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**CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY DROPOUT: CASE
STUDY**

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Abstract

The dropout is a reality in universities around the world. Its effects are felt both on a personal and social level. Revealing the causes that lead to the phenomenon and taking appropriate measures for its prevention must be priorities for universities. The paper aims to address the phenomenon of university dropout, a reality in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies to, emphasizing the most frequent causes of expelling: withdrawals, non-payment of tuition fees, non-accumulation of ECTS credits, non-signing of study contracts, accumulation of more than 3 failed exams after the first exam session. The analysis of the Career Counselling and Career Orientation Centre shows that the students come with an unrealistic image on the academic environment, and in fact what they need is support (tutoring and counselling services) for an easier integration. The research conducted is based on the premise that university dropout is a reality. Students who face difficulties to integrate themselves into the academic environment are the most exposed to the risk of dropout. This risk is dependent also on social and personal factors such as: the environment in which the student has grown up, the performance level achieved in high school, being member of a vulnerable group or not, low level of family income, lack of social competences, low level of interpersonal and emotional intelligence. The paper makes an analysis of the difficulties first year students considered they have to face and come with solutions to the university dropout phenomenon, both in terms of prevention and intervention.

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Keywords: Dropout, counselling, academic integration.



1. Introduction

Present society needs highly qualified human resource in order to function well and meet people's interests and life expectations. From this perspective, Romania is facing a gap to European countries. The Report on Higher Education in Romania (2015) pointed out that in academic year 2014-2015 the average time allocated to university studies was 1.2 years, fact that demonstrates a high level of dropping out from universities of students enrolled in higher education programs. Only 1/3 of 21 years old Romanian youngsters succeeded to graduate a bachelor university program (35.5% in academic year 2013-2014) while in 17 EU countries, the rate of bachelor programs graduation was 40% and in 5 countries (including Lithuania and Luxembourg) the percentage of bachelor programs graduates represents more than 50 % of 30-34 years old people. The opposite are 8 countries, among Romania, Italy and Malta with a percentage of below 30%.

The Strategy Europe 2020 established, as an important objective, that at least 40% of 30-34 years old people to graduate a tertiary education institution and get a university diploma or a similar qualification certificate. Due to all mentioned above, universities have to adopt and implement policies to prevent the drop-out and to increase to number of students who succeed to access higher education and graduate.

University dropout is an extreme type of educational failure. This has to be diminished due to at least four reasons: economic, social, individual, and pedagogical (Staiculescu, 2012). (1) Professional incompetence of individuals leads to a decrease in productivity and, in the same time, to an increase in costs of education, that become ineffective. (2) The low quality human resources induces negative effects such as marginalization, unemployment, social exclusion, or delinquency (the social reason). (3) For individuals, educational failure has psychological effects such as difficulties to adapt to daily life situations, lack of self-esteem and confidence in her or his own forces, anxiety, stress, and so on. (4) Educational failure is the indicator of the lack of pedagogic productivity and malfunctions of educational system.

1.1. University drop-out in Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Data collected in Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) demonstrate the amplitude of drop-out phenomenon including in this higher education institution. In academic year 2013-2014, 4527 students were enrolled in the first year of studies, but 737 students gave up or were expelled by the end of the year, that means a drop-out rate of 16.28%. In the academic year 2014-2015, 5525 students were enrolled in the first year of studies, 801 students gave up or were expelled by the end of the year, and the drop-out rate was 15.50%. In the academic year 2015-2016, 6144 students were enrolled in the first year of studies, 880 students gave up or were expelled by the end of the year, and the drop-out rate was 14.32%. Finally, in the academic year 2016-2017, 5211 students were enrolled in the first year of studies, 787 students gave up or were expelled by the end of the year, and the drop-out rate was 15.10%.

Among the objective causes of expelling most frequent are voluntary withdrawal, problems in payment the tuition fee, getting credits ECTS, or signing the study contracts, and more than 3 exams failed. A preliminary analysis of exams situation shows that students fail to diverse courses but most of them have difficulties in mathematics, microeconomics, macroeconomics, informatics, accounting and so on, as a fact, in passing exams to fundamental courses for majoring in economics and business.

2. Problem Statement

The analysis made at the Counselling and Career Orientation Centre from ASE demonstrates that many students enrolled in the 1st year have an unrealistic image of what a university is and need support to understand all requirements and act properly. In other words, they need tutoring and counselling services.

Most of the Romanian university students are 18-25 years old. They are facing profound changes both at personal and social level. At this age, individuals face instability, intense searches, efforts to adapt to daily life situations, lack of a correct image of professional environment, lack of motivation and perspective toward study and work, lack of self-knowing (Diaconu & Staiculescu, 2012). At the beginning of university studies, young students are still teenagers. While studying in university they become adults (Verza & Schiopu, 1997; Diaconu & Staiculescu, 2012). A while, characteristics of teen-age co-exist with the ones of adulthood. It is a period of challenges, tensions and doubts due to the fact the individual responsibilities increase as economic and social pressures put on individuals increase.

Difficult situations for youngsters at this age can be generated by:

- Separation from parents and psychological, economic and financial autonomy. Many youngsters are leaving family and the place where they use to live in order to study at university. They have to live in a (new) city and a new home, to manage a budget, or to find a first job.
- New educational requirements. Academic environment has a higher level of neutrality in social relationships than pre-university education environment and there are multiple and diverse requirements.
- Professional requirements. Many students are involved in internships and practical stages in real professional environments. They have specific expectations and perceptions regarding a job and, in many cases, these are far from reality
- Giving many people on standby: teachers and classmates.
- Changes in self-perception due to relationships with the others that imply confirmation or invalidation of personal qualities and traits.

All these factors can conduct to sense of loss, fear, anxiety, insecurity, inadequacy, depression, or difficulties to focus on different things and activities (Diaconu & Staiculescu, 2012).

Youngsters have many questions regarding their identity and personality: Who am I and who will I be? (In the field of „*To be*”); what have I and what I want to have? (In the field of „*To have*”); what can I do best and what will I do? (In the field of „*To can do*”) (Diaconu & Staiculescu, 2012). Experts pointed out that the integration in a new environment is depending on the socialization process in that an individual learns new roles he or she has to play. Some students succeed to integrate themselves faster while others are doing this slower. The last ones are more vulnerable to the risk of drop-out. The risk of drop-out depends on other social and personal factors too. Among these factors are: the environment in which the student grew up (rural or urban), the performance level a student achieved in high school, being member of a vulnerable group or not, low level of family income, lack of social competences and low level of interpersonal and emotional intelligence.

3. Research Questions

The research we have conducted aimed to:

- Identify first year at School of Management students' opinions regarding the obstacles they have to face at the beginning of their new life as university students in relationship with subjects they are studying and academic environment.
- Identify 1st year School of Management students opinions regarding desirable services that universities should provide to ensure a good integration of students in the academic environment and to prevent university dropout.

4. Purpose of the Study

The hypothesis of the research was that the risk of dropout at 1st year at School of Management students from ASE is directly depended on different personal and institutional factors.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Methods and techniques

In order to meet the research objectives we have conducted an empirical survey. This type of survey allows a direct observation on reality with specific methods and techniques. We have used the questionnaire and social documents analysis to collect and process information.

The methods we have used were both quantitative and qualitative. The questionnaire was selected due to its value as research instrument that allows systematic data collection and validate interpretation of collected data. The analysis of social documents as source of information allows data interpretation from the perspective of research objectives. The questionnaire was applied to 1st year students enrolled at School of Management from ASE in academic year 2017-2018.

5.2. The sampling

The sampling was:

- A *non-probabilistic sampling*, that involves use of previous information or information communicated by experts to select samples typical or representative to the research;
- A *group sampling* regularly use in the case of a heterogeneous population, with many heterogeneous groups. In this case, the groups are distinct sampling units.

The group studied: 1st year students enrolled at School of Management from ASE. In academic year 2017-2018. In the academic year 2017-2018, in the first year at School of Management from ASE were enrolled 655 students. Of these, 186 students were included in the research sample and gave answers to at least one question from the questionnaire. As a fact, the percentage of respondents was 28.38% which is a representative percentage relative to the total number of enrolled students in the first year at School of Management.

5.3. The research instruments

The questionnaire: We have used an omnibus survey that allows approaching more than one theme and a large volume of information and, in the same time, has low cost relative to the volume of collected data. The questionnaire included three questions – pre-coded questions oriented to information on the subject of research and open questions too. There were factual questions too asking students contact data.

How was the questionnaire applied: The questionnaire was applied directly in workshops conducted as part of a campaign meant to prevent university dropout and to create awareness on benefits of higher education.

When was the questionnaire applied: The questionnaire was applied in January 2018, in the last third part of the first semester before, but before the first session of exams.

Social documents analysis: Actually, we have studied the documents that students had to provide when enrolled at university – baccalaureate diploma, ID's, medical records/recommendations – and the results after first exams.

6. Findings

In order to conduct the research we have selected one of the largest school of ASE, the School of Management. Collected data were compared with the university curriculum and especially with the curriculum for the first year, first semester. All data were entered into an electronic database in order to be processed and interpreted.

6.1. Difficult subjects

The questionnaire referred to all subjects from the curriculum for the first semester of the first year. The students considered subjects such as IT applications in management, mathematics, and microeconomics difficult. Most of them considered the above mentioned subjects very difficult and estimated that they will face problems in order to pass exams: 105 respondents refers to IT applications in management and 104 respondents refers to mathematics. In the same time, 81 respondents have estimated problems to microeconomics exam.

After the first exams, many of the 655 enrolled students had failures:

- 87 students failed 2 exams;
- 69 students failed 3 exams;
- 58 students failed 4 exams;
- 96 students failed 5 exams.

The most failed exams were at subjects such as eco technologies, accounting, IT applications in management, mathematics and microeconomics. Data analysis confirms students' expectations on difficulties they face and shows a problematic situation regarding students learning skills and motivation and commitment to study.

6.2. Sources of difficulties

The most important sources of difficulties estimated and faced by students (as important and very important) are:

- Large volume of information they have to internalize in a short period of time (83 respondents);
- Different requirements in comparison with ones in high school (75 respondents);
- Lack of previous knowledge (46 respondents);
- Overcrowded schedule (40 respondents).

The analysis of difficulties mentioned by student's shows that most of them are related to the specific of academic life and only some of them are related to personal factors. Students admitted that they are not well prepared and they have learning difficulties due the lack of previous preparation.

6.3. The support students need

- Additional courses, class and tutoring activities in order to recover missing information and better understanding the concepts and theories;
- Counselling on effective learning methods and techniques;
- Compulsory tutoring activities for first year students;
- Counselling on effective stress management in exams period.

7. Conclusion

University drop-out is possible in the case of students we have surveyed. This can be consequence of different difficulties faced by students and also of the lack of support services provided by university. The university has to implement two types of policies in order to diminish the drop-out phenomenon: prevention and intervention. Both drop-out prevention and intervention could be done through counselling services specifically oriented and developed. Counselling services should target students' needs. These services should make students aware of their personal characteristics, help them to develop their self-image and conscience, take responsibilities, and solve daily university, social and professional life problems. Research demonstrates that students who benefited by counselling services succeeded to increase their results and perform better at exams (Renuka Devi., Devaki, Madhanika, Madhavan, & Saikumar, 2013), and counselling services adapted to students daily activities and interests help increase efficiency of these activities - for example, on-line counselling services (Adebowale, 2014). On the other hand, the counselling services should be developed institutionally and help implement educational programs specific to learners' characteristics, of the learners. They have to be constant promoted in order to became familiar to students and be accessed by them.

Have showed in a paper published in 2013 that counselling services are necessary, in students perception, but few of them know how to access them (35% of respondents in a survey conducted in an American university), (Gaughf, Smith, & Williams, 2013). A survey conducted in 2015 in ASE among 353 master students shows that 94,6% of them appreciate the counselling services that have help them to know themselves better, increase their self-esteem and motivation for study and work, and plan a career.

Among prevention actions implemented in ASE are: additional courses and class activities to difficult subjects in order to decrease the number of failed exams (remedial activities), counselling and career orientation services, material support to students from families with low income, extracurricular activities, encouraging students organizations, meetings with employers, athletic contests etc. Among intervention actions are: tutoring activities, individual counselling and orientation in order that the student with high risk of drop-out to be aware of the personal and social consequences of dropping-out.

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