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# Contemporary Education Challenges: University Dropout

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**Abstract:** *Lately policy makers, educators, specialist from education field become interested about statistics concerning study dropout. In university there are some programs that have registered a higher rate of dropout (for example, engineering, as EUROSTUDENT 8 (2024) study indicate). Brewer et al. (2019), Fenech (2025) indicated in their study that student wellbeing and dropout are connected. Also, Hauschildt (2024) get to the conclusion that students study situation is strongly corelated with wellbeing. Fenech (2025) demonstrated that wellbeing is an important factor that reduce the risk for study dropout. Starting from this background, the purpose of our study was to identify the main reasons that our students (engineering sciences) like or dislike university activities and what is their perception (after their first session of exams) on the relation between three types of curriculum: taught, learned and tested. Working with students that have chosen psycho-pedagogic study program (85 students from technical faculties in their first year of study, university year 2024-2025, second semester), during seminar activities, we have organized a study based on focus-group interviews and reflective exercises. An important finding was that discovering new things and socialization are the main reasons for liking school activities and perceived difficulties of tasks and level of information are reasons for not liking school. These findings inspire us to propose measures for improving activities in university as measures for preventing risk and dropout. Other results are discussed here.*

**Keywords**: *dropout; students; higher education; engineering; wellbeing;*

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## Introduction

An issue that recently focused specialists' interest is *education dropout*. Defined as *the proportion of students in a cohort who did not graduate within two years of the theoretical completion* (Alexe-Coteț et al., 2022), dropout is an important topic both for educators, specialists, and policy makers. Although specialty literature uses different concepts (like dropout, attrition, student withdrawal or premature termination of participation), we consider that the concept of dropout best covers the area of our study we will use in our paper.

Studies (S´anchez-Gelabert & Troiano, 2023, Everaert et al, 2024) indicate that dropout has profound effects on universities due to financial consequences, reputation, instability of planification. High interest for Romanian studies about dropout in higher education developed in the last years (for example Curaj et al. (eds), 2022, Alexe-Coteț et al. 2022, Mihuț & Bădescu, 2022, Ministry of Education reports, 2022, 2023, 2024).

National reports about university education in Romania (Ministry of Education report, 2022) indicate a raising percent of students that do not graduate. This report indicate that 9,4% of students have dropout university studies and 3,6% have been declared repeaters with unfinished or interrupted studies; so, we could see a percent of 14% for university dropout, higher than European average.

In particular, engineering is a domain with higher risk in comparison with education sciences (see the report of Romanian Minister of Education and Research, 2022).

The study conducted by Alexe-Coteț et al. (2022) that involved analyzing higher education dropout in Romania, between 2015-2020, was proposed by UEFISCDI (an institution subordinated

to Romanian Ministry of Education). Their results get to the alarming conclusion that *at the national level, the university dropout rate for the 2015 cohort - 3-year and 4-year bachelor's degree programs - is 47.96%.* Also, other statistics from the above-mentioned study indicate that 44% of license students drop out after their first year, that dropout rates for part-time and distance learning are the highest - 65.8% and that students aged between 23 and 26 years old have the biggest rate of dropout – 70,93%.

In the report of Ministry of Education since 2023 about higher education in Romania statistics indicates 14,8% repeaters and students with unfinished or interrupted studies. A very low difference has been indicated in the report of ministry about higher education since 2024 – 13,9% repeaters and students with unfinished or interrupted studies. We could conclude that are low fluctuations considering university dropout in higher education in Romania but higher rates in comparison with European average.

**Table 1. School situation of university license level students to the final of 2023/2024 university year**

| **Organization type/ Propriety type** | **Number of students** | | | | **Percentage of total enrolments at the beginning of the year (%)** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **At the beginning of university year** | **At the end of university year** | **Promote** | **Repeaters, unfinished situation, interruption of studies** | **Promote** | **Repeaters, unfinished situation, interruption of studies** | **Losses during process** |
| **Total** | **410.181** | **369.711** | **353.335** | **16.376** | **86,1%** | **4,0%** | **9,9%** |
| **Distribution by type of organization** | | | | | | | |
| Full-time education | 366.438 | 333.226 | 318.871 | 14.355 | 87,0% | 3,9% | 9,1% |
| Part-time education | 14.671 | 12.705 | 11.958 | 747 | 81,5% | 5,1% | 13,4% |
| Distance education | 29.072 | 23.780 | 22.506 | 1.274 | 77,4% | 4,4% | 18,2% |
| **Distribution by type of ownership** | | | | | | | |
| Public education | 356.684 | 320.250 | 306.151 | 14.099 | 85,8% | 4,0% | 10,2% |
| Private education | 53.497 | 49.461 | 47.184 | 2.277 | 88,2% | 4,3% | 7,5% |

Source: Report of Romanian Ministry of Education, 2024

As a reaction to these findings, Romanian specialists and policy makers have proposed and implemented some measures like approval of the Methodology for the organization and operation of the National Program for Reducing University Dropout Rates (see government decision no 387/16.04.2025). This national program aims for increasing student retention in higher education through supporting the transition from high school to university education, counselling support, *Second Chances* programs, implementing social programs like *First students in family*, monitoring risk for university dropout, and remedial activities.

In this context, we were interested which are the reasons that our students like or dislike to go to university as a premise for their continuity or risk for dropout. We have started from the assumption that students that like school both for social and academic reasons, will experiment wellbeing and will make efforts to continue studies and pass the exams.

## Literature review

### *University dropout – theoretical models, statistics and risk factors*

*Theoretical models.* Dropout is phenomenon that focused the interest of specialists since 1970's. Theoretical models indicated that both social and individual factors influence dropout risk level.

Early models that analyzed dropout in high level education institutions were Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto & Cullen (1973), Tinto (1975, 1997) (cited by Nicoletti, 2019). Spady's model consider both social factors (like family background, friendship support, social integration etc.) and individual factors (like academic potential and intellectual development) as we can see in the figure below.

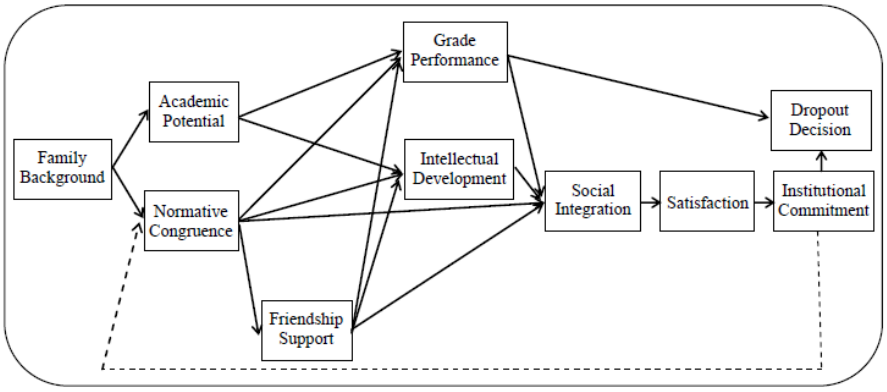



**Figure 1. Spady's dropout model**

Source: Nicoletti, 2019

A more complex model was Tinto's model that analyses factors considering both individual and social factors and connections between those factors, like academic and social integration, academic system and quality of students' effort, family background and prior schooling etc. as we can see in Figure 2.

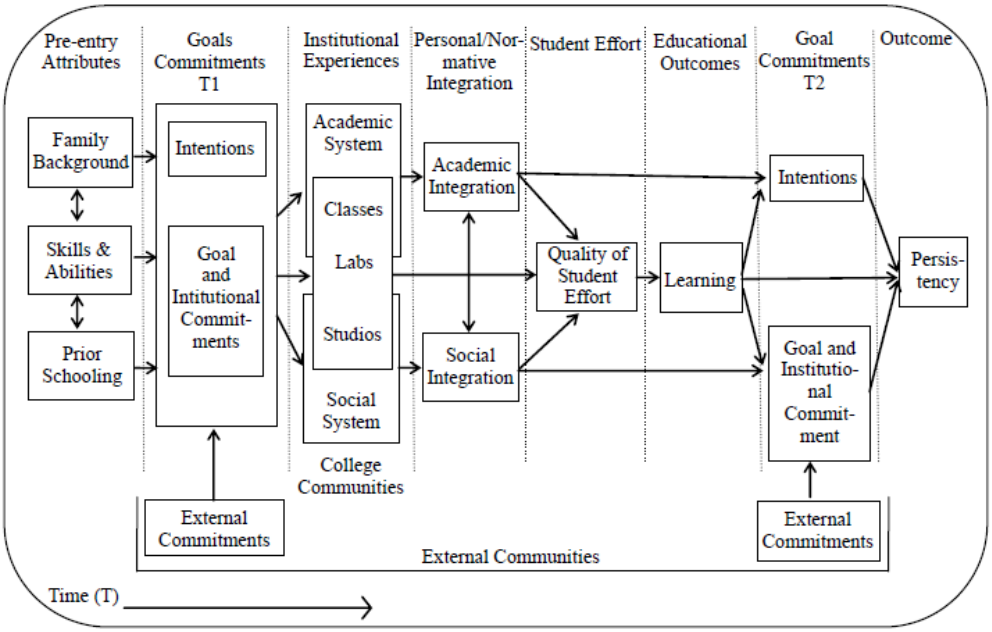



**Figure 2. Tinto's dropout model**

Source: Nicoletti, 2019

Other models have developed early theoretical models trying to consider also cultural differences (for example Wiseman et al., 2004)

*Risk factors.* Alexe-Coteț et al. (2022) study about Romania situation considering higher education dropout are quite alarming: the proportion of students from the 2015 cohort who failed to complete their studies within the theoretical duration of the study programs (3, 4, 5, or 6 years) is 48.67%. This percent is a little lower (41,12%) if we consider that there are students that managed to complete another license program. Another interesting finding of the study were that the dropout rate is highest in the *23-26 age group* (70.93%) and *part-time and distance learning* dropout are the highest (65.8%). Also, their statistics indicated that *previous academic performance* is the best predictor of successful completion of undergraduate studies (as the average score on the high school graduation exam decreases, the dropout rate by average score increases, reaching 62.8% for those with scores between 6 and 7) and that 44% of dropout is after the first year. More, dropout rate for students entering their first year on *fee-paying places* (55%) is much higher than the dropout rate for students who have been studying on state-funded places since admission (38%).

Other European studies (see Roberts, 2025) find in a longitudinal study that students tend to dropout school in their early or final stages of the year and *demographic* factors could be a predictable factor for dropout considering gender and ethnicity.

Considering higher education programs with a big risk for dropout, Romanian statistics (see Alexe-Coteț et al., 2022, Ministry of Education Report – 2022, 2023, 2024) indicated that *engineering programs* have a high rate of dropout. European statistics also indicate a higher risk for engineering programs (Hauschildt (ed.), 2024).

*Financial support* (of the family) is also a risk factor – EUROSTUDENT 8 (Hauschildt (ed), 2024) indicate that students that work more than 20 hours in a week are more likely to drop out and that only 41% of European students have *parents with no tertiary education*. In Romania this percent is higher than European average (50% of students have parents that have not completed their tertiary education). This is a risk factor for this category of students, so recent (see government decision 387/2025) Romanian policy makers have imposed measures to limit that risk – e.g. projects like *First student in family.*

The same study indicates that more than 30% of Romanian students indicate very serious *financial difficulties* and have a low public support, so they lean on family support. The same study indicates Romania as one the countries where students with parents not at all well-off have to work so that to afford their studies.

Hauschildt (ed., 2024), citing different studies, indicate that *students that are also parents* present a risk for lower academic performance and also increased risk for dropout (Ajayi et al., 2022, Conway et al., 2021) – their stress level is higher and there are not facilities in campus for families with children.

Lorenzo-Quiles et al. (2023) identified five major factors that determine university dropout: *student adaptation*, *personality*, *socio-economic level*, *teachers-student relationship*, and *quality in university education*; other sub-causes that could explain the influences of those mentioned before are low self-esteem, demotivation, frustration, or pregnancy.

Other studies (Muja et al., 2024) indicate that students with low incomes (less privileged parents) have a lower level of perceived *wellbeing*. Nowadays, student well-being is a priority for many universities, where measures are taken to prevent problems and create a healthy academic climate for the entire academic community. Although many authors define *well-being* as the absence of psychopathology, the World Health Organization (2001) considers it to be a state derived from awareness of one's own abilities, in which a person can manage the usual stresses of life, has the ability to work and be productive, and succeeds in making a relevant contribution to their community.

Regarding this phenomenon present in many universities, Fenech (2025) analyzing data bases from EUROSTUDENT 8 get to the conclusion that well-being is an important factor that reduce the risk for study dropout. EUROSTUDENT 8 (Menz & Mandl, 2024) in the module about discrimination indicate Romania as a country where 57% of students have reported at least one *hostile situation* during the course of their studies and 77% of *students with disabilities* have indicated these hostile behaviors, 24% of *male students* have been treated as less capable or smart.

***Prevention and intervention strategies***

From analysis to intervention, specialists have proposed more recent models like AI model (Mustofa et al., 2025) which promises to assists institutions to obtain data about students profile, so that to get for an early intervention for student retention.

*Romanian Ministry of Education Report* (2024) indicate several measures implemented during 2023-2024 in order to prevent or limit university dropout: normative for higher education, equal chances for access and participation to higher education, lifelong learning, accession to OCDE, digital ecosystem for universities, quality and competitivity, and correlation between university programs and challenges of employers.

Also, perspective measures for 2025 indicate developing projects, studies, reports and analyzes, like participation to EUROSTUDENT 8 and EUROSTUDENT 9, lifelong learning programs or *First student in family*, internationalization of university studies (including *StudyinRomania* in the project *StudyinEurope*), investing more in higher education and developing connections with EQAR (European Quality Assurance for Higher Education) etc.

## Methodology

As we have already mentioned, there are a lot of factors that could influence the process of dropout university studies. Through them, there are some institutional factors that we consider that represent our responsibility and offer possibility for intervention. Pascarella's model (1980) (described by Nicoletti, 2019) consider that institutional factors are faculty culture (professional interests, values, orientation), organizational structure, institutional image, administrative policies and decisions, institution size, admission standards and academic standards.

Starting from these premises, we have designed a dominant qualitative research based on focus group interviews and reflexive exercises. The purpose of our study was to identify the main reasons they like or dislike university activities and what is their perception (after their first session of exams) on the relation between three types of curriculum: taught, learned and tested. Working with students that have chosen to study psycho-pedagogic program (85 students from engineering faculties in their first year of study, university year 2024-2025, second semester), during seminar activities, we have organized a study based on focus-group interviews and reflexive exercises.

The reason for choosing for our study students from engineering faculties, is that statistics (European and Romanian) indicate a higher dropout risk for these in comparison with other specializations.

As we have already mention in introduction our intention is to analyze which are students' main reasons for liking / (dis)liking school in order to verify the assumption that students that like school both for social and academic reasons will make efforts to continue studies and pass the exams.

## Results and discussions

Results have been collected and we have processed through content analyses.

*People are curious by nature, but they are not thinkers by nature and if we do not have conditions conducive to thinking, we avoid thinking* considers Willingham (2025) in his book *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientists Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom.*

From students' answers concerning reasons for liking or not going to school, they have mentioned both internal and external factors in an hierarchy that is presented in the table below.

**Table 2. Whys students like or dislike going to school**

| | I like to go to school because… | I don't like to go to school because… |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | …I like to learn new, interesting things. | … teachers do not always know to explain and make contents more interesting. |
| 2 | …I like to be in contact with my colleagues, to make friends. | … the schedule is overwhelming and sometimes we start very early in the morning. |
| 3 | …professors inspire me and help me to develop. | … some classes are very difficult and exams are stressful. |

Is well known that changes in educational system starts with teachers' training. Investment in teachers training should be a priority for educational institutions. Students clearly stipulated that there are teachers that inspires them, the make them to see a purpose in their efforts for learning. There are some answers of interviewed students:

- *Discussions, projects, and topics challenge me to analyze, compare, and formulate well-argued opinions;*
- *I interact with intelligent teachers and colleagues: Exchanging ideas with people from different backgrounds helps me see things from different perspectives;*
- *I learn new and useful things: Some courses provide me with knowledge that is applicable in my professional and personal life, and the feeling of intellectual progress is motivating.*

Also, supportive climate, friendly spaces for socialization are mentioned reasons.

Negative aspects indicated by students were also connected with teachers and their role as mediators between contents and students, relations with colleagues and some unsatisfactory auxiliary services:

- *Some subjects seem disconnected from reality: Not all courses seem relevant to what I will actually do in my career, and that lowers my motivation;*
- *Large amount of information in a short time: Learning sometimes becomes a race against time, rather than a deep and conscious process.*
- *Too much emphasis on theory, too little practice: I would like to work more practically, to test what we learn in real life.*
- *The schedule can be tiring and inefficient: Sometimes there are long breaks between classes or very early and very late classes, which affects the daily rhythm.*
- *Constant pressure of assessments: Exams, tests, and projects can become overwhelming, especially when they are not well planned.*

Considering *perceived relation between taught, learned and tested curriculum* we have noticed that many students indicated that taught curriculum has a bigger area than learned curriculum which confirm previous result that indicate that subject matter is overloaded

(*professors sometimes are teaching so much and in such a rapid rhythm and I cannot follow the rationing and get dipper with the study)*.

The relation between tested and learned curriculum is often perceived as an unbalanced relation: tested curriculum is perceived as a larger area than learned one. And also, as an interesting (and / or alarming) finding was that few students considered that taught curriculum and tested one do not interfere or taught and learned curriculum do not interfere.

## Conclusion

Dropout education is an important issue for specialists, policy makers and should be a priority for education institutions. Statistics are alarming, but models for analyses, instrument that specialty literature are a real support managers and policy makers.

Important findings are that discovering new things and socialization are the main reasons for liking school activities and perceived difficulties of tasks and level of information are reasons for not liking school.

There is nothing spectacular in these findings, but only a confirmation. These findings inspire us to propose measures for improving activities in university for preventing risk and dropout. Becoming aware of cognitive limits of students and adapting the difficulty of tasks (challenging but not perceived as impossible to overcome), choosing the right moment to challenge a student, adapting the rhythm etc. professors could be the inspirational models for students and real support for them.

Diagnosis studies mentioned before (see also Deaconu & Hâj (coord.), 2022) offer premises for adequate measures, and those measures involve both personal and professional development, safety, sense of belonging to the academic community and motivation, learning and social resources.

Current studies, as Brewer et al. (2019), Fenech (2025) indicate that student well-being and drop-out are connected. So, the well-being of students facilitates the process of adapting to university requirements and life.

In order to prevent university dropout, we recommend several intervention/ action strategies and providing the following services:

*a) Academic Coaching Services;*

*Academic coaching services* address students' needs in terms of learning difficulties, time management, and social skills development once a week (McCoy, Roy, and Sirkman, 2013);

*b) Educational Counseling Services;*

The university counseling service can guide students in terms of appropriate behavior in the academic environment, identifying personal resources, increasing motivation for study, managing stress and time to complete academic tasks, developing critical thinking, and preventing emotional disorders.

*c) Peer-mentoring and support*, through the involvement of volunteers/senior students;

*d) Health and Wellbeing Centers;*

Health and wellbeing centers provide course adaptations and adjustments, specialized assistance based on student needs, and approaches to improve students' quality of life. According to Brown (2003), it is important to ensure that the person undergoing counseling pays attention to the most important components of life, to assist the person in ensuring satisfaction with the important aspects of life, to insist on exercising personal choices in selecting opportunities, to improve the person's self-image, to increase the level empowerment.

*e) Improving teachers' attitudes.*

Teachers' attitudes have an impact on students' adaptation to university life or on preventing them from dropping out, as they are closely linked to communication methods, teaching style and rhythm, equity or inequity treatment of students, etc.

If education policy couldn't be always supportive for institutions (due to circumstances), we have to identify correctly and optimal use the resources from inside – both professors, students and management could create a supportive educational climate and the best opportunities for development.

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