Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională
ISSN: 2066-7329 | e-ISSN: 2067-9270
Covered in: Web of Science (WOS); EBSCO; ERIH+; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Ulrich ProQuest; Cabell, Journalseek; Scipio; Philpapers; SHERPA/RoMEO repositories; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck

2024, Volume 16, Issue 4, pages: 497-508 | https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.4/926
Submitted: October 15, 2024| *Accepted for publication:* October 30, 2024

Resilience and Student Integration in Higher Education

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Abstract: *Entering the academic environment requires students to adapt to certain changes and accept challenges related to a new learning environment. Young people bring with them significant concerns and expectations regarding the organisational climate, the specific nature of activities, learning strategies, as well as social relationships. Many of these changes encountered by students often become overwhelming, exerting a varied psychological impact. This study is part of a more extensive programme aimed at maximising adaptive strategies and optimally integrating students into higher education, while enhancing resilience across all age groups. This investigative approach provides valuable quantitative data to design and implement support programmes, counselling, mentoring, and coaching. The study aims to highlight that, in the process of integration, each student's ability to demonstrate resilience is crucial; this resilience implies certain complex adaptive systems that are, at the same time, in constant evolution, underscoring the dynamic process of adaptability. Thus, the university must offer both individual and group counselling packages tailored to the student's specific needs. Understanding the factors that lead to successful academic adaptation is therefore essential in establishing intervention models and strategies to provide counselling and support to all students, with particular focus on those at educational risk. Accordingly, students' resilience and capacity for integration constitute a multi-faceted process, determined and closely linked to a network of interactions between psychological and interpersonal constructs.*

Keywords: *students; resilience; academic adaptation; psychological constructs; support programmes; self-directed learning; intrinsic motivation.*

How to cite: Constantinescu, M. (2024). Resilience and student integration in higher education. *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională, 16*(4), 497-508. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.4/926

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Introduction

The transition from pre-university to higher education is a challenging experience for both adolescent and young adult students, as well as for mature students opting for initial or continuous education. As a result, universities aim to implement programmes designed to support students in developing their competencies under optimal study conditions and student-centred support.

At the same time, student-centred higher education is emerging as a critical area of investigation for both human development and the specific nature of academic activities, placing the student and the academic process at the core of formative training. The pressure for students to adapt to the academic environment has guided our attention towards studying resilience in adolescents and young adults by analysing the factors and processes that could explain students' level of adaptation and sense of responsibility.

Literature review

In examining the term "resilience" through a modern lens, some researchers argue that resilience is a summation of individuals' personal characteristics, such as intellectual abilities, temperament, self-regulation and self-efficacy, and a positive outlook on future planning. Another perspective (Sameroff, 2000) associates resilience with contextual factors, situating it as a measurable process that does not necessarily require analysis of individual factors, while still acknowledging that certain individuals are inherently more resilient than others. Building upon these perspectives, we chose to add the idea that individual adaptation develops over time as a response to ever-evolving complex conditions (Walsh, 1996). By analysing Walsh's model (1996), we highlight the interaction between a person's internal characteristics and their environment and stressors, as well as the ways in which individuals confront situations. Studies demonstrate that, regardless of age, people continuously interact with their changing environment, seeking balance between internal and external demands, between the need for continuity and the need to adapt to the new, and between oneself and others (Moritsugu et al., 2016). The environment, in turn, shapes personality; adaptation involves not only facilitating and modifying the environment to suit individual needs but also adjusting the individual to fit the environment. Thus, understanding individual, environmental, and

contextual factors is essential for academic specialists who support more rapid adaptation.

In developing resilience, it is essential for students to gain direct experiences that help them understand contextual factors and develop skills to better cope with future challenges in the job market. Therefore, this adaptation process is of utmost importance for both personal development and success in academic, interactive, and life contexts. Resilient students tend to exhibit self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence, which correlate with interpersonal skills, prosocial development, and optimism, among others. These qualities consolidate a resilient self that enables students to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships and face diverse life situations and experiences. Such individuals can often be described as: open to new experiences, responsible, flexible, efficient, goal-oriented, creative, and optimistic about the outcomes of their efforts. They also demonstrate adaptability to challenges and possess the capacity to alter life circumstances (Southwick et al., 2005).

Adapting to the university environment is generally easier for students who have a positive attitude and seek social support (Ang et al., 2004; Raunic & Xenos, 2008), as well as those with high intrinsic motivation, positively influencing academic learning performance. The latter mediates the relationship between motivation and metacognitive self-regulation strategies (Cazan, 2020). All these aspects are influenced within the university environment, including by individual factors, behavioural factors, and environmental, relational, and situational contexts (Zimmerman, 2002).

Another important perspective, underscoring the need to develop resilience skills, focuses on student-centred academic environments, which have transformed the nature of academic activities by placing students at the core of instruction. Thus, the academic system, through quality standards, is challenged to facilitate active learning (Attard et al., 2010), experiential learning (Kolb, 2015), problem-based learning (Miller, 2004), and cooperative learning that enables students to build their own knowledge (Singer et al., 2006).

Analysing reports from the university's Career Counselling and Guidance Centre (CCOC) on students' needs assessments, we highlight the presence of the following difficulties: learning processes, evaluation processes, adaptation to activity types specific to certain specialisations, and interaction and relationship-building with peers. Many first-year

students experience anxiety, emotional regulation difficulties, low motivation, and time management challenges, all of which hinder optimal academic performance.

All these issues point towards the mentorship and counselling programmes within the university that aim to support, facilitate adaptation and integration, and enhance students' academic performance. Tutors require training in this area, as psycho-pedagogical courses do not fully cover the necessary skills to support a student; moreover, students' needs are becoming increasingly complex (McFarlane, 2016).

Methodology

In the context of the National Programme for Reducing University Dropout (PNRAU), in order to increase student retention in higher education, we conducted a longitudinal analysis of the previous reports from the Centre for Counselling and Career Guidance. These reports highlight the presence of a high rate of students at educational risk, with those leaving higher education doing so for various reasons: difficulties adapting to the academic environment, precarious family or social circumstances, or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, among others. Such findings underscore the need to monitor this phenomenon and to implement various measures—a set of best practices designed primarily to support students' integration into the academic environment and to ensure the successful completion of their educational pathway.

The investigation undertaken here is based on objectives that are subsidiary to the overarching goal of combating university dropout.

The participants in this study are students from different years of study at the university's faculties, who, following the promotion of the mission and objectives of the Centre for Counselling and Career Guidance, requested both to participate in the study and to seek guidance from trained school orientation specialists (qualified staff specifically employed for this type of activity). All participants provided informed consent, were made aware of the option to withdraw at any time without any impact on their status.

In this study, we adhered to confidentiality and the anonymity of respondents. No personal data, such as personal identification numbers or other contact details, were recorded, in accordance with GDPR regulations. All information obtained by career counsellors was treated confidentially.

To understand students' adaptation to the academic environment, this study investigates the relationship between student resilience and coping strategies within the academic context. To this end, we employed a correlational design to analyse the connection between students' resilience capacity and coping strategies. These data illustrate the empirical and data processing phase, encompassing data collection, analysis, verification of result authenticity, and interpretation and discussion of the findings. In conducting this correlational analysis, aimed at defining the profile of a resilient and adaptable university student, we hypothesised that there is an associative relationship between students' resilience skills and their coping strategies.

For this study, we used the following tools:

- **The Adolescent Resilience Scale** (Prince-Embury, 2009), which identifies and measures personal abilities and adaptation capacities, representing resilience strengths. The items from the original RBS tool (as presented in Smith et al., 2008) were translated into Romanian and adapted. This adapted version was employed in our study. The total score is calculated by summing the scores on the chosen scale for all six statements, then dividing by six. A score between 1.00-2.99 represents a low level of resilience, a score between 3.00-4.30 indicates a normal level of resilience, and a score between 4.31-5.00 indicates a high level of resilience.
- **The COPE Inventory**, designed by Carver et al. (1989), which records the stress model elaborated by Lazarus & Folkman (1987). Based on this model, a questionnaire was developed to evaluate a series of coping strategies—the COPE Questionnaire. We used the Romanian-translated and adapted COPE instrument by Crașovean & Sava (2013). The questionnaire, validated for the Romanian population, contains 60 items corresponding to 15 coping mechanisms, each measured by four items. The questionnaire's internal consistency ranges from .48 to .92, with an alpha coefficient of .70 for the 15 subscales (Crașovean & Sava, 2013).

The participants in this study consist of 80 voluntary students (45 female and 35 male, aged between 20 and 23 years, with an age mean of M=16.10 and a standard deviation of SD= .79). The students who participated in this study were selected from a pre-established list/database created to monitor the student population of the university, with the aim of identifying cases that present certain degrees

of risk of academic dropout (dropout risk level, ethnic minorities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, etc.). The student selection was conducted by career counsellors, who are experts capable of recognising patterns associated with students at educational risk. The entire monitoring process is also utilised during the counselling and support phase, which will continue in compliance with applicable national, European, and international data protection legislation, as well as in accordance with institutionally adopted policies. In the subsequent counselling phase, qualitative data will be gathered to capture a broader range of significant information.

Results

To test the hypothesis, we conducted a correlational analysis between student resilience competencies and their coping strategies, using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The correlations obtained are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients between the Resilience Scale for Adolescents and coping strategies

	Positive interpretation and growth	Pearson correlation	.104
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.369
		N	77
Factor 1 (emotion focused)	Restraint	Pearson correlation	.037
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.748
		N	77
	Acceptance	Pearson correlation	.224**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	77
Factor 2 (problem focused)	Planning	Pearson correlation	.202
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.078
		N	77
	Active approach	Pearson correlation	.076**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	77
	Deletion of concurrent activities	Pearson correlation	.075
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.515
		N	77
Factor 3 (social support)	Social instrumental	Pearson correlation	-.004
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.974
		N	77

Factor 4 (avoidant coping)	Social emotional	Pearson correlation	-.267*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.019
		N	77
	Expression of emotions	Pearson correlation	.341**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
		N	77
	Denial	Pearson correlation	-.377*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
		N	77
	Mental deactivation	Pearson correlation	-.490**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	77
	Behavioral deactivation	Pearson correlation	-.176
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.127
		N	77

Note: all correlations are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ significance level

- A positive, moderate correlation was observed between Acceptance and student resilience, with a correlation coefficient of r=.224r = .224r=.224 and a significant threshold (p<.05)(p < .05)(p<.05), indicating that resilience is significantly associated with Acceptance. In other words, respondents tend to report high scores on both resilience and Acceptance variables.
- Another positive, medium-level correlation was observed between Active Approach and student resilience (r=.076,p<.000)(r = .076, p < .000)(r=.076,p<.000). This result supports that most respondents report high scores on both variables.

The table also highlights significant negative correlations between resilience and certain coping strategies:

- Mental Deactivation (r=−0.490,p<.000)(r = -0.490, p < .000)(r=−0.490,p<.000),
- Denial (r=−0.490,p<.001)(r = -0.490, p < .001)(r=−0.490,p<.001),
- Social Emotional Coping (r=−0.267,p<.019)(r = -0.267, p < .019)(r=−0.267,p<.019).

Furthermore, the table indicates medium to high values of the determination coefficient r2r^2r2 within the interval 0.05−0.40.05 - 0.40.05−0.4, showing a moderate to high effect intensity and practical value for the associations between variables. The determination

coefficient values between 0.050.050.05 and −0.025-0.025−0.025 suggest a moderate-to-strong association intensity among the analysed variables.

In conclusion, the hypothesis is partially confirmed; there is an associative relationship between student resilience and coping strategies, although only for specific variables.

Limits and discussions

The correlational analysis proved limited; thus, the observational findings obtained solely through the administration of questionnaires were insufficient. Significant limitations of this study also stem from the relatively small number of students who expressed a willingness to participate. Another concern is the lack of homogeneity within the sample used. From this perspective, these findings cannot be generalised across various variables, such as age, gender, status, field of study, or academic year (first-year students versus more senior students). Consequently, future research directions should focus on conducting detailed analyses on larger, more representative samples that address the specific challenges and difficulties faced by students according to their specialisation and level of study. In this way, we can obtain more relevant data regarding the use of strategies within the university environment.

These data underscore the need for greater focus on measuring and developing resilience through coping strategies, as well as enhancing students' personal resources and abilities for integration, adaptation, and problem-solving. Additionally, within the organisational environment, students can improve their supportive relationships, group work adaptability, and effective communication skills, which may positively influence resilience.

These findings further justify increasing efforts to prevent university dropout and facilitate smoother integration into the academic environment. This study highlights the importance of implementing support programmes; however, further efforts are still required to develop analytical and theoretical explanations. Research increasingly suggests that academic resilience is shaped by the dynamics of the person-environment-situation dimensions examined here. Observational findings throughout each research stage also indicate that time is a significant dimension. This initial quantitative analysis may encourage

the CCOC team to implement a programme encompassing the following directions:

a) Identification of student risk factors

b) Analysis of past resilience experiences

c) Evaluation of learning strategies

d) Implementation of intervention strategies to effectively reduce university dropout rates and mitigate specific risk resources.

Therefore, the importance of counselling that integrates coaching strategies and effective coping mechanisms within the university setting can positively impact students' integration and adaptation to academic life.

The issue addressed certainly calls for new research directions, especially considering the cumulative, multifactorial determinants of effective student integration within the academic environment and the successful completion of study programmes. This is achievable through monitoring this phenomenon and implementing preventative measures, particularly for students at educational risk.

Data saturation will be analysed in a subsequent qualitative study, which will ensure the validity of the data obtained and facilitate the collection of additional information specific to students at educational risk. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for the opening of new perspectives on the measurement and assessment of student resilience within the academic setting, with a view to identifying factors that place students in the risk zone (dropout risk level, ethnic minorities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities).

Future research can address the limitations of our study by investigating larger groups of students of varying ages (youth and adults) and from diverse backgrounds (rural and urban). This approach will allow for the measurement of invariant factors within the academic environment that may contribute to dropout, lower achievement, or even maladaptive behavioural responses. In terms of data collection methods, interviews, focus groups, and observations will be used, each contributing its strengths to obtaining more comprehensive and diverse data, which will influence data saturation and potentially strengthen the conclusions. Experts from the counselling centre will organise discussions with career counselling colleagues and faculty representatives to ensure effective monitoring, review, and validation of interpretations,

which will enhance the confirmation of significant data, especially within counselling and coaching programmes.

Conclusions

The study highlights specific correlations, allowing us to conclude that resilient students—those who maintain emotional stability, adapt to challenging situations, and manage stress—are more likely to engage in positive coping strategies, such as reintegration, and avoid passive mental coping strategies like denial. These findings align with previous research (e.g., Bacon, 2014), which emphasises emotional intelligence as a mediator in behaviours related to disadaptive behaviours and sensation-seeking. Other relevant studies (Ang et al., 2004) reveal that students with a positive attitude and who seek social support adapt more easily to university life, possessing emotional maturity and resilience.

This early quantitative analysis could encourage the Career Counselling and Orientation Centre (CCOC) team to implement a support programme with key objectives:

- Identification of students' risk factors,
- Analysis of prior resilience experiences,
- Evaluation of learning strategies, and
- Application of intervention strategies to reduce dropout rates and mitigate specific risk factors.

Promoting effective coping strategies and coaching within the university environment will likely enhance students' integration and adaptation, facilitating the completion of academic programmes.

Acknowledgement

This research is conducted within the project "Academic Performance in Student Training Process from the Perspective of Teaching Profession Standards_PERFORM-STUD" (No. RF 2468/31.05.2024).

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