

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN STUDENTS ADAPTING TO THE ACADEMIC LIFE

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Abstract: *In this article we describe the results obtained in an activity of evaluation of a personal development program addressed to students in the first year of study. It was carried out within a project financed by the Scholarship Scheme for Universities, concluded between the Ministry of National Education through the Management Unit of Externally Funded Projects and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Energy and Applied Informatics, “Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University of Iasi. The specific objectives of the project pursued three intervention components: motivation (M), networking (R) and workload (V). These have been directly correlated with other identified aspects (individual failure, academic failure) that lead to school dropouts and low academic performance. In order to achieve the objectives, the project presented a proposed activity plan for a target group of 80 students for one year of implementation). The activities proposed within the project represent punctual educational interventions on the factors that influence school dropout and academic performance.*

The evaluated program, the results of which we present here, was subordinated to the objectives related to the motivation of the students and their relationship skills and pursued personal development through creativity and socio-emotional education in students. This dimension of the programme was chosen because a major need existing on the labour market is the need to educate young people to have the attitude of a winner and to find solutions to problems. The behavioural acquisitions of the students, within the personal development programme through creativity and social-emotional education were: flexible, generative thinking in solving problems; acquiring coping strategies; optimisation of personal and academic life.

Keywords: *personal development, motivation, relationship, social abilities, creativity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Transition, defined as the ability to "navigate" through the change that takes place in the transition from one educational cycle to another, from one way of learning to another [1] is a constant concern to analyse and develop proactive strategies to facilitate the adaptation process of students. The first year of university involves major changes in the lives of young people, both socially and in ways to learn, to interact with teachers. This period of transition from high school to faculty can be overwhelming, demanding for students, both personally (leaving the family, managing the personal budget), academic (the transition from organised, guided activity, to independent taking of notes, teamwork, time management, individual study), social (new colleagues / friends, a new locality for some of them, the adaptive cultural shock being even greater for students coming from rural areas, from families where their parents do not have higher education) [2, 3, 4].

First-year students need to feel that they are part of a supportive learning community, that they are valued, requiring qualitative interactions with academic staff and colleagues, outside of classes / seminars, to compensate for the alienation and anonymity of lectures in large amphitheatres [5, 6] in which students participate in most courses, bringing together several groups of students. The personal development programme developed is an approach made at the beginning of academic life to help integrate and adapt students and proactive support to propel them to employment in the academic process, performance, motivation and ability to meet academic requirements. Studies call this transition process to be carried out systematically from a curricular point of view as "transition pedagogy" [7], which covers both information and academic aspects, content, but also activities that facilitate socialisation, integration into student life.

The activity we carried out is part of the project "The future is electric! / STARTing" funded by the Scholarship Scheme for Universities, the Secondary Education Project (ROSE), concluded between the Ministry of National Education through the Externally Funded Project Management Unit and Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Energy and Applied Informatics, "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iasi.

2. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-MANAGEMENT THROUGH CREATIVITY

This educational programme that we have developed provides, on this continuum from schooling to adulthood, concrete solutions to stimulate creative social adaptation and emotional development to generate social affirmation behaviours. It is a positive mental and social health programme that stimulates social interaction and personal expression, develops creative techniques and strategies for problem solving, strengthens high self-esteem and unconditional self-acceptance, aims to form a vocabulary of emotions, identifying the intensity of emotions, applying techniques for constructive capitalisation of emotions. The behavioural acquisitions of the students, within the personal development programme through creativity and socio-emotional education are:

- developing flexible, generative thinking skills in problem solving;
- better understanding of emotions and assimilation of their management techniques;
- the formation of a healthy conception of oneself and others, as well as the development of self-interest and social relations;
- acquiring coping strategies that will help them cope with emotional stress and educational challenges;
- release from the feeling of anxiety that appears with one's own negative evaluation or in moments when they face a difficulty;
- increasing overall satisfaction with life and improving academic performance;
- students practised how to help themselves cope with life more effectively.

The general objective of the personal development programme was the creative training of personal development skills and competencies and self-management skills. The specific objectives followed: the assimilation by the participants of the norms and working principles specific to a creative training group and the consolidation of skills in such a group; mastering by students the working methods specific to the creative group of training and personal development; training the skills and competencies of creative self-development; training students in the use of creative skills in the self-management process.

The exercises and techniques applied took into account the characteristics of the students and the specific problems that may arise at this level of development. Clear objectives have been set for each counselling session, the specific content targeting certain concepts, followed by exercises to apply these contents, exercises that offer the possibility to express the aptitude potential. The programme aimed at developing creative skills and effective emotional and social adaptation, achieving wellbeing – social, emotional and behavioural. In the application of the programme for the development of creative and socio-emotional skills we used the Brancusi model of personal development promoted by Mariana Caluschi [8].

The personal development program focused on developing communication skills, self-affirmation, emotional expression and increasing self-esteem. This programme is based on the development and activation of creative potential that provides the training of flexible problem-solving skills, increases empathic capacity and increases self-esteem. This programme was adapted by each trainer / counsellor who chose the appropriate elements in accordance with the topics proposed to the students and implicitly with their needs. The work topics communicated to the students were: Learning Techniques Seminar; Self-management workshop; Personal Marketing Workshop; Workshop Communication and management of emotions; Workshop on psychological and emotional processing of negative experiences; Responsibility for the choices made; Theatre workshop; Feedback and metacognition workshop; Seminar Building career in the virtual space; Assertive communication seminar.

3. PROCEDURE OF CARRYING OUT THE RESEARCH

We developed a research structured in three stages: initial evaluation of students; application of the educational programme that responds to the needs identified in stage 1 of evaluation; final evaluation of students.

We made an experimental design in which the group was compared with itself, in the initial and final stage of research. The questionnaires were applied to the respondents in two variants: face to face and online, depending on how the pandemic context evolved. The questionnaires were applied between November-December 2020 and June-July 2021. All 80 students from the target group were invited to participate in the initial assessment activity. Out of these, a number of 60 students completed it.

The participation criteria for the members of the target group of the project were two-dimensional and aimed at: the quality of students registered in the target group of the project; their willingness to participate in the activity of completing the proposed questionnaires. The students were informed about the usefulness and finality of the study, the participation agreement was requested and the confidentiality of the answers was ensured. The questionnaires applied in the face-to-face variant were applied during two hours, respecting the following order of completion, after being previously explained how to fill in the forms: Self-assessment questionnaire; Rosenberg scale (self-esteem assessment). The questionnaires applied in the online version were completed by each respondent in their own work rhythm, following the participation in an online counselling session where they were informed about the purpose of the study, they were asked to agree to participate, they were explained that the data provided by them is confidential (in terms of personal identity information), they were explained how to complete it and were provided with clarifications when requested.

The self-assessment questionnaire is a self-constructed questionnaire that assesses students' communication peculiarities and their training / development needs. The first scale of the questionnaire allows self-assessment of students' communication skills, their attitude towards conflict resolution, their assertive skills, perception of group membership and self-esteem. On a scale of 1 to 5 students can give values to behaviours expressed in 12 items that refer to ease of communication and expression of personal ideas, giving and asking for help, attitude to problems and the extent of involvement in solving them, attitude towards self-assessment and self-confidence, self-assertion, emotions of tension, anxiety, stress in the face generated by the need to adapt to academic life. Other items of the questionnaire assess the following dimensions: How they feel in relation to the specific activities of student life (schedule, projects, learning, work pace, etc.); What skills do they think they would need to develop in order to be successful in terms of student activities?; To what extent do they think about objectives, future projects, professional plans and if they put these thoughts into action?

Another scale investigates the training needs of students, allowing them to self-assess the extent to which they would need to develop skills to ensure their personal development and social affirmation. The need to develop the following skills / dimensions was assessed: creativity, expression of emotions, learning style, self-confidence, courage to assert oneself, independence, conscientiousness, personal efficiency.

4. RESULTS OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

We find that the dimensions related to *communication, the willingness to engage in a discussion but also the attitude to recognise when they need help* are developed at a higher level. Significant differences from the initial test situation indicate the development of these dimensions. We find a high value in *the ability to offer help to others when you ask*.

Another concrete result obtained through the activity of personal development was the development of *assertive communication*. This involves open expression of ideas, personal thoughts, assertion of one's own point of view, taking responsibility for one's own actions, empathic involvement in relationships and self-help. The exercises, debates, assignments that took place during the counselling program determined the development of this competence in students. The size of the aid was developed and initially, what was new was the orientation of this availability towards empathic communication and the training of empathic self-affirmation. The students learned how to use this resource they had, to help others, the willingness to support, in self-affirmation, in putting limits in a constructive way. They have increased their ability to support their point of view even in conditions of opposition and the audacity to admit when they are wrong, without feeling that their self-esteem is eroded. We find that, compared to the initial situation, the capacity to ask for help has increased, which shows us that during the first year of studies students had the opportunity to validate their power of action and decision, so that asking for help is no longer a proof of helplessness but an ability to establish relationships that will help them assert themselves and achieve goals. Their self-perceived ability to solve the problems they face has also increased. This shows that they have moved from the perception of a new environment, which they cannot control, to the perception of their ability to find solutions and adapt to requirements. Also, students became more tolerant of diversity and different points of view, correlating with their increased ability to assert their own point of view.

The exercises they carried out during the activities had a strong collaborative character and stimulated the team work skills. Even for the online development, work teams, role play, activities carried out on the Jamboard interactive whiteboard were proposed, correlated with the students' determination to present tasks solved and presented individually in front of the group, which determined their better integration in the teams they were part of, but also the courage to assert themselves in new work contexts.

From the data obtained regarding these dimensions it can be concluded that the training of socio-emotional skills, as well as the successful integration of students in collaborative learning actions at the faculty have led to increased self-confidence and validation of their belief system. This is a very important aspect of student life and becoming a professional. At the beginning of the faculty, the students' interest is to be accepted in the group, to find similarities and to reduce the differences that could generate their exclusion from the group. It is observed that, with their participation in the group and due to the mutual recognition, there is a shift of interest towards differentiation and individual expression through the particularities that characterise each one. Thus, they become less sensitive to the evaluations of others and rely more on their own judgment and self-evaluation. The opinions of others have indicative value, it helps them to strengthen their self-image, but it is no longer decisive for them to agree with others, they can afford to express different perspectives. Exercises for expressing and recognising emotions help students to accept diversity and normalise their emotions, so they learn that different emotions are natural, that negative emotions also have their role, that they all go through different moments of mistrust or doubt, which leads to a decrease in tension and stress. Although the involvement in university activities increased during the year, the state of straining and tension of students decreased due to the fact that they became more familiar with the requirements of academic life, were put in situations to validate their skills, gained confidence through mutual knowledge and mutual support.

The fear of the future is, at a medium level, what may be related to the fact that students want to intensify their specialised practice and collaborate with companies that will strengthen their confidence that they will find a job easier. However, the fact that the state of anxiety about the future is at an average level shows an improvement in their ability to adapt, especially since these students worked in the conditions of the online school generated by the Covid 19 pandemic, which added elements of worry, fear and distrust in the future.

It was found that people with creative potential use their resources more time being involved in activities aimed at their training, than those who are not so creative. Also, an ideal environment for them is the accumulation of experiences as diverse as possible over time. Thus, it becomes very important for students to know the importance of involvement in as many experiences as possible - an opportunity provided by the activities proposed by the project. It is possible that some of the teaching methods that professors use in teaching-learning assessment, as well as the working methods within the project have developed students' abilities to generate multiple problem-solving ideas, the ability to adapt flexibly to new requirements, to generate new ideas to improve existing systems, to express themselves originally. Moreover, the learning experiences they went through led to the identification of strategies to make the effort more efficient and the students learned about their own personality traits and about the sensory peculiarities of their learning style.

In terms of expressing emotions, we find that it is a developing skill. Emotional intelligence develops over time and involves a period of practising the recognition and management of one's emotions, so that later the individual is able to intervene in mediating interpersonal conflicts and in the strategic use of emotionality to create collaboration and professional success. So far, students have improved their relationship with their own emotions, by increasing acceptance of emotional diversity, recognition and expression of emotions, and even mastering techniques to reduce disruptive emotions and generate wellbeing.

Self-confidence has increased considerably, and we believe that consistent exposure to problem-solving situations, coming to the foreground and self-assertion, confirmation from professors about the knowledge and skills acquired, involvement in team activities have led to this result. Also, some of the students' expectations regarding student life were met, remedial activities were made available to them, as well as other recreational activities that would open new perspectives for understanding the field. The project activities provided a contribution in self-knowledge, in the valorisation of one's own aptitude potential and in the abilities of relationship, decision making, problem solving.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the results obtained in this stage of final evaluation of the personal development programme of the investigated students we can see several dimensions that have been considerably optimised at the end of the first year of activity compared to the beginning period.

The acquisition of an important component targeted was achieved by the personal development activity - assertive communication.

This involves open expression of ideas, personal thoughts, asserting one's own point of view, taking responsibility for one's own actions, empathic involvement in relationships and helping each other. The exercises, debates, role-plays that took place during the activities determined the development of this competence in students. They have increased their ability to support their point of view even in conditions of opposition and the audacity to admit when they are wrong, without feeling that their self-esteem is affected.

Compared to the initial situation, the ability to ask for help has increased.

Their self-perceived ability to solve the problems they face has also increased. This shows that they have gone from the perception of a new environment, which they cannot control, to the perception of their ability to find solutions and adapt to requirements. It is observed that, with their participation in the group and due to the mutual recognition, there is a shift of interest towards differentiation and individual expression through the particularities that characterise each one.

40% of students feel comfortable and confident with the specific activities of student life, and 22.6% feel indifferent. □

If we understand this last percentage as being represented by intermediate level students, who do not aim at academic performance, but have personal goals, which are rather related to obtaining the diploma and fulfilling strictly professional objectives, then we could consider that they do not present risk of school dropout. A percentage of 37% of the investigated students are tense and overwhelmed by learning activities. We could conclude that academic learning is a dimension of student life, but it is not the only one that can provide confidence or tension. The state of tension and anxiety is average for the investigated group, which entitles us to say that the relational dimension and personal development alleviate the discomfort created by learning difficulties.

Over 60% of the investigated students think about objectives, future projects and put these thoughts into action.

Student activities are, in fact, concrete actions that bring them closer to the goal of vocational training. But some of the students are also interested in developing transversal skills and participate in various extracurricular activities for their training. We can also see that there is no student who has stated that he never embodies thoughts about the future in present actions, which means that everyone can find the right motivation to be stimulated in taking steps that bring him closer to the professional goal.

Expressing emotions is a developing skill.

Emotional intelligence develops over time and involves a period of practising the recognition and management of one's emotions, so that later, the individual is able to intervene in mediating interpersonal conflicts and in the strategic use of emotionality for greater collaboration and professional success. So far, students have improved their relationship with their own emotions, by increasing acceptance of emotional diversity, recognition and expression of emotions, and even mastering techniques to reduce disruptive emotions and generate wellbeing.

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The courage of personal affirmation increased due to the fact that students experienced different situations in which they expressed their point of view, participated in group activities in which they were accepted and validated.

Independence is an acquisition that most students acquire because they manage their own learning process and all faculty-related activities, as well as the fact that they manage their time, budget, relationships, physical space, most of them coming to university in a locality different from their hometown. Although some of the school activities did not take place in the university spaces due to the pandemic, however, the students kept the coordinates of their independent behaviour.

Conscientiousness and personal efficiency have increased due to experiences that have confirmed that they are doing well and that their effort matters. They have certainly mastered learning techniques, time management, asking for help and collaborating, managing their goals, dosing their efforts according to the difficulty and complexity of the requirements.

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