

MOTIVATIONS FOR ATTENDING UNIVERSITY AND DROPOUT INTENTION IN FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *University dropout is considered a critical research topic today due to its significant implications for individuals, institutions, and society. The main aims of this study were to analyse the differences in learning engagement and dropout intention during the first academic year and to analyse the predictive value of motivations to attend university and pre-entry characteristics on the dropout intention. Results showed that learning engagement and dropout intentions vary during the first year, with the decrease in engagement and relative stability towards the end of the year. Students without clear reasons for attending university are most susceptible to dropping out. Learning engagement appears to be a powerful predictor of a low dropout intention.*

Key words: *motivation for attending university, dropout intention, first year university students, academic performance.*

1. Introduction

University dropout is considered a critical research topic today due to its significant implications for individuals, institutions, and society, post-pandemic studies also highlighting the increase of dropout rates worldwide (European Commission, 2022), the consequences of this phenomenon being discussed at different levels. Studies showed that students who drop out of university often face lower lifetime earnings compared to their peers who complete their degrees, affecting their personal financial stability but also impacting the economy at large through lower tax revenues and higher potential reliance on public assistance programs (Bernardo et al., 2016). In addition, dropout contributes to the skills gap in the labour market, particularly in high-demand fields, which can stifle economic growth and innovation (Cabrera et al., 1993). The reasons behind university

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dropout often include mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress, both as predictors and consequences of dropout and maladjustment (Blanco et al., 2014; Drăghici & Cazan, 2022). University dropout refers to the phenomenon where students discontinue their higher education studies before completing their degree. This issue is complex and has been studied extensively, resulting in various definitions and theoretical frameworks. first year adjustment difficulties.

The reasons for dropping out can be understood through multiple perspectives. The psychological perspective views dropout as an individual decision, highlighting internal factors that influence student persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2020). The sociological perspective links dropout to social attributes, suggesting that a student's family's social status can affect their educational and employment outcomes (Herţeliu et al., 2022). The institutional perspective examines how the academic environment affects student behavior, with factors like structure, resources, and climate playing significant roles in shaping socialization patterns and, consequently, retention (Berger, 2001). The interactionist view integrates these perspectives, considering dropout as the outcome of ongoing interactions between an individual's psychological and socio-economic traits and the educational institution (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Tinto, 1997), dropout and retention being the results of continuous exchanges between the individual and the institutional system (Herţeliu et al., 2022).

The relationship between university entry motives and dropout rates has been explored in several studies, highlighting how different factors can influence students' decisions to leave higher education. Students' motives for entering university significantly impact their academic engagement and subsequent dropout rates. For instance, students with altruistic motives (e.g., desiring to contribute to society) show higher academic engagement and lower dropout rates (Jungert et al., 2014). Beside motivations to attend university, family and personal background could predict academic dropout, studies showing that low income and lack of a university-going culture, negatively affect university retention (Aina, 2013). Academic vulnerability and family support are also important predictors, students who have lower entry grades and less family support are more likely to drop out, especially during critical periods such as the beginning of the second year of university (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019).

The relationship between learning engagement and academic dropout among first-year university students is also critical, students considering dropping out often score lower on engagement scales (Truta et al., 2018) and suggesting that boosting engagement could be a key strategy in reducing dropout rates (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2024). First-year students who display higher levels of academic engagement tend to perform better academically and are more likely to persist in their studies. Engagement dimensions such as hardiness and resourcefulness are notable predictors of continued university attendance and success (Ayala & Manzano, 2018).

Given the importance of academic adjustment and the consequences of dropout in first year university students, the main aims of this study were to analyze the differences in learning engagement and dropout intention during the first academic year and to analyse the predictive value of motivations to attend university and pre-entry characteristics on the dropout intention.

2. Methods

2.1. Measures

Students' motivations for attending university were measured with The Students' Motivations for Attending University Questionnaire (Côté & Levine, 1997). The 23 items are measured on a six-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree and are grouped in five scales: the Careerism-Materialism (CAR) motivation scale (5 items, $\alpha = .82$) measures motives related to seeing university as a mean of gaining money and status, the Personal-Intellectual Development (PER) motivation scale (5 items, $\alpha = .79$) emphasizes the role of university in personal growth, the Humanitarian (HUM) motivation scale (4 items, $\alpha = .80$) emphasizes the role of attending university to help those less fortunate and to change the world, the Expectation Drive (EXP) motivation scale (5 items, $\alpha = .77$) involves expectations and pressures from family and friends to attend university, and the Default (DEF) motivation scale (4 items, $\alpha = .76$) refers to undefined motives, attending university is better than other options.

Dropout intention was measured with a five-item scale also used in previous studies (Cazan et al., 2023)(example of items: "Sometimes, I think there are other professional fields that might suit me better than the one I am currently studying"; "I am considering giving up on this university"). The items are measured on five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly), Cronbach's Alpha being high, .80, (Schaufeli et al., 2006)high scores indicating a higher intention to dropout.

Learning engagement was measured with The UVES Learning Engagement Scale ,(Schaufeli et al., 2006) the 9-item version was used for this research, the items covering three dimensions (three items per dimension, Vigor (Cronbach's Alpha = .83), Absorption (Cronbach's Alpha = .76), and Dedication (Cronbach's Alpha = .84). The Cronbach's Alpha for the entire scale was .92.

A factual questionnaire was used to collect data about demographic aspects (gender, age, and faculty), educational background (baccalaureate mean grade), and current academic context (grades at the end of the first semester of the first academic year, number of passed exams, etc.).

2.2. Participants

A sample of Romanian university students participated in a repeated measure study. We measured motivations to attend university at the beginning of the academic year (two months post-enrolment) and learning engagement and dropout intentions at three key times: two months post-enrolment, at the end of the first semester, and after the first academic year. The study initially surveyed 352 students at the first time point, but this number decreased to 280 by the second and 235 by the third. Only 154 participants who provided complete data across all three measures were included in the final analysis. The final sample demonstrated a gender imbalance with 120 females and 30 males, with a mean age of 19.67 years ($SD = 1.75$). These students were enrolled in different academic programs, including engineering, psychology, education sciences, biology, music, arts, and mathematics.

2.3. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics analysis showed that all the variables are normally distributed with no signs of multivariate outliers and the normality assumptions were met. To analyse the differences between the three testing moments, Repeated measures ANOVA tests were used, Mauchly test was computed to test the sphericity assumption. Pearson correlation and linear regression were computed to analyse the associations between variables in the three testing moments and to identify the predictive value of individual characteristics for the dropout intention.

3. Results

The three testing moments were compared using repeated measures ANOVA (Table 1) to analyse the differences regarding learning engagement and dropout intention through the first academic year. The results showed a significant decrease in learning engagement between time 1 and time 2. Still, there was no significant change for time 3, showing that the strongest adjustment effort is involved in the middle of the academic year. Significant changes were also observed in the dropout intention. Still, while no significant difference was found between the beginning and the end of the first semester, the dropout intention decreased significantly at the end of the first academic year.

Table 1

Repeated measures ANOVA for the three testing moments for learning engagement and dropout intention

	Bonferroni comparisons	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean diff.	<i>sig</i>	<i>W</i> (2)	<i>sig</i>	<i>F</i> (2,154)	<i>sig</i>	η^2
Learning engagement	T1-T2	4.420 (.894)	4.107 (.975)	.313	<.001	.940	.416	19.580	<.001	.120
	T1-T3	4.420 (.894)	4.047 (.927)	.373	<.001					
	T2-T3	4.107 (.975)	4.047 (.927)	.060	1.000					
Vigour	T1-T2	3.988 (1.151)	3.574 (1.180)	.414	<.001	.969	.107	21.160	<.001	.128
	T1-T3	3.988 (1.151)	3.464 (1.118)	.524	<.001					
	T2-T3	3.574 (1.180)	3.464 (1.118)	.110	.574					
Dedication	T1-T2	4.926 (.909)	4.675 (1.085)	.251	.002	.971	.119	9.450	<.001	.062
	T1-T3	4.926 (.909)	4.620 (1.009)	.306	.001					
	T2-T3	4.675 (1.085)	4.620 (1.009)	.055	1.000					
Absorption	T1-T2	4.347 (1.062)	4.071 (1.109)	.276	<.001	.962	.104	8.569	<.001	.056

	T1-T3	4.347 (1.062)	4.057 (1.129)	.290	<.001					
	T2-T3	4.071 (1.109)	4.057 (1.129)	.014	1.000					
Dropout intention	T1-T2	1.717 (.727)	1.699 (.770)	.018	1.000	.995	.416	7.958	<.001	.022
	T1-T3	1.717 (.727)	1.624 (.698)	.093	.001					
	T2-T3	1.699 (.770)	1.624 (.698)	.075	.010					

To identify the possible predictors of the dropout intention at the end of the academic year, the associations between the motivations to attend university, pre-entry characteristics, learning engagement and dropout intention were analysed (Table 2).

Table 2

Correlations between motives for attending university, pre-entry characteristics and dropout intention

	Careerism-Materialism	Personal-Intellectual	Humanitarian	Expectation drive	Default
Number of options	-.035	-.070	-.122*	.138**	.052
Rank of accepted application	-.168**	-.138**	-.159**	.103	.112*
Learning engagement T1	.447***	.555***	.333***	-.186***	-.499***
Learning engagement T2	.440***	.560***	.302***	-.265***	-.571***
Learning engagement T3	.389***	.372***	.349***	-.114	-.306***
Dropout intention T1	-.326***	-.375***	-.238***	.258***	.576***
Dropout intention T2	-.322***	-.352***	-.205***	.256***	.531***
Dropout intention T3	-.287***	-.350***	-.253***	.245***	.522***
Baccalaureate GPA	-.081	-.142**	-.035	-.009	.065
GPA end of I semester	-.062	.058	.043	-.095	-.058
GPA end of 2nd semester	.012	-.008	-.015	-.005	.066
GPA end of I year	.115	.088	.063	-.068	-.064

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $N_{time 1} = 352$, $N_{time 2} = 235$, $N_{time 3} = 154$.

The results showed significant correlations between motivations and dropout intention in all three testing phases, the strongest association being obtained, as expected, for the Default motives; the higher the level of Lack of alternatives, the higher the dropout intention. The next significant association was obtained for Personal-Intellectual Development motivation, showing that when the choice of the university was guided by

the belief that the university is important for personal growth, the dropout intention was lower. Negative associations were also found for Careerism-materialism and Humanitarian motives, while motives guided by the pressures from family and friends to attend university positively correlate with the dropout intention. The same pattern was observed for the associations with the Rank of accepted application, showing that the lack of alternatives and vaguely defined reasons for a particular study program explains why a position is accepted at the end of the admission process although the obtained position is far from the preferred option. Previous academic performance was not correlated with the motives for attending university while learning engagement shows negative association with the lack of alternatives and positive associations with all other types of motives.

Several variables were considered predictors to predict the dropout intention at the end of the first academic year, following their associations with the criterion (Table 3). The results showed that the baccalaureate grade point average was not a significant predictor while learning engagement was the strongest negative predictor. In addition, the lack of alternatives as a motif for attending university and the rank of accepted applications were positive predictors. Therefore, higher levels for the lack of alternatives, choice of a least preferred program and low learning engagement could explain a higher dropout intention.

Prediction of dropout intention at the end of the first academic year Table 3

Predictors	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Collinearity Statistics	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>			<i>Tolerance</i>	<i>VIF</i>
(Constant)	1.846	.344		5.375	<.001		
BAC GPA	.034	.032	.045	1.052	.294	.982	1.018
Rank of accepted application	.138	.057	.105	2.414	.016	.970	1.031
Default	.180	.027	.333	6.737	<.001	.748	1.337
Learning engagement	-.218	.032	-.340	-6.848	<.001	.740	1.351
$R^2 = .373$, $F(4,149) = 51.165$, $p < .001$							

4. Discussions

The results showed that learning engagement and dropout intentions vary during the first year of study, with the decrease in learning engagement and relative stability towards the end of the academic year in the dropout intention being reflective of the adjustment effort of students (Larose et al., 2019). Students without clear reasons for attending university are most susceptible to maladjustment and dropping out. These individuals may enroll in higher education without a specific purpose or due to a shortage of alternatives, which subsequently impacts their academic trajectory, as previous studies also showed (Hyytinen et al., 2022; Truta et al., 2023). Learning engagement appears to

be the most crucial predictor of a low dropout intention. Student engagement is connected not only to immediate academic achievements but also forecasts long-term educational outcomes, including the completion of secondary education and academic persistence (Fraysier et al., 2020). Therefore, while lack of motives impacts negatively persistence, learning engagement could be a protective factor against dropout intention (Szabó et al., 2024).

Motives for attending university are closely connected with dropout intentions during the first academic year for several reasons. Students who have clear and strong motivations for attending university are likely to see their education as aligned with their long-term goals. When students feel that their university experience is a critical step towards achieving their career and personal aspirations, they are more likely to persevere through challenges. Motivation predicts learning engagement (Ganotice et al., 2022). Students motivated by specific reasons for attending university (e.g., interest in a subject, career aspirations) are generally more engaged and committed to their academic work (Hyytinen et al., 2022). High engagement often leads to better academic performance, reducing the likelihood of dropping out. Coping with challenges could also be an important factor; students who attend university with well-defined motives are typically better equipped to handle these challenges (Drăghici & Cazan, 2022; Freire et al., 2020). They may have a stronger support system or be more proactive in seeking help because they are more invested in their educational outcomes. On the other hand, students who enroll in university, because they see it as their only option or due to external pressures (such as family or peers' expectations) may not have the same level of personal commitment. If they don't find the academic environment rewarding or aligned with their personal values and interests, their risk of disengagement and eventual dropout increases (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Truta et al., 2023).

5. Limitations, Future Research Directions and Implications

This study has several strengths but also recognizes certain limitations. It primarily examined motivational aspects influencing academic trajectories and suggests that future research should also explore university environmental factors like teaching practices, peer relationships, or contextual variables such as family background and socioeconomic characteristics. Future research could focus on these aspects and could expand the research by adding personality traits (Fraysier et al., 2020; Stan et al., 2023) and learning strategies as predictors of dropout intention (van Rooij et al., 2018; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004). Another drawback is the limited timeframe of the repeated measures design, which covered only the first year of study. Extending this period in future studies might reveal more about student persistence throughout university tenure. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data to assess adjustment, achievement, and dropout intentions. These metrics were collected via student questionnaires without access to personal academic records. Future studies could improve the reliability and validity of these measures by incorporating data from multiple sources (Szabó et al., 2024).

Understanding and addressing the motives of university students can be key to

developing interventions that reduce dropout rates, especially during the critical first year. The results of this study can serve as a starting point for proposing and implementing counselling programs for students to support their engagement in learning throughout the first year of studies and to counteract factors that lead to maladjustment. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of choosing a university at the end of high school, drawing attention to the need to support career counselling from high school onwards. This would ensure that high school students' career decisions are better founded and guided by motives that emphasize the desire for professional development in a well-defined field rather than by extrinsic motives related to the expectations of others or the attainment of material rewards.

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