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Enhancing Learning Environments: A Study of Student Perspectives on Learning, Engagement and Assessment in Higher Education

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Abstract: *This study explores the complex field of assessment and evaluation in higher education, emphasizing the student's viewpoints and experiences. Considering several elements that impact students' learning and skill development, such as the changing dynamics of professionalization within the educational system, this study attempts to clarify the complex relationship between assessment procedures and student performance. Data was gathered from 273 students enrolled in the bachelor's degree, from two separate Universities in Romania from different fields and study levels. The method for gathering information was a survey that included demographic information as well as Likert-scale questions to learn about students' happiness with their academic achievement, assessment technique preferences, self-perception, study habits, and assessment-related stress issues. Students were also asked about their performance objectives, assessment preferences, and recommendations for strengthening academic support services. A descriptive analysis was performed to examine the perception of university students regarding the survey items. By investigating these factors, this study adds to a thorough understanding of the constraints and possibilities inherent in assessment processes in higher education settings. The findings can have important implications for curriculum design, teaching techniques, and support services aimed at creating a positive learning environment and promoting students' overall development.*

Keywords: *higher education; assessment preferences; academic achievement; skills development.*

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Introduction

Understanding how academia is reacting to current changes in higher education is essential, particularly given their considerable economic effect in society. This insight may be used to build ways to help academics effectively navigate obstacles, particularly those in early careers and education. By 2025, more than 260 million people will be enrolled in postsecondary education globally, according to UNESCO's projections, underscoring the need of free access to educational materials for effective and financially viable instruction (UNESCO, 2022). Rapid advances in digitization have sped up the growth of learning theories and practices, which is changing how knowledge is created and acquired. Contextualization and associations are necessary in this situation since they have a big impact on how students engage with and understand the material (Roebber, 2005). In today's dynamic and collaborative learning contexts, social interaction and negotiation are essential for knowledge exchange (Chen & Tu, 2021). According to UNESCO (2022), the nature of knowledge has evolved towards flexible, collaborative networks in which collective interaction processes have a considerable impact on learning outcomes. Students in higher education must navigate dynamic and oftentimes unstable situations, examine through large volumes of information, satisfying their expectations and academic standards (Courtney & Wilhoite-Mathews, 2015). Additionally, social negotiation and mediation have become essential for establishing meaningful learning experiences and allowing access to desired knowledge amongst the wide range of information available (Ross et al., 2023). Resilience emerges as a fundamental notion, providing a road for students to attain their greatest ability and discuss expectations in both education and research (Takimoto, 2019). Given the ongoing uncertainties and obstacles, as shown by previous and current events, academics and higher education institutions must develop resilience in handling global concerns while also striving for sustainable educational objectives (Sevĩnç & Gĩzĩr, 2014).

In Romania, challenges in higher education are a matter of interest. As the educational landscape evolves, Romanian institutions are confronted with new difficulties and possibilities (Salmi et al., 2015). The incorporation of technology into learning settings, changes in pedagogical techniques, and social expectations all contribute to the requirement for resilience in students and instructors (UNESCO National Commission, 2022). Romania's educational system must adapt to accommodate distinct socioeconomic and cultural dynamics. Economic differences, geographical variances in resource

availability, and attitudes towards education could have an impact on Romanian students' educational experiences (Proca & Gall, 2018). Areas that are of a particular interest for the higher education sector in Romanian include improving access, participation, and graduation for students, better means of marketing of Romanian higher education to attract students, and tools for more data efficiency (Salmi et al., 2015).

Factors for student learning and skills development

Several factors can offer a comprehensive understanding of the wide variety of student requirements and expectations in higher education, including linguistic competency, academic talents, personal development, intercultural skills, and professional advancement. Understanding these characteristics allows educators to tailor their programs and support services to student's needs, resulting in enhanced academic and professional achievements:

- *Academic competency*: research emphasized the importance of academic competence, which includes scholarly aptitude, effective use of academic language, adaptability to academic rigor, and obtaining research experience (Takimoto, 2019). There is emphasis on establishing new academic viewpoints and adjusting to the needs of the academic environment (Gonta & Bulgac, 2019). Also, academic competency is viewed as beneficial to success in higher education and subsequent professional opportunities (Van Der Vleuten, 2015). Developing good academic talents may lead to more prospects for growth and success in a variety of sectors (Bontje & Musterd, 2009; Meyer, 2003).
- *Personal growth:* there are studies that focus on personal growth, including topics such as adaptation, maturity, independence, and the ability to overcome problems (McAdams & Olson, 2010; Rickaby et al., 2020). Furthermore, hedonism and personal values were addressed in the discussion of students' personal growth (Meyer, 2003; Papastylianou & Lampridis, 2016; Ryan et al., 2019; Vaingankar et al., 2022; Vecchione & Schwartz, 2022).
- *Intercultural skills:* there is a body of study that focuses on the development of intercultural competence, with an emphasis on acquiring information, awareness, abilities, and attitudes mandatory for intercultural interactions (Kampermann et al., 2021; Luciani et al., 2020; Wang & Zhou, 2016). Extroverts show higher levels of intercultural connection, respect for cultural variety, pleasure of interaction, and attention during exchanges

(Aksin, 2023). Similarly, extroverts were found to have stronger intercultural views, which made them more likely to tolerate cultural diversity (Jach & Smillie, 2019). Moreover, some research revealed that extroverts had improved intercultural skills and a higher threshold for ambiguity (Jackson & Wilton, 2016). Therefore, extraverted personality qualities may help students develop their ability to be sensitive to cultural differences.

- *Professional development:* research focusing on professional development, stressing the importance of developing career-oriented competencies, encouraging people to pursue careers abroad, and preparing for future occupational endeavours (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Nyström et al., 2008). Early utilization of career growth learning in degree programs helps students produce truthful individualities and increases their hold of potential professional pathways. Students' assignation with the program increases as they start to see the possible requests of their degree and the significance of what they are studying. Students who are less sure of their motivation in pursuing a degree are more likely to choose a "just get by" strategy in which passing is the main goal (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Peixoto & Almeida, 2010).

Upon joining the university setting, students go through a variety of psychological processes that are impacted by changes in their social dynamics and academic expectations. These changes may cause emotions of uncertainty, disappointment, worry, despair, loneliness, and tension (Kurtović et al., 2018). As a result, students must negotiate several psychological pathways, with self-efficacy, coping behavior, and locus of control being especially important (Greco et al., 2022; Sagone & Indiana, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Self-efficacy refers to a student's confidence in their capacity to finish assignments, whereas coping behavior include adopting techniques to adjust to the new academic environment (Mitsopoulou & Pavlatou, 2024; Van Dinther et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2015). The extent to which students attribute prior events and experiences to internal or external sources is referred to as their locus of control. By way of students' academic and social self-efficacy increases, they acquire coping mechanisms and adopt an internal locus of control (Carr & Fraser, 2014). This leads to improved confidence, drive, internal attribution, and a decrease in perceived stress during difficult situations (Carr & Fraser, 2014; Zhao et al., 2015). Carr and Fraser (2014) describe developing trends in the design of learning environments. These settings make it easier to adopt a variety of pedagogical tactics that use information and communication technology (ICT), promote collaborative and interactive learning approaches, and allow for the integration of students' own ICT equipment. Furthermore,

they are intended to provide comfort, feature spaces favourable to casual learning, and smoothly integrate online learning components. As scholars pushed for a change towards student-centred learning, the design of next-generation learning places was viewed as a visible manifestation of this pedagogical approach (Patterson & Gray, 2019). We saw emphasis on the adoption of these creative venues with changes made in teaching techniques (Goldie, 2016; Pavlou & Castro-Varela, 2024). However, empirical data from the early adoption of these next-generation learning spaces revealed that many instructors continued to use traditional teaching approaches, depending on their own student experience rather than embracing the new surroundings (O'Rourke et al., 2017). Although academics may not completely embrace the teaching approaches promoted by next-generation learning spaces, the continuing retrofitting of existing spaces and development of new ones provides a chance for educators to take use of these surroundings. They may also use the spaces to create collaborative, dynamic, and technology-enabled learning environments (Van Der Vleuten, 2015).

Learning skills in the era of professionalization

Goldie (2016) emphasizes the importance of the ideas of "what to know," "how to know," and "who you know" in today's higher education scene. He promotes the use of connectivism theory, emphasizing the significance of building and fostering professional and personal learning networks. As higher education advances, traditional thought patterns must be revisited. Linear education strategies have proved ineffective in enhancing the quality of learning and instruction (Scheerens, 2015). Enhancing learning and teaching requires access to a wide range of materials (Dini et al., 2020). Devlin & Samarawickrema (2010) highlight the necessity for effective teaching techniques to adapt to the ever changing education landscape, emphasizing the need of concentrating on the quality and efficacy of both learning and teaching practices.

Lifelong learning, continual skill refinement, and ongoing professional development are increasingly valued in Europe as accelerators for economic success and active involvement in society. Castaño Muñoz and colleagues (2013) underlined the potential for technology improvements and open educational frameworks to transform higher education. Similarly, we see a shift to digital academic settings, accentuation technology's transformational potential (Grosseck et al., 2023; Patterson & Gray, 2019; Plekhanov et al., 2023).

The emphasis on acquiring skills during the professionalization era represents a trend towards educating students for the difficulties of today's

workforce (Kim, 2022). As industries expand and technology evolves, there is a greater need for people who can adapt fast, learn continually, and use their knowledge in a variety of circumstances (Nyström et al., 2008). As a result, students should not only learn subject-specific information, but similarly develop transferable skills that will allow them to traverse dynamic career pathways and make important contributions to their professions (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2019; Quinlan & Renninger, 2022). Learning skills in the age of professionalization represent a paradigm change in higher education, with the shifting from academic achievement to the holistic development of students. This would make them adaptable, resourceful, and lifelong learners capable of excelling in the complexities of the modern world (Fajaryati et al., 2020).

Assessment and evaluation in the higher education scene

The methods for structuring curricula and guiding learning trajectories are transitioning away from a rigid, sequential model to one that is fluid and adaptable. With this new approach acknowledges that every student follows a unique learning journey, shaped by their individual background, abilities, and attitudes upon entering the educational system (Patterson & Gray, 2019). Consequently, assessment practices have evolved from relying solely on standardized tests to incorporate a diverse array of assessment methods tailored to specific learning objectives and contexts (Murphy et al., 2023). Rather than concentrating exclusively on raising test difficulty, educators may help their students by ensuring that assessments encourage the use of effective learning practices. The goal is to create evaluations that foster active recollection of material, critical thinking, and deep interest with the subject matter (Murphy et al., 2023). Educators can practice a variation of testing plans, such as multiple-choice questions with plausible substitutes, prompted retrieval questions, and collective testing, group testing, team-based assessment. This approach may help students participate in these beneficial learning processes. Identification of the fundamental methods by which testing improves learning allows educators to deliberately incorporate testing as a tool for boosting information retaining, understanding, and application (Binks, 2018). This method emphasizes examinations not just as evaluation instruments, but also as essential components of the learning process. This will actively contribute to students' academic growth (Cantor et al., 2015; Hays et al., 2013). For the case of Romania, the curriculum for each semester includes subjects that are assessed either through a final examination (minimum 3 subjects) or through continuous assessment (minimum 2 subjects). In subjects with a final examination, the assessment comprises both

ongoing evaluations (conducted during seminars, practical works, projects etc.) and a final exam component. Final evaluations are conducted during regular sessions according to the established schedule for all forms of education. In subjects with a final examination, the ongoing evaluations contribute to the final grade as specified in the subject's documentation. The results of ongoing evaluations are communicated to students by the respective teaching staff in the last week before the regular exam session. Each teaching staff member is required to explicitly outline the evaluation methods and student requirements in the subject documentation provided during the first course/seminar of the semester. The subject documentation remains unchanged throughout the semester. Evaluation committees consist of teaching staff who have taught the subject and those who have conducted seminars (practical works), or another designated teaching staff member. In the absence of the subject holder, the department director appoints a committee to conduct the exam. Evaluation methods can be written, oral, or a combination thereof, with the evaluation form approved by the Faculty Council. Examinations are scheduled based on student preferences, with approval from the subject teacher who will conduct the evaluation.

By examining students' perceptions and preferences regarding assessment methods, learning trajectories we seek to uncover insights into student engagement, satisfaction, and academic achievement. Through our study, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding effective pedagogical approaches and the improvement of student learning outcomes in higher education.

Materials and Methods

The data of the study was collected by means of a specially designed survey, during which the experiences of assessment, evaluation, academic performance, confidence, anxiety, study skills and preparation of study were measured at higher education institutions. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The questionnaire consists of 27 items designed for this study specifically and 6 subscales were created: satisfaction and progress, preferences in assessment, self-perception and responsibility, confidence in their skills, anxiety in assessment and study skills and preparation. A Cronbach's α coefficient was calculated to test validity and reliability with a value of .992.

The survey consisted primarily of close-ended questions, comprising of formulated statements, which incorporated a five-point Likert scale to assess respondents' opinions and perceptions. The scale of each item ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," providing participants with a

spectrum of options to indicate their level of agreement. Within this format, there were additionally subtypes present. Notably, single-answer questions were included to capture demographic details such as age, gender, program enrolment, and level of study. Example of statements "The assessment process is suitable for my learning pace.", "Practical assessment is suitable for me.", "Online assessment moments are more accessible than those in the class.", "I feel anxious when I have to answer oral tests.". The survey was distributed via Google Forms within the online platform. The data collection took place between March 2024 – June 2024.

The sample consisted of a total of 273 completed and evaluated surveys (77.7% female and 23.3% male). The distribution of females and males in the sampling was due to characteristics of the higher education programs. For Romania's case, female students tend to outnumber male students in higher education enrolment (UNESCO National Commission, 2022), and these disparities are even more prevalent when we consider humanities faculties, where Romania registers a noteworthy discrepancy: 30.1% female students in contrast to 17% male students choose these faculties (Proca & Gall, 2018). The institutions were selected by way of convenience sampling to participate in the study. The participants were enrolled in the bachelor's degree, from two separate Universities in Romania (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution containing the count and proportion of respondents

Gender	**Data**
Female	212 (77.7%)
Male	61 (22.3%)
Age	
18 – 24 years	215
25 – 34 years	43
35 – 44 years	8
45 – 55 years	7
Year of study	
Year 1	168 (61.5%)
Year 2	105 (38.5%)
Study level	
Bachelor	243 (89%)
Masters	30 (11%)
Program Enrolment	
Higher education vocational course	160 (58.6%)
Bachelor/Master of science course	113 (41.4%)

Convenience sampling was utilized in this research for several reasons. Firstly, considering practicality, the chosen pool of students was readily accessible as they were enrolled in courses, we oversee as part of the core curriculum of the bachelor's degree program and master's degree program. These courses include "Theory of Instruction", "Theory of Evaluation and Assessment" for the students enrolled at the Education Sciences program and "Theory of Instruction and Evaluation and Assessment" for students enrolled at the music program and geography program. Although we were mindful of the ethical implications associated with potentially introducing an unequal tutor-student dynamic to the researcher-subject relationship, the accessibility of these students was paramount. Secondly, these courses offered an ideal focus for the study, as they centred around the transition from traditional assessment methods, focused on determining memorization, to authentic assessment approaches. While the former relies on recall-based techniques, the latter encourages learners to showcase deeper comprehension and practical application of knowledge.

By delving into students' perceptions and attitudes towards evaluation and assessment within the context of these courses, it was anticipated that insights gained would contribute to the enhancement of course provision. This understanding would facilitate the students' development of independent learning skills, aligning with the overarching goal of the courses to prepare future educators to employ effective assessment strategies that promote deeper learning and understanding. Therefore, the variables that were assessed through the survey were as follows:

Dependent variable: Dimensions of student learning, engagement, and assessment

Independent variables:

1. Satisfaction and progress
2. Preferences in assessment
3. Self-perception and responsibility
4. Confidence in their skills
5. Anxiety in assessment
6. Study skills and preparation

Student participation was voluntary, anonymous and they were informed in advance about the purpose of data processing and the study's objectives.

Results

The data were analysed using the SPSS statistical program (v.26). A descriptive analysis was performed to examine the perception of university students regarding the survey items. We calculated the Shapiro-Wilk (test of normality) and it was concluded that the data sampled doesn't fit normal distribution ($p<0.05$) (see table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the factors influencing academic life of students

	N	Median	Std. Deviation	Shapiro-Wilk	
				Statistic	Sig
Satisfaction and progress	273	4.000	0.757	.807	.000
Preferences in assessment	273	3.600	0.712	.938	.000
Self-perception and responsibility	273	3.800	0.754	.920	.000
Confidence in their skills	273	3.750	0.744	.915	.000
Anxiety in assessment	273	3.500	1.061	.940	.000
Study skills and preparation	273	3.400	0.805	.975	.000

Table 3. Non parametric Mann-Whitney U results

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Satisfaction and Progress	6358.500	8249.500	-0.200	0.841
Preferences in Assessment	5313.500	7204.500	-2.132*	0.033
Self-Perception and Responsibility	6145.000	8036.000	-0.594	0.553
Confidence in their abilities	5741.000	28319.000	-1.345	0.179
Anxiety in assessment	4389.000	6280.000	-3.866*	0.000
Study Skills and Preparation	6085.500	28663.500	-0.703	0.482

Grouping Variable: Gender
*Significant at less than 0.05

Since the number of females and male students participating in this study has registered a difference, we have employed a non-parametric testing (Mann-Whitney U test) to observe if there are any significant variations in student's perceptions based on the initial measurements. The summary is being depicted in table 3 and 4. We can observe that that responses for females

(N_{212}) and males (N_{61}) have registered a difference for subscale *Preferences in Assessment* (p=.033) and for *Anxiety in assessment* (p=.000). In the results for these subscales the Z-value is -2.132 (for p< .005) and -3.866 (for p< .005) and therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that the distribution of *Preferences in Assessment* and *Anxiety in Assessment* is the same across categories of Gender. To assess the magnitude of these differences, we calculated the effect size using the r impact factor ($r = Z / \sqrt{N}$). For the Preferences in Assessment subscale, the effect size was r = .129, and for the Anxiety in Assessment subscale, it was r = .234. Based on Cohen's (1988) criteria, an effect size of r = .129 for the Preferences in Assessment subscale and r = .234 for the Anxiety in Assessment subscale indicates a small effect size. Graphics for these two subscales can be found under figure 1 and figure 2.

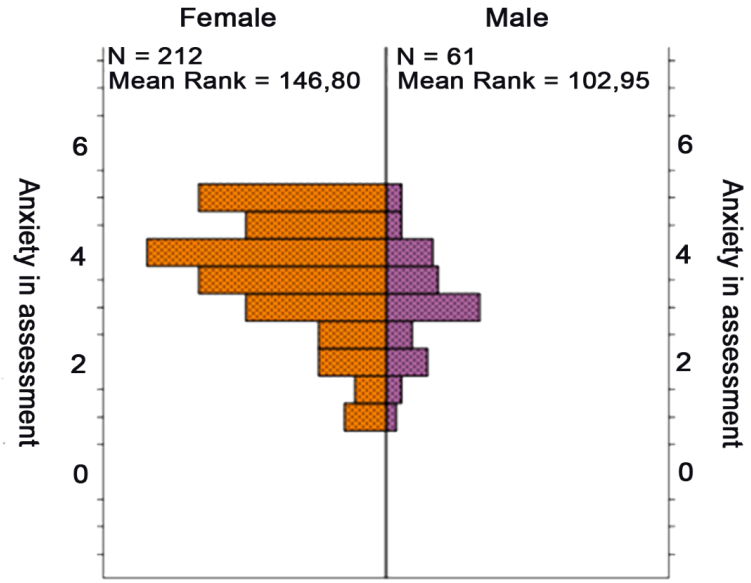


Figure 1. Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test depicted for subscale *Preferences in assessment*

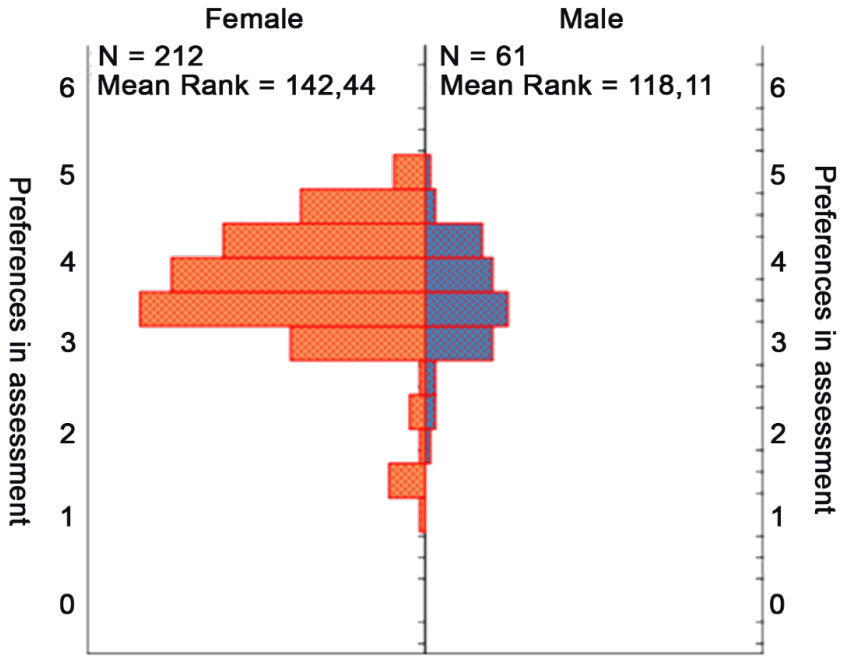


Figure 2. Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test depicted for subscale *Anxiety in assessment*

Table 4. Hypothesis Test Summary for Mann-Whitney U test

Null Hypothesis	Sig.	Decision
The distribution of Satisfaction and progress is the same across categories of Gender.	.841	Retain the null hypothesis.
The distribution of Preferences in Assessment is the same across categories of Gender.	.033	**Reject the null hypothesis.**
The distribution of Self-Perception and Responsibility is the same across categories of Gender.	.553	Retain the null hypothesis.
The distribution of Confidence in their abilities is the same across categories of Gender.	.179	Retain the null hypothesis.
The distribution of Anxiety in assessment is the same across categories of Gender.	.000	**Reject the null hypothesis.**
The distribution of Study Skills and Preparation is the same across categories of Gender.	.482	Retain the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .050.

Table 5. Value of mean for subscales Preferences in Assessment and Anxiety in assessment for gender distribution

Gender		Preferences in Assessment	Anxiety in assessment
Female (N_{212})	Mean	3.5745	3.6226
	Std. Deviation	0.73369	1.06498
	Median	3.6000	4.0000
Male (N_{61})	Mean	3.4066	3.0902
	Std. Deviation	0.62072	0.94652
	Median	3.4000	3.0000
Total (N_{273})	Mean	3.5370	3.5037
	Std. Deviation	0.71238	1.06152
	Median	3.6000	3.5000

Discussion

Student responses about the dimensions of student learning, engagement and assessment

Satisfaction and Progress: Focuses on students' overall satisfaction with their progress and academic journey.

There are multiple factors that determine satisfaction and progress in academic life of students. As depicted in Table 2, the results of the median value of students' overall satisfaction with their progress and academic journey was M=3.971. This result indicates that students had positive satisfaction with their academic advancement and educational experience. This can be influenced by the quality of teaching (Scheerens, 2015), learning environment (Gonta & Bulgac, 2019), peer interaction (Alam, 2022), and institutional culture (Tierney, 1988; Torres, 2022). The values, norms, and organizational culture of the institution significantly shape students' experiences, influencing their satisfaction and sense of belonging within the academic community. Collaborative learning opportunities, group projects, and interactions with peers foster a sense of belonging and academic engagement. This in effect can influence students' satisfaction and progress.

Preferences in Assessment Methods: explores students' preferences regarding the methods used for assessment

As depicted in Table 2, the results indicated that the median scores of students' preferences regarding assessment methods. This result shows that students exhibit a preference for certain assessment methods over others. This finding underlines the position of considering students' preferences when

designing assessment strategies, as it can impact their engagement, motivation, and overall satisfaction with the learning process (Clack & Dommett, 2021; Faerman & Quinn, 1985). Preferences for evaluation techniques have significance for student progress (Melo et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2022). Student discontent with evaluation systems may lead to dropout from higher education (Nurmalitasari et al., 2023).

Self-Perception and Responsibility examines students' perception of themselves, their sense of responsibility, and their ability to set goals

Examining perceptions, sense of responsibility and goal setting (Table 2), students median score was still high, and this score suggests that students, on average, possess a relatively positive self-perception, a heightened sense of responsibility, and a propensity for goal setting. The significance of this result lies in its implications for students' academic performance and overall learning experience. This result reflects the need of creating a supportive learning environment in which students may develop positive self-perceptions, take responsibility of their learning process, and establish meaningful objectives (Herrera Granda et al., 2023). A higher value indicates that students generally perceive themselves in a favourable light, acknowledging their own capabilities and taking responsibility for their academic journey. In the context of higher education, students perceive themselves as autonomous individuals with the ability to control their actions and intentionally influence their learning environment (Arey & Levental, 2024; Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009; Tausen et al., 2018).

Confidence in their skills: investigates students' levels of confidence in their abilities

Students with high levels of self-confidence may easily complete their schoolwork, and the majority of them embrace diverse academic activities (Crowther, 2002; Othman et al., 2013). Students with low self-confidence have been shown to have poor performance on tasks and were unwilling to participate in all academic activities (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Melo et al., 2022; Michie et al., 2001; Peixoto & Almeida, 2010). When self-esteem and self-efficacy intersect, they form the foundation of self-confidence in academic settings (Burger et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2004). In this regard, examining the results indicated in table 2 that the median of students' exploring the degree of confidence students have in their own abilities. This implies that many students have a positive attitude about their skills, indicating a favourable atmosphere for academic engagement and achievement. Their increased confidence adds to their proactive approach to learning, which allows them to face problems with resilience and drive (Nkansah & Ikbal, 2024). Creating

a supportive educational environment that fosters students' self-belief, allowing them to reach their full potential and achieve academic success is a requirement in academia (Sartika & Nirbita, 2023). Bandura's theory suggests that repeated successes in performance accomplishments can lead to the development of strong self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, individuals experiences of success or failure play a role in shaping their self-confidence and influencing their future behavior and performance (Pfitzner-Eden, 2016; Zhao et al., 2021).

Anxiety: students experience of anxiety related to assessment

Anxiety has been shown to have a detrimental impact on evaluation, and neuroticism has been linked to poor performance on intelligence tests (Furnham et al., 2008). Anxiety has been repeatedly connected to poor performance on evaluation tasks, practical tasks, or online evaluation (Eysenck et al., 2007; Gedda-Muñoz et al., 2023; Gikandi et al., 2011; Struyven et al., 2005). As a result, students with greater degrees of emotional stability may be more equipped to deal with the stress and expectations of a final exam (Struyven et al., 2005). This might lead to better performance and results in academic tests. Upon examination, the results indicated that the median scores representing students' encounters with anxiety in relation to assessment was 3.50. This suggests that a significant proportion of students experience anxiety during assessment and evaluation. These findings underscore the importance of addressing anxiety-related issues in educational settings to support students in optimizing their academic performance and well-being (Dekker et al., 2020; Rand et al., 2020). Education institutions can create a helpful and empowering learning setting that promotes academic achievement and individual growth by putting a priority on students' mental health and well-being and taking proactive steps to address anxiety-related issues (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023; Wiedermann et al., 2023).

Study Skills and Preparation: focuses on students' study habits, preparation strategies, and time management skills

Study skills are a collection of strategies and behavior utilized by students to help them study and succeed in academia. These may include note-taking strategies, reading comprehension techniques, efficient organizing of learning material, participation in class discussions, and time management skills. Study skills have an impact on academic achievement and learner satisfaction (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022; Tomsett et al., 2023) Students with more effective study habits have higher levels of comprehension, recall of information, and critical thinking skills (Abid et al., 2023; Magulod, 2019; Stan & Manea, 2015). Examining the results obtain on our study (Table 2),

suggests that a proportion of students consider themselves equipped with the mentioned skills and use them in academia to better navigate challenges. They are more equipped to deal with the demands of classes, do well on exams, and can handle their academic workload efficiently (Burger et al., 2020; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016). Students with strong study skills usually experience lower levels of stress and anxiety related with their academic responsibilities, that can result in a more enjoyable learning experience overall (Alters & Nelson, 2002). According to study, three factors are critical to the perceived development of graduate attributes: students' performance motivation, the amount of educator backing in imaginative and critical thinking, and students' willingness to approach the class as an education community (Jansen & Suhre, 2010; Smith & Lee, 2012).

The relationship between student responses and gender

As we can see from table 5, there are notable differences in the mean scores reported by females and males for the two subscales where significance was observed in the Mann-Whitney U test.

The results are consistent with previous research findings. Student participation is important for educational institutions' academic reputations, but also for their financial viability. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) underline faculty's critical role in constructing the educational environment, arguing that their behavior and attitudes have a significant influence on student learning and engagement. Institutions whose faculty prioritize excellent teaching approaches observe better levels of student engagement and perceived benefits from the undergraduate experience. The quality of the student-teacher interaction is particularly important, since Groves and colleagues (2015) identified it as the most important factor impacting student involvement. This emphasizes the importance of encouraging pleasant connections between students and professors in improving general engagement and academic performance. These findings are echoed in DeVito's (2016) study, which revealed that students exhibit higher levels of engagement in learning when they have a clear understanding of the teacher's expectations and are given opportunities for participation in decision-making processes. Respondents also emphasized the significance of teachers' instructional styles in fostering active engagement.

In line with the findings, participants exhibit varying preferences regarding their goals for their next academic undertakings. Figure 3 illustrates that accumulated knowledge, good grades, and collaboration with both colleagues and teachers are favoured choices among both female and male participants.

Figure 3. Preferences among participant for goal settings

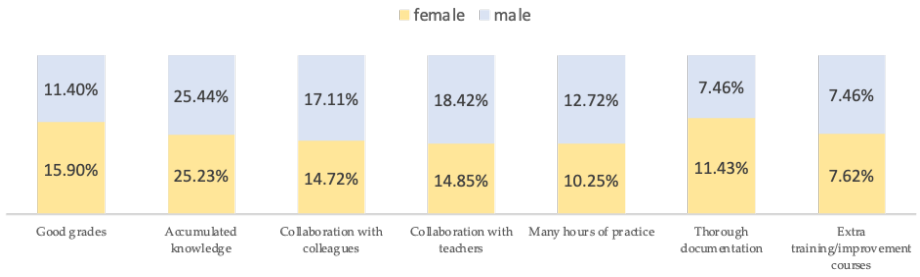


Figure 4 shows interesting trends in students' choices for evaluation techniques. Written examinations, multiple-choice tests, and portfolios appear to be the most popular methods of evaluating knowledge among both male and female participants. These strategies most likely provide an organized way to testing comprehension and may allow for a thorough demonstration of information gain.

In contrast, oral examinations and written essays appear to elicit less preference among the surveyed students. This might indicate a preference for assessment forms that include more organized criteria or opportunity for review and reflection, which may not be as readily available in oral or essay-based examinations. The perceived subjectivity or possibility for ambiguity in judging oral comments or written essays may lead to a decreased preference for more objective forms such as multiple-choice examinations.

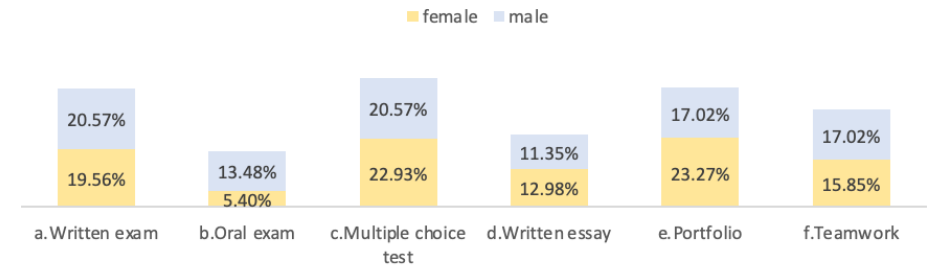


Figure 4. Preferences among participants for type of assessment

This data presented tries to add value to the worldwide discourse on higher education evaluation by providing insights from Romania, a country confronting unique educational and socioeconomic issues. While much of the global assessment literature focuses on systems in Western Europe or North America, this research offers a fresh viewpoint from Eastern Europe, highlighting the importance of cultural, economic, and institutional elements in affecting student experiences.

The findings highlight important variations in how students interact with assessment techniques, notably in terms of preferences and anxieties. Notably, the gender inequalities revealed in this study emphasize the need for more inclusive assessment processes that consider varied student requirements. These findings are consistent with worldwide trends that promote adaptable and student-centered methods, such as UNESCO's emphasis on inclusive education and lifelong learning.

Additionally, this study adds to the broadening corpus of research stressing the link between evaluation techniques and student involvement. The study helps worldwide efforts to improve education environments by identifying the specific approaches that students prefer, such as group projects and practical examinations. This makes them more beneficial and equitable.

Findings are consistent with global research trends in student evaluation, engagement, and learning, stressing creative and tailored approaches that value trust, self-confidence, and adaptability in education. The results, which investigate how faith in instructors, infrastructure, and one's own talents influences learning outcomes, are consistent with international attempts to develop more student-centered and supportive educational institutions. The Romanian environment offers a unique perspective, demonstrating how cultural, structural, and institutional elements influence educational outcomes. These findings can provide useful lessons for other nations, particularly those facing comparable socioeconomic issues, emphasizing the necessity of building trust and confidence as essential aspects for student achievement in a quickly changing environment.

Study limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that must be addressed in order to contextualize its findings. The sample was selected from two Romanian institutions, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other nations or areas. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling may create selection bias because the sample does not completely represent the range of student experiences in Romania's higher education system.

Future study might overcome these limitations by using longitudinal designs, increasing the sample size, and conducting comparison studies in various countries to better appreciate the findings' worldwide relevance.

Conclusions and future directions

Our findings highlight the relevance of student satisfaction, choices of assessment methods, confidence in abilities, and study skills in promoting learning engagement. Also, the positive link shown between these elements and aspects of student learning, engagement, and evaluation emphasizes the importance of effective teaching approaches in shaping students' experiences. The importance of effective instructors in establishing a climate favourable to student involvement cannot be emphasized. The study emphasizes the impact of faculty behavior and attitudes on student learning and engagement, highlighting the significance of successful educational practices in fostering active involvement and perceived advantages from the undergraduate experience. Overall, our findings provide empirical evidence for the importance of student assessment choices, confidence, and study abilities in promoting student involvement. These findings highlight the significance of fostering a supportive educational environment that prioritizes effective teaching approaches and healthy student-teacher interactions to improve student engagement and academic performance.

Considering how much faculty attitudes and behavior affect students' participation, funding teacher education programs may be a wise proceed. These courses may concentrate on equipping teachers with the abilities and information they need to design dynamic classes that encourage active participation from students. Expanding upon the good effects of technology on students' motivation to learn, further study and funding for educational technology may be advantageous. This can entail looking at creative methods to improve learning outcomes and student engagement in the classroom by incorporating technology. It might be beneficial to include student-centered strategies, such as giving students the freedom to choose how they want to learn and make decisions. Subsequent investigations may explore the efficacy of these methodologies in greater detail and pinpoint optimal strategies for execution. Future work might concentrate on improving assessment techniques to better match student requirements and learning objectives, given the impact of assessment methods on student preferences and satisfaction. Investigating different evaluation techniques that encourage in-depth study, and introspection may be one way to do this. Continuous progress in student engagement initiatives can be facilitated by collaboration amongst institutions to exchange best practices and insights. Creating

networks or platforms for cooperation and knowledge sharing across higher education institutions may encourage an innovative and learning-oriented culture.

The study findings revealed notable differences between female and male participants across various dimensions. Females reported slightly higher mean scores for both the Preferences in Assessment and Anxiety in Assessment subscales compared to males. These differences suggest variations in assessment preferences and anxiety levels between genders, underscoring the importance of considering gender-specific factors in educational practices and interventions.

The way assessments are conducted can impact students' preferences. Data from the study may suggest that students may prefer assessments that allow them to demonstrate their understanding and skills in a practical or hands-on manner, rather than relying solely on written exams. Providing options for different assessment formats, such as group projects, individual presentations, or online quizzes, can accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences among students. Depending on the faculty enrolment programs, different types of assessment are used in the Romanian system, and these can be adjusted to fit the requirements. Consultations with the student at the beginning of the year can offer insights into the preferred manner of evaluation.

Some students may prefer frequent assessments throughout the semester to track their progress and receive timely feedback, while others may prefer fewer assessments with more weight placed on final exams or projects. Considering that, in Romania, the examinations are already in place when the semester starts, we should be looking further in aligning assessment schedules with students' preferences, so that educators can create a more balanced and effective assessment framework. Study skills and preparation are considered components of student success, and these concerns are present in Romanian students as well. These skills encompass a wide range of abilities and strategies that students employ to effectively manage their time, organize their materials, and engage with course content. Even though there are classes specifically design for learning strategies and course preparation, every professor could employ a system for their specific course requirements.

A good learning environment may be enhanced by offering complete support services such as career services, academic advising, counselling, and tutoring. Ensuring students' holistic well-being and academic achievement implies attending to their academic, personal, and career-related requirements. The learning process may be improved by creating adaptable learning environments that consider different teaching pedagogies and student

preferences. This might entail designing technology-enabled classrooms, outdoor learning spaces, and collaborative workspaces that accommodate various learning preferences and styles. Universities can create diverse and inclusive learning environments that value the unique experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds of their students. Encouraging social justice, equality, and cultural competency in the curriculum and campus life may improve every student's educational experience.

The findings on Romanian students' assessment choices and observed gender inequalities have important consequences for educators and policymakers globally. As higher education institutions develop in response to globalization and digital revolution, this study's findings highlight the importance of adaptive and inclusive teaching approaches that promote student participation and well-being.

Future study should expand on this work by looking at similar topics in different cultural and institutional contexts, resulting in a more thorough knowledge of global evaluation procedures. This study emphasizes the transformational potential of inclusive education practices in establishing fair and effective learning environments throughout the world by combining local findings with international trends.

Informed Consent Statement: *Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Scientific Council of the Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Doctoral School Education—Reflection—Development (no. 1/1 date: 9 January 2024).*

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