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Study on University Dropouts in the Context of the Romanian Education System Reform

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Abstract: *After 2010, the Romanian university system registered an increase of dropout cases. This aspect requires to identify and implement some alternative methods of action at the national level with the unique scope to prevent and combat early university dropout. The good motivation of the students for their studies is increasingly low. Some of the causes which determine this phenomenon are well known and quite difficult to remove, as for example the financial and intellectual development level of the family from where they come. These aspects can often be decisive factors in the emergence of the school dropout phenomenon. But these aspects are certainly not the only causes. This is the reason for which other aspects, which determine the students to dropping out the school and can be more easily corrected, must be identified.*
The aim of this paper is to present these aspects, emphasizing the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to limit absenteeism and university dropout. For this purpose, we present a questionnaire applied at "Ovidius" University on a target group of students. The participants consisted of 500 students from 5 faculties of our university. With this questionnaire we want to identify patterns and trends in the evolution of absenteeism and university dropout.

Keywords: *evolution of absenteeism; university dropouts; Romanian education system reform; alternative methods of action.*

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Introduction

Education is considered the main tool for promoting social equality and personal development. The inequalities in education represent a significant challenge in the modern societies. This aspect affects the young peoples in their development and is strongly connected with some socio-economic factors. As examples regarding these aspects, we can enumerate: income and access to some financial and material resources, the level of education and position in society as result of social stratification. The education is considered, by many political decision-makers, a powerful tool for promoting the increase of skills and to reduce the social inequality. These are explained by the improving the qualifications of the less educated segments of the population and emphasize the strong relationship between education and income (Spiel et al., 2018).

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 is devoted to present some aspects regarding the school dropout in Romania, section 3 represents the results of a questionnaire applied at "Ovidius" University to a group of 500 students, whit which we want to identify some causes of the factors contributing to the absenteeism and school dropout, from socioeconomic and cultural aspects to individual and social influences. We must remark that the students participated anonymously at this questionnaire, by filling out a Google Docs form, being informed about the purpose of the research, and expressing their agreement to join before completing the questionnaire.

The paper ends with a conclusions section in which we present ideas for further research.

Remarks regarding the school dropout in Romania

In the following, by the "school" notion we understand all levels of the education, including university level. In an attempt to give a definition, by the "school dropout," we can understand "the leaving of school education without completing the level or the started educational program". Lack of college graduation is considered a sign of incapacity among dropouts. For this reason, students are stigmatized, and as a consequence, they are excluded from social integration, they have to try harder to get closer to the ordinary course of life. In the same time, due to permanent unemployment and exclusion from the labor market, a good course of the life is still hard attainable for many young people. The essential thing is that, in the present days, the failure is interpreted as the non-use of possibilities and, in the same time, the inequality of conditions is ignored. Young people

who cannot finish school are seen as people with "no potential" for the labor market.

These individuals are removed from the ordinary course of life because they cannot meet the demands of life. These persons are considered "uncertain" while others, that meet current requirements, are considered "reliable" people who have a good perspective of personal development (Curelaru et al., 2010).

In the last years, various statistics have been made in Romania to monitor school dropout and the leading causes of this phenomenon. Regarding university dropout, one of the causes is represented by the previous levels of the school, namely the primary and secondary education classes where is register high values of school dropout. The highest values of the school dropout rate in primary and secondary education were recorded at the level of the school population in rural areas, respectively at the level of students from first year and last year of study, both at the rural and urban level (Ghimişi, 2021).

If we refer to the Romanian university education system after 1990, the highest number of students enrolled in undergraduate programs can be found in the academic year 2007-2008, namely 907.353 students, from out of a total of 21.130.503 inhabitants, represented by the residency population. That means a number of 429 students per 10.000 residents (Anghelache, 2018, 285). Also in the academic year 2007-2008 we have the highest number of graduates for the Romanian higher education institutions, 232.885 graduates (Anghelache, 2018, 302).

Starting with the golden period of 2007-2008, the number of students enrolled in higher education and the number of graduates of a higher education institution has suffered decreases in each academic year. At the same time, the dropout rate in university education began to increase (Anghelache, 2018, 285). The decrease of the number of students enrolled in higher education is also caused by the decrease of the resident population of the age corresponding to the university studies. However, in recent years there has been a slight increase in the number of foreign students and distance learners students (Ministry of Education, 2022).

To combat the school dropout, among the adopted measures in the European Union, in the strategic plan *Europe 2020* for a sustainable economic growth, the measures in the field of Education occupy a main place. One of the provisions included in this plan, contained in the "Education and Training 2020" strategic framework and adopted at the end of 2014, is referred to the stopping of school dropouts in general, for 2020. It is desired that in the EU the percentage of young people between the ages

of 18 and 24-year-olds who prematurely leave the school should be below 10% (Anghelache, 2018, 492 & Europe 2020 Review) Romania adapted these requirements according to local specifics and, through the National Reform Program, has proposed that the average school dropout rate, at all levels of education, to be below 11,3% in 2020 (Anghelache, 2018, 492). Despite all the efforts made, this target was not reached.

Regarding the university dropout, the main five causes are represented by the following: the personality of the students, their ability to adapt, the socio-economic level, the student-teacher relationship and the quality of the educational act in the universities. To these are added other secondary ones such as: poor motivation, lack of self-esteem, a high degree of frustration that students feel especially in the first year of studies, until they adjust to the new status, and so on. According to the published statistics by Eurostat in 2020, in Europe the country with the highest school dropout rate is Malta, with a rate of 18,4%, then Spain with 18,3% and Romania, which occupies third place with 18,1% (Lorenzo-Quiles, 2023).

In order to highlight the increase of the school dropout rate in the Romanian university environment, we will refer to the statistical data from the last two scholar years. Due to the National Institute of Statistics from Romania, in higher education, in the academic year 2021-2022, 554.007 students were enrolled in all Romanian higher education institutions (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). Of these, 415.839 students were enrolled in bachelor's programs, 112.140 students were enrolled in master's programs, with a slight decrease of 4.000 people compared to the previous school year, 22.240 students were enrolled in doctoral programs and 154 students were enrolled in postdoctoral studies. A number of 3,634 people were enrolled in post-graduate programs. The passing rate of undergraduate studies was 87%. The percentage of 13% is represented by students with unfinished schooling or who have abandoned their studies, the latter representing a weight of 9,4%, with an increasing compared to the previous period (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In the academic year 2022-2023, 538.720 students were enrolled in the higher education system, registering a decrease in the number of students compared to the previous school year, with approximately 15.300 fewer students (National Press Agency AgerPress, 2023). About 410.181 students were enrolled in the bachelor's programs, a decrease number compared to the previous school year. The resident population on January 1, 2022 being 19.038.098 inhabitants, this means that we have a number of 215 students per 10.000 resident inhabitants, practically a half decrease compared to the golden period 2007-2008. About 102.975 students were enrolled in

master's programs, also in decrease compared to the previous school year. A number of 3.476 students were enrolled in post-graduate programs and in doctoral studies we find 21.803 registered doctoral students and 285 students enrolled in post-doctoral programs all of them included in state higher education (Ministry of Education, 2023).

At the end of the 2022-2023 academic year, 125.580 people graduated (National Press Agency AgerPress, 2023). Of these, 87.373 were graduates of undergraduate studies, down from the previous year. A number of 38.457 students completed master's studies, also in decrease, compared to the previous year, 2406 completed postgraduate studies, 2206 completed doctoral studies and 57 persons completed postdoctoral studies. The pass percentage at the bachelor's level was 85,2%, down from the previous academic year. Therefore, the percent of those with incomplete studies or those who abandoned their undergraduate studies was 14,8%, increasing and higher than the previous school year. This rate is higher than the target average of 11,3%, as it was assumed as the average for the country, for the entire Romanian education system, for the year 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2023).

As can be observed, the statistics do not show positive things about the fight against school dropouts, placing Romania at the top of the European Union countries in this issue. As new measures taken, into an attempt to correct the problems of the educational system related to school dropout, in Romania, in September 2023, was adopted the new pre-university education law, no 198/2023, with distinct articles regarding school dropout. For example, in article 77 of this law, it is specified that the Ministry of Education has ongoing programs regarding school dropout, in which the priorities, programs, activities and services for this purpose are provided. Among these priorities, we emphasize the provision of free transport and school supplies, as well as the granting of social grants. Among the programs developed for this purpose, we mention the national "Healthy Meal" program, which has over 1.000.000 beneficiaries. The program is carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Parliament of Romania, 2023).

Prior to this law, at the end of 2021, there was also a government decision in which the National Program for the Reduction of School Dropouts was approved. This program is carried out within the framework of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience of Romania (PNRR) and is consistent with the National Reform Project "România Educată", assumed by Memorandum of the Government of Romania. This program has as its first objective the reduction of school dropouts by 25% in the period 2021-2026 (Government of Romania, 2021).

A research regarding the university studies dropout

In the contemporary education period, absenteeism and university dropout have become significant challenges, generating essential difficulties for the university education system and the professionalization perspective of young people. These phenomena not only affect the individuals directly involved but also have lasting consequences on society as a whole and have their origin in the educational behavior of the pre-university level, as we have shown above. In a context where access to education is considered a fundamental right, any form of absence or abandonment of education becomes a problem with significant impact. This research aims to provide an analysis of the factors contributing to absenteeism and dropout, from socioeconomic and cultural aspects to individual and social influences. Through this research, we aim to highlight a questionnaire applied at "Ovidius" University to a group of 500 students. On the other hand, we want to identify patterns and trends in the evolution of absenteeism and university dropout. The group of participants consisted of 500 students from 5 faculties as follows:

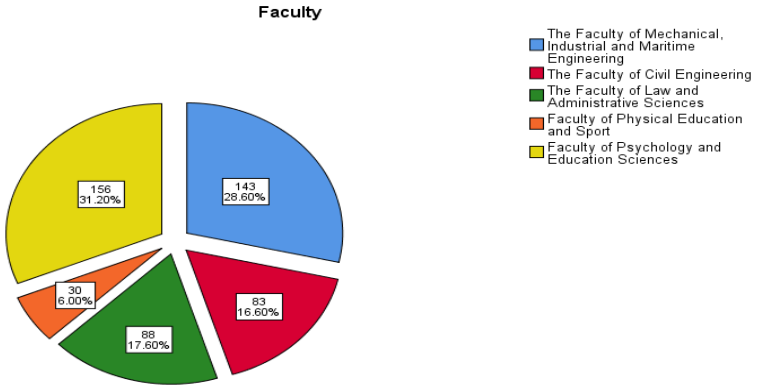


Figure 1. The percentage of students corresponding to the five participating faculties (*Source: Authors own conception)*

31,20% from FPSE, The Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences
26,6% from FIMIM, The Faculty of Mechanical, Industrial and Maritime Engineering
17,6% from FDSA, The Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences
16,6% from FC, The Faculty of Civil Engineering
6% from FEFS, The Faculty of Physical Education and Sports

As a method of research, we used questionnaire-based survey addressed to students selected in the sample. We used the questionnaire as a research tool. This study used a probabilistic sampling. The students participated anonymously, filling out a Google Docs form, being informed about the purpose of the research, and expressing their agreement to join before completing the questionnaire.

Research objective: Identifying the main reasons of why students drop out the studies in view of finding some indicators that predispose to leaving studies early.

Working hypothesis: There are significant differences regarding the reasons for dropping out of school and the faculty from which the students come.

Working tools: A Likert scale questionnaire with 15 questions was built to carry out the research. The stated reasons were:

1. Personal decision considering skills and interests;
2. The opinions of family members;
3. The opinions of the group of friends;
4. The attitude of university teachers;
5. The difficulties of passing exams;
6. Employment prospects after graduation in Romania;
7. Employment prospects after graduation abroad;
8. Study fees;
9. Facilities regarding accommodation conditions in dormitories;
10. Distance from home;
11. The study facilities offered by the university (scholarships, libraries, reading rooms, international programs);
12. Social facilities (social grants) and entertainment facilities provided by the university and student associations;
13. Alteration of relations with the secretariats or other structures of the University;
14. The practice facilities offered by the university;
15. Program of course, seminar, and practical activities.

The questionnaire was built with the aim of identifying the most common reasons why students take in consideration the dropping out of the school. The questionnaire contains two sections: the first section provides data on the composition of the target group from the point of view of the faculty and specialization attended by the research participants, the area of origin, the gender, as well as whether they have attended the courses of another faculty. If the answer is affirmative, the students must choose what the reason for the professional reorientation was.

The second part of the questionnaire contains eight questions that identify the reasons for why students think they would drop out the school. A 15 questions are listed for which the students can choose from the five answer options presented (on the Likert scale) from a very low frequency to a very high frequency. The 16th option is left with a free answer in order to be able to cover all aspects and thus create a complete picture of the reasons for dropping out among the students.

At the same time, the questionnaire aims to identify the support persons that students can turn to for advice on the decision to abandon their studies as well as the reasons that may intervene in the decision to drop out the school.

Another question in the questionnaire aims to identify the possibilities of continuing the studies targeted by the students. Students can choose a variant from those six presented, starting from "I don't know/don't answer" to "To a great extent".

Another aspect analyzed by the questions of the questionnaire concerns to the students' perception of employment after completing their studies, both in the graduated field and in related fields. The answer options are also on a five-point intensity Likert scale, to which the answer option "I don't know/don't answer" is added.

At the end of the questionnaire, their desire to go through a counseling program is analyzed, as well as the directions in which they want to be counseled.

Analyzing the normality of the data, we observe a non-normal distribution of them, and thus, we apply a non-parametric method of data analysis by running the Kruskal-Wallis test in SPSS version 26. The Kruskal-Wallis test is a nonparametric statistical procedure used to compare more than two independent samples that are not related (Corder & Foreman, 2014, 117-118)

Table 1. Test of Normality (*Source: Authors own conception)*

Tests of Normality

	Faculty	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
[1.Personal decision considering skills and interests]	FIMIM	.329	143	.000	.774	143	.000
	FC	.297	18	.000	.797	18	.001
	FDSA	.322	88	.000	.802	88	.000
	FEFS	.308	30	.000	.823	30	.000
	FPSE	.279	156	.000	.824	156	.000
[2.Opinions of family members]	FIMIM	.333	143	.000	.601	143	.000
	FC	.290	18	.000	.609	18	.000
	FDSA	.293	88	.000	.709	88	.000
	FEFS	.358	30	.000	.667	30	.000
	FPSE	.321	156	.000	.652	156	.000
[3.Opinions of the group of friends]	FIMIM	.401	143	.000	.543	143	.000
	FC	.449	18	.000	.566	18	.000
	FDSA	.370	88	.000	.598	88	.000
	FEFS	.290	30	.000	.697	30	.000
	FPSE	.373	156	.000	.575	156	.000
[4.The attitude of university teachers]	FIMIM	.326	143	.000	.790	143	.000
	FC	.372	18	.000	.756	18	.000
	FDSA	.370	88	.000	.783	88	.000
	FEFS	.359	30	.000	.784	30	.000
	FPSE	.364	156	.000	.775	156	.000
[5.Difficulties in passing exams]	FIMIM	.313	143	.000	.819	143	.000
	FC	.371	18	.000	.784	18	.001
	FDSA	.341	88	.000	.814	88	.000
	FEFS	.301	30	.000	.832	30	.000
	FPSE	.343	156	.000	.799	156	.000
[6.Employment prospects after graduation in Romania]	FIMIM	.323	143	.000	.797	143	.000
	FC	.359	18	.000	.784	18	.001
	FDSA	.302	88	.000	.785	88	.000
	FEFS	.325	30	.000	.797	30	.000
	FPSE	.316	156	.000	.807	156	.000
[7.Employment prospects after graduation abroad]	FIMIM	.353	143	.000	.753	143	.000
	FC	.389	18	.000	.739	18	.000
	FDSA	.316	88	.000	.781	88	.000
	FEFS	.268	30	.000	.833	30	.000
	FPSE	.311	156	.000	.772	156	.000
[8.Tuition fees]	FIMIM	.340	143	.000	.748	143	.000
	FC	.371	18	.000	.666	18	.000
	FDSA	.315	88	.000	.807	88	.000
	FEFS	.398	30	.000	.713	30	.000
	FPSE	.365	156	.000	.772	156	.000

[9.Facilities regarding accommodation conditions in dormitories]	FIMIM	.303	143	.000	.712	143	.000
	FC	.292	18	.000	.738	18	.000
	FDSA	.366	88	.000	.726	88	.000
	FEFS	.388	30	.000	.671	30	.000
	FPSE	.312	156	.000	.665	156	.000
[10.Distance from home]	FIMIM	.316	143	.000	.744	143	.000
	FC	.293	18	.000	.732	18	.000
	FDSA	.343	88	.000	.768	88	.000
	FEFS	.359	30	.000	.740	30	.000
	FPSE	.326	156	.000	.726	156	.000
[11.Study facilities offered by the university (scholarships, libraries, reading rooms, international programs)]	FIMIM	.340	143	.000	.702	143	.000
	FC	.293	18	.000	.757	18	.000
	FDSA	.357	88	.000	.759	88	.000
	FEFS	.392	30	.000	.617	30	.000
	FPSE	.319	156	.000	.687	156	.000
[12.Social facilities (social scholarships) and entertainment facilities provided by the university and student associations]	FIMIM	.333	143	.000	.712	143	.000
	FC	.371	18	.000	.666	18	.000
	FDSA	.360	88	.000	.729	88	.000
	FEFS	.366	30	.000	.631	30	.000
	FPSE	.319	156	.000	.672	156	.000
[13.Alteration of relations with secretariats or other structures of the University]	FIMIM	.329	143	.000	.714	143	.000
	FC	.310	18	.000	.626	18	.000
	FDSA	.337	88	.000	.747	88	.000
	FEFS	.331	30	.000	.674	30	.000
	FPSE	.290	156	.000	.638	156	.000
[14.Practice facilities offered by the university]	FIMIM	.352	143	.000	.745	143	.000
	FC	.324	18	.000	.784	18	.001
	FDSA	.382	88	.000	.736	88	.000
	FEFS	.377	30	.000	.727	30	.000
	FPSE	.316	156	.000	.725	156	.000
[15.Program of course, seminar, and practice activities]	FIMIM	.346	143	.000	.768	143	.000
	FC	.198	18	.061	.852	18	.009
	FDSA	.366	88	.000	.761	88	.000
	FEFS	.365	30	.000	.729	30	.000
	FPSE	.378	156	.000	.742	156	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As can be remarked, significant differences emerged regarding the students employment prospects after completing their studies. Thus, we have the following

Table 2. Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test. Summary (*Source: Authors own conception)*

Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test Summary

Total N	500
Test Statistic	16.645[a]
Degree Of Freedom	4
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.002

a. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

Since sig is less than 0.05, we have at least one significant difference between the student groups.

Table 3. Pairwise Comparisons of faculties (*Source: Authors own conception)*

Pairwise Comparisons of faculties

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig.[a]
Faculty of Mechanical, Industrial, and Maritime Engineering-Faculty of Civil Engineering	-2.784	18.972	-.147	.883	1.000
Faculty of Mechanical, Industrial, and Maritime Engineering – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences	-25.053	15.917	-1.574	.115	1.000
Faculty of Mechanical, Industrial, and Maritime Engineering-Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences	-63.621	18.628	-3.415	.001	.006
Faculty of Mechanical, Industrial, and Maritime Engineering – Faculty of Physical Education and Sport	-67.474	27.610	-2.444	.015	.145

Faculty of Civil Engineering – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences	-22.270	18.679	-1.192	.233	1.000
Faculty of Civil Engineering – Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences	-60.838	21.037	-2.892	.004	.038
Faculty of Civil Engineering – Faculty of Physical Education and Sports	-64.691	29.289	-2.209	.027	.272
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences-Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences	38.568	18.330	2.104	.035	.354
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences-Faculty of Physical Education and Sport	42.421	27.409	1.548	.122	1.000
Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences – Faculty of Physical Education and Sport	-3.853	29.067	-.133	.895	1.000

Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and Sample 2 distributions are the same.
Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is .05.
a. Significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

We observe significant differences between students from FDSA and those from FIMIM, as well as between construction students and law students. Law students find it increasingly difficult to find a job after graduation compared to other students.

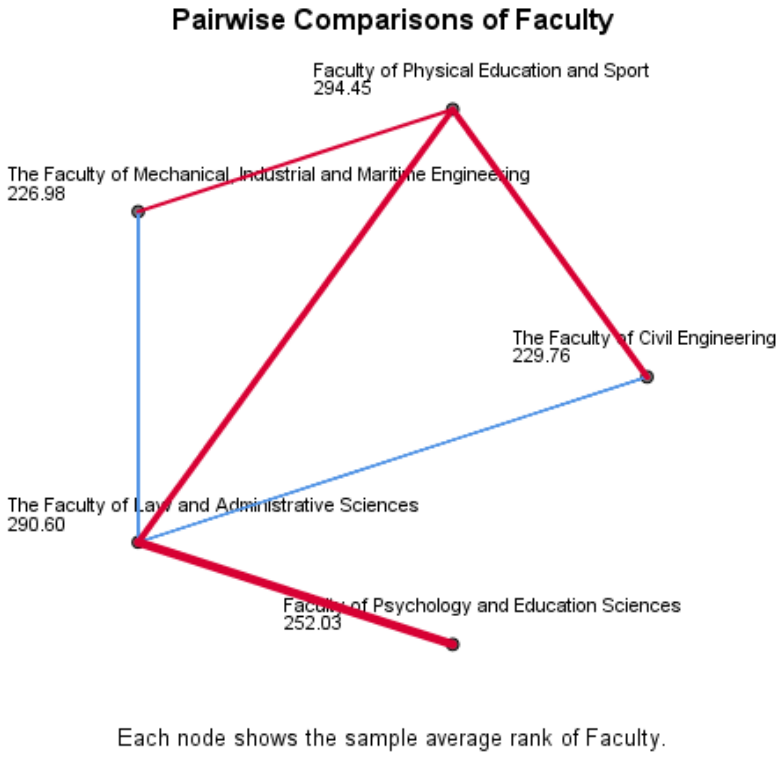


Figure 2. Pairwise Comparisons (*Source: Authors own conception)*

Conclusions

Due to the freedom of choice, there are situations in which a person, at the end of the first semester of study, realizes that that faculty does not suit proper aims and then gives up the faculty, following that in the next year to enroll in another faculty, closer to the personal skills. Such a person can upload the statistics, appearing at the same time as a dropout the school and as a graduate of the school. Another situation is when a candidate chooses to study at two faculties in the same time. A student realizes that cannot cope and gives up on one of them. It loads the statistics again, appearing twice times: both at dropout and at graduate. It would be interesting to establish a real school dropout rate, that is, to find out the number of those people who dropped out the school and never resumed university studies. These can really be passed to school dropouts. A person who gives up one

faculty and enrolls in another cannot be said to have truly abandoned university studies. We propose to study, as a further research, how widespread is this phenomenon and if it is a really one of the reasons that lead to an increased value (artificially, in this case) of the school dropout rate, that is, we propose to see if there is a difference and how big is this between "leaving the studies prematurely and resuming them later" and "permanent leaving the studies" and not resuming them in any form.

We consider that the definition of the university dropout as being "the leaving of school education without completing the level or the started educational program", given in the second section, can be nuanced as "the leaving of university education without completing any started level or program".

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