



ORIGINAL PAPER

The beginning of studies and the prediction of university abandonment

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Abstract

This study makes an incursion on the issue of abandoning the higher education, understood as the most serious situation in which is a first-year student, who wants to abandon the studies. Also, in its turn, the phenomenon of abandonment is linked to the social exclusion, unemployment, poverty, delinquency, lack of health insurance, which means that a poor education, without exploiting own possibilities, trains, like a snowball, a series of shortcomings. However, we can distinguish the abandon from the false failures that can occur in the cases of shy, indecisive, pessimistic students, who usually assess exaggerated the difficulty of the current academic tasks, especially in the case of the difficult examinations, considered as impossible to be passed, as there is no confidence in their own possibilities for action. Thus, the smallest failure makes these students to devaluate themselves even more, to develop a fear of failure, which they will consider as a fatality. The reason for choosing such a thema is closely related to the high rate of university abandonment in our country, which requires a detailed analysis of the causes in order to prevent or improve them. At the national level, the results of certain research indicate the main causes: the financial problems, dissatisfaction with the choice of specialization, but these causes are very diverse: the distance to the educational institution, the negative influences of the socio-cultural environment/the anti-school culture, the mobility/migration of parents which creates inconsistencies in the social integration, life events such as marriage and the birth of children, intellectual disability, insufficient training, health problems, teachers' poor pedagogical style and so on. From our perspective, as teachers, the prevention of dropping out of university studies can be achieved through remedial activities at the problematic disciplines, through counseling sessions in academic learning, personal development activities, or socio-professional/practical training.

Keywords: *higher education; students; abandon; retention; adaptation.*

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The specific of the higher education

In Romania, the higher education is a tertiary education (ISCED 6), and its specificity is given by objectives, contents, methodologies and assessment modalities different from the other stages of education, compared to the previous education cycle, the high school education. In the higher education, the pursued aims of advanced specialization impose new standards that require a considerable learning effort from the students.

The disciplines and the contents of learning are very close to the pure science, being heavily theorized. Identifying those methods and means in order to attract more students in the learning activity remains a challenge for their teachers (Sava and others, 2015). At the same time, in order to adapt to the way in which the higher education is conducted, in particular to the summative assessment, through exams, the students need to restructure and make more efficient their strategies, learning styles, to self-organize themselves so that they can learn deeply, thorough and not superficial, in assault.

An important factor in adapting students to the requirements of the study program is attending the courses and seminars, their involvement in learning, the benevolent attitudes promoted. The students' participation in activities ensures a familiarity with the elements to be learned: a initial learning, as a result of the interactions with the discipline, the means of education, teachers, colleagues, which provide the basis for the academic success, by knowing of criteria/requirements/teaching style.

By their specificity, the learners who are in a low-frequency education, are engaged in the professional and family life and do not have time for learning, this being unsystematic. However, it is possible, especially if they are adults, to be more determined than young learners, by a professional motivation, to have a richer experience, to experience the social affirmation and the confrontation with others, to be concerned about the practical utility of what they learn, to be critical about the quality of the training they get, to be more independent in their approaches, which are some of the advantages that need to be taken into account when we know them and interact with them.

What is the abandonment of the university studies?

The abandonment means giving up the studies, but it does not occur instantly, it is announced by a series of the pre-emergent phenomena: the non-attendance at school/the absenteeism, the isolation from colleagues, low/at limit graduation or the repeatability, the temporary abandonment of the studies. Traditionally, the attribution or existence of the decision to abandon the studies of the learner, as an independent and definitive decision, corresponds to the drop-out, and a more modern perspective also draws the attention to the "expelled students": the push-out phenomenon.

In the pre-university education, from a legal point of view, the abandonment means that the students do not attend the school for two consecutive years. From a statistical point of view, the dropout rate is established as a percentage ratio between the number of the students enrolled and the number of the graduates.

Although it is considered to be a manifestation of the scholar failure, we should, however, distinguish the abandonment of the studies from the situations of false failures. There are cases where the timid, indecisive, pessimistic people usually over assess the difficulty of the current academic tasks, considering them as impossible to be passed,

because they do not trust their own means of action. The smallest recorded failure leads them to devalue themselves even more, to develop a fear of failure, which they will consider as a fatality.

Also, due to the practice of some students to enroll in more specializations in the first year, for the admission safety or to have options to choose what they are testing, from a numerical point of view, we can mistakenly catalog these cases as abandon.

The phenomenon of dropout (or disinsertion) was analyzed by many authors: Tinto, 2006; Moseley and Mead, 2008; Dekker, 2009, 2010; Demetriou and Schmitz-Scibouski, 2011; Delen, 2011; Raisman, Thammasicci and others, 2014 (cited by Aulk and others, 2017).

The abandonment is the most serious situation in which a pupil/student can be found, but the more serious is whether or not the society accepts or is indifferent to this phenomenon. The severity of the situation is given by the interdependence of the abandonment with the precarious education, social exclusion, unemployment, poverty, delinquency, lack of health insurances, which in their turn are generative. Those who abandon the school are not re-accepted later to the same educational institution and are not enrolled in an alternate schooling program. The short-term and long-term effects are negative: the students do not get a qualification, they have an insufficient training, they are under the unemployment spectrum, they have low incomes, invested training resources are lost, and socially, there may be blaming.

The importance of preventing or remedying the university abandonment is also given by treating or reporting it in the educational policy documents. The European Commission recommends widening the access to the higher education by drawing attention to "the social responsibility in helping students to reduce the psychological, financial and/or emotional risks of not completing their studies (...). The students retention can be considered as a key indicator of the performance of superior education systems." (European Commission, 2014:10).

At national level, in mass media, empirical studies indicate that Romania is among the countries with the most pupils and students in Europe who abandon the school. In the case of the pre-university education, in spite of the improvement programs, there is a percent of 20% on school drop-outs. In the case of the university education, the non-binding nature of the studies creates very high abandon rates. The National Alliance of Students Organizations in Romania (2014) showed that only 61% of the students enrolled in the first year completed their undergraduate studies, one of the most common reasons for the university abandonment being the lack of financial resources.

At European level, the countries where the success of studies is low are Bulgaria, Cyprus, Iceland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Turkey, and examples of good practice are given by countries such as Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden (European Commission, 2015: 7).

Etiology of abandonment

Referring to the quality of the Romanian higher education, Păunescu and others (2011: 44) observed that the main criteria that dominated the classical higher education, meaning the selective and elitist criteria, were replaced by the increase in the participation in the higher education and, in our opinion, this trend may be an explanation for which some students of the first year abandon their university studies.

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Their adaptive difficulties include the difficulty to keep up with the specifics of higher education as a volume and pace of instruction, which requires the awareness of the teachers teaching these students, the intervention to support them, in order to avoid the demotivation.

Citing Jordan and others, 1994, Watt and Roessingh, 1994, Doll and others (2013: 2) report why students abandon: they can be pushed, pulled, or fall out of school: students are pushed out when adverse situations within the school environment lead to consequences, ultimately resulting in dropout; students can be pulled out when factors inside the student divert them from completing school; we talk about falling out of school, when a student does not show significant academic progress in schoolwork and becomes apathetic or even disillusioned with the school completion.

The approach to the abandonment concerns not only the educational domain, but also the sociological one, and some authors such as Rumberger, Dornbusch, Ghatak, Poulos and Ritter (1990), Ensminger and Slusarcik (1992), Jenkins (1992), Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey 1997), Russell (2000) (cited by Olah, 2009) analyzed the causality of abandonment. Thus, a number of predictors of the abandonment were established: the poverty, race, parental non-involvement in the school life, parents' level of education, aggressive behavior of the pupil. The studies carried out mainly referred to the situation of the public schools, especially those in the less-favored areas.

Aulk and others (2017: 17) considered that "The students who dropped out (...) were defined as those students who did not complete at least one undergraduate degree within six calendar years of the first enrollment", and the factors influencing this trend, experimentally established, are very diverse: specialization, age, whether the students are or not at the first enrollment, the session in which they enrolled (summer, autumn).

The causes of abandonment may be cognitive or non-cognitive, both of them being important. Also, another way of identifying and structuring the intervening factors includes the external-internal dimension. Thus, as external factors, socially-objective, the cause the decision to abandon the studies is the physical environment represented by the geographic isolation. Also, external factors are the precarious socio-cultural environment, the disorganized and non-supportive family environment, the mobility/migration of parents, which creates superficial/inconstant adaptation, marriage or professional integration, imposing other existential priorities, extra-family group, friends who have antisocial aspirations, a anti-school, anti-work anti-discipline culture, poor pedagogical style, obsolete teaching, assessment errors, inadequate relationship of teachers with their students. Many of the external causes are related to the socio-economic context: low financial resources or disadvantaged environments have an effect on motivation, beliefs, the ideal of life of the young people.

The students values can be related to the types that Schwartz (2006) enumerated as personal values: Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, Security. It is interesting to determine whether the propensity towards certain material values is a predictor of abandoning the studies because some national studies indicate the lack of money as the main cause (Pricopie and others, 2011: 65). A model of the predictive factors of the abandonment (idem: 67) includes: the family income (the students coming from the low-income families are 58% more likely to abandon than the students coming from the high income families), evaluation scores in the session (students with small, medium grades are more prone to the abandonment), plus the presence of materialistic values, compared

to the case when the students choose other values related to their intellectual-spiritual training.

From this point of view, we appreciate that the study of the determinants of abandoning the university studies must be done carefully, depending on the national specificity, but also according to the concrete context of each university, fact confirmed also by Rothman (2001: 67), is important to choosing an appropriate design for the analysis of school data, especially when data are collected as part of an educational system's administrative collection.

In Europe, during the 1970s, sociologists approached the issue of the "global crisis of education" (Coombs, 1968) from conflictual positions. The crisis of the education has been linked to the inability of the education and training systems to help all people to value their resources. The main reproach to the education systems was that they constitute a factor in reproducing certain power reports existing in society by discriminating the access to the high culture of the children coming from the social-culture disadvantaged environments. The school can not ensure equal opportunities, by favoring access to a higher education only to children from the social classes with a leading role in society. Through complicated systems of conditional access to higher education, exploiting the inequality in the distribution of the linguistic and cultural codes that promote success, the education leads to a reproduction of the existing power relations in society. The equal opportunities refer to the fact that the human beings are free to develop their personal capacities and to choose without limitations imposed by strict roles, being pursued for humanitarian, ethical, social, economic, political, legal reasons. Raymond Boudon (1973) showed that the educational system and the choices that pupils make repeatedly can lead to inequality of the chances. For example, rural origin creates an inequality in the opportunities for the personal development/non-formal education/leisure, as well as for support or guidance chances, parental monitoring during studies. In this case, the work activities become competitive for learning ones. The existence of some reasons for social discrimination (such as Roma membership) may be an impediment to further studies through the additional effort required to integrate into the community.

The internal factors of abandoning the studies include the general health status, which, if unfavorable, biologically conditions the learning success, but also the psychological factors, regarding the poor functioning of the intellect, the insufficient mobilization of motivation, attention, will, affectivity, malfunctioning in the manifestation of the personality components: temperament, character, aptitudes.

The individual affective issues, such as the anxiety for school, for teachers, emerging from some conflicts, create an avoidable behavior. The same happens in the case of certain psycho-nervous determinations such as hyper-excitability, emotional imbalance, depression, and so on. From a behavioral point of view, they are destructive, if they are virulent: the originality crisis/delayed adolescence, aggression, delinquency.

Sneyers and De Witte (2015: 7) have shown that the higher admission standards reduce the abandonment rate. Correlatively, the mediocre school results in the pre-university cycle often generate a low motivation for the academic learning. Also in this category, related to the insufficient training level is the lack of psychological training, the low capacity to respond to the requirements of the academic environment due to the differences from the previous cycle. The students (especially those of the first year) face difficulties in organizing their own activities and do not have adequate intellectual work strategies, which in most cases comes from a behavior perpetuated from high school.

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Many of them have little confidence in the role of completing a university course, in finding a job or in obtaining material or moral benefits.

From the point of view of predictive research, some contributions point to arborescence explanatory patterns and establish a strong correlation with personal factors such as the illness or educational factors, consisting of learning difficulties, difficult courses or institutional factors relating to the university campus environment (Rai, 2014).

At a personal level, the academic learning is often hampered by the lack of: the necessary skills, exercise, basic knowledge, learning techniques; by insufficient motivation, accountability, focus or voluntary support; poorly defined interests or professional orientation; negative learning experiences; not attending courses; by inappropriate material conditions; by the lack of planning and organizing competencies for the learning activities, by a wrong self-evaluation and the avoidance reactions, refusal to learn (Frăsineanu, 2012).

Knowing students and investigating the risk of abandoning studies during the first year of the license

According to a pilot survey conducted at the West University of Timișoara, Sava and others (2015: 5) showed that "The failure to meet the reasons and expectations, the unrealistic expectations and their lack of clarity, specificity, the emotional training and the poor academic abilities, the adaptive (s) difficulties and the marginalization from the academic process cause abandonment of the students". In 2016, The Transylvania University of Brașov used a questionnaire to monitor the academic abandon rate. An own questionnaire, pre-tested on students from the University of Craiova, could be helpful in determining early the risk of dropping out of university studies, but it is also an easily applicable tool, so that the teacher and the students themselves to be better acquainted with the educational needs, respecting the principle of student centered academic education.

The structure of the questionnaire is presented below, and the utility of such a tool is related to the knowledge of the causes and the action on them, also other authors considering tracking and monitoring of students aims to reduce the number of students who drift away, especially in their first year (Quinn, 2013).

Questionnaire for the prevention of academic abandonment

This questionnaire is designed to know and improve the factors associated with the interruption or abandonment of studies for the first year students, in the second semester. Please respond honestly to your questions and we assure you that your data will be used exclusively for statistical reporting, being useful in preventing this phenomenon. Some questions allow more variants of answers, which you may to choose or detail.

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A. Facts:

1. Academic year
2. Initials of the first and last name

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3. Gender
 - a) Female
 - b) Male
4. Age
5. Faculty:
6. Specialization/
Program of Studies:
7. Educational format:
 - a) Frequency education
 - b) Reduced frequency
8. Type of studies:
 - a) Budget
 - b) With study fee

B. Questions:

1. Please indicate which of the following variants corresponds to your current professional situation:

- a) Hired
- b) Self-employed/Entrepreneur
- c) Inactive person on the labor market
- d) Unemployed

2. You assess that your family's income is:

- a) Very good
- b) Good
- c) Average
- d) Low
- e) Very low and not at all

3. Please indicate, by making a circle the appropriate answer, which of the following variants corresponds to your current study situation. So far, within the university:

- a) You have been enrolled in a single study program (the one mentioned above).
- b) You are a graduate of a university degree program.
- c) You have previously been enrolled in a degree program, but have not graduated.

4. Who do you think is the main support factor for continuing university studies in your case?

- a) Family
- b) Teachers
- c) Entourage, friends
- d) Other students, colleagues
- e) Other situation (to be specified)

5. Being a student and graduating then from the university is, for you:

- a) Very important
- b) Important
- c) Little important

9. Domicile

- a) In the urban environment
- b) In rural areas

10. Current residence area:

- a) Home
- b) Campus
- c) With rent
- d) Other situation
(to be specified).....

11. Type of admission to university:

- a) Based on a file
- b) Exam

12. Nationality:

13. Marital status:

- a) Married
- b) Unmarried

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- d) Not at all important
 - e) I do not know
6. In the following academic year, you intend to:
- a) Continue your studies
 - b) Do not continue your studies
 - c) Enroll in another study program
 - d) Continue your studies abroad
 - e) Other (to be specified)
7. If you are considering to abandon the studies, please indicate which of the following reasons would clearly make you make this decision:
- a) Not applicable
 - b) Low chances of finding a job
 - c) The quality of the study program does not meet your expectations
 - d) Teachers do not teach you according to your requirements
 - e) The content of the education disciplines does not meet your expectations
 - f) The educational conditions do not meet your expectations
 - g) Lack of usefulness of what you need to learn
 - h) Your financial resources are limited and you can not cover your tuition costs
 - i) Your financial resources are limited and you can not cover your personal expenses
 - j) The courses timetable or the schedule does not match your wishes
 - k) The residential environment is far from the university
 - l) The financial charges/fees outweigh your possibilities
 - m) The accommodation conditions are unsatisfactory
 - n) The cultural-academic life does not meet your expectations
 - o) Deficient human relationships
 - p) Your professional status has changed
 - q) Your family situation has changed
 - r) Another reason (to be specified)
8. Your grades average in the first semester was:
- a) Less than 5.00
 - b) Between 5.01-6.00
 - c) Between 6.01-7.00
 - d) Between 7.01-8.00
 - e) Between 8.01-9.00
 - f) Between 9.01-10.00
9. Make a self-assessment of your degree of involvement or effort in the academic learning!
- a) Very much
 - b) Much
 - c) Average
 - d) Little and very little
 - e) Not at all
10. Make a self-assessment of your attendance at courses and seminars!
- a) Very much
 - b) Much
 - c) Average
 - d) Little and very little

e) Not at all

11. In your own case, the main reason for choosing the license specialization was:

- a) Continuing the profile chosen in high school
- b) Tradition of the family
- c) High chances of enrollment
- d) The benefits of the profession
- e) External encouragement made by parents/close relatives
- f) As an alternative to lack of job
- g) Other reason (to be specified)
- h) Combined Reasons

12. Do you consider that in order to prevent the abandonment of the university studies, it would be necessary:

- a) Common debates teachers-students
- b) Remedial courses
- c) Psycho-pedagogical counseling sessions
- d) School and Professional Orientation Activities
- e) Exchanges of experience
- f) Other activities (to be specified)

In developing the built tool, we took into account the specificity of the questionnaire survey: tracking/integrating components that correlate with the scholar abandonment and can be real indicators for its prediction in relation to different premises. The facts can provide information about: the gender differences, age, student specialization, education form, impact of the study fees, the change of residence environment, the influence of the admission mode, the nationality, the marital status. The Item 1 refers to the professional integration, which can be an asset, but also involves additional efforts from the student. The Item 2 aims to establish the level of the financial support, correlated with the Item 4, in an attempt to know the moral/motivational support. The Item 3 seeks to identify the existence of some competitive factors for the current activity, in close connection with the motivational dimensions (interests, intentions, motives) investigated by the Items 5, 6, 11. The Item 7 is the core of the questionnaire, in that, the student is required to exclude the risk of abandonment or to select the plausible reasons for it. The Items 8, 9, 10 establish the level of the results achieved by students and the consumed learning effort, the degree of study attendance, as quantitative or qualitative indicators of the learning efficiency. The last item aims to validate anti-abandon measures or solutions. Such a tool can be combined or supplemented with other questions within the focus groups or with individual student conversations.

Solutions to university abandonment

The students retention, as the positive phenomenon opposed to the abandonment, is the intent of the educational policies in the university education. Thus, for the academic year 2018-2019, the National Council for Statistics and Prognosis of Higher Education in Romania proposed a tuition figure of 62,000 places financed from the state budget for the higher studies, one of the arguments being the evolution of the number of the enrolled students in the first year at the state universities, which has a slightly upward trend in recent years.

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In the U.S. education system, there is a number of the facilitating measures for organizing the student learning activity so that they better adapt to the new environment: the Endowment with modern resources such as electronic libraries determines the use of state-of-the-art technologies for obtaining and processing information by students (e.g. e-mail accounts for documenting or presenting different papers); the study program is flexible, with many optional courses (especially in the first period of studies), which gives the student the possibility to choose the courses according to his/her own requirements; at the beginning of the studies there are programs that provide the guidance, assistance, counseling in learning.

From the perspective of teachers, it is important in the academic education, to notice but especially to solve the situation in which sometimes, the students find themselves as being unable to cope with the learning requirements, to feel overwhelmed, because what is required is new, too much, too difficult. Therefore, identifying the specificity of the study area approach is a solution that includes assessing learners' needs and learning styles, guiding them in learning. This is a matter of regulation or feed-back, which should be solved at the initial moments of the training, in which the teacher presents the specifics of the subject matter and along the way, when establishing, by consultation with the students, strategies of teaching/learning/assessment.

The European Commission (2015: 65) identifies our country-specific approach to ensuring the success of studies: financial support for students, Curriculum design, student support services, support for study choices. Other solutions that can be listed are: knowledge of threats and the action on them; personalized intervention programs; applied interactive methods, using the modern means; deleting elitism, meritocracy, in favor of an education correlated with the requirements of the labor market, more pragmatic; interdisciplinary; applying new education, extracurricular education; introducing the admission exam; initiation programs; tutorial; provide personalized support; encourage innovation.

Some solutions are already being applied, for example, in the Romanian Secondary Education Project (ROSE), with reimbursable funding, grants are allocated to universities to reduce the students abandonment. In the ROSE Project (2017-2019), *The Retention of the Philology students with the abandonment risk, integrated solutions* at the University of Craiova, as a project we participate at, the students are involved in: a) remedial activities in those areas where students have had low results; b) guidance and support sessions in order to optimize the academic learning process; c) personal development activities, coaching and building of some important socio-emotional skills, allowing the students to set priorities more easily, to relate more easily, to increase the interest in volunteering and lifelong learning, which will lead to a better quality of their life in the long term; d) activities that familiarize students with the current job requirements and working atmosphere in a professional organization, aiming at socio-professional training, career counseling and guidance, and entrepreneurship sessions.

We conclude that, through a reflective, proactive, selective, responsible approach, the students can identify the proper resources to improve their outcomes and to get support for the risk of abandonment of the university studies: human resources - teachers, themselves, others colleagues, material resources, information and of content, financial resources, procedural resources, space resources, time resources.

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Article Info

Received: April 08 2019

Accepted: April 16 2019
