

## THE SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION OF THE 1<sup>ST</sup> YEAR AGRICULTURAL STUDENTS INTO THE UNIVERSITY LIFE. METHODOLOGICAL REFERENCE MARKS

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### Abstract

The communication presents in detail a strategic plan of the management from the Agriculture Faculty to support the 1<sup>st</sup> year students who risk dropping out of university and who belong mainly to the disadvantaged groups. The educational approach was settled after the initial analysis of the causes that lead to the university dropout phenomenon. Some students come from families with low income; others live only with one parent or their parents work abroad (19.8%); some of them live in the countryside (45.3%); others come from disadvantaged social groups or they risk dropping out of university (86.6% in the academic year 2016/2017). In the academic year 2015-2016, 77 first year students were expelled, out of a total of 376, which represents 20.5 %. In the academic year 2016-2017, 321 first year students were enrolled, out of which 278 students are in a risky situation; 174 students belong to disadvantaged social and economic groups; the first year students of the graduation cycle do not have the necessary learning skills. In order to diminish the university dropout, the following efforts will be made: to find out the students' individual particular features according to their age; to focus on the students about the teaching-learning-evaluating approaches; to initiate and to carry out social and emotional development programs; to counsel the students individually so that they overcome adapting issues which occur in the first year of the bachelor's cycle; to acquire efficient learning techniques that could open for them new horizons to the lifelong education; partnerships among families, university, community and economic agents.

**Key words:** university dropout; individualized counseling; social and emotional development; efficient learning techniques.

The university management is a relatively new field of theoretical reflections, with practical action implications. In a world characterized by unprecedented dynamism, by interdependencies at the micro level and at the macro one, by the huge impact of the new technologies, the universities must reconsider their educational policies and anticipate the modifications on the labour market, the use of the human resources and the integration of the new technologies into the people's daily lives. While talking about the agricultural universities, apart from these challenges, there are also others related to the quality of people's food.

Romania signed the Bologna Process in 1999 and started its implementation in the university year 2005-2006 aimed at making similar European university systems.

One of the major objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy represents precisely the issues of our communication: "A target on the educational attainment which tackles the problem of early school leavers by reducing the dropout rate to 10% from the current 15%, whilst increasing the share

of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020".(EUROPE 2020 STRATEGY, p. 9) Moreover, Europe 2020 Strategy requires that the higher education should be modernized at the national level, the results attained in the educational field should be improved by an integrated approach that should focus on a set of key competences and it should reduce the early school dropout (*ib.*, p.16).

The investment in the human resource will continue to be the most important investment in order to shape a better future. Therefore, we have been and we will be a concerned with making our students **active partners** in the training process of agricultural specialists of great performances and of human characters similar to the diamond.

The didactic experience emphasized that the first year students encounter several difficulties in the integration process within the academic activity and this is why the university management must take measures in order to provide with

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personalized support in partnership with the other partners who are involved in shaping our students.

"The students' retention can be considered a key indicator about the performance of the higher education systems. The goal is to obtain a great number of students who should learn well and graduate from university with the best results. Having in view the idea of stimulating the students to go to university, if the governments encourage more and more students to do that, then the former have to be aware that they have social responsibility to help remove the psychological, financial and/or emotional risks for students not to complete their academic studies." (European Committee/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2014).

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

A strategic direction taken by the management of the Agriculture Faculty will be in the academic year 2017-2018 **to support the first year students who face the university dropout risk** and who belong mainly to the disadvantaged groups.

"Although the dropout rate in the higher education is extremely high, many countries have few national examples of developing clear strategies with measurable objectives that could solve this issue." (European Committee/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2015)

The educational approach was set out according to the initial analysis of the causes that lead to the university dropout phenomenon: the students come from families with low income, have one parent or have parents who work abroad (19,8%); they live in the countryside (45,3%); they come from disadvantaged social groups or they risk dropping out of university (86,6% in the academic year 2016/2017); in the academic year 2015-2016, 77 first year students were expelled, out of a total number of 376, which represents 20,5%; in the academic year 2016-2017, 321 first year students were enrolled, out of which 278 students risk of dropping out of university; 174 students belonged to the disadvantaged social groups; the first year students in the bachelor cycle do not have the necessary learning skills.

The target group (direct beneficiaries) will be represented by 360 students at risk, who will benefit from counseling activities (for 3 years).

Some of the used methods are: the social investigation, personality tests, and observation records for the first year students with integrating difficulties, specialized and individualized counseling, programs of social and economic development, efficient learning techniques, and modern communication methods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

University education focused on training of key competences specific to the study field and to the different specializations. De Ketele defined in 1996 the competence as an ordinate totality of abilities that are practiced to some extent in a certain category of situations to solve the issues limited to that situational area (*apud* Roegiers, 2001, p. 65). This definition emphasizes the three constituent parts of a competence: content, ability and situation.

Learning is "at the same time a divergent process, at the level of capacities and convergent at the level of competences" (Roegiers, *op. cit.*, p. 71). The interdependence between capacity and content will lead to the formulation of a specific objective (*ib.*).

**Competence**= (abilities X content) X situations = specific objective X situations

The definition of the competences can also be achieved in a metaphorical way (transfer of knowledge or stimulation of the subject's resources at a given time) (Perrenoud Ph., 2002, In: Dolz J., Ollagnier E., Édts, p. 45). The metaphor of stimulation emphasizes the subject's activity, which implies "*a totality of complex mental operations*, connected to some situations, rather *transforming* the knowledge" (*ib.*, p. 46). The stimulation metaphor suggests "the orchestration, the coordination of multiple and heterogeneous resources" of the subject, a permanent recombination of these resources (Perrenoud Ph., 2002, *op.cit.*, p. 56). "Mobilization has nothing magic, it is an effort of the spirit" (*ib.*, p. 57)

The academic curricula include, in accordance with ARACIS standards, two categories of competences: professional (specific to the academic subject) and transversal. The specific competences are structured on several levels: knowledge, comprehension and use of the language specific to the field; explanations and interpretations; application, transfer and problem solving. In addition to that, there are: critical and constructive reflection; creativity and innovation.

The following steps of an action approach were laid out after having analyzed the causes of the academic dropout:

a). Making a database about the students enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași, who face the dropout risk in the first study year of bachelor cycle. By means of social investigations, there will be nominal charts with the students at the Agriculture Faculty who face the risk of dropping out in the first study year of

bachelor cycle, charts which will represent the target group of the experimental approach.

b). Making personality tests for the students enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași, who face the dropout risk in the first study year of bachelor cycle. It is important to know the psychological particular features of the first year students and it is a necessary premise for their rapid and efficient integration into the university life in order to carry out individualised counselling programs. According to that, the students should be provided with support in order to obtain positive results at exams and in their personal development, which should lead to their progress and lower the dropout at the end of the first study year of bachelor cycle.

c). Elaborating observation records of the activities made by the students enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași, who face

the dropout risk in the first study year of bachelor cycle.

d). Activities of counseling and personal development in order to support the integration of the first year students into the university activity.

e). Acquiring efficient learning techniques. The previous research (Stanciu M. & al., 2011) proved that the students in the first study year of bachelor cycle lack the necessary learning skills. This is the conclusion of a research project coordinated by the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași (“Developing the metacognitive competence for the first year students. Teaching the students how to learn”) in partnership with “Stefan cel Mare” University, Suceava and the University of Bacău, PNII, no. 92106/2008). This project showed that about 80% of the involved students lacked the logical learning skills, a fact that led to the mechanic learning of the knowledge (Table 1).

Table 1

Statistical indicators regarding the students’ appreciation of the metacognitive competences

Nr.	Metacognitive competencies	Mean	Sum
1	material structure	3.25	1116
2	systematic notes at courses	3.33	1109
3	following a learning system	3.09	1059
4	planning and presenting a group project	3.08	1055
5	planning and presenting an individual project	2.88	987
6	planning a learning system	2.88	987
7	assessing a learning system	2.87	983
8	planning and presenting a scientific paper	2.38	818

f). Elaborating and implementing an individualized program of social and emotional development by the Counselling Center and Orienting in Career within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași. In the category of young adults, the students represent a disadvantaged category having in view their social and emotional development since there is predominant emphasis on their vocational training. The main mission of the Romanian school as a traditional institution is to educate the young generation and is “focused around the cognitive learning as an essential way to support and promote the individual development” (Ignat A. A., 2011). by neglecting the social and emotional aspects.

The social and emotional development represents an integration of the theories upon the social intelligence (Lazarus R.S., 2011; Rime B., 2009), upon the emotional intelligence (Goleman D., 2001) and upon the development of the competences applied in the education. By

corroborating these three concepts. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL, Great Britain) proposes a new concept: “the development of the social and emotional competences” that can be applied to students. “The emotional health is dramatically the positive predictive factor not only for the best academic achievements and school results but also for the productive experiences that bring along satisfactions, the integration on the labour market, the development of a career, a successful marriage, good relationships with the others and a satisfying physical condition. Our entire human being is “an avalanche of emotions.” (Călineci, M. C.; Păcurari O. Ș., 2009)

g). Developing the communication competences in the academic environment for the first year students enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty. This action direction aims at developing the communication competences (speaking and writing) for the first year students, at solving situations that hinder a good communication, at

learning techniques of efficient communication. at improving the communication of the educational partners involved in the training process of the agronomic students in the Agriculture Faculty within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași. By communicating well, the students will be actively involved in the didactic activities as well as in the extra-curricular ones, which will increase their self-esteem.

h). "The ABC of the entrepreneur education" which will be attended by all the first year students enrolled in the Agriculture Faculty and by which they will have meetings with successful farmers (the best graduates of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iași) and with experts to access European funds.

i). The activity cycle "Free time for the training as citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" will include a wide range of activities ("Agronomic Olympiad", "First year students' party"), volunteering activities, participation to the band "Mugurelul", the Christmas show, movies at the cinema, theatre plays, opera shows, visits to museums and memorial houses in Iasi city and in Iasi county etc.), which will aim at combining the school (formal) activities and the extra-curricular ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a world characterized by unprecedented dynamism, by interdependencies at the micro level and at the macro one, by the huge impact of the new technologies, the universities must reconsider their educational policies and anticipate the modifications on the labour market, the use of the human resources and the integration of the new technologies into the people's daily lives.

The rapid and efficient integration of the first year students at the Agriculture Faculty represents a strategic of the university management. Therefore, we have identified the main causes that lead to the university dropout phenomenon: the students come from families with low income, have one parent or have parents who work abroad; they live in the countryside; they come from disadvantaged social groups or they face risky situations; they lack the necessary learning skills;

This is how we initiated an educational approach that has in view the following coordinates: making a database about the students enrolled in the first year who face the dropout risk; knowing the psychological particular features of the first year students; activities of counseling and personal development; acquiring efficient learning techniques; implementing a program of social and emotional development; developing the

communication competences in the academic environment; developing the entrepreneur competences; helping the first year students get involved in extra-curricular activities with a training value etc.

The conclusions of the experimental approach will be presented each semester and then there will be propositions to improve it by following its sustainability, its active involvement of all the educational actors and which should improve the quality of the educational process.

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