

# COMMITMENT TO THE GOAL OF COMPLETING STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. DROPOUT RISK OF THE STUDENTS FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE SPECIALIZATION FROM THE THREE ROMANIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES THAT PARTICIPATE IN THE PROJECT PRACTIPASS

Adrian Hatos<sup>1</sup>

University of Oradea

Adrian Pop<sup>2</sup>

University of Oradea

**Abstract.** *This paper aims to find the degree of commitment to the goal of completing studies in higher education of students in the institution they are registered in. The study relies on a questionnaire-based survey, which was applied to students enrolled in the PractiPASS project. The questionnaire was applied to students from the University of Oradea, University of Bucharest, and "Aurel Vlaicu" University from Arad. The analysis was made starting from theoretical models from papers which had studied the same subject. The most important variables that were used for analysis are: student's integration (social and academic), financial resources, socio-economic background, organizational climate, specialization etc. Using these variables we tried to find differences between the engagement degree of students from the three Universities, and to find out some of the causes of dropping out.*

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<sup>1</sup> **Author address:** University of Oradea, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universităţii Street, no.1, 410087, Oradea, Romania. **E-mail:** [ahatos@gmail.com](mailto:ahatos@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> **Author address:** University of Oradea, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universităţii Street, no.1, 410087, Oradea, Romania. **E-mail:** [pop.petru.adrian@gmail.com](mailto:pop.petru.adrian@gmail.com)

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## Introduction (the problem)

The project *Practice programme for students. "Child protection - from theory to practice"* (acronym: PractiPASS) is a strategic demarche that includes as target group students from three public universities from Romania: The University of Oradea (as lead partner), University of Bucharest and University "Aurel Vlaicu" from Arad. In each of the three universities involved in the project there are students at bachelor and master degree in social sciences: mainly social work plus smaller contingent of students in psychology, sociology, pedagogy and related master programs.

According to the results of the first survey (January-March 2012), conducted with the students participating in the project's activity of practical training (498 students), the possibility of school dropout occurs most in the case of students from the University of Oradea. Starting from the practical interest of ensuring a high level of engagement from students and low student enrolment fluctuations and the scientific one, of explaining the significant changes regarding the commitment to objectives in similar conditions, we considered useful to investigate the correlations of the risk of dropping out of the students from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Oradea, compared with the situation at the other two universities participating in the PractiPASS project. (If we take as referent the University of Arad, Oradea University students have a two times higher perceived risk of dropping out compared with their colleagues from Arad).

**Table 1.** *Have you thought to abandon the current course of study without having acquired a degree? (%)*

	No	Yes
University of Arad	85.8	14.2
University of Bucharest	90.2	9.8
University of Oradea	74.8	25.2

## Theoretical model

Clearly, the question that generated the analyses of these pages (*Have you thought about abandoning the current study program without having acquired a degree?*) does not directly measure the risk of abandonment or the intention of abandoning even though it is related to these concepts. Cross-sectional studies, which cannot actually study dropout as the object of investigation, analyse indicators of so-called *dropout syndrome* which is indicated by discussions about abandonment and intention to drop out (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bennett, 2003). On the other hand, the question used in our research operationalizes the concept of commitment to successfully fulfil a study program (goal commitment), which itself is considered as an important predictor of persistence or, conversely, of dropout from education system. In the following pages I will use for comfort, the short term commitment

*to the goal*, with the restricted sense of commitment to the goal of completing the current course of study.

The importance of initial commitments to long-term persistence in college and success in finalize the study cycle had been recognized in all theories about dropout from higher education. This explains the fact that *commitment to the goal* has been investigated in many researches dedicated to the issue of dropping out. The results of these studies have emphasized the importance of commitment to the objective of a successful academic journey (Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Munro 1981).

To explain variation in commitment to the goal of student, narrowly understood as described above, I formulated three alternative explanations that refer to three categories of predictors of school engagement, from the well-known theories about students persistence in higher education: Tinto's integralist model (1993b), the rational choice model (Becker, 1975; Chen 2008; Manski & Wise 1983) and Morgan's commitments model (2005). Shortly, we expect that goal commitment is correlated with the student's academic and social integration, with traits of the groups of traditional or non-traditional students and with indicators of resources important for completion of studies.

### **Student's academic and social integration**

Tinto's model, which is most known in the area of studies about persistence in higher education, is called "integralist" because highlights the importance of student integration in academic and social processes of the institution in which they are enrolled, in their decisions to continue or discontinue studies, where the commitment to the goal is a mediator of the relationship between integration and dropout. Tinto's model highlights (1993a) that, in order to develop strong commitment to objective of completion studies, students must be integrated both socially - having positive relationships with peers or teachers and researchers, and academically, which is indicated by positive adaptation to the requirements of the educational institution. The dimensions of academic and social integration used in the current research are the evaluations of **school climate and student satisfaction**. Some of the important relationships presumed in the integralist model of student persistence, are those of social and academic integration, on the one hand, and students commitment to the goal (Tinto, 1993b).

### **Traditional students vs. Non-traditional students**

It is theoretically a plausible hypothesis, because we know from the literature that traditional students (young people, who usually started college immediately after high school), have stronger attachments to the goal of successful completion of studies, primarily because they have better resources, therefore also lower dropout rates (Lassibille & Gómez, 2007). In consonance with the literature, the main indicator of belonging to one category or another of students is represented by the

interruption of studies before the current education cycle for a minimum period of one year.

## **The impact of resources**

### ***Financial resources***

On the other hand, since attending university comes with costs, both direct and indirect impact of economic factors on student persistence have often been investigated in the works in this area. Chen (2008) explored, for example, the impact of financial aid on taking decisions of dropout and concluded that scholarships and grants mediating in a significant degree the effect of academic performance and commitment on the decision to drop out. In our paper we will also investigate whether grants, funding mode (tuition fee paying or tuition fee exempt) availability or existence of his/her own money (wages) influence commitment to the objective in the way predicted by theory (...), namely, that as the pressure of the material issue is greater the commitment to the goal decreases.

On the other hand, time is another resource necessary to overcome successfully most academic tasks. It is plausible to expect that people who have concurrent tasks to show low commitment to their studies. We investigate therefore the most important way in which such commitments - as marriage and having a job - affects commitment to the goal for students of the three universities involved in our research.

Each university has participated with students of Social Work specialty, to which were added, in the target group, students from other specialties (Psychology, Sociology, Special Education, Master's programs). It is possible that the intention of dropout to be more common in some specialties, and by that the disadvantage of the University of Oradea because of the specific composition of student population of certain specializations. Introducing the indicators of university, cycle of studies (BA or MA and study program) is therefore necessary in subsequent analyzes.

## **Variables**

### ***Dependent variable***

*Commitment to the goal* is the result of recoding into two categories the answers of the question where students were asked how often they thought to abandon current studies without obtaining a degree. 15.7% of the students have thought at least once to abandon their courses. Did they ever think about abandoning?

### ***Independent Variables***

All the structural variables I dichotomized to facilitate analysis. Distributions are presented in the tables below.

#### ***Socio-economic background***

All the structural variables in this category are dichotomies.

**Table 2.** *Distributions of socio-demographic variables*

	% for 1
Gender (Male=1)	7.8
Marital status (Married or divorced=1)	6.8
Occupational status(Employed=1)	19.5
With scholarship (Scholarship=1)	20.1
Funding of education (tuition free student = 1)	56.2
Father's level of education (father with high education level =1)	20.9

*University and study cycle:* Arad, Bucharest and Oradea. In subsequent logistic regression models we dichotomized the affiliation to university by building two categories corresponding to universities in Bucharest and Oradea (the one from Arad remains for reference). In absolute numbers, distribution per universities is: 176 at the University of Arad, 183 at the University of Bucharest and 139 at the University of Oradea. Regarding study cycle, all students are in first or second years of Bachelor cycle and first year of MA cycle. The Master students are only from the University of Oradea.

### ***Organizational climate***

Organizational climate indicators were also dichotomized noting with 1 the students who said good and very good relationships with teachers and those who were satisfied and very satisfied with the university.

**Table 3.** *Distribution of organizational climate items*

	% for 1
Relationships with teachers (good relationship with teachers = 1)	92.8
Satisfaction with learning conditions (satisfied and very satisfied =1)	88.0

To test the explanations suggested above I modelled in blocks, using logistic regression, the dependent variable. In block 1, I introduced the corresponding variables of the university and the year/cycle of study, in block 2 I introduced the socio-economic variables, in block 3 I introduced the school climate variables.

## **Results of the multivariate models**

### ***Block 1: University and study cycle***

**Table 4.** *Logistic regression model. Block 1*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1	Q2			3.887	2	.143	
	2 <sup>nd</sup> bachelor year	.464	.312	2.221	1	.136	1.591
	MA	.946	.576	2.702	1	.100	2.576
	University			8.231	2	.016	
	U Bucharest	-.240	.386	.387	1	.534	.787
	U Oradea	.678	.326	4.329	1	<u>.037</u>	<u>1.969</u>
	Constant	-2.134	.338	39.749	1	.000	.118

R<sup>2</sup>Nagelkerke=0.06

The model from the block 1 shows that study cycle does not matter for the declared intention of dropout but only the University. Having as referent the University of Arad, being student at University of Oradea doubles the risk of intention to abandon. The results show that at least the cycle of study does not determine the risk of intention to dropout.

### *The specializations test*

It is true that the intention of dropout is more common in some specializations than others. The table below shows that it is much higher for MA students than in the case of BA students, and higher for students in sociology, for instance, than for students in social work. However, comparing by specializations (this is possible for Social Work, Sociology and Psychology due to number of cases) between universities, we find that, consistently, the percentage of those who thought about dropping out at the University of Oradea is higher than in other universities.

On the other hand we must admit that some of the percentage of students who thought to dropout the University of Oradea are due to programs towards which students have a low attachment (Special Psychopedagogy, MA programs) that are found only at the University of Oradea.

**Table 5.** *Intention to dropout per university*

University			He has thought about dropping out	
			No	Yes
UA	Which of the following specializations are you enrolled?	Social worker	85.9%	14.1%
		Psychology	85.7%	14.3%
		Total	85.8%	14.2%
UB	Which of the following specializations are you enrolled?	Sociology	77.8%	22.2%
		Social worker	90.6%	9.4%
		Psychology	100.0%	
		another, which?	100.0%	
		Total	90.2%	9.8%
UO	Which of the following specializations are you enrolled?	Sociology	71.4%	28.6%
		Social worker	80.6%	19.4%
		Psychology	76.9%	23.1%
		Special Psychopedagogy	50.0%	50.0%
		Social services management	57.1%	42.9%
		Total	74.8%	25.2%

**Block 2: Socio-economic dimension****Table 6.** Logistic regression model. Block 2

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1	Q2			2.689	2	.261	
	Q2(1)	.426	.330	1.667	1	.197	1.531
	Q2(2)	.798	.598	1.778	1	.182	2.220
	University			7.961	2	.019	
	U Bucharest	-.228	.437	.272	1	.602	.796
	U Oradea	.726	.372	3.805	1	<u>.051</u>	2.066
	Age	.023	.033	.474	1	.491	1.023
	male01	.100	.468	.046	1	.831	1.105
	married01	-.476	.708	.452	1	.501	.621
	employed01	.139	.371	.141	1	.707	1.150
	scholar01	-.168	.357	.223	1	.637	.845
	withouttax01	.011	.328	.001	1	.973	1.011
	st_high_father01	.382	.308	1.541	1	.214	1.465
	Constant	-2.701	.756	12.764	1	.000	.067

R<sup>2</sup>Nagelkerke =0.07

None of the independent variables indicating structural features has significant effect on the dependent variable. Instead, the university effect remains significant, on edge.

**Block 3: School Climate****Table 7.** Logistic regression. Block 3 (climate variables added)

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1	Q2			2.648	2	.266	
	Q2(1)	.445	.339	1.722	1	.189	1.560
	Q2(2)	.784	.610	1.654	1	.198	2.190
	University			8.623	2	.013	
	U Bucharest	-.036	.451	.006	1	.936	.964
	U Oradea	.896	.390	5.287	1	<u>.021</u>	2.451
	Age	.022	.034	.430	1	.512	1.022
	male01	-.013	.480	.001	1	.978	.987
	married01	-.585	.737	.631	1	.427	.557
	employed01	.224	.378	.352	1	.553	1.252
	scholar01	-.056	.362	.024	1	.877	.945
	withouttax01	.008	.331	.001	1	.982	1.008
	st_high_father01	.458	.312	2.155	1	.142	1.580
	rel_teacher_goof01	-1.146	.538	4.536	1	<u>.033</u>	.318
	satisf_conditions01	-.527	.405	1.690	1	.194	.590
	Constant	-1.346	.925	2.116	1	.146	.260

R<sup>2</sup>Nagelkerke =0.10

Good relations with teachers reduced to one-third the risk of the intention of dropout. Other effects remain unchanged, while that of the University becomes even stronger. This result is important as it shows that the intention of dropout is more common at the University of Oradea because of the university climate. (If it would be reversed, with the introduction of the measure of relations with teachers the university effect should disappear).

These analyzes have confirmed a single hypothesis, namely that the intention of dropout depends on the climate, specifically the perceived relationships with teachers, but did not allow us to understand why the risk is higher at the University of Oradea than the other two universities. In each of the 3 models the effect of the University of Oradea is significant.

### Explorations

To solve this mystery we explored the interactions of the dependent variable with certain independent characteristics and got a surprising result which has the capacity to cover (statistically) the effect of belonging to the university: being a tuition free student at the University of Oradea determines a dramatic increase of the risk of intending to dropout.

**Tabel 8.** *Logistic regression model with interactions*

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1	Q2			3.482	2	.175	
	2nd year license (1)	.581	.344	2.846	1	.092	1.788
	MA (2)	.763	.614	1.543	1	.214	2.144
	University			.016	2	.992	
	U Bucharest	-.071	.848	.007	1	.933	.931
	U Oradea	.041	.547	.006	1	<u>.940</u>	<u>1.042</u>
	Age	.020	.034	.343	1	.558	1.020
	male01	-.046	.479	.009	1	.923	.955
	married01	-.553	.732	.571	1	.450	.575
	employed01	.220	.385	.327	1	.568	1.246
	scholar01	-.123	.364	.114	1	.735	.884
	withouttax01	-1.084	.670	2.616	1	.106	.338
	st_high_father01	.533	.319	2.793	1	.095	1.704
	rel_teacher_good01	-1.143	.543	4.437	1	<u>.035</u>	<u>.319</u>
	satisf_conditions01	-.413	.409	1.017	1	.313	.662
	University * withouttax01			5.184	2	.075	
	U Buc (1) by withouttax01	.869	1.056	.678	1	.410	2.385
	U Oradea by withouttax01	1.903	.844	5.079	1	<u>.024</u>	<u>6.705</u>
	Constant	-1.208	.922	1.718	1	.190	.299

R<sup>2</sup>Nagelkerke =0.12

The table above shows that compared to tuition free students from the University of Arad (reference model university), similar students from the University of

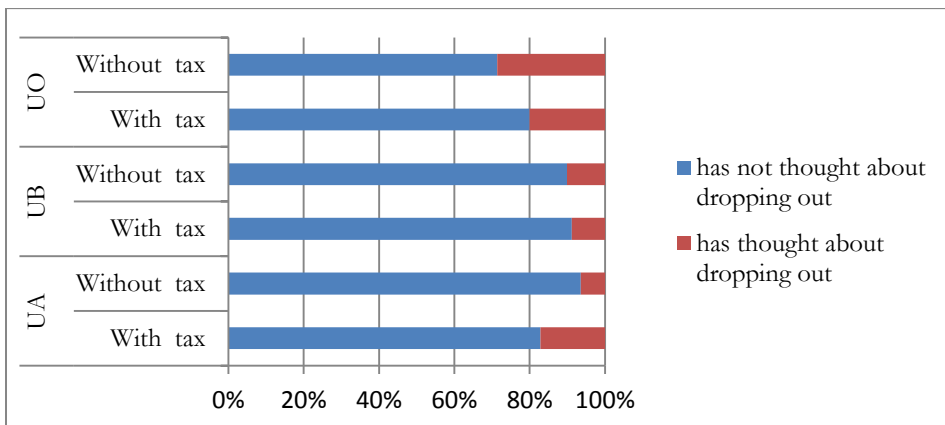


Oradea have a probability of almost 7 times more likely to think of abandoning. This interaction effect cancels also the university impact which suggests that in general, the large share of those who were thought to leave the University of Oradea is explained by the bizarre behaviour of the tax free form. A trivariate contingency table best illustrates this phenomenon:

**Tabel 9.** *Investigation of interactions*

<b>withouttax01 * He has thought about dropping out * University Crosstabulation</b>					
University			He has thought about dropping out		Total
			No	Yes	
UA	withouttax01	With tax	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%
		Without tax	93.6%	6.4%	100.0%
	Total		85.8%	14.2%	100.0%
UB	withouttax01	With tax	91.2%	8.8%	100.0%
		Without tax	89.9%	10.1%	100.0%
	Total		90.2%	9.8%	100.0%
UO	withouttax01	With tax	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
		Without tax	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
	Total		74.8%	25.2%	100.0%

The above table clearly shows that in terms of dropout intent depending on the registration form, students at the University of Oradea and University of Arad show opposite behavior. While budgetary students from Arad have the lowest probability of dropping out (6.4%) the budgetary students from Oradea are in the opposite situation, nearly 30% of them thinking at least once to quit. Concerning the students that have to pay school taxes the percentages are similar, but significantly higher than those of the students from University of Bucharest.



**Figure 1.** *The intention of dropping out by university and registration form*

Obviously at this point the problem becomes: how to explain the low commitment of tuition free students from the University of Oradea or, conversely, the low attachment of the tax form students from the University of Arad?

In the case of the University of Oradea in a first phase we thought a possible simple explanation is the fact that many of those enrolled in tuition free form have chosen their specialization based on the economic perspective and have given up their vocational preferences because of the benefit of exemption from payment of fees. This hypothesis is quickly refuted when comparing students' opinions from the specializations of Psychology and Social Work from the University of Oradea and University of Arad on the one hand, and students' opinions enrolled in Sociology programmes at the University of Bucharest and University of Oradea.

**Tabel 1.** *The intention of leaving, per university, specialization and registration form*

Specializations	University		Thought about dropping out		Total		
			No	Yes			
Sociology	UB	withouttax01	With tax	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%	
			Without tax	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%	
		Total		77.8%	22.2%	100.0%	
	UO	withouttax01	With tax	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%	
			Without tax	73.7%	26.3%	100.0%	
		Total		71.4%	28.6%	100.0%	
Social work	UA	withouttax01	With tax	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%	
			Without tax	91.3%	8.7%	100.0%	
		Total		85.9%	14.1%	100.0%	
	UB	withouttax01	With tax	92.9%	7.1%	100.0%	
			Without tax	90.2%	9.8%	100.0%	
		Total		90.6%	9.4%	100.0%	
	UO	withouttax01	With tax	85.0%	15.0%	100.0%	
			Without tax	78.6%	21.4%	100.0%	
		Total		80.6%	19.4%	100.0%	
	Psychology	UA	withouttax01	With tax	83.0%	17.0%	100.0%
				Without tax	95.8%	4.2%	100.0%
			Total		85.7%	14.3%	100.0%
UB		withouttax01	1.00	100.0%		100.0%	
		Total		100.0%		100.0%	
UO		withouttax01	With tax	79.3%	20.7%	100.0%	
			Without tax	70.0%	30.0%	100.0%	
		Total		76.9%	23.1%	100.0%	
Special Pshihopedagogy		UO	withouttax01	With tax	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
			Without tax	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%	
	Total			50.0%	50.0%	100.0%	
Social services management	UO	withouttax01	Without tax	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%	
		Total		57.1%	42.9%	100.0%	
another, which?	UB	withouttax01	Without tax	100.0%		100.0%	
		Total		100.0%		100.0%	

It is noteworthy that regardless of their specialty (Psychology or Social Work), the contrast between those who pay and those without tuition fee remains even when the comparison between the University of Oradea and University of Arad is made. The situation that contradicts the above hypothesis is that of Psychology specialization because of its strong entrance competition, at least at the University of Oradea, so it is unlikely that those who enrolled in this specialization without having to pay tax had stronger preferences for another specialization where they could not enter without tax. For what concerns the students of Sociology specialization, the numbers are so small that comparisons are less relevant (9 students from the University of Bucharest vs. 21 students from the University of Oradea).

At this point of the analysis we must admit that we have no other explanation that can be tested. We can speculate, however, and we think that part of the explanation lies in the fact that students of the University of Oradea are in a larger degree “captive” of their university than those from the University of Arad. The small distance between Arad and Timisoara allows the best candidates from Arad to enroll in desired specialties in Timisoara without increasing too much the direct costs of schooling. For many gifted candidates from Oradea there is no such option.

### **Instead of conclusions**

The main results of this mini-survey that tracked the sources of variation of dropout intention of the students involved in the project Practipass from the three participating universities, and especially its high level at the University of Oradea, are:

1. Neither the specialization, nor the educational cycle nor, especially, the socio-economic elements that describe student status does explain the intention of dropout. None of the variables in these classes are significant predictors of the indicators of the intention to dropout while the affiliation to the University of Oradea has a consistently strong positive effect on the intention to dropping out.

2. The intention of abandonment has one among the few identified covariates with the relationship students have with their teachers: as expected, if the relationship students have with their teachers is described in more positive terms, the lower the risk of students thinking about dropping out. Relationships between students and teachers however, do not explain the variation between universities in terms of intention of abandoning, so we cannot say that at the University of Oradea relationships with teachers are of lower quality, which would explain the high frequency of early intention which we find in this institution.

3. The large share of those who have thought at least once at quitting college from the University of Oradea is explained, in fact, by the unexpected attitudes of students enrolled in the tuition free form at this institution of higher education: those who are in this situation at the University of Oradea have a 6 times higher risk than those in the same situation at the “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad. This phenomenon is only partially explored in this report, and it appears to be

independent of the specialization. Unlike their colleagues from Arad (those in Bucharest being situated somewhere in an intermediate position in this matter), students who are enrolled in the free of tuition form from the University of Oradea, regardless of specialization, are less attached to the aim of completing their studies than their peers that pay tax. Although, theoretically, belonging to similar structural situations, the students who do not pay school tax from the two universities act apparently different motivating forces. That needs to be explored further.

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