

## UNDERSTANDING STUDENT TRANSITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

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### Abstract

*Students' transition to the university is a major challenge for the most of them, the new life stage arises with many changes and difficulties, requiring multiple skills on a wide range, from cognitive to social and emotional, in order to assure a successful adjustment. The aim of the paper is to address relevant issues in students' transition in higher education: students' perceptions on the difficulties they encountered, self-assessment of the adaptation to the new environment, and the reasons that might underlie their academic drop-out; also, the study aims to analyze the relationship between academic self-efficacy, general self-efficacy and students' perceived social support. The 78 participants were students in different universities in Romania. The results show that the great majority of the students consider that they are well-adjusted to the academic work, that they are satisfied with their choice regarding the study programme, being convinced that they will be prepared to work in their chosen field. Also, the correlations between global self-efficacy and self-efficacy ratings for different areas of academic activity are positive. This study makes some contributions to the topic of students' perception regarding their transition to university, but certain limitations should be taken into consideration.*

*Keywords: transition to university; academic self-efficacy; perceived social support; education*

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During their years in the education system, students go through many changes, and some of the most important are school transitions, the transitions from one cycle of education to another. For those who choose to continue their education, the transition from high school to university is considered the transition with the greatest impact, being considered as one major step to adulthood.

Adapting to the new situation is not an easy process for all students, this also being one of the reasons why some of them drop out of their studies. Besides the fact that choosing a study programme involves choosing a future profession, people face multiple challenges. Most individuals leave their family and the environment in which they grew up and move to another city, on their own. The teaching-learning and assessment system is changing, a new demand is arising to integrate into new groups (colleagues, friends, romantic relationships), to create a new identity for themselves as higher education students, to adjust to all that academic life involves (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Students have to learn to manage their time and money, to continue the individuation process, because even though most enter this stage in their teenage years, by the time they finish university they are already young adults. As such, entering this environment is not just a tense time, but a stage that helps personal and professional development. Experts consider that the impact of university attendance on the transition to adulthood is positive, even if maturation effects are difficult to distinguish from the consequences of the university experiences. The studies conducted documented that university experience enhances cognitive development, critical thinking, civic responsibility, human capital skills, and also, on long-term, the quality of life through higher income and social status (Montgomery & Cote, 2009; Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

Given the positive benefits of higher education, it is extremely important for personal and societal development that large numbers of people enrol in and graduate from their chosen degree programmes. The number of students in higher education in Romania is among the lowest in Europe. It is becoming clear that attracting, retaining and supporting students to graduate is a major concern and challenge for Romanian higher education institutions, and at the European level, measures are being sought to increase the efficiency of the education system (Sava et al., 2015).

Within this context, a large number of studies have drawn attention to the factors impacting academic adjustment. The review of literature reveals numerous relevant factors related to university/college adjustment, both in terms of individual characteristics (self-efficacy, ability to develop new coping strategies, to negotiate with a new and complex world etc.) and environmental factors (peer support, parent-child relationship, family socioeconomic status, university support system etc.) (Cassidy, 2015; Clinciu, 2013; Cocorada et al., 2021; Wintre & Yaffe 2000).

An examination of the literature reveals that self-efficacy and social support are frequently studied and indicated as predictors of high levels of academic adjustment and performance (e.g. Cassidy, 2015; Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; DeWitz, Woolsey & Walsh, 2009; Morton, Mergler & Boman, 2014; Pennington et al., 2018; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Yusoff, 2012). The major purpose of the current study is to further contribute to existing literature by examining these variables in relation to academic self-efficacy.

The general term of self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). This general belief also includes how one perceives their ability to motivate themselves in order to overcome difficulties encountered in solving tasks and it influences their level of motivation and perseverance facing obstacles. As such, self-efficacy is closely related to how people think, the decisions they make, the goals they set, the effort they put in, how they anticipate their outcomes, their resilience in the face of impending obstacles, the quality of their emotional life, as well as the level of stress and depression they experience (Vasiliu et al., 2015). It is expected that this general belief will also be reflected in students' confidence in their ability to accomplish their academic tasks, in preparing for and performing during exams, as well as in adjusting to other aspects of university life. Levels of self-efficacy have been found to be associated with perseverance, resilience and task achievement in the educational environments (Pennington et al., 2018). In addition, academic self-efficacy is strongly related to other outcomes such as academic achievement and retention.

There are also major social changes for students. Studies show that an important factor in helping students to emotionally adjust is family support. Most students receive both emotional and material support from their families. Those students who have close relationships, having families that support them by giving autonomy, they will adapt better to the life from the role of student. The case is similar for the students who leave home in order to pursue their further education, as well as for those who still live with their parents and have chosen a university in their hometown (Montgomery & Cote, 2009). Another challenge is social insertion into new peer groups. The peer group changes in most cases, and for those from rural areas the cultural challenge can be much greater. Experiences during the transition period are influenced by the interaction with others, also by the sense of social integration, the research showing that a positive "sense of belonging" is an important predictor of one’s behaviour and academic choices, of the perceived satisfaction and of the decision to stay in that environment (Pennington et al., 2018; Thomas & Galambos, 2004;). In line with the postulates of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), collective self-

esteem is derived from belonging to groups valued by the individual, and as such, the social support provided by peers and academic staff may be important factors during the transition to university. Social support is seen as a protective factor within the stress and coping framework, and the research has also documented the role played as an important predictor in the psychological adjustment process during cross-cultural transitions (Yusoff, 2012).

## **Method**

### ***Objectives***

The purpose of the paper is to address relevant issues in studying students' transition in higher education. The first aim of the research is to study students' perceptions of their transition to university, in terms of the difficulties they encountered, self-assessment of the adaptation to the new environment, and the reasons that might underlie their academic drop-out. The second aim of the study is to analyze the relationship between academic self-efficacy, general self-efficacy and students' perceived social support, assuming positive correlations between the variables.

### ***Participants***

A number of 78 students (58 were women), enrolled in the first and second year of study, aged between 19 and 32 (mean 20.69; std. dev. 2.03), from the University of Oradea, the University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Iuliu Hațieganu" in Cluj-Napoca and the Faculty of Business Administration in Brașov have participated in this research. The participation has been voluntary, and data were collected at the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 (before the start of the online activity as an effect of the pandemic caused by the SARS Covid-19 virus).

### ***Instruments and procedure***

*The Academic Transition Questionnaire* was designed by Sava et al. (2016) and used in a study on identifying the level of student satisfaction at the West University of Timisoara, which also aimed to analyze the academic transition of first-year students. The first 11 items refer to the students' adaptation to university life, the respondents indicating on the five-point Likert scale the extent to which they agree with the statements; the next 8 items refer to the possible difficulties the students have encountered by indicating whether they have faced the specified aspects. The last 6 items refer to the reasons that might cause the drop out (six reasons are described and respondents had to answer "Yes" if those reasons might lead them to drop their studies).

*The Self-efficacy Scale* – SES (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1981, adapted on Romanian population in 1996 by Băban, A.) - measures the level of the overall self-efficacy, a person's belief in his or her ability to activate the cognitive and motivational resources necessary for the successful accomplishment of given tasks or an anticipation of positive results in the actions undertaken due to the knowledge and skills possessed. This scale focuses on a person's ability to anticipate the outcome of their action.

*The Multi-dimensional Support Scale* – MDSS (Winefield, Winefield & Tiggemann, 1992) is a 16-item instrument constructed to measure respondents' perceptions of the frequency of support received from their family, friends and a person in a formal role as trainer/supervisor (in this study teachers). The three subscales contain the same sequence of five items, and the family support subscale includes an additional item "How often do they make you feel really loved". The frequency of social support is evaluated based on a four-point Likert (from 1="never" to, 4="always"). Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for the three subscales range from .82 to .88 for the research group.

*The Academic Self-Efficacy Scale* (Garfour & Ashraf, 2006) measures students' self-efficacy based on self-assessments on the domains relevant to academic activity. Thirty-seven items were included in the present study, three of the original items not being applicable to activities in the university environment. The task of the respondents is to indicate on a five-point Likert scale the extent to which each item is true in their case. For this study the following domains were selected: learning process (reading and comprehension, memory, learning), adjustment (adaptation to new disturbing situations, problems, and challenges), examination (keeping focus and expressing ideas while attending exams, performing well in tasks within evaluations) and time management. Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for the subscales are .841, .760, .720, and respectively .666 for the research group.

The scales used were entered into Google Forms, and then applied online. The IBM SPSS 16 was used to analyse the data.

## **Results and discussions**

The analysis of the responses Sava et al. (2015) questionnaire shows that the great majority of the students consider that they have well-adjusted to the academic work, that they are satisfied with their choice regarding the study programme, being convinced that they will be prepared to work in their chosen field. Furthermore, they have also favourably evaluated the work of teachers and colleagues, as well as the group climate and

integration into the student life rhythm (Table 1). Of considerable interest is the fact that a third of respondents believe that their results would have been higher if they had been better informed about what university study implies.

Table 1. Students' opinions regarding adaptation to academic activities

Item	Answers (%)				
	Total agreement	Agreement	Neutral	Disagreement	Total disagreement
I appreciate that I have adapted to what academic life means.	44.9	38.5	12.8	3.8	-
If I had been more informed about what college meant, I would have achieved better results.	12.8	21.8	30.8	15.4	19.2
I believe I made the right choice when I chose this study programme.	50.0	33.3	6.4	9.0	1.3
I realised that I am not prepared to work in the field in which I am studying.	9.0	7.7	21.8	17.9	43.6
The teachers we interacted with during the courses and seminars made efforts to make us understand.	44.9	33.3	10.3	10.3	1.3
The marks I received in the first session exams were as good as expected.	34.6	35.9	16.7	9.0	3.8
My results reflect my commitment and efforts.	39.7	38.5	17.9	1.3	2.6
My year-mates are active (they read, ask questions, do presentations, etc.) during courses and seminars.	26.9	32.1	23.1	12.8	5.1
I've adapted to the rhythm of student life.	41.0	48.7	6.4	1.3	2.6

Regarding the challenges encountered during the first year of studies, we found that most students have experienced difficulties in terms of time management and adaptation to the timetable, the large volume of information, the rhythm of learning and the teaching style, as well as the group integration (Table 2).

By assessing the reasons that might cause students' drop out, attention is drawn to an important internal factor related to students' vocational identity and their expectations to their future professional competencies, being anxious not to be prepared to work in the chosen profession, as a result of the self-assessment or of the feedback from educational trainers. The external factors mentioned are also considered

relevant - the amount of tuition fees, financial support from the family and the quality of the study programme.

Table 2. Percentage of students reporting difficulties related to the mentioned variables

<b>Item</b>	<b>%</b>
Time management	74.4
The large amount of information, the volume of topics	70.5
Getting used to the style of teaching of professors	70.5
Adapting to the rhythm of learning and the specificities of university education	64.1
Adapting to the timetable (odd/even week, afternoon hours, module hours, "free windows" between classes, etc.)	64.1
Group integration	56.4
Tuition fee	34.6
Failure to promote some exams	19.2

Table 3. Percentage of students who have stated that the reasons mentioned could lead to a decision to drop out from their studies

<b>I'd give it up if...</b>	<b>%</b>
I would consider that I'm not prepared to work in this field	73,1
I would appreciate that I can't meet the expectations that teachers have	67,9
I wouldn't be able to pay my tuition fees	51,3
the quality of the study programme would decrease	34,6
Teachers//PROFESSORS' demands would become higher	34,6
my parents wouldn't be able to support me	30,8

The aspects revealed by the sections of the questionnaire highlight the importance of mentoring activities conducted by teachers, of some programmes/activities carried out in higher education institutions in order to initiate first-year students concerning aspects related to adaptation to the specifics of academic activities and integration into student life.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy (ASE), and support

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
General self-efficacy	78	31.89	4.60

ASE_Learning process	78	39.65	7.22
ASE_Adjustment	78	21.23	4.23
ASE_Examination	78	21.28	4.31
ASE_Time management	78	10.33	2.72
Support from family	78	19.87	3.89
Support from peers	78	16.35	3.62
Support from professors	78	13.97	3.50

The relationships between self-efficacy, assessed by various dimensions relevant to academic adjustment, general self-efficacy and perceived social support from family, peers and teachers are analysed based on the correlation coefficient values in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlations between academic self-efficacy, general self-efficacy and social support

Academic self-efficacy related to		General self-effic.	Family support	Peers support	Teach. support
Learning process	Pearson	.351**	.273*	.247*	.376**
	Sig.	.002	.015	.029	.001
	N	78	78	78	78
Adjustment	Pearson	.528**	.324**	.326**	.395**
	Sig.	.000	.004	.004	.000
	N	78	78	78	78
Examination	Pearson	.412**	.170	.121	.274*
	Sig.	.000	.138	.291	.015
	N	78	78	78	78
Time management	Pearson	.274*	.324**	.236*	.484**
	Sig.	.015	.004	.037	.000
	N	78	78	78	78

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, two-tailed; \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.

The correlations between global self-efficacy and self-efficacy ratings for different areas of academic activity are positive. The higher the level of self-efficacy, the more the person believes that he/she has the necessary skills to succeed in the learning process, adapt to new challenges, and evaluate them after the exams.

A large number of studies indicate that general beliefs about self-efficacy influence the goals set, the effort put in and the perseverance in pursuing the goals, as well as the ability to cope with various challenges and

difficulties that might arise along the way. These beliefs are related to a higher level of positive expectations about the possible effects of one's actions in new situations, the ability to manage personal resources more effectively, and greater resilience, which will lead to perceive these new situations as a challenge rather than a threat (Willson & Gillies, 2005). These ways of relating to unfamiliar situations are expected to apply to school transitions, including the transition from high school to college. The findings of educational research have often documented that individual differences in perceived self-efficacy are better predictors of academic performance than previous achievement or ability and these differences are very important when individuals are facing adversities (Cassidy, 2015).

Ramos-Sánchez and Nichols (2007) have investigated the relation between self-efficacy and college adjustment, and the results indicated that high self-efficacy at the beginning of the year predicted better college adjustment at the end of the first year, regardless of generational status. The findings have suggested that self-efficacy seems to be related to better college adjustment, which in turn, could increase persistence toward graduation.

Morton, Mergler, and Boman (2014) have studied the relationship between self-efficacy, optimism and university adjustment and pointed out that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of students' own evaluation of adjustment. The results indicate that students with higher self-reported levels of self-efficacy better adapt to university than students with lower self-reported levels of self-efficacy.

Cassidy (2015) has investigated the association between academic self-efficacy and academic resilience in undergraduate students. Academic resilience is seen as an increased likelihood of success despite environmental adversities, the resilient students maintaining achievement and performance when faced with stressful situations and adverse conditions which could put them at risk of low levels of academic performance. The results have shown that academic self-efficacy represents a significant predictor of academic resilience, thus having positive self-efficacy beliefs is likely to contribute toward increased resilience in students.

Yusoff (2012) has examined the relationship between self-efficacy, perceived social support, and the psychological adjustment of 185 international students in a Malaysian public university. The results have revealed that international students with higher levels of self-efficacy have shown higher levels of psychological adjustment. Moreover, support from friends and significant others has compellingly contributed to the level of psychological adjustment thus, students who experience higher levels of support from other important persons were more likely to experience higher levels of life satisfaction.

The importance of support received from family and relevant persons has been extensively documented in case of academic engagement among adolescents, but the relation between parenting and academic engagement among emerging adults was less investigated. According to studies conducted on this topic, current relationship quality between parents and emerging adults could have implications for adjustment to university, study skills and academic performance (Gozu, Newman & Colvin, 2020). Wintre and Yaffe (2000) have revealed that mutual reciprocity and discussion with parents have direct links to adjustment to university. Moreover, the quality of parenting has been identified as also having an indirect effect due to the relations to the psychological well-being variables: parents' authoritativeness was negatively related to depressive symptomatology and perceived stress, and positively related to self-esteem of the students.

The study conducted by Waterman & Lefkowitz (2017) examines the associations of parenting style and parent–offspring relationship quality with academic engagement. A sample of 633 college students answered surveys about mothers' and fathers' parenting style, parent-offspring relationship quality, academic attitudes, academic behaviours, and academic performance. The results have shown that relationship quality with the mother was positively associated with grade importance, class attendance, and GPA for women, and that relationship quality with the father was positively associated with GPA for women and with grade importance and GPA for men (p.1253). The findings have documented the association between parenting characteristics and academic attitudes. Also, the authors draw the attention on the relevance of other more proximal factors which can be of importance for the academic behaviour and performance, in the new context: social interactions with peers (friends, roommates, romantic partners) and instructors. Our results draw the attention on the importance of perceived support received from the professors, obtaining very significant positive correlation between this factor and the academic self-efficacy related to learning process and evaluation, time management and adjustment.

A study relevant to this idea has focused on students' perceptions of what factors enable successful transition to university (Bowles et al., 2014). Among the enablers of successful transition to higher education, the most important seems to be the effort factor, which encompasses: willingness to work hard and join the university culture, and also to be motivated to interact with others, including peers and staff. The results of this study, which have revealed students' perspectives on the factors that contribute to a successful adaptation to academic work and university life, emphasize once again the importance of variables related to the personal skills important related to performance, but also those related to social relationships.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of the current study is twofold: to highlight the students' opinions regarding their transition from high-school to university, and to analyze the relation between general self-efficacy, perceived social support and academic self-efficacy.

The findings indicated that most students, even if they feel that they have adapted to what academic life means and have integrated into the rhythm of student life, had difficulties related to time management, specific aspects of the teaching-learning process (teaching style of the professors, high volume of academic material, pace of learning, adaptation to the timetable) and social integration. Another aspect of interest is that many respondents felt that if they had been more informed about what university meant, they would have done better. We note the strongly significant relationships between academic self-efficacy for all areas included in the research and perceived support from academic staff. We believe that all these aspects together highlight the importance of professors' monitoring of students' learning styles and the difficulties they face during their academic transition. Sava et al. (2015) draw attention to the need for appropriate programs of academic learning techniques and skills, and the importance of professors' recognition of the difficulties experienced by students during their teaching activity in order to support the learning process. Brooman and Darwent (2014) followed students during their first year of study. Results showed that those students who perceived greater support from staff at the beginning of the academic year reported higher self-efficacy autonomous learning beliefs, study habits, and a greater sense of belonging five weeks later. In addition, the potential reasons for dropping out indicated by students were related to possible negative beliefs about their own preparedness and how they would respond to professors' demands, which indicates the importance that trainers have in students' opinion for predicting career success. In conclusion, the findings of the current research confirm evidence in previous studies that academic staff play a vital role in ensuring successful transition. Academic transition should be seen as a long-term process, going beyond the first week (induction) in which there is a first contact with the new setting offered by the institution, through meeting academic staff and the year tutor. As such, higher education institutions should consider academic and career counselling services that target long-term interventions, and the first week meetings should be considered just a part of a strategy applicable within the longer process of acclimatization during the first year (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Sava et al., 2015).

Although this study makes some contributions to the topic of students' perception regarding their transition to university, as in the case of any study certain limitations should be taken into consideration. The first

limitation is related to the sample size. The results of this research cannot be generalized due to the small number of participants who represent a convenient sample. Another limitation of the study is that no control variable was included, as students' gender, age, specialization, high-school academic performance etc. Also, the characteristics of the academic self-efficacy scale and the academic transition questionnaire must be critically evaluated, because some of the items might not describe the realities of transition in the new context created by Covid-19 pandemic.

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