

PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL CLIMATE TO REDUCE THE RISK OF DROP OUT IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The high number of students who have dropped out of higher education prompts to find out both the reasons for dropping out and the causes of dissatisfaction. The psycho-emotional climate of an educational institution is considered to be one of the indicators of the quality of the institution's organizational culture and performance, which determines its pedagogical effectiveness. Therefore, at the moment when the idea of institutional accreditation seriously marks its place in the accreditation process, there is a growing interest in research, the subject of which is the psycho-emotional climate of a higher education institution as a pedagogical resource. The aim of this publication is to identify the psycho-emotional risks of drop out among the students. The research methodology consists of a set of qualitative data obtained by surveying 50 students who have expressed an intention to drop out. The study data were analysed using the qualitative data processing program NVivo 12.0. The study analysed and described the theoretical framework of the psycho-emotional climate and identified the main risks of drop out. It is concluded that the psycho-emotional climate is an essential component of students' desire to continue their studies, as it promotes the institutional sense of belonging and learning achievements. The results of this study complement existing research with qualitative data, operationalizing psycho-emotional support in higher education settings.*

Keywords: *higher education, NVivo, psycho-emotional climate, students' drop out risk.*

Introduction

Higher education is an educational phase which, while implementing the training process, provides the training of highly qualified specialists in the labour market in the necessary sectors, the development and renewal of human capital of research, and the development of a knowledge base. It is at the level of higher education that these are seen as key factors in creating new knowledge, technology, and innovation and in creating a sustainable economic system. Sustainable higher education is not only the acquisition of specific competencies and qualifications, but also the process of human talent, emotional intelligence and personality development (Medne & Jansone-Ratinika, 2019). Therefore, early school leaving marks significant risks in both the individual development and the social sphere. In turn, the combination of both dimensions points to significant risks to economic development and its sustainability. Despite the urgency of this issue, it is emphasized that drop out at the tertiary level is a difficult issue to conceptualize (Kehm, Larsen, & Sommerse, 2019). This is because this

phenomenon is defined and formed by a subjective set of multidimensional aspects. Among the several reasons for dropping out in the student population, the relationship between a positive psychosocial environment, student academic satisfaction and completion of studies are a few mentioned (Grøtan, Sund, & Bjerkeset, 2019; Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018; Truta, Parv, & Topala, 2018). The psychosocial environment has two main dimensions: the first is related to individual failures in the study process and the level of perceived academic stress, and the second is related to both student-student relations and the social climate of the educational institution in general (Gustafsson, Allodi, Åkerman, Eriksson, Eriksson, Fischbein, Granlund, Gustafsson, Ljungdahl, Ogden, & Persson, 2010). It is possible that in the context of the Latvian pedagogical space, this finding has enabled the development of a modern, high-quality and competitive higher education that promotes the professional development of everyone, the healthy growth of development content, research and innovation capacity, and competitiveness in the labour market, that results in professional autonomy, a review of the content and form of learning is needed (Medne, Rubene, Bernande, Illiško, 2021). Although teacher-student relationships have been identified as an important prerequisite for learning achievement and student engagement at primary and general levels (Quin, 2017), the impact of such relationships in higher education is less frequently studied and often lacks a clear theoretical and conceptual framework (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). On the other hand, the available research emphasizes that investing institutional resources in the quality of teaching and the improvement of pedagogical communication can reduce drop out rates (Larsen, Sommersel, & Larsen, 2013). This setting of the pedagogical process raises awareness of the need to strengthen the pedagogical, digital, and communicative capacity of the main drivers of this process (Guillén-Gámez, Mayorga-Fernández, Bravo-Agapito, & Escribano-Ortiz, 2020). A proactive approach to the promotion of the psycho-emotional environment ensures continuity, as the organizers and implementers of the study process have tried to anticipate the expected limitations and look to the future in order to develop a flexible future development strategy as much as possible. Thus, ensuring that solutions are not only based on *ad hoc* short-term responses, but also collectively develop a long-term vision at national level, as it challenges students to explore different perspectives, face the challenges of the 21st century and learn to work with people from different backgrounds and meanings (Iliško et al., 2020).

However, research on this topic is difficult for several reasons. Some of the leading reasons for the topic study are the lack of a common understanding of what constitutes drop out, the measurement of drop out is complex, based on context (Serra Hagedorn, 2012), and the need for an in-depth knowledge of measurable variables and access to accurate institutional data that are systematically accumulated (Gairín, Triado, Feiado, xas, Figuera, Aparicio-Chueca, & Torrado, 2014).

The described situation clearly highlights the research problem, according to which the research questions are determined:

- 1) Are the reasons for drop out a psycho-emotional nature?
- 2) Which reasons for drop out are most often exhibited in interviews with anxious respondents?

Context of the study: drop out and psycho-emotional climate in higher education

Analysing school drop out at higher education level, 44 empirical research analysis has identified nine groups of arguments that influence students' decision to discontinue studies: (1) Study conditions at university, (2) Academic integration at university, (3) Social integration at university, (4) Personal efforts and motivations for studying, (5) Information and admission requirements, (6) Prior academic achievement in school, (7) Personal characteristics of the student, (8) Socio-demographic background of the student, (9) External conditions (Kehm et al., 2019).

Describing the framework for each reason, in line with the author's study (Kehm et al., 2019), will assess the relevance of these causes to the purpose of this study and the feasibility of using them as codes for the coding of interviews. (1) The framework for study conditions at university is multifaceted, consisting of six aspects. The first aspect is the institutional resources, which include the number of students per lecture, the level of staff qualifications, the intensity of research, the general staff-student ratio, the academic expenditure per student, the library expenditure per student, etc. The second aspect is the curriculum, the study structure and the organization of the examinations. The third aspect includes the physical environment of learning and the quality of learning, which is characterized by student satisfaction and well-being. Contradictory results have been identified regarding the importance of this criterion, however, it is emphasized that the quality of the learning environment is the strongest argument for decision to drop out. The availability of support and counselling services (on various issues, including drop out issues) has been identified as a fourth aspect. Peer influence on decision is identified as the fifth aspect. The sixth aspect is related to the study conditions at the university, in this aspect the field that the student has chosen to study is determined to be important. (2) Academic integration at university is a dimension that includes two features: objective and subjective. Analysing objective features of academic integration, such as exam results, confirm that there is convincing (and predictable) evidence that the better the academic performance, the lower the risk of dropping out. On the other hand, the subjective features of academic integration (such as self-perceived progress, group inclusion, and interaction with academic staff) are supported by conclusive evidence that the better the subjective integration, the lower the risk of dropping

out. (3) Social integration at university is also to some extent linked to the quality of the learning environment, as it includes well-being aspects, which in turn is one of the most important factors influencing decision to drop out from school in general. This dimension is related to the sense of belonging to the group, the course and the university as a whole. (4) Personal efforts and motivations for studying include two aspects: first, the interest in the subject, which significantly reduces drop outs, while the interest in future work is to some extent important, but its relevance could not be statistically demonstrated. The second aspect: personal effort, time management, resource management, finding solutions, goal setting, i.e. the ability to learn independently. (5) Information and admission requirements depend on the degree of institutional or subject-related selectivity (e.g. admission quotas, entrance examinations, numerous clauses, etc.). It is concluded that the general trend is that admission to non-graded tests reduces the risk of dropping out. Admission analysis using graded tests suggests that the higher the score, the lower the risk of discontinuation. On the other hand, the evidence base on the impact of information and admission requirements on dropping out is weak and the evidence itself is mixed (Larsen et al., 2013). (6) Prior academic achievement in school - as a whole, this aspect is strong evidence that academic achievement at school is a powerful prerequisite for leaving university, but cannot be used to predict decisions about switching to another curriculum. (7) The personal characteristics of the student dimension consists of two dimensions. Age and gender, on the one hand, and personal traits and trends, such as learning approach and conscientiousness, on the other. (8) Socio-demographic background of the student includes the level of education and professional competence of parents. While some studies showed heterogeneous or even insignificant results, there is strong evidence that parents' high educational attainment reduces the risk of abandonment. (9) External conditions. This group is divided into two subgroups: the financial situation of students and part-time work during studies. Despite expecting financial difficulties to increase the risk of abandonment, the results of the studies examined in the meta-analysis are contradictory. It is therefore not possible to obtain clear evidence of this aspect in order to predict drop out (Larsen et al., 2013).

Expanding a deeper analysis of each cause, it can be concluded that four out of nine are related to the psycho-emotional climate: Study conditions at university, Academic integration at university, Social integration at university, Personal efforts and motivations for studying, because it includes academic stress, professional skills of teachers, the ability of educators to communicate. And two are partly related to it: Information and admission requirements and Personal characteristics, which include aspects of the educational environment and support for personal growth. These nine reasons are essential evidence dimensions to answer the formulated research questions and will therefore serve as a basis for coding interviews.

Methodology

Qualitative approach has been chosen to achieve the aim of the study. An interview was chosen as a method of data acquisition, as it reduces the likelihood of giving the respondent imaginary "correct" answers, and allows to mark the frame of understanding in the context of the subject under study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Linguistic context analysis of interviews was carried out in the qualitative data processing program QSR NVivo 12. The choice of Nvivo data processing program in the study was determined by the fact that it increases the validity of the qualitative study (Siccama, & Penna, 2008). Interview processing and analysis was carried out in the following steps: (1) preparation of interview transcripts in Microsoft Word; (2) importing transcripts into an NVivo file; (3) open coding in the NVivo file (identification of topics, contexts, problems) by assigning a code to the relevant snippet of the interview transcript; (4) the reliability of the encoders was checked, the coincidence is assessed as high (80%); (5) based on the context structure developed in the context analysis, the interpretation of the content has been implemented.

Sample type for this study: purposive sample. The 'snowball' approach was used for sampling. The sample consisted of students who decided to drop out (n=50). Age of respondents – from 21 to 36 years. Students were interviewed over the period of three years (the last year of interview included the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (n=11). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical aspects of the research, and informed consent was obtained from the study participants. The interviews did not ask for information that could allow the respondents to be identified, the study participants were informed that they have the right to terminate their participation in the study at any time.

Research results and analysis

In relation to the focus of the study, where age and level of education are important, a sample of the study will be described in detail. The sample of the study consisted of students (n=50) aged 21-36 who had dropped out of higher education institutions of various profiles. Distribution of respondents by age: 21 years (n=5); 23 years (n=5); 24 years (n=3); 25 years (n=4); 27 years (n=3); 28 years (n=2); 30 years (n=3); 31 years (n=2); 32 years (n=4); 33 years (n=3); 34 years (n=5); 35 years (n=6); 36 years (n=5). Distribution of respondents by education levels: bachelor's level (n=20), master's level (n=30).

In order to determine the reasons for students' drop out and their framework, the nine codes defined in theory were identified during the open coding in the NVivo program: (1) Study conditions at university, (2) Academic integration at university, (3) Social integration at university, (4) Personal efforts and

motivations for studying, (5) Information and admission requirements, (6) Prior academic achievement in school, (7) Personal characteristics of the student, (8) Socio-demographic background of the student, (9) External conditions.

Table 1 Code frequency table

Code numbers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Quantity	365	156	123	65	25	2	18	4	5

The frequency of use of the codes indicates how expanded, extensive or detailed respondents talk about each question, including, indirectly, what is current or important to the respondent. The results of the study show that the most frequently identified code is Study conditions at university (365), which is characterized by the following statements in the interviews: constant ignorance; change of requirements; use of unrepresentative materials for lesson content; provision of outdated information; ambiguity in requirements; ignorance of requirements; high demands on the student, but low on the quality of one's (lecturer's) nature; low quality of lessons; non-performing lessons; lecturers are not prepared; frontal lessons only. The fact that this code is identified is most often explained by the fact that it is the most comprehensive in its framework. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the most common reason for this study is the second aspect - the structure of studies and the organization of examinations (236), and the third aspect - the physical environment of learning and the quality of learning (292). These codes are mentioned in interviews whose respondents are mostly over 27 years of age. These results outline the need to increase the pedagogical skills of university lecturers. The reason for the lack of support and information or the unavailability of lecturers is mentioned only in individual interviews (the total number of codes in the interviews - 25), and identified only in the interviews of bachelor's students. Perhaps these results reflect the fact that the transition from secondary education to higher is accepted as a simple or natural situation, but in reality it appears difficult and perhaps the emotional resilience needed in the new situation is underestimated because the social transition from education to the next is considered to be a natural process and easy to implement for students. However, this statement needs to be confirmed in further studies.

The second most frequently mentioned code is Academic integration at university (156). This code is characterized by the following statements in the interviews: assessment of progress was not encouraged during the training; lecturers are unkind and unresponsive; preferential special treatment to some students; lecturers behave arrogantly; public discussion of students' personalities; public comparison of students. It is important to emphasize that only one aspect of the subjective dimension of this code has been identified in this study:

communication with staff (academic, administrative, and general). In turn, these results outline the need for university lecturers to increase pedagogical communication skills and understanding of ethical issues. In this study, dropping out is not linked to academic achievement. This code was more often identified in master's level interviews (n=133), while in bachelor's level interviews (n=67) and in the age group over 27 (115). These results could be explained by the fact that students' expectations of university studies and the interpretation of their experience are shaped by their previous educational experience, so those who come from academia and have no previous university experience may lack healthy pedagogical communication and study organization experience. However, such an interpretation requires evidence in future studies.

The third most frequently mentioned code in interviews is Social integration at university (123). This code is mainly identified in the interviews for those who drop out of master's studies (98) and in the age group from 27 years (101). In interviews, this code is characterized by the following statements: I did not fit; I was asked to recreate the views of the teachers; I was not expected and welcome; I received regular emails that I do not meet the requirements; I don't know if I want to get a higher education ever again; There was no correspondence between the reality in the profession and what the teacher spoke in the lectures; I never thought I would feel it, but I really felt humiliated because of my experience - I am no longer 18...; I felt as if I can go away and never return; Management did not respond to our needs at all; All our suggestions were considered biased. Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents have chosen to discontinue their studies because they perceive the intellectual and social gap between the university's values, social regulations, the quality of communication, and the quality of studies. Lack of belonging to academic and social systems undermines a student's confidence in his / her institution and in social and academic systems in general, in fact contributing to isolation. Healthy pedagogical communication with teachers and others could encourage students to choose to continue their studies. However, the correctness of the generalization of this conclusion can also be tested in more extensive studies, possibly starting from the conceptualization of this concept.

The next code by frequency is Personal efforts and motivations for studying (65). This code is relatively less mentioned in the interviews in general and mainly at the bachelor's level (61) and in the context of the situation in Covid - 19 (11). This means that at the secondary school level already it is necessary to improve self-directed learning skills for prospective students. The situation during Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency of the problem, as it confirmed the importance of self-directed learning skills for a meaningful, focused, and uncertain learning process.

The next code in frequency is Information and admission requirements (25). This code was identified mainly by bachelor's students (23), and two master's

students and indicated that the information about the program did not fully correspond to the content of the curriculum. At the master's level, this code is interpreted as a lack of information from lecturers and program managers. Thus, it can be concluded that at the master's level, one of the reasons for dropping out of studies is the information gap. And at the master's level, the flow of information is very important for students. An objective and reliable evaluation of this code requires further research to identify the content and form of entrance examinations. Respondents noted that the marks in the entrance examinations were 8 and higher, so it can be concluded that it would not be correct to include this criterion in the list of grounds for dropping out of school in the framework of this study.

Personal characteristics of the student (18) was the following code identified by frequency in the interviews. Age (in any interpretation of the concept of age) was not mentioned in any interview as a pretext for dropping out. However, the frequency of codes in relation to age indicates the following trend: the higher the biological age of the respondent, the higher the demand for respectful communication from academic and general staff.

External conditions are identified as the next code by frequency in the interviews (5). In general, this code is mentioned in the interviews only at the bachelor's level and in the context of the situation during Covid - 19 pandemic. Students emphasized the financial aspects.

Socio-demographic background of the student was identified as the next code in frequency interviews (4). This code is only mentioned at the bachelor's level. The interviews focused only on parental support and not on the parents' level of education. The students emphasized that the parents had not shown any interest in the students' intention to drop out.

The final code identified by frequency in interviews (2) is Prior academic achievement in school. This code is mentioned only at the bachelor's level, but the frequency of the code in the interviews shows that it is not identifiable as a reason for dropping out in this study.

Discussion and conclusions

Analysing the results of the research, it is possible to answer the research questions that all the dimensions of drop out updated in the theory outline the topics of the interview content, as well as the dominant pretexts that have motivated students to drop out at higher education level. Thus, within the framework of the research, the main problems that students have encountered in the daily pedagogical process have also been identified. Although the results of the research are not generalizable and it is possible to identify only trends, traditionally qualitative research is considered to be accurate to reflect the

subjective feelings of students. Because it is qualitative research that allows to find out subjective experiences, interpretations, feelings, and attitudes.

Analysing the results of the study, it can be concluded that drop out is the sum of subjective vectors that result in different scenarios. According to the design of this study, the scenarios for drop out were developed within the framework of education levels. At the bachelor's level, the sum of the main pretexts in the scenario is formed from the following dimensions: students lack motivation and self-discipline, especially within the remote learning process, as well as self-directed learning skills. Students need support and access to information that outlines insufficient acquisition of stress management and communication skills. It is these skills identified in the study as necessary to move from one level of education to the next. It can be concluded that the drop out from bachelor's level scenario outlines the significance of the student's subjective, lecturer's, as well as some what administrative dimension. Analysing the results of the study, it can be concluded that at the bachelor's level, the psycho-emotional climate is an important pretext for drop out, but not the only one. The master's level scenario consists of the sum of the following pretexts: the dimensions of the study process organization, pedagogical communication, and the attitudes of the staff of the educational institution. It can be concluded that the scenario of dropping out of studies at the master's level outlines the significance of the administrative, lecturer's dimension, emphasizing the subjective dimension of the student very little. Analysing the results of the research, it can be concluded that at the master's level, the psycho-emotional climate is an important pretext for drop out.

The results of this study probably outline the marginalized issue of healthy pedagogical communication at the higher education level as one of the key creators of the psycho-emotional climate in higher education institutions. Until now, it has been considered that pedagogical communication at the higher education level *a priori* is healthy or formal, however, the results of the study indicate a serious trend, namely that, by nature, pedagogical imitation is currently taking place (both remotely and on-site), this may be linked to a number of aspects. The first is the relationship with power, which is most often the basis of authoritarian relations. It is possible that it can still be considered a legacy of the Soviet period, as each time period develops a certain form of verbal communication and a set of behavioural clichés that are constantly maintained in practice, which is not easy to change because it is at the level of habits. The second aspect, this issue may be related to pedagogical narcissism (self-gratification of teachers), because it also distorts pedagogical communication. The obtained results cannot be considered as a generalizable reflection of students' authoritarian experience, because the sample of the study is small (n=50). Therefore, this dimension should be explored in further research, especially as this is a position

that the university itself can change. Also because 43 respondents out of 50 in the interviews emphasized that no one had asked them the reasons for dropping out. Therefore, the analysis of the research results encourages the formulation of ideas for further research of the topic and recommendations for practice. In the field of research, there was a need to conceptualize the concept of drop out and each of its content components. In order to improve practices, research would be useful, which would focus more on the factors that arise in higher education and which may be affected, as well as better use of innovative and efficient projects to explore intervention measures. Thus, using subject, process and time perspectives in the research of the topic.

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