' academic goals, self-evaluation capacity and their academic abilities, but also other variables such as: institutional commitment, social support, social involvement, financial support institution or selectivity of the institution. The authors find that students are more tempted to drop out of university if they feel they can not cope with the demands of the courses, their academic capacity being defining.

DeBerard (2004) shows that dropout rates can not be explained by the way students respond to stress or behaviors that may affect health, but these variables influence the academic achievements of students.

Jia and Maloney (2014) indicate a number of other factors influencing university dropout as follows: ethnicity – majority students are more likely than minority students to complete their studies, gender – women have higher completion rates (Paura, Arhipova, 2014), the form of schooling (the students from the higher education have higher rates of completion of the studies than those from other forms of education), the age (students who are aged 2 to 3 years older than the average age enrollment in faculty are more likely to drop out of studies).

Westrick et al. (2015) show that first-year school results are important predictors for retention in study programs. The better these results are the more students do not dropout. The same authors state that good results in pre-university education tests influence higher academic performance and that there are no significant correlations between parental income levels and child dropout, especially given that the university provides material support to students in need of help. Bonaldo and Pereira (2016) show that the genre of students, the educational level of parents, the academic failure of students, or the fact that they have a child during their studies are not statistically significant explanatory variables for abandonment.

Factors such as age (Bonaldo and Pereira 2016, Araque, Roldan and Salguero, 2009), changing civil status (marriage, divorce, widowhood, child's appearance, lacking financial support are variables) abandoning university courses.

Araque, Roldan and Salguero (2009) make an analysis of abandonment according to the field of study. They show that humanitarian students have the highest chances of abandonment compared to those in engineering and economics. They introduce a number of other variables such as: the admissions faculty (those entering the first round are more likely to abandon the courses than those who enter the round), admission to college (those who are selected on the basis of of an examination are less likely to drop out of studies than those enrolled on an exam score (eg, a baccalaureate grade), failing exams.

Oreopoulos (2007) show that the most likely to dropout are students who consider the school uninterested and unmotivated.

With regard to the time of dropout, other studies show that students are more likely to quit after examination periods when they have failed some examinations. High dropout rates have been recorded among students with low outcomes in pre-university education but also among those who have good grades, but the university program did not respond to their expectations (Paura, Arhipova, 2014).

The analysis of the Career Counseling and Career Center of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies shows that the students of the first year come with a picture of the academic environment often not in line with reality.

In most cases, university students in Romania are people aged between 18 and 25, a period of profound transformation both personally and socially, characterized by instability, intense quests, adaptation efforts, lack of a correct vision on the professional environment, lack of motivation and perspective for studies and work, insufficient self-knowledge, so on. (Diaconu, Stăiculescu, 2012). If at the beginning of the university studies, the young students are still teenagers, during graduation there is a gradual transition to maturity (Diaconu, Stăiculescu, 2012). The characteristics of adolescence and maturity coexist in a certain period. The challenges come from the growing responsibilities, the economic and social pressures that make this life stage tense and full of searches. The demanding situations for young people in this period can be generated by:

- separation from parents and the acquisition of psychological, economic and financial independence. Many young people are in a position to change the city, home, access to their first job, manage their own budget and resources;
- addressing other school requirements. Compared to the pre-university school environment, the university environment is characterized by a greater neutrality of social relations, the requirements are multiple and diverse, the teachers have another interpersonal approach to the pre-university education, have other types of school activities, the colleagues are unknown so on;
- compliance with professional requirements. Many young people practice internships in real professional environments, have expectations and certain perceptions of a job, and often they are far from reality;
- separation from many people considered to be representative in the previous period (teachers, school colleagues, etc.);
- changes in the self-image influenced by relationships with others, confirmation or invalidation of certain qualities. All these factors can lead to situations of loss, fear, insecurity, inappropriateness, anxiety, depression or difficulty in concentration. Young people are confronted with questions to define their personality: Who are they and who will I be? (in the sphere of “Be”); What do I have and what do I want to have? (in the sphere of “Have”); What am I able to do better what I will do (in the sphere of “Can do”) (Diaconu, Stăiculescu, 2012). Integration into a new environment is dependent on the process of social adaptation, through which the young students learn their new roles. Some students make it faster, others slower, the latter being the most exposed to the risk of dropout, depending on a number of social and personal factors such as: the social environment of origin (rural / urban), the level of training previously recorded, belonging to a vulnerable social category, low family income, lack of social skills and a low level of interpersonal and emotional intelligence, so on.

3. Solutions to prevent university dropout.

After examining a wide range of programs that various universities around the world have applied to increase student retention, Cabrera et. Al. (2006) identified the following types of interventions that universities could adopt:

- efforts to promote social and institutional adaptation. This type of effort tries to promote the social life of the students' body with programs aimed at organizing recreational and cultural events;
- efforts to recruit students;

- university guidance programs (eg through university tutors);
- programs that provide pre-university information and guidance on university specialties;
- programs that provide counseling and support to the student, especially providing training in learning and psychological support strategies;
- institutional efforts – for example, the creation of “campus leaders” and the training of “retention facilitators” in student relief efforts;
- guidelines for preventing drop-outs for students;
- efforts specifically addressed to students in on-line courses.

Braxton and McClendon (2002) recommend 8 areas where measures can be taken to ensure student retention in academia: academic counseling, administrative and political practices, recruitment, faculty development, faculty rewards, programs providing information and guidance to students, institutional approach to student issues.

Johnson, J.L. (2000) indicates one of the most important solutions, in his opinion, consisting in the positive academic and social integration of the student into the community of the institution, the recommended interventions consisting of:

- Concluding a contract requiring students to meet certain requirements. Candidates who do not meet the criteria are not accepted as students;
- Creating an alert system to identify students at risk in the first 4 weeks of the first year (previous results, attendance at courses, evaluation). Teachers receive the role of counselors and discuss with identified students about their situation;
- Learning communities for students with poor results in pre-university education set up in a training system comprised in a preparatory year. Those who cannot face the requirements will not be admitted to the university;
- Learning communities for those with higher than average results in the university and have a high motivation for learning.

The solutions for reducing the phenomenon of university abandonment are, in our opinion, of two types: prevention and intervention. We advocate for the development of counseling, coaching, and socio-emotional skills development in universities, addressed to students targeting both preventive and interventionist actions. The counseling, coaching and development of students' socio-emotional skills must come to meet these needs. They should make students aware of their own personality, help them develop their self-image and self-awareness, help them take responsibility, help them solve their school integration problems, social and professional.

Studies show that, where students have received counseling services, school performance has increased (Renuka et al. 2013), that counseling services tailored to students' daily concerns contribute to a higher effectiveness (for example, online counseling services – Olusegun, 2014).

On the other hand, counseling services should be developing institutionally, contribute to the adoption of educational programs specific to the traits of those who follow them.

Gaughf, Smith and Williams show in a study published in 2013 at a US academic center that counseling services are perceived as necessary by students but too few know how to access them (35% of those studied).

4. Results and Discussions.

A survey conducted by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies in 2015 among 353 master students shows that 94.6% of them appreciate the benefits of counseling services that helped them get better acquainted with the university, grow self-esteem, be more motivated for learning and engaging, plan for proper careers, so on.

In the field of preventive actions there are also a series of measures that the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest carries out:

- organizing additional courses at the disciplines where the most outstanding (remedial actions) have been recorded;
- setting up and developing counseling and guidance services;
- providing material support to low-income students;
- encouraging extracurricular activities (in student NGOs, employer's meetings, sports competitions, etc.);
- developing tutorial services for students organized by teachers and older students from first year students;
- counseling and individual guidance, in which the person at risk of university dropout is aware of the effects of abandoning on a personal and social level
- coaching services, personal development, development of socio-emotional skills
- career counseling and career guidance
- visits to employers, meetings with employers, career plans;
- workshops in specialized fields and study visits, meetings with teachers, university leadership, older colleges, employers;
- recreational activities, visiting representative cultural institutions, meetings with representatives of student organizations, involvement of beneficiaries in projects of student organizations.

Gaughf, Smith and Williams show, in a study published in 2013 at a US academic center, that counseling services are perceived as necessary by students, but too few know how to access them (35% of those studied). A similar study conducted by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies in 2015 among 353 master students shows that 94.6% of them appreciate the benefits of counseling services that helped them get better acquainted with the university expectations, grow self-esteem, be more motivated for learning and plan for proper careers, etc. The setting up of workshops and meetings with colleagues from older generations ensure the development and construction of learning networks, contributing to integration (Justyna 2015). Students will be encouraged to participate in activities, to have adequate academic behavior – which is another predictive factors of good integration. It seeks to promote an environment that combines traditional teaching with other learning ways. It is important for students to feel comfortable in the university environment (“at home”), to participate in extracurricular activities, to be connected with teachers and colleagues, which will reduce the risk of university dropout. Teachers and university staff must provide an academic background to help students integrate academically. Optimal combination of educational resources and related services, facilitating social interactions make academic integration and socialization easier, predictive factors for school success. All these activities will contribute to better social and school integration, defining factors in preventing university dropout. (Trevor and Parker, 2014).

5. Conclusion.

The aim is helping students to have a linear, chronological, progressive transition from one institutional structure to another, covering both information and academic, content, as well as activities that facilitate socialization, integration into student life.

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