

HOMEWORK MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC LEARNING*

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Abstract

The article promotes the concept of rationalization or optimized perspective of the construction/ assignment of homework by the teachers and their approach by the students, so that the practice of certain tasks and the accomplishment of certain applied works could be integrated as well as possible into the educational process. The knowledge of the students' insights regarding the motivation associated with solving homework, difficulties, the relationship amount-difficulty-time and allocated effort, represents a type of feedback necessary both for the students, for a more sustained involvement in the management of the learning resources, but also for the teachers, for a better adjustment of their actions. Because they were asked to professionally reflect specifically on meeting these conditions and were supported in capitalizing on self-management strategies, our intention was to find out whether students of the psychopedagogical training program for the teaching profession improve their commitment and satisfaction in completing homework. Their responses showed us that effectiveness can be achieved by initiating/ triggering the moment homework is to be done, eliminating procrastination, by identifying the time and context in which allotting homework is useful, by taking a strategic approach, during which distractors were eliminated and the necessary materials were provided. When solving homework independently, students should optimally use their resources, combine solving moments with some breaks, review the solutions globally, pay attention to respecting the submission deadlines, and capitalize on the external strengths and recommendations in the presentation of the results.

Key words: Homework; Students; Self-management; Optimal; Rationalization.

1. What does homework involve and how is it possible to manage it?

Regarding homework, divergent opinions have been formulated over time, and to overcome the empirical approach, a series of quantitative researches have been carried out. The choice of this issue of interest is justified for its implications: an efficient management, an assignment of homework according to the students'

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possibilities helps to prevent the appearance of stress, through the balanced assignment of the learning tasks. It is closely related to: maintaining long-term motivation, applying pleasant ways of spending free time, completing tasks on time, demonstrating competencies.

Cooper (1989, p. 7) defined homework as: "task assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours", excluding: in-school guided study; home study courses; extracurricular activities. Homework is a part of students' independent study and it refers to those tasks, applied works assigned and solved by the students (young people and adults in the higher education system) independently, outside the actual academic course program, seminars, laboratories, practical activities led by teachers. If for the students in pre-university education, homework is assigned with a daily frequency or with a longer deadline, of several weeks, in the case of students, they have a long deadline, sometimes until the end of the semester, because their schedule involves meetings with a frequency of one week and not daily. The rational stages of approaching homework include: the existence of a transition period from didactic activities; ensuring the state of focus/ silence; the actual elaboration of the solutions; checking/ correcting them before they are completed.

2. Intervening internal and external factors

As a sequence of self-initiation, planning, organizing, leading, monitoring and self-evaluation, self-management in solving homework transfers many elements from self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2008), which involves managing factors which are related to creating an environment which is favourable to solving, to distributing time adequately, to meeting deadlines, to maintaining motivation and a propitious emotional dispositional state (Xu, 2013). The optimal approach to homework is conditioned by external and internal factors, on which, initially, the teachers, then the students themselves, can intervene.

There are a number of disturbing factors that appear in the process of doing homework: related to the place of study, obstacles and elements that sabotage tasks, existing attitudes. Even if the method of relating to tasks is directly managed by the students, the type of tasks, their difficulty and the reactions determined are dependent, in advance, on their initiators, the teachers.

Thus, regarding the ergonomics of the study place, the layout of the room or the office must be a pleasant, simple one, in order to find the materials, courses, notes, books, papers, supplies, traditional or online informational resources. In order to act effectively, a good, fast internet connection goes into ensuring these conditions. For the visual analyzer to function well light must be sufficient, if possible from natural sources. To prevent fatigue, the furniture will have to be comfortable, and, to ensure the physical parameters necessary for the good functioning of the body, there should be a suitable temperature (neither cold nor hot) in the studying room as well as suitable humidity and adequate ventilation, for a good oxygen level of the body.

In order to focus attention, mobilize motivation and voluntary effort, only the materials necessary for the decisive moment will be used. Distractions such as: talking on the phone, exchanging messages on social networks, using the Internet for purposes other than those related to homework, watching TV, listening to music, the existence of noises, interruptions, external requests, will be eliminated.

What is more important is the attitude towards homework, and students have the ability to relate to them objectively, even if there are difficulties, misunderstandings, by keeping calm when the situation is pressing from the point of view of the demand for effort, in a short time, trying to formulate clarifying questions, testing different solutions. An optimized motivation can be achieved through a slight under- or over-motivation, depending on the difficulty of the task and the realistic estimate of the effort to be made.

So, to the control over external factors which students need to be aware of and apply, we can add the recommendations of good planning, monitoring and connection of the teaching staff to the needs of those who learn (Marzano, Pickering, 2007), which agrees with a rational level to act, by which we understand the most appropriate capitalization of human, informational-material, procedural and temporal resources, meant to prevent both the excessive use and the underutilization of resources.

3. Aspects researched in the literature of the field

The research questions and answers about solving homework were related to its purpose, reported benefits and losses, types of acquired competencies, categories of homework, recommendations made for improving the educational practices and the school-family partnership, identified at the level of primary, middle school and high school education.

An interesting study we found brings to the fore the fact that the importance students give to solving homework is dependent on the level of recognition from the trainers, and if they are taken into account in the final evaluation, they are completely fulfilled, with students wanting to accumulate points even when they missed deadlines (Letterman, Morris, 2013).

The greatest benefit of homework is that it improves the understanding of the study contents (Brewster, Fager, 2000; McPherson, 2005; Cooper, Robinson, Patall, 2006, as cited in Blazer, 2009), and most criticism comes from the finding that, at the end of a day full of didactic activities, they demotivate and tire those required to carry them out (James, 2000; Leone, 2005), as also cited in Blazer (2009). In addition to their contribution to the development of academic competencies in a specialty, the one worthy of consideration are those regarding the formation of transversal competencies: self-management, discipline, time management, openness and independence in solving problems.

Some authors (Yildirim, 2021) appreciated that, seen in terms of the process and not necessarily the result, solving homework is difficult to measure. A complex analysis scale, proposed for this purpose, led to establishing 5 factors and 28 descriptors subsumed by them, validated by the student subjects, and the essential

components, useful for an evaluation, were: process of doing homework; form of the homework; benefits of the homework; outcomes of the homework; characteristics of the homework (2021, pp. 126-127).

In higher education, task-based learning is absolutely necessary, because it is an active way, in which the assignment of certain requirements is followed by the planning of actions, by the implementation of their solving, and then these results are presented, important being the fact that the proposed tasks are ones that exercise meaningful skills and not imitative ones (of copying or identifying, rendering some information). Such important skills in homework are those of higher thinking, of drawing conclusions, of making comparisons or own judgments (Blustein, 2006).

Cooper (2007) presented several classifications, starting with a demarcation of the topics that have an instructional purpose and those that are not necessarily related to instructional-educational objectives. Homework also differ in quantity/volume, and according to the domain of skills, they are specific to each subject. At the same time, according to addressability, the types of homework are: for all students or individualized. Their status leads to being classified as mandatory or optional/ non-mandatory, also called voluntary. According to the assigned completion time, homework can be: long-term or short-term, respectively. If, in general, homework is designed to be solved by each student separately, thus independently, there is also the possibility for some homework to require cooperation with other students, as in group homework. Of course, homework also varies in difficulty: some are difficult, some are easy. As we have already seen, pupils or students give homework different importance when they are taken into account in the final assessment or if they are not taken into account in the marking, being considered to be implicit, as activities that come under learning. Foyle and Bailey (1986) developed four types of homework classified according to their purpose: thorough training homework; application/ practice homework; training extension homework and creative homework.

In our country, concerns for solving homework were mainly oriented towards compulsory education. In 2016, the Romanian Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research developed normative documents related to the methodology of homework, and in 2017, the Ministry of National Education, in collaboration with the Institute of Education Sciences, published public consultation data that showed that homework in pre-university education must not overwork the students. Likewise, for the Romanian primary education, Catalano and Catalano (2018) indicated the need for a child-school-family partnership, useful in overcoming the disadvantages and adversities experienced in completing homework. At this level, the essential gains consist in the empowerment of students and the formation of their autonomy. The essential conditions for assigning homework are "to be made in such a way that they are attractive, take into account individuality, so that the student would like to work and solve the assigned tasks with enthusiasm. The time allocated to the homework and the degree of difficulty must be managed very well, and the end of the homework must be clear" (Catalano, 2018, p. 135). At a young age, the disadvantages of homework (Kohn, 2015) are that it becomes a burden for the

parents, it is a stress factor for the children, it generates conflicts in the family, it reduces the time spent on other activities, and it decreases interest in learning. For primary education, the reflective diaries of the teachers have proven useful in optimizing the practices of homework drawing, monitoring and assessment (Negru, Sava, 2022). A meta-analysis of the field with proposals for education policy in Ireland at primary level was made by Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, in 2021, by taking stock of the multiple study perspectives and results obtained about how the parents, teachers and students perceive homework. In 2021, Guo *et al.* set out to track the relationship between performance and the amount of time given to solving homework, for intervals that increase progressively by 15 minutes, as well as the one related to the motivational dynamics created. The construction of interesting homework requirements, in accordance with the clearly pursued competencies and the possibilities of those who are asked to solve them remain valid conditions also at the age of youth (between 18-35 years) or at the adult age (35-65 years), and an adaptation to the specificity of the current generation of trainables requires, as Catalano and Catalano (2018) well observed, capitalization on the curiosity of the digital natives to search online and their desire for immediate feedback.

A well-known study, carried out by Cooper, Robinson, Patall (2006) showed that, as early as middle school and high school, homework has a considerable impact on the results, while for very young students the differences are not so important, being in competition with other enjoyable activities. Thus, the amount of homework correlates with the classroom performance as the age of the subjects increases. The 10-minute rule (McPherson, 2005; Cooper, Robinson, Patall, 2006) showed that completion time can gradually increase with each class, so that high school students can complete two-hour homework or even allocate more time. An important aspect is the "optimal amount of homework", depending on the "nature of the requirements and individual differences" (Cooper, Robinson, Patall, 2006, pp. 52-53).

4. The specifics of the students' activity

In the academic environment, for the students involved in the education process, some of the major sources of stress can come from the nature of the tasks, their amount, their difficulty, the existence of deadlines, limitations, fatigue, the status of a parent or a person who works in parallel with studies, unsatisfactory learning conditions, unjustified rules, the ambiguity of the requirements, the lack of feedback, dissatisfaction with the chosen course of study/profession, routinism, the fact that they do not receive instructional support on how to use of online learning platforms/technologies, conflictual or too cold relationships with the colleagues or teachers.

For an efficient use of resources and successful learning, ensuring the well-being of students is a desire to which they contribute themselves, as well as relevant people from their environment, the teachers who determine them. Referring to contentment, acceptance, optimal demands, experienced satisfaction, the assignment of homework should fall into a balanced dimension, since control of free time contributes to increasing the subjective well-being. In a multivariate analysis of the

subjective well-being of people, Muntele Hendreş (2004) included locus of control among the factors that influence it: subjective well-being is directly correlated with the internal locus of control; learned helplessness is closely related to an external locus of control.

The importance of feedback from the teachers is considerable, and in the context of solving homework, feedback has a motivational role. In accordance with the *National Report Eurostudent VII 2018-2021. Living and studying conditions of students* (National Centre for Education Policy and Evaluation, Education Research Unit, 2022, p. 34): "Half of the Romanian students agree that their teachers regularly provide them with useful feedback in their work, and 40% of the students believe that the teachers motivate them for performance during their academic activities." Depending on the category of students we are referring to, there are differences in the allocation of the time budget, which depend on the level of studies: undergraduate students and those enrolled in long-term university studies devote more time to study activities, while those enrolled in the master's program devote more time to paid work. The mentioned report (2022, p. 102) also showed that, in 2020, students from Romania devoted, on average, approximately 22 hours/ week to attending classes, seminars, laboratories, etc., and approximately 15 hours/ week to individual study.

The teaching staff and the students in university education are faced with new challenges, which are related to supporting learning, its thorough accomplishment, the assumption of autonomy and the development of transversal competencies, which are very obvious in the classic contexts of academic training, but also that of online education or the blended, post-pandemic type. Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online activities, is considered a more flexible form of achieving higher education (Banihashem *et al.*, 2014; Lockee, 2021; Megahed, Ghoneim, 2022; Fang *et al.*, 2023; Sharma, Shree, 2023, as cited in Banihasem *et al.*, 2023). Some homework assignments based on personal discovery allow flipped classroom teaching (Bergman, Sams, 2012), where students explain what they have learned and understood to other students, while the teacher is more of a guide for them, the use of online training platforms having advantages and disadvantages in achieving performance, compared to traditionally assigned homework (Magalhães *et al.*, 2020; Yumuşak, 2020).

The complexity of student activities makes some applied courses to follow routes: from theory to theory; from practice to practice; from idea to practice; from practice to idea. Solving tasks and developing applied works are beneficial for stimulating autonomy in knowledge, for developing intellectual work techniques and associated capacities, for satisfying epistemic curiosity, and developing creativity. The independent study of some materials made available forms skills such as: selecting the necessary contents, reading quickly, making reading papers, reading between the lines, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating the texts, synthesizing the content covered, drawing conclusions, transferring to other similar contexts.

The type of attitude towards learning and towards the task, in students, can be thorough or superficial (Marton, Säljö, 1976), and this existing attitude can influence

the involvement in doing homework, therefore, the teacher has the role of guiding the students to a thorough approach and to ensure the achievement of accomplishing personal understanding.

5. The research design

The current generation of students is part of Generation Z (most being born between 1995 and 2000). They had, in their adolescence, computers and mobile phones at hand, they access the Internet, they are used to several tasks at the same time, but they get bored quickly; they are sociable, flexible, and independent, they appreciate audio-visual elements, and, nowadays, many combine employment with studies. However, it should not be neglected that among young students there are also adults, trained before the 1990s, who are not as open to using information technology. They are more persistent in their work, due to the fact that they already have family responsibilities and they are also employed, which makes them organize their time better, be productive and responsible.

The experimental sample of the research was represented by 141 students in year II and III, from the training program for the teaching profession, the Faculty of Letters, Communication and public relations, Journalism, Acting, Music, Cinematography, Foreign Languages specializations, from a university of Romania, south-west region. He was chosen due to the fact that in the students' psycho-pedagogical curriculum we covered topics related to creating the conditions for effective learning, the formation of self-assessment competencies, the application of organizational measures, time management.

The formative experiment consisted in: the progressive implementation of homework, discussion sessions and the provision of guidance on the methodology of intellectual activity, the practice of some adjustments at the level of external and internal factors, the flexibility of the assignment method, by the possibility of choosing three of the 7 assigned homework accompanied by constant feedback. The feedback was provided both through Google classroom, in an individualized way, as well as face-to-face, through the correct face-to-face solution, as suggestions, additions, problems, during a semester (five months, October-February). At the end of the first semester, the year 2022-2023, the students were questioned about various aspects of completing homework, in the case of psycho-pedagogical subjects, by applying a criterion evaluation grid, with evaluation scales at the levels of Very Much, Much, Medium level, Little, Not at all.

Because the relationship between doing homework and the learning outcomes, embodied in the students' grades, is determined by multiple contextual factors, and doing tasks, applied works is only a part of the individual study, which requires strictly determined efforts, including for the direction of preparing for assessments/exams, we stopped at analyzing the following aspects:

Hypothesis 1: The application of didactic rationalization techniques by the teacher in constructing homework according to the criterion of usefulness at the level of student learning positively influences the level of commitment in relation to them.

Hypothesis 2: In students preparing for the teaching profession, the teacher's feedback and support for the application of self-regulatory strategies in doing homework is likely to increase satisfaction after doing it.

6. The results obtained

Regarding the influence of homework on learning motivation, as Figure 1 reveals, we could find that they support the growth of interest, and most students find them attractive, challenging, for the fact that they require their creativity.

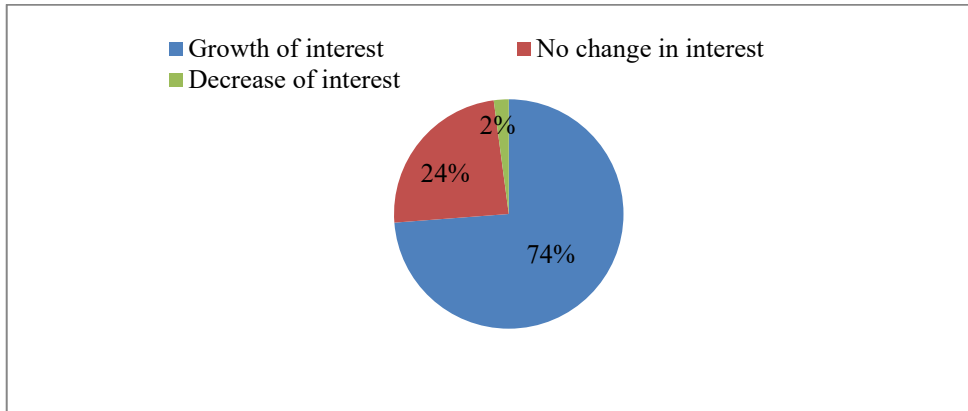


Figure 1. The influence of homework on learning motivation

The high percentage of 74% of the students who became more interested in the psycho-pedagogical subjects validates both the internal motivation each student relates with to the teaching profession, as well as the fact that there is an external influence on interest by taking into account the students' efforts in the final evaluation.

Two other items under observance were about the perception of the usefulness of homework and the appreciation of the effective way of engaging in solving, in a responsible, original manner, avoiding plagiarism (Table 1), at the level of the entire sample.

Table 1. Assessments about the usefulness of homework and the level of self-engagement in solving it

	Measure	Percentage	Actual engagement	Measure	Percentage
	Usefulness	Very much		45.4	
A lot		25.5	A lot	29.8	
Medium		24.1	Medium	22.7	
A little		3.5	A little	4.2	
Not at all		1.4	Not at all	0	

For the obtained assessments, in the case of each string value, the correlation coefficient – the CORELL function in Excel between utility and effectiveness, indicated a value of 0.588. This value is considered significant when it differs from 0, between -1 and +1. Because the resulting value was positive, we infer that as the values in the first data series increase, the values in the second data series also increase. It means that we can confirm the hypothesis that there is a concordance between the independent variable (the usefulness of homework) and the dependent variable (the actual engagement/effectiveness in solving it): the more pragmatically they are constructed by the teachers, and the students appreciate their usefulness, the more they actively engage in solving homework.

Also, other variables correlatively tracked were the support given by the teachers (where 1 represented the top level, very much, and 2 meant a lot, 3 – medium, 4 – little and not at all) and satisfaction with the completion of homework (similarly rated). The overall results are shown in Figure 2.

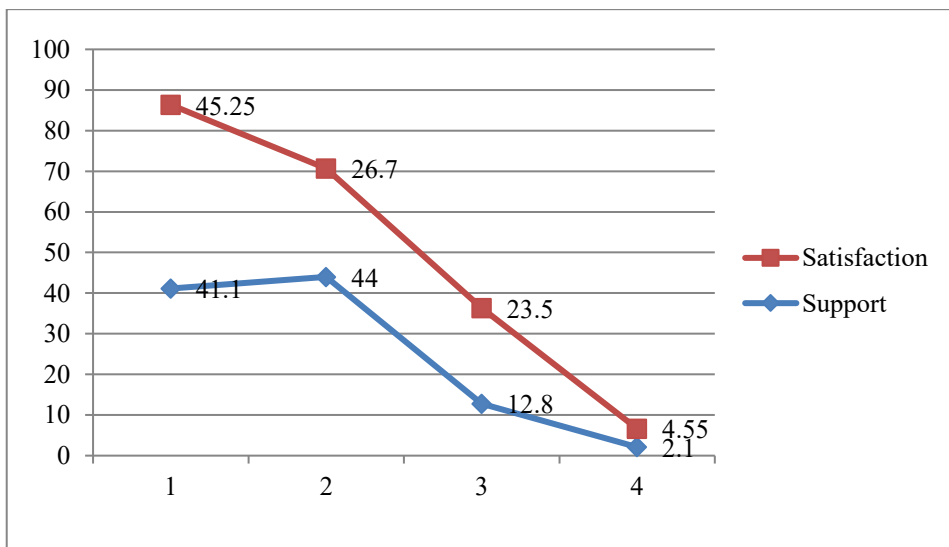


Figure 2. The relation given support experienced satisfaction

For each string value, the correlation coefficient, according to the application of the CORELL function in Excel, indicated a level of 0.576. This value is considered significant and, because it is positive, it means that as teacher support increased, the values related to experiencing satisfaction also increased, which confirms hypothesis 2. We noticed that the values were not close to +1, they did not grow exponentially, because there is a maximum level, beyond which the too high support relation no longer works. For example, a very high level of support from the teacher must be received when necessary, when there are difficulties, so as not to exclude manifestations of independence/autonomy; when it was given too insistently, the students reported that their personal satisfaction of self-accomplishment was hindered and that they felt directed.

Three other monitored components focused on some characteristics that we consider essential to optimize in the formulation of homework, from a teacher: the amount, the difficulty, the degree of effort/ stress. The values reported by the students were those in table no. 2.

Table 2. Assessments on the level of some essential characteristics of homework

Volume %		Difficulty %			Stress %			
Too much	Optimal	Too little	Too much	Optimal	Too little	Too much	Optimal	Too little
20.9	73	6.1	21.3	71.6	7.1	16.3	78	5.7

We observe that these quite close percentages, maintain an average of the adjustment actions, possible to be carried out by the teacher, which the students consider to be optimal, for a large majority of the students, of 74%.

The time used is seen as an important resource, and the number of hours declared by the students to have been used to solve homework is generally between one and two hours (Figure 3).

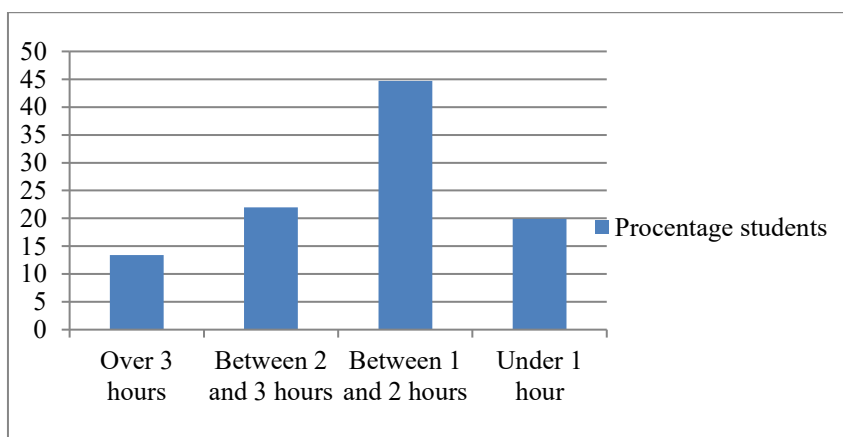


Figure 3. Time allotted to homework

This distribution of time shows a slight right asymmetry, being an upward distribution, where, according to the health insurance rules in learning and the European Transferable Credit System (ECTS), the time used for homework after classes is enough. Of course, this allocation also depends on the personal pace, faster or slower, on the degree of participation/ absenteeism in the actual academic activities. Following the deadlines of homework recorded other values (Figure 4).

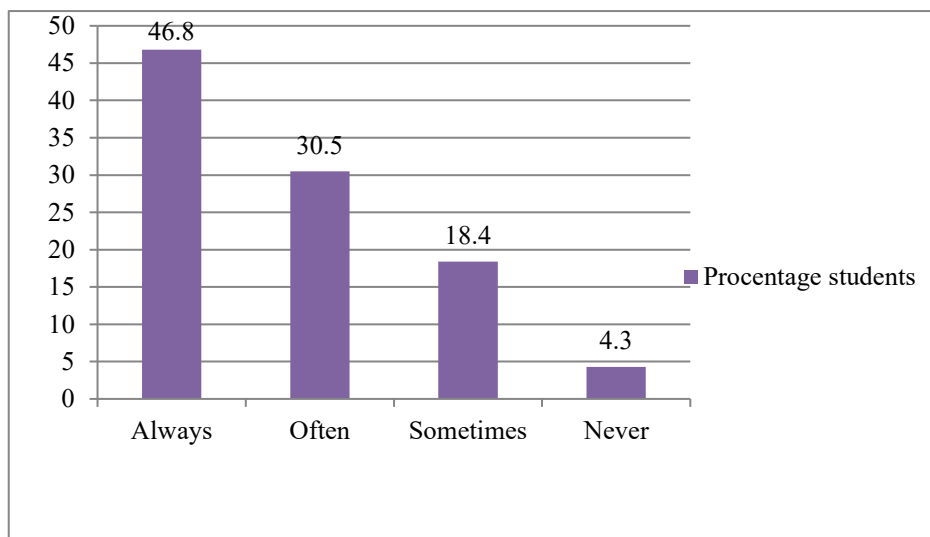


Figure 4. Following deadlines

The shape of graph 4, is a right descending one, most students, regardless of the time invested, managed to fit in time.

We were interested in the subjects' explanations for the aspect of time management, and the students indicated a series of encountered difficulties. We believe that at the level of the Romanian academic culture, the observance of deadlines is not so strictly followed, due to the minimal interest in obtaining the passing score or through the possibilities that the students have to appear for a prolonged examination as a deadline.

While 17% of the students do not have any difficulty in solving homework, the rest mentioned a series of encountered difficulties, among which, in descending order, we note: lack of time (42%), competition with other tasks (profession, child care) – 17.4%, weak self-determination – 16.5%, learning by leaps – 14%, personal misunderstandings of requirements – 8.1%, lack of means – 2%.

To conclude on how they related to the homework assigned by us, the question with closed answers related to the existence/ non-existence of felt stress obtained 30.5% confirmations, while 69.5% believe that they were not stressed. Such a result is gratifying, because achieving well-being and reducing stress are elements that are pursued by all trainers.

Moreover, we were interested in the students' preference for the procedure of submitting homework and getting feedback: traditionally or online. For this item, the results were outlined as in the following diagram (Figure 5):

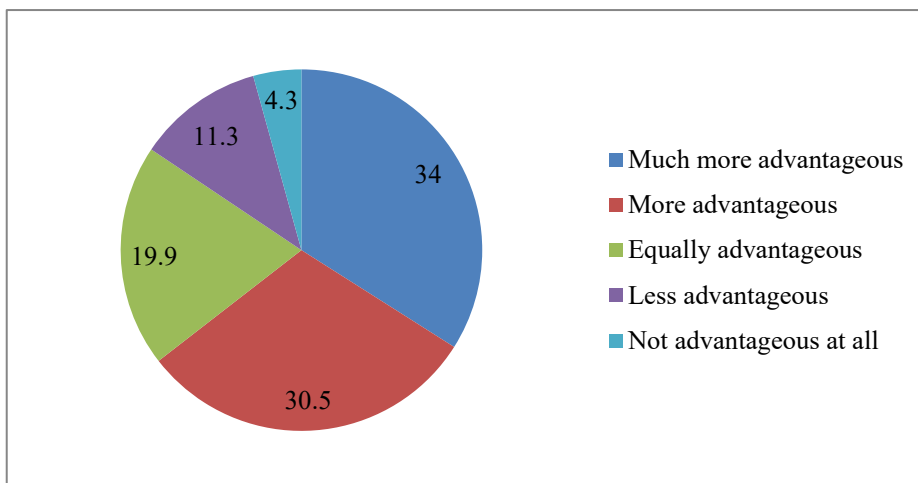


Figure 5. Comparison online/face-to-face version

Therefore, a large part of the students appreciate online procedures more, due to the easy possibility to document themselves, the notifications that warn them about the need to be on time, the individualized feedback they receive.

7. Discussion of results

Even though our sample was small in size, knowing the students' perception of homework is important for every teacher, and a clear mutual communication of expectations and encountered difficulties makes them more motivated to relate and manage resources better. By indicating the main ways of study, we found out from the students whether they are consistent in solving the homework or whether they choose the variant to act by leaps. Even if for a continuous learning it would be necessary to study independently daily or, at least, periodically, a large part of the total number of students recognized that they learn with priority in the session and do the applied works in the last period of time possible they have at their disposal. These habits are closely related to their involvement in solving homework and determine procrastination, delays, superficial approaches, copying.

The students' judgments and attitudes regarding solving homework explain the level of effort they put into learning. If they were unable to solve them, students indicated that homework competed with a very busy study or work schedule. Those who solved them with pleasure and responsibly opined that they were strongly motivated by the following reasons: solving homework supports understanding; through homework they learn more thoroughly, they practice tasks; they are conscientious and, in this way, update information effectively; thus the connection between theory and practice is achieved; he is interested in every course, and the solved homework is a way of developing knowledge; with the help of the homework they check themselves. That is why an optimal assignment of homework maintains

a balance between the learning capacity and the reactions obtained: perceptions, states, orientations, behaviors.

8. Conclusions and proposals

At the student level, the most appreciated measures we implemented were: avoiding crowding the off-school program with homework in several subjects and explaining the requirements in detail each time, so that the assignments represent opportunities of practicing/ applying learning. Co-approximating the required time and using the remedial feedback online were also considered good solutions.

Among the students' proposals, to optimize the assignment of homework and a better support of their achievement, we list: connecting the homework to aspects of real life, through tasks that will be useful in future assessments; constructing homework assignments that require their creativity; the allocation that allows interactivity with other colleagues; the consideration of professional experiences in the derogation from certain tasks or the equivalence of non-formal experiences; negotiating/extending deadlines.

We believe, therefore, that rationalization can be implemented on the following levels: from teachers as trainers of trainers, from students, as future teachers, from students, for themselves as students. The actual measures to achieve a closer connection between teachers and students in this aspect are: establishing relevant topics; avoiding overlaps with other tasks; giving the necessary time, ensuring feedback, showing (self) appreciation.

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