STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES INTO UNDERSTANDING FIRST-YEAR SUBJECTS: A PREMISE FOR UNIVERSITY DROP-OUT. CASE STUDY: THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES, THE FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND TOURISM

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Abstract

The increasing rate of students enrolling into higher education leads undoubtedly to a more contrasted student body, impeding the identification of potential sources that might determine their option into continuing or dropping out of university, mainly after the first year of admission. Although there are various reasons why students drop out of university, ranging from personal, social or even technical ones (considering online blended learning), we will focus mainly on difficulties encountered by students related to specific subjects or teaching techniques, known as academic difficulties. Therefore, considering Romania's higher education is facing retention problems among students in various universities around the country, the purpose of the present study is to analyze the influence of a particular variable which, lato sensu, consists in students' inability of channeling their resources into getting a deeper understanding of various university subjects in order to achieve effective learning and therefore successfully continue their studies. A quantitative study consisting in a two-stages questionnaire was carried out with 70 first year students enrolled at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the Faculty of Business and Tourism who agreed to take part into the development of their academic performance by joining the agenda provided via the Secondary Education Project – ROSE BT. The present research offers empirical evidence that might be useful for future decision-making in order to improve educational processes and both students' and professors' accomplishments in university settings. Also, the results have indicated that students who have difficulties into understanding first-year subjects are more open to engage into further communication and academic activities with their professors and also to adapt to improved teaching and interaction techniques or strategies.

Keywords: *University drop-out, education, learning difficulties*

JEL Classification: *A29, I21*

Introduction

Economic crisis, increasing rate of inflation and the accelerated growth of private institutions that provide higher education has made it difficult for every Romanian public university to capture a larger market share regarding students' interest into taking the curriculum provided by such an institution. In the best case scenario, even though attracting a large scale of potential students becomes an achievable goal for a public university, the process of retaining them for at least a 3 year bachelor degree program becomes the real challenge for both professors and students themselves. The current research was conducted in order to investigate university students' tendencies toward and potential reasons behind dropout, considering the fact that previous papers have presented the difficulties encountered in the process of understanding or learning an academic subject as an element that could negatively influence

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a student's academic route. Regarded as a personal factor that is influencing the tendency toward dropout alongside with gender, school attendance, level of satisfaction with administrative and teaching staff, boredom during classes, discipline penalty and many others (Pirmohamed, Debowska and Boduszek, 2017; Șimșek, 2013; Qureshi and Rarieya, 2008; Bergson 2005), a subject's degree of difficulty could easily be bended if proper measures and student's needs are taken into consideration.

Finding the sources that cause difficulties into understanding first-year subjects has become useful in the general context of a student's inability to promote disciplines and accumulation of insufficient credits required to a swift transition into the second year of study. Academic dropout is a major policy issue, affecting more than 20% of young students in most countries (OECD, 2012). This phenomenon substantially increases the risk of unemployment, leads to lower earnings over lifetime and is linked to several adverse outcomes later in life, including health and more aggressive behaviors such as violence and crime (Chapman et al., 2010; Thornberry et al., 1985). According to Romania's National Institute of Statistics between 2014 and 2017 the national dropout rate was severely increasing. While in the prior academic year (2014/2015) this phenomenon reached a percentage of 8.5% of the total number of students enrolled at year's inception (respectively 411.000 students), the academic year 2017/2018, despite the decreasing number of enrolling students, exceeded all expectations, with an increase of students dropout to 9.3% (about 405.000 thousand students).

The following paper embodies a scientific endeavor carried out during the 2019-2020 academic year by the Faculty of Business and Tourism's body of professors during the project *From university dropout to performance in Business and Tourism (Perform-BT)*, funded via the Grant Scheme for Universities and implemented under the Secondary Education Project - ROSE[2]. The meaning of the research is to provide future guidance for professors engaged into educational activities with first-year bachelor students enrolled at The Bucharest University of Economic Students, The Faculty of Business and Tourism. Moreover, one of its main objectives is to provide an insight into the difficulties encountered by students in relation to first-year subjects, as a potential cause that determines an increasing drop-out rate encountered among those students. Thus, they can help students, acting accordingly to their expressed needs. Also, the management body will be able to obtain useful information regarding students' perception over the subjects taught in the first year curriculum.

1. Literature review

In order to achieve a remarkable level of performance, research on a wide range of domains has shown that individuals who start their instruction from an early age and continue to sustain their efforts and increase their goals will become successful both from an academic, but also a professional perspective (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich and Hoffman, 2006). Moreover, Glsser (1996) has found that one of the most notable adjustments made in the process of long-lasting learning is the learner's intrinsic motivation towards understanding and accumulating useful information. In this case, the learner will take over the responsibility of self-monitoring his performance and self-regulating learning from parents and professors, as they come into adulthood as students.

Within an academic setting, performance can be considered the end product of a wide range of actions or behaviors, ranging from effective learning, managing goals, group activities, searching for in-depth information up to negotiating with professors and colleagues, avoiding counterproductive conducts and structuring effective communications (Kuncel, Hezlett and Ones, 2004). Moreover, in 2018, Casanova et al. determined that academic performance can be used as a determining variable in the process of decision making regarding university continuation or dropout, allowing them to establish cohorts of students with high, medium and low achievement and variables such as gender, majors and their subjects, the ability of getting enrolled at the first-choice university playing a significant role.

Shaping a precise definition of dropping out is complex and has multiple features depending on a researcher's goal. The most frequent is the one that considers changing the major or even university (Aina, 2013; Heublein, 2014), or, alternatively dropping out of university for an indefinite period,

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identified as non-enrolment over the original faculty in two years after the last enrolment (Gury, 2011). In the present paper, considering the aforementioned aspects, we will consider permanence as referring to students who decide to continue their studies in the second academic year at the same faculty and dropout as all students who have cancelled their enrolment during or after the first year.

One of the main examples found in literature regarding the subject of academic dropout is represented by Tinto's integration model (1975). The model defines dropout as a set of factors that refer to: student personality, existing information prior to student academic life (family support, high school education, personal skills), student's goals and desires referring to a professional career or expectations he has regarding the educational institution where he enrolled, academic acclimatization (his experiences in relation to university environment which include: school achievements and performance, development of intelligence) and social acclimatization, as well as teacher to student interconnection and peer-to-peer relationship (Tinto, 1975).

Another well-known model that describes university dropout was developed by Bean and Metzer (1985) and refers to external events, out of academic context, that lead to the same outcome of the given phenomenon. One of its' many determinants is represented by the lack of financial resources considered indispensable for sustenance during the academic life (Pricopie et al., 2011).

According to several subsequent studies, it has been shown that a good understanding of university dropout was realized by combining the two aforementioned models (Sandler, 2000). This type of model does not expose the dropout phenomenon in a more precise way, but it rather offers an advantage of revealing it in an explicit and precise approach compared to the previous two models, presented individually. Sandler, exposes a series of concepts meant to clarify the concept, such as: self-efficacy, the ability to make individual decisions in order to achieve success and improve performance, financial problems, the emphasis being on the latter concept, stating that obtaining financial support brings an increase on student retention (Pricopie et al., 2011).

Student engagement is another aspect that can be found in various research, being considered significant with respect to the dropout phenomenon (Astin, 1999). Activities that include involvement of both parties, student-to-teacher and student-to-student, bring a positive effect and increase students' retention rate on the university premises. Attracting students in numerous activities from the very beginning (first year of bachelor's degree) as well as studying their particular behavior, may be regarded as a starting point in developing a set of activities designed to persuade or advise students to continue their studies on behalf of their own interests and success. The models described above briefly reflect the phenomenon of academic dropout and were applied to different cohort groups of students such as adults, who are not able to manage accordingly their time for study due to other social or economic priorities compared to the standard typology of students or students from minority groups (Pricopie et al., 2011, p. 53).

Given that dropping out of university has a wide range of reasons behind it, many negative factors are found in institutions that contribute and support this activity (government, management of faculties and universities and various departments), but also the teaching activities and techniques, and professor's receptiveness into collaboration. Over time, the literature has written strategies to reduce dropout consisting in generally valid recommendations that can be applied regardless of context (Casanova et al., 2005). Vocational concerns may also represent a ground for students' permanence or dropout, especially vocational motivation and their personal goals. Students who have the opportunity to enroll in their first-choice university major develop a more positive perception over their competences and the ability to easily overcome future expectations or inconveniences (Vries et al., 2011).

Despite the fact that we are considering young adults, the vast majority of whom are between 18 and 22 years old, their attitude towards life is fairly characterized by self-sufficiency, feeling fully empowered and experienced into deciding what is best for their life and academic direction. Even though, legally they could be considered adults, parents' role continues to play a major part in their development, especially in terms of emotional support. But, although parents' role suffers many transformations when they leave the hometown from high school to university in order to pursue their studies, a good collaboration and an emotional closeness can become helpful for the student in

difficult or even critical times. This is especially important when it comes to the physical distance that opens in most cases, with many students choosing new cities to study (Jones and White, 2000).

When considering academic dropout, one of the best indicators that one might pay attention to is a student's class attendance which in many cases slumps from a week to another, ending with no attendance at all. Knowing this, students who miss classes or seminars can be approached rather sooner than later, somewhere in the second or third week, if needed. It was found that this intervention is most beneficial if it is performed by the teacher who has the closest regular contact with students. The aim should be to help students make the right decision for themselves, to reflect on the situation and to think about how to make present decisions for future outcomes, and not necessarily to convince them to continue their academic trajectory by imposing the situation on them (Ghignoni, 2015; Stratton, O'Toole and Wetzez, 2008).

Moreover, studies have shown that students living on campus premises continue and complete their studies to a greater extent than students living apart the academic environment. For this reason, it might be recommended to provide first-year students the opportunity of getting accommodation into student dormitories. This situation might help the development of their openness towards socialization to larger and heterogeneous groups of people, as well as establishing new relationships and friendships. Also, studies have indicated that students satisfied with factors related to comfortable learning environment, shared spaces and campus accessibility have significant impact on the overall students' satisfaction with the academic lifestyle (Karna and Julin, 2015). In addition to the above information regarding students' proximity to university campus and the dropout phenomena, considering the new geopolitical context during the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities found themselves into the position of organizing their courses via online platforms. Transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching can be demanding but in many cases also rewarding for both students and professors. It is troublesome to assess students' level of learning or understanding and feel the connection of a live discussion without being face to face (McShane, 2004). Students' inability to receive constant and further feedback or detailed explanation of difficult concepts may become one of the factors causing academic dropout. According to Giles (1999) there is a fair to little amount of information regarding reasons for dropout or completion in online courses, because many of them represent a new concept. Moreover, Carr (2000) asserts that a wide range of distance-education professors and students have a different explanation for why the last decide to drop out of online courses. Still, in a few words, the rationale behind the previous opinions can be separated into two main threads: students' dropout of online courses has essentially the same reasons as traditional courses, or reasons for dropping out are associated to fundamental differences between the types and infrastructures for instruction.

Related to the process of students' retention in the new environment they have entered, especially considering the transition from high school where at least the grading system was different, to an academic system where rules are more rigid, they will need support in order to develop a further understanding of interacting with academia. Students would be better suited to their selected study program if, from their first interaction to experienced professors and / or older students, they were presented a preliminary program or guide, introduction and / or orientation either on a formal basis or an out-of-class communication style (Witt, Schrodt & Turman, 2010). Based on prior experiences it might include information useful into solving the main problems that freshmen students encounter every step of the way. In this particular situation, literature has proved many times that students' retention is highly affected by professors' behavior towards students, moreover, their out-of-class-communication is highly correlated with students' motivation and therefore the retention process (Jones, 2008). Moreover, the professor's verbal and non-verbal behavior in class, in many cases leads to a higher level of out-of-class-communication, which furthers the process of motivation among the students (Dobransky and Frymier, 2004). As mentioned above, the studies that were applied and analyzed in different academic contexts and studying different cohorts of students, showed that first-year students who participate in activities with colleagues and teachers, gain higher chances to complete their studies and grow up into successful adults and professionals (Hanushek, 2016, pp. 538-552).

Another factor that might contribute to lower the drop-out rate in relation to a deep understanding and learning of university subjects is the implementation of a process of evaluation in various forms of each discipline related to the study program, performed beforehand and periodically during the semester, not only during the exam session. By performing this assessment, students are attracted, encouraged and prepared for the final exam, especially if they receive frequent feedback on their own progress, which allows them to adjust their learning style along the way. Teachers facilitate and stimulate students' interest by the means they transmit information, through topics they propose for further research and also by the means of interaction to new students. Starting from the aforementioned aspects, teachers need training programs based on collaborative learning but also on active teaching methods, which will later be used in students' benefit.

Moreover, various specialized books recommend the implementation of remedial activities that can help students to understand the reason behind their academic failure at the right time, given specific subjects. These activities, generically called "remedial", can be defined as "representing all the courses and services offered in order to provide support for students vulnerable or unprepared into achieving academic goals. The term unprepared refers to a students' category in need to develop basic cognitive or emotional skills in order to cope with learning university subjects (Boylan, 2009). Those courses, are not only based on activities that take place inside the faculty, but they can also include various individual activities, which allow the use of their own learning systems, sessions that stimulate critical thinking, and allow the development and assimilation of effective learning strategies but also counseling and tutoring services (Brants and Struyven, 2009). As Griffith University has determined, universities are prone to discover that quitting factors are mostly related to student background and motivations. The present research is going to focus over a particular range of drivers such as: academic difficulties, student expectations and perceptions of university life and study, student lack of preparation for university life and study, social and academic student integration, teaching and learning styles, assessment strategy used in courses, student mentoring, dissatisfaction with the university, course or programme unsuitability and learning anxiety (Lobo, 2012).

2. Methodology

2.1 Case description

The Faculty of Business and Tourism (former Commerce) represents the first Romanian academic institution engaged into providing during its' three year cycle of graduation advanced expertise in domains such as business administration in commerce, tourism, services, commodity science and quality management. Its main priority is to increase the faculty's teaching and scientific reputation, by constantly improving the academic content of both courses and seminars, educational materials, as well as by integrating effective new methodologies and modern theories and practices to enhance the faculty's role into preparing future professionals. Until March 2020, the program was provided on a classical approach with a 100% class attendance and swiftly moved to entirely online (using a blended learning platform), approach that continues nowadays. The courses are designed to provide both individual and group interaction with the professor and establish a strong emphasis on a student-centered approach and virtual peer-to-peer collaboration.

Apart from courses where participants' number ranges between 100 and 200, the seminars take place with cohorts of maximum thirty students. They complete about 7 subjects by the time of a semester over a three-year period. Each course and seminar is divided weekly into chapters in order to appropriately structure the academic content. As mentioned before, the courses were delivered via a live audience, on the university premises and now through live audio and video lectures along with PowerPoint presentations. After students have completed the weekly course they engage into seminar activities using the blended learning platform provided by the university. Students get the opportunity to perform various assignments according to the information learned during a lecture and have the opportunity to interact with their professor and other students in order to complete specific task projects. About 50% of the assignments require students to collaborate with their peers in a "virtual team" to complete group assignments.

The lectures provided by The Faculty of Business and Tourism is a 3-year course that comprises on average 6-7 subjects per semester and lead to a Bachelor Diploma in Economics. Based on the data provided by the secretarial office of the faculty (2019), the total number of registered students in the academic year of 2018–2019 was 558, having on average, a dropout rate of 27.06% after the first-year from enrolment. One of the aims of the project *From university dropout to performance in Business and Tourism (Perform-BT)* is to reduce the aforementioned rate for the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 by proving students with specialized information and personal support via remedial activities, group activities along with business environment and personal career counseling.

2.2 Participants

In order to obtain unbiased and useful response from our small sample, the students included in our target group were the ones who found themselves in final stages of their semesters of the first academic year. In other words, we were interested to find out what were the main subjects that they considered difficult and what was the relationship to their professors in order to evaluate certain topics such as counseling, teaching techniques and methodology, the level of difficulty and many others. Furthermore, considering students' profiles originating from different programs and areas of specialization, the evaluation was essential in order to analyze their level of understanding and potential academic performance or failure.

For the current study, data were drawn from two cohorts consisting in first-year students enrolled in the academic year 2019-2020. The first cohort had the opportunity to take the courses in a traditional format on the university premises, while the second cohort has spent most of its time on the blended learning platform due to requirements imposed by the exceptional situation of COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected considering a descriptive research design. Participants in the current study were 70 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in business and tourism courses, 37 in the first semester and 33 in the second semester. The sample reflected the dominant high school specialization of the enrolled students. The first cohort was composed primarily of philology graduates (31%) and mathematics and informatics (21%) graduates. Only 15% of our respondents graduated from a high school with economic specialization and 12% from tourism which might have been useful considering the disciplines studied in the first year of university. The second cohort was correspondently composed with primarily philology graduates (29%) and secondary with mathematics and informatics (23%) graduates. Only 17% of our respondents graduated from a high school with tourism specialization and 11% had an economic background.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that out of the total of 70 respondents, 58.57% were female students and 41.43% were male students. Last, but not least, 12.86% of the respondents had rural-based origins, which may constitute a prerequisite for dropout.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Starting from the hypothesis that students might opt for dropout when they find themselves as not being able to pass more than 2 exams over a one-semester period, emphasis was given in predicting dropout-prone students among the ones that found themselves in such situations or were included in a category known as academically vulnerable. The academic vulnerability was measured by using high school grade point average (GPA) scores and rural-base origins.

At the time of enrolment students were informed regarding the objectives of the ROSE-BT Project and agreed to give their free and informed written consent into participating to future activities or research. We also requested their permission to get real-time access to their grades and status (dropped out or currently enrolled) at the beginning and the end of both first-year semesters. Therefore, we ensured the confidentiality of their data, as well as making participants aware that they are not bound in any situation to continue their participation, having the ability to stop or end the collaboration by simply communicating their decision. Following informed consent, participants completed different remedial academic activities in order to get additional help for subjects that they considered difficult and agreed to take part in the present research. Student records were reviewed in order to obtain e-mail address, age, gender, location background and high-school. These data was used into creating a target group of

the present research. Each student who met the criteria of the target group was sent an e-mail that informed him/her regarding the purpose of the study and contained a link to a transparent questionnaire. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire and submit the answers electronically.

The tool used for data collection was a simple questionnaire administrated online during the first and second semester for first-year bachelor students in 2019-2020 academic year. The main difference between the structural content of the two questionnaires is the creation of a new variable intended to analyze students' perception regarding taking classes on the online blended platform provided by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies and additional materials sent via email by professors. In this case, the research team chose to use a multiple choice closed-ended question where students had to present their opinion that ranged from having serious problems in understanding the content of each subject to an overall more relaxing experience than on university premises. The questionnaire has used a five point Likert scale for measuring students' difficulties and potential problems that they may encounter at the examination process for each of the disciplines studied in first semester (e.g. Microeconomics, Mathematics), for the first cohort and second semester (e.g. Management, Marketing, Macroeconomics) for the second cohort.

Furthermore, a seven point Likert scale was used for measuring student's understanding of each subject studied where 1 represented an easy-going discipline and 7 a difficult subject to understand. As mentioned before, first semester subjects are different from the second semester and were analyzed separately. Apart from using the Likert scale, the research has been more than useful from the perspective of descriptive statistics for the data collected. Therefore, students were asked via a multiple choice closed-ended question which are the main factors that contribute to increasing the difficulty of the disciplines, both during courses and later on seminars. As part of the main clarifications provided, were found: teaching methodology (or how to teach), content provided, the amount of information that needs to be assimilated, difficulties encountered in the teacher-to-student communication, the timetable for each activity, the placement of the activity, the evaluation requirements and the lack of prior knowledge related to the subject. Furthermore, in order to meet students' needs, they were asked to provide solutions that they consider useful in order to minimize the difficulties encountered and to increase their performance level during exams and other academic activities. As in the cases before, several possibilities were allowed, such as: a counseling program outside of classes and out-of-class communication) and seminars, implementing different teaching methods, reducing the volume of information to be assimilated, remedial activities (courses / seminars / tutoring) and getting advice on effective studying methods and techniques.

Following the process of collecting responses via an online questionnaire, all the data was processed and analyzed for a deeper understanding with Microsoft Excel Software for data analysis.

3. Results and discussion

The first question in the research instrument was meant to help identify students' perception regarding the study subjects for each of the two semesters in which they consider they might encounter difficulties that will lead to problems in the exam sessions. The students were asked to evaluate the extent to which they consider that they encounter difficulties and will have problems in the exam on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("to a very large extent"), for each of the subjects included in the curriculum in the first year, considering both semesters. The weighted average of the answers obtained for both cohorts of respondents is presented in figure 1.

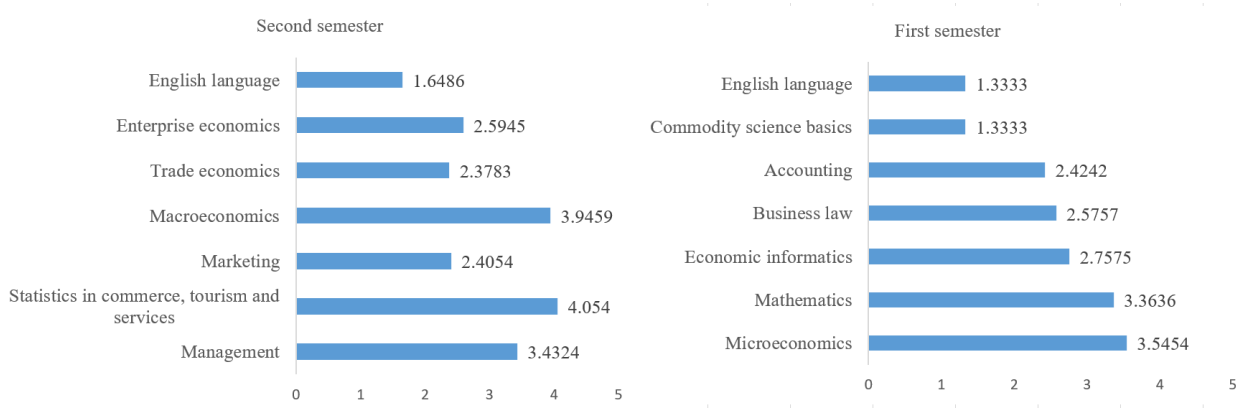

Figure 1. Students' perception on the difficulty level of first year subjects
Source: Authors, based on research

It can be easily observed that for the first semester, the students in the target group consider that they will encounter difficulties and have problems in the exam in the case of the Microeconomics subject (3.55 – the highest score), a similar situation being encountered in the Mathematics subject. On the other hand, for the subjects Economic informatics, Business law and Accounting, the students' perception was that they will not encounter problems at the exam, except to a certain extent. In the case of the subjects Commodity science basics and English language, the surveyed students considered that they will not encounter any difficulties. As for the subjects studied in the second semester, the students perceived possible difficulties in the exam in the case of the subject Statistics in commerce, tourism and services (4.05 – the highest score), a similar situation being met for the subject Macroeconomics (score – 3.95) and Management (score – 3.43). On the other hand, for the subjects Trade economics, Marketing, Enterprise economics, the students' perception was that they will encounter problems in the exam only to a relatively small extent. In the case of English language, the surveyed students considered that they will not have any problems at all.

The purpose of the second question was to obtain a hierarchy, depending on the difficulty, of the subjects studied both in the first and second semester, by scoring 1 – easiest subject to understand, 7 – hardest subject to understand. The results are presented in table no. 1.

According to the students surveyed, the discipline Microeconomics was assessed as the most difficult to understand in the first semester (5.84 – the highest score), followed by Mathematics, Business law and Economic Informatics. The subject Accounting was perceived as having a medium level of difficulty, the easiest subject being Commodity science basics. For the second semester, according to the students surveyed, the subject Statistics in commerce, tourism and services was evaluated as the most difficult to understand (5.69 – he highest score), followed by the subjects of Macroeconomics, Management and Marketing. The subjects Enterprise and Trade economics were perceived as having a medium level of difficulty, the easiest subject being the English language. It is worth noting that the answers confirm the results obtained in the case of the first question.

Table 1. Hierarchy of subjects for the first bachelor year at the Faculty of Business and Tourism

First semester			**Second semester**		
Subject	**Score**	**Ranking**	**Subject**	**Score**	**Ranking**
Microeconomics	5.84	6	Management	4.04	5
Mathematics	5	5	Statistics in commerce, tourism and services	5.69	7
Business law	4.24	4	Marketing	3.23	4
Accounting	3.60	3	Macroeconomics	5.09	6

Commodity science basics	2.06	1	Trade economics	2.94	2
Economic Informatics	4.24	4	Enterprise economics	3.03	3
English language	2.51	2	English language	1.54	1

Source: Authors, based on research

Furthermore, the survey aimed at identifying the factors that contribute to the increase of the degree of difficulty of subjects, both for the activities during the lectures and those of the seminars. Students had the chance to express their opinion, through multiple answers, taking into account several factors. The results for both semesters are presented in table no. 2 and 3.

Table 2. Factors contributing to increasing the difficulty of first semester, first-year subjects

Factors	Activity	Microeconomics	Mathematics	Business law	Economic informatics	Accounting	English	Commodity science basics
		Percentage of the responses						
Teaching method	Lecture	45.45%	51.51%	21.21%	39.39%	6.06%	9.09%	3.03%
	Seminar	18.18%	27.27%	18.18%	27.27%	9.09%	9.09%	6.06%
Subject contents	Lecture	45.45%	51.51%	42.42%	24.24%	21.21%	0%	12.12%
	Seminar	39.39%	45.45%	27.27%	9.09%	24.24%	3.03%	6.06%
Amount of information	Lecture	51.51%	42.42%	51.51%	21.21%	33.33%	3.03%	6.06%
	Seminar	33.33%	36.36%	39.39%	15.15%	21.21%	0%	0%
Difficult communication with the teacher	Lecture	30.30%	24.24%	3.03%	27.27%	0%	3.03%	3.03%
	Seminar	6.06%	24.24%	0%	21.21%	0%	3.03%	0%
The time at which the activity is scheduled	Lecture	0%	6.06%	0%	24.24%	12.12%	6.06%	6.06%
	Seminar	12.12%	6.06%	6.06%	9.09%	3.03%	9.09%	6.06%
The room where the activity takes place	Lecture	3.03%	6.06%	6.06%	6.06%	3.03%	6.06%	6.06%
	Seminar	6.06%	9.09%	6.06%	0%	18.18%	3.03%	3.03%
Assessment requirements	Lecture	15.15%	12.12%	12.12%	18.18%	6.06%	3.03%	6.06%
	Seminar	18.18%	9.09%	6.06%	15.15%	9.09%	6.06%	6.06%
Lack of prior knowledge of the subject	Lecture	30.30%	27.27%	15.15%	18.18%	15.15%	0%	6.06%
	Seminar	27.27%	24.24%	6.06%	18.18%	21.21%	3.03%	6.06%

Source: Authors, based on research

Taking into account the subjects of the first semester, in the case of the subject with the highest degree of difficulty – Microeconomics, the surveyed students perceived that the factor with the greatest impact in this regard is the excessive volume of information to be assimilated, correlated with the teaching methods and the content of the subject. A similar situation is highlighted by the results of the survey and the subjects Mathematics and Business law.

On the other hand, in the case of Economic informatics, the factor that contributes the most to the increase of difficulty is the way of teaching. It should be noted that, while for the subject Microeconomics, the factor "difficult communication with the teacher" has lost its influence in the case of the seminar activity (compared to the lectures), for the subjects Mathematics and Economic

informatics this factor has almost the same impact for both lectures and seminars. It is interesting that the assessment requirements do not have a major impact for any of the seven subjects.

For the second semester, in the case of the subject with the highest degree of difficulty – Statistics, the surveyed students perceived that the factor with the greatest impact in this sense is represented by the content of the subject, correlated with the information volume to be assimilated. A similar situation is highlighted by the results of the survey for the subject Macroeconomics. On the other hand, in the case of Management, the factor that contributes the most to the increase of the difficulty is the teaching methods, correlated with the information volume to be assimilated and the difficult communication with the teacher. It is interesting that the assessment criteria do not have a major impact for 6 of the 7 subjects, only in the case of Management approximately one fifth of the respondents selecting this factor as one with impact on the difficulty of understanding the subject.

Table 3. Factors contributing to increasing the difficulty of second semester, first-year subjects

Factors	Activity	Management	Statistics	Marketing	Macroeconomics	Trade economics	Enterprise economics	English
		Percentage of the responses						
Teaching method	Lecture	51.35%	20%	13.51%	27.02%	18.92%	27.02%	11.11%
	Seminar	35.13%	17.14%	16.22%	21.62%	16.22%	27.03%	8.11%
Subject contents	Lecture	35.13%	51.43%	13.51%	37.84%	10.81%	16.22%	8.11%
	Seminar	35.13%	37.14%	16.22%	35.14%	10.81%	24.32%	5.41%
Amount of information	Lecture	43.24%	40%	13.51%	32.43%	10.81%	16.22%	2.70%
	Seminar	21.62%	45.71%	13.51%	35.14%	10.81%	8.11%	2.70%
Difficult communication with the teacher	Lecture	43.24%	8.57%	5.41%	21.62%	18.92%	16.21%	8.11%
	Seminar	29.73%	5.71%	8.11%	8.11%	10.81%	8.11%	5.41%
The time at which the activity is scheduled	Lecture	8.1%	11.43%	13.51%	2.70%	2.70%	2.70%	0%
	Seminar	8.1%	11.43%	2.70%	8.11%	5.41%	16.22%	2.70%
The room where the activity takes place	Lecture	2.70%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2.70%
	Seminar	2.70%	0%	0%	2.70%	2.70%	2.70%	0%
Assessment requirements	Lecture	21.62%	2.86%	5.41%	2.70%	2.70%	5.41%	0%
	Seminar	16.21%	2.86%	0%	10.81%	0%	5.41%	0%
Lack of prior knowledge of the subject	Lecture	27.03%	28.57%	8.10%	18.92%	13.51%	13.51%	5.40%
	Seminar	18.92%	28.57%	5.41%	16.22%	10.81%	13.51%	2.70%

Source: Authors, based on research

Furthermore, the survey was aimed at identifying students' perception regarding the most opportune measures to be taken at faculty level in order to alleviate the difficulties encountered in understanding first year subjects and increase students' performance during the exam sessions (multiple choices were allowed – the results being presented in table no. 4).

For the subjects considered to be the most difficult on both semesters – Microeconomics and Statistics, the most agreed measure is the introduction of consulting hours, besides the scheduled lectures and seminars. Other measures agreed by the surveyed students would be counseling on the use of effective study methods and techniques and supplementary lectures/seminars. A relatively similar situation is encountered in the case of Mathematics and Accounting. For the subject Business law, the most useful action would be to reduce the information volume to be assimilated, while for the subject Economic Informatics, it has most often been suggested to apply different teaching methods. In the case of Macroeconomics, the suggested actions would be scheduling consulting hours, as well as a smaller information volume to be assimilated. For the third most difficult subject of the second semester – Management, the most recommended action would be the application of different teaching methods. It can be seen that the measures proposed by the students are correlated with the aspects declared as factors that increase the difficulty of the specific subjects. Moreover, it can be interpreted that the introduction of the remedial activities is welcomed by the students in the target group.

Table 4. Proposed measures to be taken for minimizing the difficulties encountered by students

Measures							
Consulting hours, besides the scheduled lectures and seminars	**Microeconomics**	**Mathematics**	**Business law**	**Economic informatics**	**Accounting**	**English**	**Commodity science basics**
	60.60%	45.45%	12.12%	18.18%	42.42%	6.06%	6.06%
	Management	**Statistics**	**Marketing**	**Macroeconomics**	**Trade economics**	**Enterprise economics**	**English**
	27.02%	45.71%	21.62%	40.54%	13.51%	13.51%	8.11%
Different teaching methods	**Microeconomics**	**Mathematics**	**Business law**	**Economic informatics**	**Accounting**	**English**	**Commodity science basics**
	39.39%	39.39%	18.18%	39.39%	12.12%	15.15%	9.09%
	Management	**Statistics**	**Marketing**	**Macroeconomics**	**Trade economics**	**Enterprise economics**	**English**
	40.54%	8.57%	16.22%	24.32%	13.51%	18.92%	8.11%
Smaller information volume	**Microeconomics**	**Mathematics**	**Business law**	**Economic informatics**	**Accounting**	**English**	**Commodity science basics**
	39.39%	27.27%	45.45%	24.24%	18.18%	6.06%	12.12%
	Management	**Statistics**	**Marketing**	**Macroeconomics**	**Trade economics**	**Enterprise economics**	**English**
	43.24%	40%	18.92%	43.24%	21.62%	24.32%	8.11%
Supplementary lectures/seminars, tutoring classes	**Microeconomics**	**Mathematics**	**Business law**	**Economic informatics**	**Accounting**	**English**	**Commodity science basics**
	42.42%	39.39%	6.06%	24.24%	30.30%	9.09%	3.03%
	Management	**Statistics**	**Marketing**	**Macroeconomics**	**Trade economics**	**Enterprise economics**	**English**
	35.13%	45.71%	13.51%	35.14%	8.11%	13.51%	2.70%
Advice on effective study methods and techniques	**Microeconomics**	**Mathematics**	**Business law**	**Economic informatics**	**Accounting**	**English**	**Commodity science basics**
	48.48%	33.33%	18.18%	30.30%	27.27%	15.15%	9.09%
	Management	**Statistics**	**Marketing**	**Macroeconomics**	**Trade economics**	**Enterprise economics**	**English**
	29.73%	31.43%	8.11%	29.73%	8.11%	10.81%	5.41%

Source: Authors, based on research

In the context of suspending face-to-face teaching activities due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and carrying out all teaching activities by using online instruments, the survey conducted during the second semester also aimed at identifying students' perception on the new way of working and interacting during classes – exclusively online.

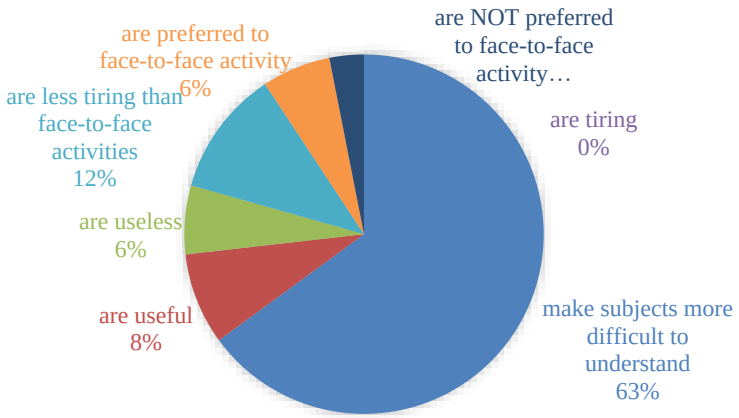

Figure 2. Students' perception on online teaching methods
Source: Authors, based on research

As presented in figure no. 2, the majority of students (63%) stated that participating at exclusively online lectures and seminars made the subjects more difficult to be understood, only 8% finding this way of working useful and only 6% mentioning that they prefer it even to face-to-face activity. Thus, in these conditions, it is clear that all teachers must take efforts to identify those teaching tools that facilitate online interaction and improve, as much as possible, the teaching process under the new conditions.

Conclusions

Researching the students' perception regarding the difficulties encountered in connection with the subjects studied in the first year at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Business and Tourism, is critical in the context of a dropout rate of over 25%. Thus, the possibility for students to express their point of view openly, the further processing of information and their transmission to teachers, are obvious methods for ensuring a high level of transparency and circulation of information. Direct communication contributes to understanding the needs of students and leads to teachers finding solutions that are useful for future generations of students.

This type of research should be conducted every academic year, for first-year students and, as far as possible, for sophomore students. Only by carefully following the difficulties that students have in understanding the subjects, methods and techniques can be adopted in order to facilitate the educational process and reduce university dropout.

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