



## WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' DECISION FOR ACADEMIC STUDIES

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**Abstract:** Student population in Romanian higher education has been decreasing in the last years. The dropout is quite high. Such data force the universities to look for concrete solutions to widen the participation, the retention and the completion rate. Informed decision about academic studies, clear academic and career goals are prerequisite for study success. Thus, at the West University of Timisoara (WUT) was carried out a pilot study, on 900 students enrolling for higher education, to find out about the way they have chosen their academic studies and about their expectations. Their views and suggestions for easier and clearer options are ground for tailored policy measures within our university and beyond. The initial evaluation on the new students is a basis for a better focused interaction with them during their first year of studies. Also, the data suggests possible specific measures to improve retention rates, such as: diversified student services, covering academic guidance services, not only career guidance services, as well as a stronger collaboration between universities and highschoools, for a better orientation and guidance of the pupils for their possible academic studies.

**Key words:** access to higher education, academic counselling, student drop out, policy measures

### 1. Introduction - Focus on improved students' access to higher education

“Widening access to higher education is a tool for social and economic development” (EC 2012, 2014) being therefore one of the main goals to be reached by 2020, agreed upon by the 47 ministers responsible for higher education. Therefore, within the “Social dimension”, set as one of the general policy priorities by the Bologna Follow up Group (BFUG), the “Students' access, drop-out/retention and completion” became a distinct policy sub-priority, data being collected from member states periodically to map how such issue is addressed by the national policy makers. The social dimension of higher education is seen not only as social justice, ensuring equity and equal opportunities, in order to create a better and more socially cohesive society, but also as a way to enhance social capital, maximizing talents (Orr 2012:173).

This aim is an even more relevant one for the higher education system of Romania, as the research data indicates it as the most socially exclusive system in Europe, i.e. a system characterized by a significant under-representation of students with low educational background, and with a high degree of influence of parents' educational attainment on students' chances to achieve a higher education (EC 2012:78).

One of the main challenges for Romanian universities is to attract and to retain students, as the student population graduating high school is continuing decreasing. The universities, therefore, in the last years, increased and diversified their efforts and advertising activities, improving this way provision of academic and career guidance services targeting potential students to universities, in particular upper secondary pupils. These services can be considered as outreach activities, aiming to raise awareness and to enable pupils to make appropriate choices for their academic study, and not only as advertising activities. Efforts for attraction and increased access to higher education are even more relevant for countries like Romania, with only about 25,6% participation at tertiary education in 2016, and a target till 2020 for 26,7%, far beyond the target of 40% of Europe (EC, 2017b, Eurydice, 2017).

To reduce such disparities, student services provided within the higher education are commonly regarded as an integral part of the social dimension, but also as elements belonging to the quality of the teaching and learning process, as elements contributing to the quality of the student experience and to widening access and retention into higher education (Eurydice, 2017). Such services can support prospective students before entry to higher education to get a clearer view and make a more informed decision; they contribute also to students' involvement and study success during their studies, and accompany, after completion, in the transition to the labor market (Eurydice 2011, ESU, 2016). "In the context of widening participation, if governments encourage a broader range of students into higher education, there is also a social responsibility to help reduce the psychological, financial and/or emotional risks of non-completion... Student retention can be considered as a basic and key performance indicator for higher education systems" (EC 2014:10).

It is not by chance therefore that within the „Social dimension”, another two sub-priority policy lines address aspects like „Development of National Access Plans/measures” and „Reforms in the students' support system”, inviting the member states to indicate if such aspects are their national priorities, for what rationale. In the process of consultation and of data collection, the universities are asked also to indicate if these aspects are part of their organizational priorities and concerns, asking for more articulated actions and policy measures at national level, to address the problems they are facing. Listing as distinct priorities of action for enhancing the social dimension aspects like access-retention/drop-out-completion, and adding as solutions the development of access plans/measures, and improved support system for students, are clear proves that within European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a common issue and concern the access of students to higher education, „pushing” the governments and the HEI to consider solutions inside the universities to improve not only the access, but also the retention of the students. Taking note that the disparities are increasing within the EHEA, the European Commission sets as one of the priority actions in the Renewed Agenda for Higher Education, till 2020 (EC, 2017a), the support to HEIs to develop integrated strategies to address the social dimension. This way, the Romanian Strategy for Tertiary Education for 2015-2020 (HG 565/2015) has as distinct strategic priority improving the access to higher education. To address this issue, there are mentioned action plans/ measures, and even reform of the existing services to students, expressing the need for more articulated efforts, conceptualization, and larger scale action, indirectly evaluating the rather limited concerns and developments so far (Eurydice, 2017). One main reason for limited progress is the not so attractive and efficient system for students' fees and aid-grants, mainly for the students coming from vulnerable groups (UEFISCDI, 2015; Eurydice, 2016; EC, 2017b).

The article addresses some of the listed aspects of the social dimension, exploring how the counselling services can be improved and reconsidered, mainly for attracting more students and for supporting students' transition higher education and adaptation to the academic life, in the first year of study.

## 2. Addressing students' access, retain, and drop-out

Addressing the students' access, retain, completion and drop-out there is needed a comprehensive state of the art, in different countries, to figure out the dimensions and the factors influencing the respective problems. In this respect, at the European level it was set up the U-Multirank system of ranking universities (U-Multirank, 2014), not only with the purpose of data gathering to be compared, but also as an interactive tool supporting the students to identify the HEI and study programs fitting best to their purposes. In 2014 more than 850 higher education institutions have participated at the first exercise of large scale evaluation and related ranking. The West University of Timisoara (WUT) was among them. The dimensions it includes are teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation and regional engagement, measuring items like students completion rate at BA and MA level. The U-Multirank system is a very useful tool for future students to find the study and the institution fitting best to their purposes, as “it compares institutions with similar institutional profiles and allows users to develop personalised rankings by selecting performance measures/indicators in terms of their own preferences” (U-Multirank 2014). Furthermore, the prospective students can find out about the university they are interested in not only from the university' self-evaluation, but also from the student's satisfaction and ratings about “overall learning experience”, “quality of courses and teaching”, “organisation of program” etc.

The scores reported by the Romanian universities are quite comparable, but illustrate quite a critical situation. For instance, the BA graduation rate for WUT, reported for U-Multirank evaluation, is 49.94% in 2014, and the completion rate after first year of study is 57.6%, showing the amplitude of the drop out, mainly after first year of study. A slight increase can be noticed in the coming years, accompanied by a decreasing of the student population (MENCS, 2017), both facts being an alarming situation for HEIs, requiring dedicated solutions and actions.

Addressing the problem, there are needed first of all diagnosis studies, and reliable data about the amplitude of the problem and its root causes. In spite of this, Romania does not have a systematic data gathering about the students' profile at the entrance in higher education, neither a systematic data gathering explaining the causes for student dropout, and proposing adequate measures to improve retention of the students (UEFISCDI 2013:20, EC 2014, Mitulescu, Florian, 2015; UEFISCDI, 2015). Studies meant to contribute at understanding the student drop out (Doll, Eslami, Walters 2013) differentiate factors pulling, pushing or falling out of the studies, factors ranging from the educational environment, till the personal or social ones. In this context we are mainly interested in the ones we can control in the institutional environment, even we are aware about the influence of the social ones (like „financial difficulties at home”, needing to work therefore, or moving to other town/ country etc.), or the stronger personal ones. The factors related to teaching and learning support, to social support from peers will be further discussed, with possible ameliorative solutions.

To the existing situation it is to be added that the Romanian universities spend more efforts to get more students enrolling to higher education, as they get the subsidies from the government according with the number of students enrolled, and their efforts are less directed towards increasing students' retention, as the subsidies do not decrease according with the number of students dropping out.

Also the quality assurance procedures set by national agency for quality assurance in higher education, advices that the first survey of students' satisfaction about the quality of teaching and learning is to be done at the end of the first semester. Usually the results of the survey come not earlier than the end of the first year of study. It is known that the highest student drop out happens in the first year of study. So, the data collected cannot be used to act in remedial way in time, before the students drop out. In addition, the survey does not cover the students' problems and needs for support, but it is meant more as feedback for teachers and administrative staff. More determined policy measures, and also monitoring of their impact are to be taken, at national and organizational level, one of them being related to the data collection system, meant to inform about the needed measures, about the students' profile entering nowadays in higher education, their needs, and problems they are coping with in the academic life.

Two possible solutions are further explored and illustrated in the paper, addressing on one hand ways of improving the outreach activities, and on the other hand, diversifying and improving the support system and student services, mainly addressing the starting of the academic life, and challenges to cope with in the first year of study.

Regarding the access to higher education, the efforts of higher education institutions for raising the awareness of the potential students (mainly of the ones about graduating highschools) about the academic offer, facilities, and prospective on the labor market are more and more consistent, as the marketing activities are meant to attract as many as possible students. However, it is generally well known that the future students just graduating high-school are quite unclear in their option for university studies and a certain career path, registering at several specializations, faculties, universities. A premise for a good student performance is a clear goal of the student for the academic study chosen. It is also well known that quite a lot of them drop out after first year of study or later, noticing that it is not what they have expected, and they are not satisfied with the option they have made.

The pilot study at the West University of Timisoara, on the candidates registering for the academic year 2014-2015, highlights the difficulties the students have in choosing their academic studies, and the suggestions they have for an easier and clearer option (see later the details of the study). The answers of about 900 respondents to the questionnaire administered when they have registered for possible studies at all the faculties of our university offer an empiric ground for tailored policy

measures within our university and beyond. The results of this study help the university to draw the attention to the high-schools within our local and regional community, from where we are mainly recruiting students, about the quality of the counseling services, and ways to improve them, by a better cooperation with the WUT. In the same time, the initial evaluation on the new students is a basis for a better tailored interaction with them during their studies, and also the preliminary data suggests possible specific measures to improve retention rates for first year students. These data can be used not only by the university for improving its activities, but also as empiric ground to propose at the national level, among higher education institutions, in professional fora, and at ministry level argued solutions for policy measures meant to increase the student's access and retention to HEI, as they are consonant with other complementary studies (Pricopie et al, 2013; Mitulescu, Florian, 2015).

It is well known that the transitions from one schooling level to the other are difficult to manage by students. This is true also for the transition from high-school to university, the first weeks being critical for students to accommodate to university demands and facilities, to the academic way of studying, to student life, often in another town. "Surveying students at the early stage can be informative and help universities manage proactively student expectations to optimize first year engagement and retention" (Grebennikov/ Shah 2012:267). In spite of this, little research is available in this regard, and in Romanian universities such practices are quasi-absent.

Different types of what it might be called initial evaluation can be undertaken, from different perspectives:

- Investigation of student's clarity, motivation and expectations, study and career plans while registering for a certain study program, as described in the study undertaken presented further in the paper. Such data about their new students are valuable for the university staff, as universities should articulate with students' expectations, and adapt the interaction with the students accordingly;
- Investigation of students' concrete experiences and problems in their first weeks of the student life, as "surveying the commencing student may provide universities with insights on their expectations and early experience. (...) [ n.n. Investigating student's view after some weeks] gives enough time for students to 'get a feel' for how things work so that they can give meaningful feedback whilst still allowing time for staff to respond before their unit/course is over" (Grebennikov/ Shah 2012:268).

These data can be compared then against the student's opinion at the end of the semester regarding the quality of teaching and learning. One can notice, this way, the extent to which students' expectations have been met, the challenges they have had while adapting at the student life, and academic demanding. However, we would like to draw the attention to the fact that the data collected at the end of each semester cover, at least in the Romanian universities, only the courses provided, and the interaction with the administrative staff, not data from other types of support services the students should benefit from (i.e. counseling activities, tutoring etc.). Such fact is an expression of the not so developed concern regarding the support system for improving student's learning. Our point is for reconsidering such situation, and offering with a larger extent academic support and counseling, even more needed at the beginning of student life.

Other aspects needing to be improved are the real and systematic use of such data for ameliorative actions, as well as communicating transparently to the students the ways the data collected from them was valorized, for their benefit. In a study run by the Students' Organization of the West University of Timisoara (OSUT) regarding the students' satisfaction and proposals for improvement, the students claim that they cannot see the effects of the actions taken, based on their feedback (OSUT 2010). "The prominence of student voice requires universities to: innovate strategies for engaging students in feedback provision; chose best time and appropriate methodology to undertake surveys; ensure validity of survey instruments; take actions based on survey outcomes; and finally, 'closing the loop' on student feedback. This means letting students know that their opinions matters through informing them on the findings and actions taken as a direct result of their feedback" (Grebennikov/ Shah 2012:269).

Implementing such practices of initial evaluation at organizational scale (not only course scale, as a lot of academic staff do) allows universities to act in a proactive, more systematic and transparent manner, with big chances to improve student's satisfaction and retention.

Once the data from such surveys are available, the challenge is to persuade the academic and support staff to integrate them into their activities, reconsidering accordingly their approaches, if needed. Such reconsideration can be done by implementing dedicated academic counselling services and systematic practices at the beginning of the academic life, by training the academic staff to be more aware and supportive with the students' difficulties, acting more in a student-centred and proactive way, rather than expecting that students themselves will take the initiative and seek out support individually (see also O'Shea/ Vincent 2011:152).

This issue is not a marginal, limited one, but part of the more complex integrated curriculum system, important for ensuring an adequate start in the academic life. As A. Lindberg-Sand mentions, "the curriculum system of HEIs ... depicts both the duties and the rights of students, teachers and the institution towards each other in the educational process... It is not primarily an administrative or management tool, but a cultural structure that handles and contributes to the production, reproduction and transformation of human knowledge: It makes formal education possible" (2012:193).

To implement a sustainable shift into the curricular system towards student-centered teaching and learning, as pointed out also in the strategic document of Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, till 2020 (EC 2012), provision of training to the teaching staff in HEIs, and of a substantial support for academic development is needed. Such support, both for designing and following, in all their didactic interactions with the students, an outcome-based curriculum, but for ensuring a "cultural change of learning and teaching" (A. Lindberg-Sand 2012:198), is a complex one, covering all aspects of didactic process, from initial evaluation and better knowledge about their new students, till adequate outcome-based evaluation, passing through all multi-dimensions of the curriculum process. Therefore, developments like evaluating students' interests and orientation while choosing their academic studies, as illustrated in this paper, is a service the university can easily run for all their specializations, as input both for teachers and students.

Such input however is not to be used only for ameliorative practices at the beginning of student life, but also as useful data for reconsidering the outreaching activities, as prior to enrolment the prospective students need for clear advice in order to ensure a match between student expectations and the realities, the expected academic standards to be met. Therefore, the outreach activities are to be reconsidered to be more formative, not only informative (as part of the advertising campaigns), and to consider more peer support, for instance as "communities of practice". The good practice example of the "Uni-Start" program, run in Australia (O'Shea & Vincent 2011: 155-158), together with other studies grounding its concept, demonstrates that a more efficient transition from highschool to university can be done through learning from more experienced peers, already students, about the academic standards and expectations regarding independent learning, about the challenges they had to cope with and the way they did it etc. In this way, the career and study plan can be more realistic, as the information in the counseling activities are not limited only to the data about attractiveness of studies and related specializations in the labor market, but includes also hints about how to successfully undertake such specialization and to benefit in the best way by the facilities of the university during the student life.

The reality shows that, in spite of improved practices in the last years to inform students at the beginning of their student life (i.e. brochures offered to all new students, but mainly activities aiming at attracting new students through advertising events like "student for one day", "open doors", summer camps etc.), the drop out of the students from the first year is increasing. Moreover, there are also significant differences in attrition rates between fields/domains of study and also between faculties, therefore the attrition rates analysis and its consequences should be a more complex and deeper process. Thus, besides the most common so called 6 reasons of drop-out (students who are coming from problematic socio-economic background, students that are people in care, students who are part of ethnic minorities/communities, disabled students, working students or students who are commuting), more consistent data is needed about the causes of the drop out, the profile of students more likely to

dropout, the profile of the student as a whole, to notice the changes of such profile and needs in the last years, and to act accordingly, for ameliorative purposes. Unfortunately, in Romania such data is not gathered (UEFISCDI 2013), neither in reactive way, investigating the students when they step back from the studies about the reasons of such decisions. Even less are chances to act in a proactive way, without needed information. In fact, few European countries have online statistics available regarding students' attrition and graduating and among them are Denmark, Austria, Finland, United Kingdom and Norway. Besides that, we should also better monitor not only the graduation and attrition rates at national/institutional level, but also the progress/problems related to each disciplines and accordingly to provide specific support.

Our argument therefore is for considering the outreach activities meant to facilitate the smooth transition from high-school to HEIs (run, for instance, as communities of practice, as social learning networks) as part of diversifying HEIs missions towards increased quality. These activities should include also systematic data gathering, both for measuring their impact, but also for being more informed about the prospective students and their start into academic life.

The extended concern of the universities for formative outreach activities brings added value both for universities (helping to a quicker and better adaptation of new students to the academic life, with more chances to avoid dropout), and for prospective students, supporting them to have better informed decisions and avoiding psychological costs of failure in academic life. With such argument, it can be considered that universities are extending also their services towards community, fulfilling their moral duty to support informed decisions of their beneficiary at the entrance into HE, about the process of academic studies, and after graduation, while preparing to access the labor market. Furthermore, it is to consider targeting such outreach activities also to educationally disadvantaged pupils, to widen their participation to universities (Hoare & Johnston 2011:25), reducing this way the segregation existing into the Romanian HE system.

### 3. Findings about prospective students' decisions for academic studies

Retaining students and improving students' learning is a goal of the West University from Timisoara (WUT), trying therefore to find new solutions in this regard. The phenomenon of multiple choices used by prospective students while registering for the future academic studies is a common one in the Romanian universities. However, there were not done studies to find out about the etiology of the candidates' behavior, identifying to what degree this situation is determined by not a clear academic plan, or by factors like indecision, accessing to free places etc. Such pilot study was run by West University of Timisoara (WUT) in 2014, questioning the candidates registering in summer for academic studies about the way they have made their options for academic studies, and the further support they would have need for a clear option. From the candidates filling in the questionnaire only 855 answers were complete, allowing for further analysis upon them, and some of the findings will be presented and discussed in the following.

WUT is the biggest university in the Western part of the country, and one of the main important classic universities in Romania, covering, within its eleven faculties, various domains that range from economics to natural sciences (mathematics & informatics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography), from social sciences (law, sociology, psychology, educational sciences, political studies and communication, philosophy etc.) to humanistic studies (i.e. languages) and performing arts (music, art, theatre, physical education etc.). More than that, each of the eleven faculties have several departments (26 departments in university) running different BA and MA study programs. According to the structure of HE system in Romania, students have to decide from the enrolment the academic study they will undertake, and the study programs are quite fix to a certain department, with very few options for choosing other courses. Therefore, in spite of registering for different study programs, the candidates have to decide, once they were accepted, in less than two weeks, for only one option they will enroll (some can decide to attend two different programs in parallel, but this is more an exception, as requires double effort to aim to get two BA degree in the same time). The number of free places for each specialization is limited; usually the candidates are more than the budgeted places, and then they have the possibility to register for paid academic studies. This is one of the reasons for which

candidates register for different specializations, to increase their chances to get acceptance on a free place, based on their marks from graduating highschool. But even candidates being sure that will get a free place, due to their high marks, register in different parts. The candidates registered with only one option are very few, in spite of knowing that soon they have to quit other options and to decide only for one.

Therefore, we tried to find out how clear they are about their option, what it has influenced their option(s), what was helpful in clarifying for the academic studies to choose, what it was the rationale behind choosing an academic path.

The large majority of respondents (77%) registering at the WUT in summer 2014 were graduating highschool in 2014, and 88% of the candidates were not registered before to another higher education institution.

The data shows the positive fact that 79% of the candidates answering to the questionnaire (n= 855) said that it wasn't difficult to choose which faculty/specialization to attend, as "it is their vocation and since long time ago they have decided to attend that faculty/specialization" (see the figure 1).

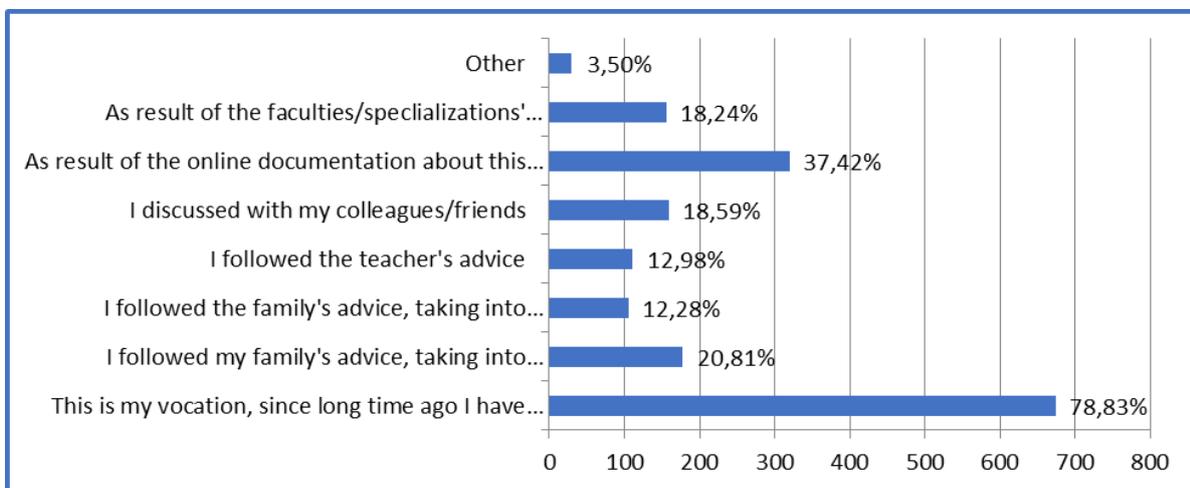


Figure 1. How was chosen a specialization/faculty

In spite of pointing that the respective studies fits to their vocation, still more than half of the respondents (51,64%) took into consideration to register for more than one faculty/specialization, the main reason being "to have a better chance to get a budgeted place", and they will even reconsider the enrolment to a faculty/specialization in direct correlation with admission to a budgeted place. Only 41.4% have registered clearly for only one specialization (see Figure 2):

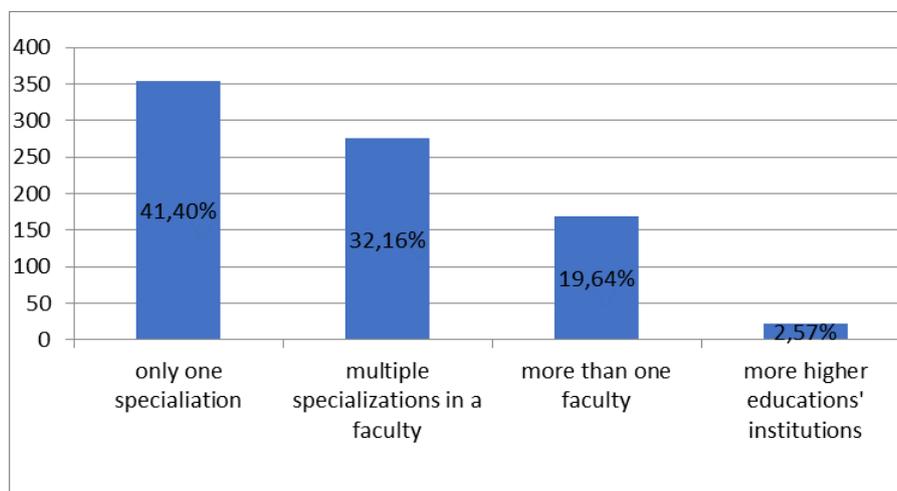


Figure 2. Options of the candidates at registration

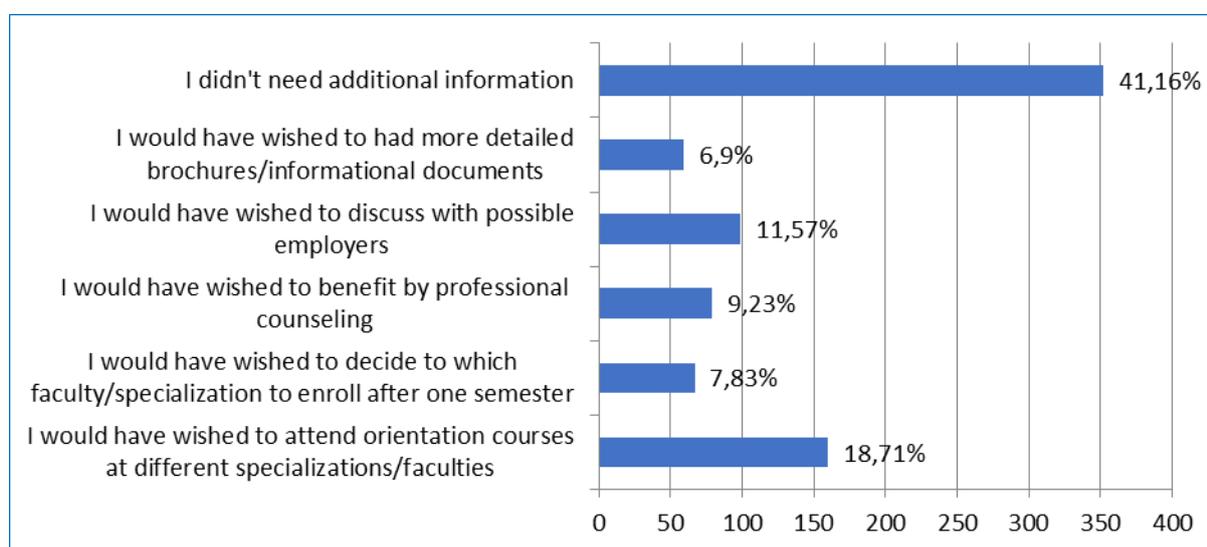
10,68% indicate as reason for multiple choices that they “like both faculties/specializations and I want to attend them in parallel”. In spite of this, the reality shows that most of them decide for only one specialization, as for the second one they have to pay, and the effort is considerable.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned answers, it can be noticed that even for the most career/vocation determined people the decision is still difficult to get.

41,16% of the respondents indicated that they did not need for additional information, being clear with their decision. They correlate with the ones registering for only one specialization, following their clear academic plan. Such applicants can be considered as self-regulated students, as S. Cassidy (2011:963) calls them, able during their studies of independent, self-organized learning.

But the analysis of multivariate correlation between the type of registration, information needed for having a decision and respondents indicating that “it is their vocation” reduces at half the ones being self-regulated consequent applicants.

Therefore, in order to have an easier decision, the respondents needed for counseling and guidance, from various sources, as shown in Figure 3:



**Figure 3** – Additional information needed for a clear option

Such findings highlight the role of counseling activities, as more than 53% of the candidates still admit when they are in the situation to give their option for a certain study career that they would have need for more information and support:

- 27.7% of the students claim more need for different ways of “preliminary” counseling activities
- 26.54% would have like to have a direct contact with the university studies before deciding.

Formally, the possibility to be accepted and enroll to higher education and to decide after first year/semester what studies to choose, is not possible in Romania. So, offering alternatives like „to decide to which faculty/ specialization to enroll after one semester”, or „to attend orientation courses at different specializations/ faculties”, to give their option for, was for the candidates a new proposal. The fact that more than one fourth of the undecided candidates (26.54%) said they would have liked to be able to find out first by experiencing, and “from inside” what it means a certain study path, before finally deciding, highlights the need for more flexible organization of the academic studies, allowing to the students to decide, based on the concrete reality they have experienced, what studies fit best to them.

## 4. Discussions

Practices allowing to students not sure about their option to find out about different alternatives as students, deciding after first year which study to go for, can be found in other systems of higher education (i.e. South Korea, France etc.). The „undecided students” can attend in the first year different courses, to different specializations inside university, collecting the related credits, and from the second year of study they have to stick to the chosen specialization.

The reality showed us that the Romanian students enrolling for two different studies, prefer to pay for the enrolment and the first tranche of the study fee for enrolling to the second faculty (they have to pay for, therefore, according with the regulations allowing only one study for free), going for at least the first semester in parallel with two studies, just to be able to decide which one to continue with. In this way, they are counted as drop out students from one study. The measure for „undecided students”, just described, will allow both reducing costs for the students, and reducing dropout rate.

If such possibility is meant to increase the retention of the students, once they have made their option for one university, the other activities meant to support the prospective students to have more informed decisions are to be signals both for highschools and for the universities about the further activities to be considered. On one hand, the situation is a barometer of the quality of counseling activities performed in highschools. On the other hand, the universities need to enforce the outreach activities, but also to have a closer cooperation with the highschools in this respect, in order to foster at young graduates of pre-university level an easier transition towards higher education.

The data offers preliminary insights about the prospective students, and are in line with conclusions from other complementary surveys regarding the „significant implications for the university’s first year strategy and confirms the importance of giving students better prior training on what will happen at university; expanding the scope of formal and informal peer support programs; offering convenient enrolment services...” (Grebennikov/Shah 2012: 281).

The data underlined once more that the system of higher education is difficult to understand for some of potential candidates, needing therefore sometimes for appropriate assistance and more information, to be able to decide upon a clear academic path that is directly linked with their skills and aptitudes. Actions like the ones suggested can help the candidates/ future students to be more confident with their career and avoiding this way further drop-outs.

## 5. Considerations for institutional policy and practice

The solutions highlighted in this paper, of developing more structured data gathering at the starting of the academic life, and of developing outreach activities and academic counselling services to enable smooth transition from the high-school to university, as measures for improving the retention of the first year students, are in line with data proved by using them in other higher education systems, more orientated towards students, and with more diversified services for them:

“Counseling services are an integral component that strives to acculturate academically and socially the students into the higher education experience. In existing empirical research, counseling services have been associated with the retention and success of students (Astin, 1993; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Summers, 2003; Tinto, 1987, 1990, 2003). Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2002-2003) found that counselors could significantly influence retention by acknowledging and supporting students’ needs. Helping students set clear academic goals, develop educational plans, integrate into the university life, and explore career options and life goals are among the most important services counselors provide for students” (Guzman 2014).

While running them at practice level, the counseling services should also take into consideration developing the self-regulated learning and learning how to learn, enabling students with meta-cognition skills (Cassidy 2011:990f), self-management competences, and developing their motivation and self-confidence, through a holist validation process (Sava, Borca, Danciu 2014:178f). Also, as S. Cassidy points out, “self-regulated learning requires an ‘enabling environment’, including the physical setting, material resources and social interaction and positive support from teachers and peers”, and

“self-regulated learning involves a new role for teachers which focuses on process-orientated teaching, with students actively involved in the learning process” (2011:996). S. Cassidy draws also the attention to the implications at management level, as “implementation requires a ‘whole-school’ approach involving the support of both senior management and teachers... Overall, higher education institutional policy and practice should be enabling, in that they should reflect the need for opportunities to model and practice self-regulated learning for both students and teaching staff” (2011:996).

Therefore, our argument of considering the focus on providing such services in a systematic way at institutional level, as one possible solution for diversified mission of universities towards increased quality, both of teaching and learning process and student support, as well as for setting up better relations with the highschools in the community, to determine informed transitions of pupils to higher education.

The improved quality in teaching and learning cannot be ensured without changes into academic and pedagogical cultures. The (European) curricular reform, and the different instruments to measure its impact at national and organizational level, in HEIs, cannot limit at structures, paper-work and data-bases underpinning institutional curricula (Lindberg-Sand 2012:205), but go beyond figures, supporting the academic staff.

The support to academic staff should include also drawing the awareness about first year student’s difficulties to acculturate to academic life, and enabling the academic staff to act proactively in this respect, mainly if separate academic counselling services are not set up in university. With the mass higher education, and high diversity of students, the gap between the academic support and students’ needs while adapting to the academic requirements is increasing, with the consequence of increased drop out. The high percentage of students dropping out after first year of study requires more dedicated measures, both regarding data gathering for a better understanding of its causes, and at practice level, for ameliorating it. However, the academic staff can hesitate accepting this change in his academic identity, and it can be somehow in contradiction with the management staff, concerned with the budget of the university and the preoccupation of attracting and retaining as many as possible students (see Winter 2009:123-127). Such divergence is to be managed in a constructive way, for the benefit of the students, first of all, but also for the competitive advantage of the university.

The solutions discussed in the second part of the paper were mainly addressing organizational level, as the universities, based on their autonomy and strive for excellence, and improved processes and outcomes, can act on their own, without big (financial) efforts, for introducing the policy measures and tools suggested (from studies and systematic data gathering, till enforced capacity building, setting up structures and services, training of the staff, extending the network and partnerships in the community etc.).

At the national level, the suggested policy measures range from the normative policy tools to be launched (like flexibilizing the academic studies, allowing the students not knowing what studies to attend, to postpone their decision after the first year of study, as described), till improving the data gathering (see also UEFISCIDI 2013), or using even coercitive tools related to the student drop out. Possible tools can be also the financial incentives, performance standards, contractual relationships, strong quality assurance and quality management regimes, strong quality evaluation, improving HE information systems, national information management, regular empirical research, for a better evidence-based decision-making and monitoring (Orasanu et al 2014:33), etc. At the public policy making level, the whole policy circle is to be considered for a systematic action, introducing therefore measures meant to support an evidence based policy formulation, but also to evaluate the impact of the measures adopted, once they have been implemented and monitored, based on a coherent action plan.

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