FACILITATING THE TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY TO HIGHER EDUCATION - EMPIRICAL STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA*

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Abstract

The process of making the transition from secondary to higher education easier involves providing support and guidance to students while they navigate the challenges of entering a new academic environment. The transition from high school to university is a major event in a student's life. Not only the new responsibilities a student faces, such as living away from home, less direct support from the family environment, the responsibility for their own finances, can create difficulties or cause stress, but also the new academic culture to which they must adhere, can lead to adaptation difficulties or even to the abandonment of university studies.

Specialized literature presents ways for the university environment to help students during this transition. In practice, each university tries to discover and implement various ways to facilitate the adaptation and integration of young people in the university academic environment. Orientation programs are held to familiarize students with the campus, academic resources, and available support services. This helps them feel more comfortable and connected to their new educational setting. Students need academic advising to understand the requirements and expectations of their chosen program, they need guidance on course selection, degree planning, and strategies for success in higher education. Young people need the training and development of study and also time management skills.

The present study is a diagnostic one and aims to investigate the needs and expectations of first-year students, after their first month of academic activity, enrolled in the study programs of the University of Craiova, in order to be able to identify the programs that can help them, facilitating their transition from secondary to university education. We consider it important to facilitate the adaptation of the transition from secondary to higher education because the elements of novelty that come with the

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university period require a state of preparation of the young people who need support to discover and internalize the demands of the academic environment.

Key words: *Transition; Facilitation; Integration of students into the academic life; Academic advising.*

1. Introduction

The transition from high school to university life is often very demanding for the first-year students, especially during the first weeks of the academic year, and these difficulties are observed on a personal level (through the separation from their family and resource management), on an academic level (a greater degree of freedom regarding the choice of the optional curriculum, own management of participation in courses, which is no longer mandatory, time management, management of individual study activities), as well as on a social level (interactions with new colleagues, high school friendships are redefined, new groups are formed).

The effort to adapt to all these changes simultaneously makes the transition a critical one, especially during the first six weeks, which is why many researches on adaptation to university life (Sava *et al*., 2014) choose to identify the students' opinion about the manner this transition was institutionally supported, respectively, about the way in which they consider that they have adapted after this period.

In recent times, the first year of university studies has begun to be the subject of several researches carried out in several university centers in Romania, determined in particular by the wave of decrease in the enrollment of graduates in university studies and the increase in the phenomenon of dropping out of university studies after the first year.

Considering that the aspects related to this topic have not been exhausted, we consider it necessary to focus on studying the process of transition after the first month of academic teaching activities, because, as C. C. Jung said, a person adapted to an environment is not necessarily integrated in that environment.

Research in the field indicates that early experiences in college education are critical in establishing values, attitudes, and approaches to learning that will shape the lifelong learning experience beyond the undergraduate years (McInnis & Jones, 1995). Another aspect indicated by research is related to the fact that the first year is identified as the one during which most students drop out of university studies. There are authors who believe that if the students end up completing the first year of studies, the battle is more than half won, and regardless of difficulty, they find the resources to complete.

The processes through which young people come to identify with, and become members of a community of study have been compared to the processes through which individuals move from youth to full adulthood in traditional societies or through which immigrants are accepted into a new community: the stages of separation (from the previous group), the transition (the interaction with the new group) and finally the incorporation or integration into the new group. During these first two stages – separation and transition – the first tertiary year, the students may

be most at risk of withdrawing from their studies or a particular university altogether (Hillman, 2005).

2. The transition from pre-university education to university

The concept of transition to higher education refers to the transition from secondary education to higher, university education. The studies of the last decades (Bean, 2005; Chickring and Reisser, 1993; Coulon, 1997; Fidler, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Schnell and Doetkott, 2003) have made an important contribution in establishing the foundations for determining the transition to university education as a vast field of research whose scientific and social relevance remains important even today.

The transition from school to university is widely recognized as a significant leap towards greater personal and academic independence and autonomy for most students (Kyndt *et al.,* 2017; Murtagh, 2012). This transition is a crucial time in the student period because it can lay the basis for successful development and future achievement (Hultberg *et al.,* 2008; Krause and Coates, 2008). However, for many young people entering higher education, this transition represents an important developmental step in their journey to adulthood, requiring significant social and emotional adjustment (Young *et al.,* 2020). Moving from the controlled environment provided in school and at home to accepting personal responsibility for the academic, financial and social aspects of your life is challenging (Belfield *et al*., 2017; Lowe and Cook, 2003; Parker *et al.*, 2004). The complex and demanding experience of this transition has the potential to affect mental health and well-being (Ran *et al.,* 2016; Thorley, 2017).

Change is something that happens to people and they may or may not agree with it. When change happens quickly, an effective transition is made. When we are faced with change, the transition can often take longer. Higher education can be seen as consisting of several concurrent transitions (Jindal-Snape 2010) both in context (such as moving to a new city, in a new system) and in interpersonal relationships (such as forming new relationships with students, colleagues, university support and academic staff, as well as changes to the already existing relationships with family and friends at school). Thus, transition is seen as a continuum process where the levels of support should be adjusted accordingly (Jindal-Snape 2010).

From the specialized literature we have selected, based on the relevance for the transition of students to university education, useful models for understanding the numerous changes experienced by the students during their transition to higher education.

During a transition, young people experience feelings similar to other life events, such as changing jobs, moving from one country to another, or even losing a loved one (Schaetti, 1996). Although students experience the transition to higher education in different ways, for almost all of them, the change from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one is a time of disequilibrium (Jackson, 2010). In other words, the transition to university life involves changes and potential challenges that young people may experience.

Overview of the potential changes and challenges students may experience as indicated in the published literature.

Table 1. Challenges and Strategies refferd to type of changes

Types of changes	Potential challenges	Strategies
Environment Home Culture shock	Depression, anxiety, isolation Fear of being ignored	Developing new supportive relationships Adjustment, adaptation
Financial Credit/ loan (family, friends, bank)	Stress, worries about the future	Seeking institutional support, monitoring expenses
Social New friends New interactions with the academic staff Roommates/ apartment	Anxiety Isolation, Feelings of not belonging Stress, anxiety, unhappiness	Openness and flexibility Involvement in formal and informal activities, development of self-efficacy Communication and compromise
Academic Learning, environment Activities, expectations Performance Presentations and exams	Anxiety, confusion Disappointment, stress Stress, anxiety Stress, anxiety, fear of failure	Interactions with colleagues, participation in student organizations Induction processes, self-management of expectations Developing self-knowledge, time management, academic development, information literacy Development of communication, of academic study skills, development of self-efficacy and critical self-reflection

The Bridges Transition Model developed by Bridges (2011) as a general view of the change process, distinguishes three overlapping phases. People enter the first phase (Ending, Losing and Letting Go) when change is first presented to them and experience emotions of fear, denial, anger, sadness, disorientation, frustration, uncertainty and a sense of loss. This phase could represent the students' first weeks at university when they go through external changes that are related to the new environment (different location and culture) as well as the experience of sharing an apartment or living in a student dormitory with other students, together with the shock of the new academic environment. These changes can cause students to experience feelings of homesickness, isolation, depression, anxiety, unhappiness, and confusion (Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Ramachandran 2011; Thurber and

Walton, 2012). The second phase, the "Neutral (Transitional) Zone" is where people are still attached to the old situation while trying to adjust to the new one. In this phase, individuals are often confused, impatient and unsure as they experience skepticism, low productivity and anxiety about their role. Specific to student transitions, external and internal changes in this phase can lead to anxiety due to meeting new people; stress and anxiety about academic performance; fear of being embarrassed by not being able to answer questions during presentations and stress and anxiety before, during and days after the exam has taken place (Gu *et al*., 2010; Wrench *et al.,* 2013; Yumatov *et al.,* 2001). People are considered to have entered the third phase, the "New Beginning" when they begin to embrace the change initiative and begin to build the skills they need to work successfully in the new way. In other words, they experience openness to learning, high energy, and a renewed commitment to their role. In terms of student transitions, this may be when students become more confident as they progress through university and adjust to university learning routines. For example, they are more organized, prepared and have learned to plan ahead. The transition model developed by Bridges, although developed for an organizational environment, could be considered relevant for describing student transitions.

Another model that can contribute to understanding the experiences students have during their transition to higher education is the U-curve Adjustment Theory (Risquez *et al.,* 2008). This model, which derives from organizational literature (Oberg 1960), was adapted by Risquez *et al.* (2008) and describes three phases: Honeymoon, Culture Shock and Adjustment in student transitions. The first phase is considered to be very short. At this stage, most students about to enter university envision a life with opportunities for personal, social and intellectual growth (Pancer *et al.,* 2000). The second stage, that of culture shock, is characterized by feelings of disappointment. During this phase, the student may experience high levels of anxiety associated with academic demands, feelings of isolation and alienation, stress, homesickness, a sense of loss, detachment, and even boredom. Students experience these emotions due to changes in their environment (location and culture shock), their social life (meeting new people, sharing an apartment/ room, interacting with academics), and their academic and learning environment (Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Gu *et al*., 2010; Thurber and Walton 2012; Wrench *et al.,* 2013). The third phase is the adjustment phase when students begin to function effectively in the new environment. For example, they become more motivated, develop a sense of communion with other students, as well as develop new learning routines.

The models mentioned so far have only focused on the first few weeks of university. Although the first few weeks are of particular importance for successful transitions (Wilson *et al.,* 2014), it would be incorrect to say that the transition process starts or stops there.

The Student Experience Model is a result of a study by Burnett (2007), and although this model focuses heavily on the first year of college, it provides a more holistic view by perceiving the transition process as a continuum of cohesive experiences that can appear over the university years, from the first to the last year.

This model identifies six phases: Pre-transition; Transition; Orientation Week; First Year Student Induction Programmes; The Middle Years and Capstone or Final Year Experience.

3. Empirical study carried out at the University of Craiova

The practical part is embodied in a quantitative analysis of the data obtained by using a quantitative research method, more precisely the sociological survey, because through this research we want to find out how the transition from high school to university was achieved for a relatively large number of students.

The effort to adapt to all the simultaneous changes that occur when entering university education makes the transition a critical one, especially during the first six weeks, therefore this study on transition and adaptation to university life is focused on identifying the students' opinion, on the way in which this transition was institutionally supported, respectively about the manner in which they consider that they have adapted after this period.

The research tool used is a questionnaire adapted for the study of student transition. It includes a number of 10 questions with reference to the changes they go through during the transition period: environmental, financial, social, academic. The research was conducted at the end of the first month of the academic year 2023-2024. The questionnaire was sent via google forms to all the students from three faculties of the University of Craiova: the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration and the Faculty of Law. The students had 21 days to answer the questionnaire. At the end of the period 390 completed questionnaires were recorded. The respondents are students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports in proportion of 61.5%, of the Faculty of Law 23.1% and of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in proportion of 15.4%. The students who participated in the study are between 18-24 years old, 87.2%, and 13.8% are between 25-45 years old.

Next, we will present the interpretation of the collected data, which are grouped according to the dimensions followed in the students' transition to university life.

Because the decision to attend a university is very important, and in recent years higher education institutions have made efforts to develop collaboration programs with high schools in the regions where they operate, we considered it important to identify the ways in which study participants have made the decision to attend the University of Craiova:
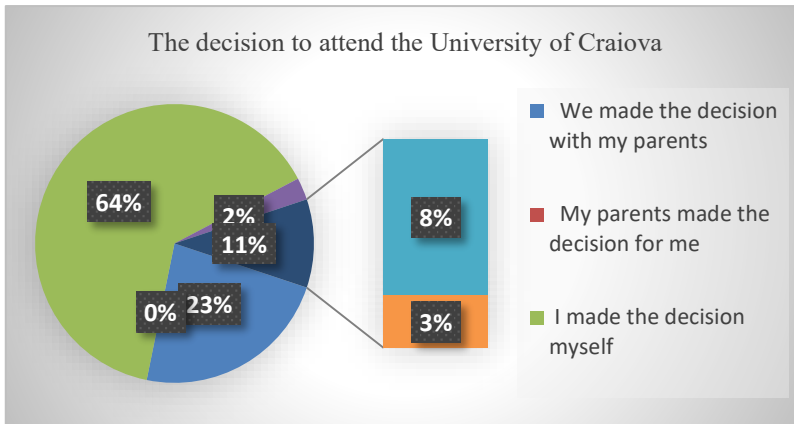
Figure 1. The decision to attend the University of Craiova

Most of the respondents made the decision to attend the University of Craiova courses, even if more than half (56.4%) did not visit the University of Craiova before enrolling in the faculty.

The first change that occurs as a result of enrolling in university studies is that regarding the home and the new relationships, either with roommates, if they live on the university campus, or with those with whom they share a rented apartment, or in the situation in which they live alone with the states they experience as a result of this situation.
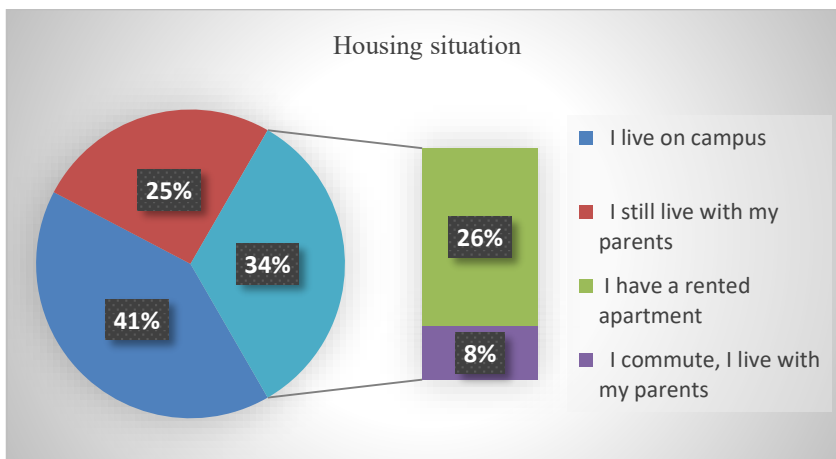

Figure 2. Housing situation

Of the respondents, 34% live in student dormitories, 26% have a rented home, and the remaining 40% still live with their parents. Of those who go through a change of residence, more than half had difficulties adapting to dorm life or to the situation of living in a rented house, but without their parents.

The difficulties listed by the students who changed their housing situation once they entered university are numerous and fall mainly into the relational category ("it was the first time I lived with a foreign person", "it is very difficult to harmonize the schedule", "I need to have more self-control", "I need to be more careful how I behave when my colleague is sleeping or studying", "I think we will have to establish a set of rules, in order to be able to live in the same apartment"). From an emotional point of view, leaving home made some of the students experience a very wide range of negative states, from sadness, anxiety, isolation, feelings of abandonment, and others to feel responsible, mature.
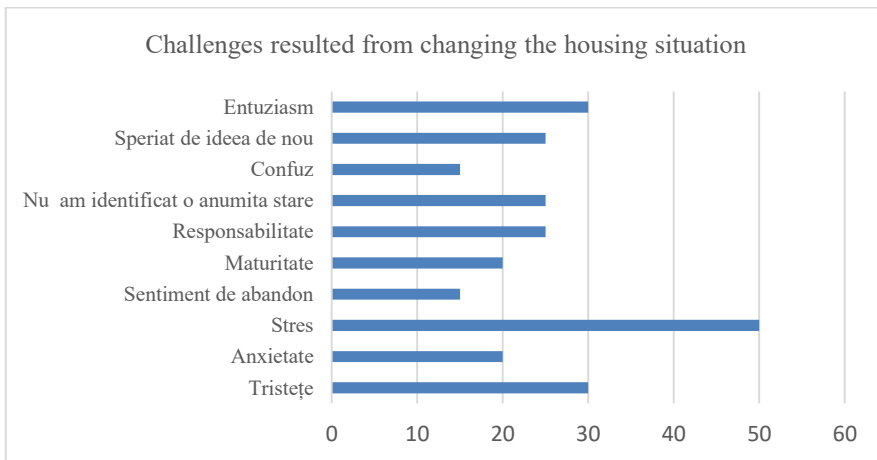

Figure 3. Challenges resulted from changing the housing situation

From a financial point of view, the difficulties related to the large expenses that the parents have covered, whether it is renting a house or staying in a dormitory, the subsistence expenses that the parents also support and their concern regarding the granting of scholarships study or looking for a part-time job to support themselves. For 75% of the respondents, the parents are the ones who support the expenses for university studies, at least during the initial period.

In order to capture the social dimension, we asked the participants in the study to describe the first week of student life: "It was an interesting week, full of opportunities and new people. However, it was also quite stressful because I was away from my familiar surroundings, among people I don't know, impediments doubled by some personal problems. But overall it was a pleasant experience"; "The first week was difficult, because I'm shy and I haven't managed to make friends quickly, but with time I settled in and even met a lot of people"; "Hard from all points of view, leaving home, getting to know the faculty, new colleagues and teachers"; "During the first week as a student, I felt a sense of disorientation in relation to the activities I took part in". Most of the answers pointed to aspects related to anxiety, feelings of not belonging, disorientation, stress, unhappiness, but there were also answers in which we identified enthusiasm, joy.

The respondents learned about the subjects they are going to study from the professors they interacted with, from the timetable they studied on the notice board or on the faculty website. The students were also presented with the subject sheets and implicitly the requirements and expectations for the first semester. After the first month of teaching activities, the surveyed students made assessments regarding the difficulty of the curriculum for the first semester:
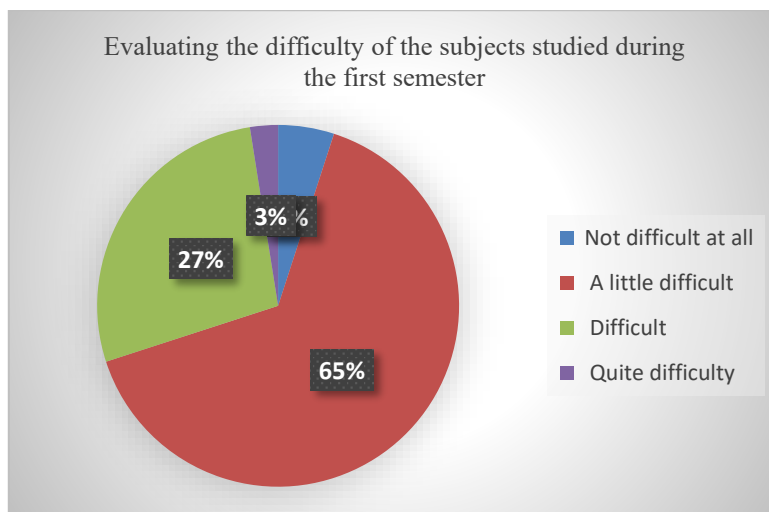

Figure 4. Evaluating the diffculty of the subjects studied during the first semester

The learning difficulties they faced during the first month of school are related to the teachers' language (25.64%), taking notes (17.94%), understanding the timetable (15.40%), finding the lecture/ seminar rooms (25.64%) and understanding the requirements (15.38%).

The students' opinions regarding the transition from school to student life, after the first month of academic activity, make it necessary to identify the ways in which the process of adapting first-year students to the specifics of academic life can be accelerated, in accordance with their specific particularities. The first-year experience has been and still is an important issue in higher education research.

The successful integration of first-year students must take place on the personal, social level as well as on the academic one, as it is very likely that adjustment difficulties in one of the three areas will have an impact on the other area. Social integration and academic performance have been identified as strong predictors of dropping out, as has satisfaction with university life (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). Information about young people's experiences and perceptions of their first year of tertiary education is therefore of great importance to investigations of school leaving and the development of lifelong learning. Given that the costs of college education and reorientation to another field

of study or institution for students can be high, it is important to identify the factors that shape the first-year experience.

4. Conclusions

In order to support the transition from high school to university education in recent years, the ROSE project was carried out in Romania - Component 2 Interventions at the level of universities in the public education system, with competitive grant schemes that financed:

a) "summer bridge" type programs on campus that included activities such as: university-level summer courses for high school students, to give them an early university experience; high school-university-labor market partnerships, to promote the benefits of tertiary education and professional insertion; the development of tutoring programs on campus, managed and coordinated by universities, for high school students, tutoring being provided by academic staff and/ or final year students.

b) creating, developing and ensuring the initial operation of learning centers/ laboratories in universities, with the aim of increasing the degree of keeping in the university the students at risk, through the development of specific skills, and the provision of academic support services , aligned with the students' needs.

The activities that have been carried out through such interventions should be continued and supported by universities to facilitate the transition of young people from high school to university.

We propose key ways to help young people during the transition from high school to university:

Orientation Programs: organizing orientation programs to familiarize students with the campus, academic resources, and available support services. This will help them feel more comfortable and connected to their new educational setting.

Academic Advising: Providing academic advising to help students understand the requirements and expectations of their chosen program. Providing guidance on course selection, degree planning, and strategies for success in higher education.

Study Skills Workshops: conducting workshops and seminars on study skills, time management, note taking techniques and effective exam preparation. These sessions will help students develop the skills needed to excel academically in college or university.

Peer Mentoring: establishing a peer mentoring program where experienced students can provide guidance and support to upcoming students. This can help foster a sense of community and provide a safe space for new students to ask questions and seek advice.

Transition courses: considering offering transition courses designed specifically for new students to help them adjust to the academic rigor and expectations of higher education. These courses may cover topics such as critical thinking, research skills, and academic writing.

Support Services: promote and inform students about the various support services available on campus, such as tutoring centers, writing centers, career

httpservices, and counseling services, encouraging students to use these resources as needed.

Networking Opportunities: organizing networking events or social activities where students can connect with the professors, the university staff, and other students. Building social connections can help students feel more engaged and supported during their transition.

Clear Communication: maintaining open and clear communication with the students, providing them with information about important deadlines, policy changes, and academic opportunities. Using various communication channels such as email, online platforms and face-to-face meetings to ensure students stay informed.

By implementing these strategies, we can help facilitate a smooth transition for students from secondary to higher education, supporting their academic success and overall well-being.

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