# Preserving and Increasing Students' Motivation - A Case Study

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## Abstract

*The present paper aims to investigate students' motivation to continue learning as well as their perception on the support provided by their professors during a period of online courses. The questionnaires where developed and the data used was collected from the first-year students of "Ovidius" University of Constanta, the Faculty of Economic Studies. Various cross-disciplinary theories explain that students learning occurs only when properly motivated, especially in a period when social and environmental challenges impact on academic structure. Therefore, we decided to investigate up to what extent this vital component of the learning process was challenged. The questionnaire investigated the problem of motivation for the first-year students to continue their studies and the circumstances which could encourage them to continue their effort. We paid particular attention to the social component, as well as to the special social connections they perceive, or they manage to develop during this period.*

**Key words:** intrinsic motivation, social component, digital learning, academic system
**J.E.L. classification:** Z 13

## 1. Introduction

The study was issued from a desire to offer an insight into a period of complex and unique challenges which determined the educational systems all around the world to adapt and adopt several unprecedented changes, among which the online system of teaching as a desperate solution for creating a continuity for the academic learning system. I consider this solution as being particularly challenging for the first-year students, as they did not have the opportunity to meet each other in real life before or to experience in most cases the traditional education system of a university. In their specific case, despite their initial expectations, the academic life started online, and it is particularly interesting to discover what happens behind the screens and how they perceive this new reality they have been confronted with. At the same time, we consider interesting to draw a parallel between a previous case study we carried out in April 2019 and see how the answers to some of these questions changed from one generation to another and from one period to another.

## 2. Theoretical background

Why motivation? Well, we are all aware that behind the learning process lies motivation. It initiates the internal "procedure", it "makes things happen" and "it nourishes our entire internal mechanisms". Diverse motivational constructs study the connection between cognitive abilities and students' academic achievement showing that motivational factors push academic results beyond the borders of pure intelligence. To a larger extent, learning goals, specific motives and task values more than performance factors can predict better results. Several key instances determine the existence and the type of motivation developed in students: student, educator, content, method process and environment. During the learning experience, the exposure of students to an as large as possible number of variables determines an optimum level of motivation, in response to the increasing diversity of the learning styles, cultural backgrounds and individual various experiences displayed by our students. Educators go beyond their traditional role of providers of knowledge and become creators of accessible environments, in their desire to facilitate students to learn as much as

possible. The use of a comprehensive, long range educational plan and the visualization of their future professional development would contribute to increase their self-confidence as well as their interest in education. They will be less inclined to abandon when they encounter difficulties. The transition process between education /school to career/work will be more fluent and less disruptive and their chances to adapt will increase.

Students are the key factors in any educational process, they are the "raw materials" and at the same time "key members of the labor force involved in creating education" (Lengnick-Hall and Sanders, 1997, p. 1335) and their motivation is determined by several factors which are generally grouped under two headings- intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivational factors are tightly connected to internal rewards and it "is important for task persistence seeing a project through and ensuring exploration of solutions" (S.W. Russ, 2011, p. 433). Intrinsic motivation goes hand in hand with a positive affect and a state of well-being. In the case of students, intrinsic motivational factors at work include curiosity (as a desire to discover more relevant information about their interests), social interaction with the academic environment, being challenged by the topics introduced to them and involvement. Intrinsic motivation is tightly connected to two psychological needs the need for autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan, 1985, p. 35). Extrinsic motivational factors include competition, (compliance to the rules requirements etc.), recognition (from the group), as well as work avoidance (providing the exact amount of work necessary). As expected, externally motivated students present a greater risk to lower quality performance than those who are intrinsically motivated.

The concept of *deep learning* - deep approach, as discussed by Beekes (2006, p. 27), Fullan and Langworhty (2013, 2014, p. 33) and Pauline (2013, p. 2), in which the student engages profoundly in the process of learning, is tightly connected to students' intrinsic motivation. It is derived from students' interest in the process of learning. This concept stipulates the ideal situation of a more independent and self-regulated student who is actively involved and actively seeking which skills and abilities to develop, who is committed and even passionate to study. At the beginning of studies, however, the typical profile of a student would rather be closer to an adaptive or interested profile, in need of more support and guidance.

Individual and social factors have a considerable impact on students' academic motivation. In this respect the probability of finding a suitable job after graduation, expectations about the future, all increase or decrease the willingness to engage in a learning process. Students' state of wellbeing or life satisfaction, the meaningfulness of life, their mood, as well as their health, financial security and social contact need to be put in a direct relationship with their intrinsic motivation. Beyond the quality of teaching, students' satisfaction is determined by the capacity of educators to show compassion understanding and support for the personal difficulties encountered by their students when these surface in the process of education.

## 3. Research methodology

The present study has as starting point a micro-level analysis of the social and psychological factors involved in preserving and increasing our students' motivation to pursue their studies, this provides useful information in designing a certain direction on the orientation, the methods and of the curricula used. At the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, I conducted the present survey on a number of 86 students enrolled in the 1st year at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, at "Ovidius" University of Constanța. The average age of the respondents is around 18 years and the structure and size of the groups involved is similar.

The survey contained 23 questions dedicated to the challenges encountered in the use of the virtual instruments and platforms dedicated to the courses, the relationships established with the other students and the professors. The ability to set social connections the risks and the fears students predict for their academic education as being associated to this online period. Respondents were also offered the possibility to suggest adjustments to be brought to the present e-learning online system. The survey contains closed-ended questions and opened-ended questions. The answers are anonymous and students were offered the possibility to avoid answering uncomfortable questions in the survey. The average time to answer the survey was 11:14 minutes.

## 4. Findings

When asked about the biggest challenge they have been confronted with during the past few weeks the students were biased to choose between access, inclusion or connectivity (20) and distractions and competing priorities (21). In my previous study – "Teaching and Learning on the Edge of a Pandemic: Providing Continuity and Re-building an Online Learning Community" (2020, p. 254), I noticed that the same challenges of access, inclusion or connectivity and distractions and competing priorities were also top-rated, considering the efforts made to increase the digitalization of the systems all around the world, this issue is quite surprising and it proves that the efforts made are, at least until now, insufficient to provide a proper continuity of the educational system.

As we all know, 2020 proved to be a period dominated by many social turmoil and fears, the biggest fear the respondents selected from the possible answers to the question what has been bothering you during this period of online courses, surprisingly, only one answer was "fear of sickness", the other overwhelming number of answers were given to: "fear of exam failure" (54) and "fear of inadaptation to the system" (19). "Other fears" registered 11 answers. Given the fact that the respondents are first-year students we consider their answers as a sign of normality under the present circumstances, as it is obvious that students overcame their socially inoculated fears and are rather focused on learning and accumulating proper knowledge than on external disruptive factors.

Undoubtedly, even if our social life was radically transformed and social connections are also modified and reduced to online communication, social connection during online teaching still plays an important role especially in the case of students who have never had the chance to meet each other or to meet their educators in real life. 56% of the respondents chose "yes" when asked if they felt any social connection during online teaching.

As illustrated below, when asked about being offered the necessary support they needed during online courses, students' answers varied from "sometimes" (36) to "no, never" (4).

*Figure no. 2. Students' perception on the support offered*



| | |
|---|---|
| *no, never* | *4* |
| *seldom* | *9* |
| *sometimes* | *36* |
| *usually* | *22* |
| *yes, always* | *14* |
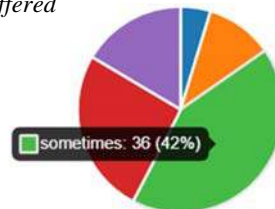
*Source:* Generated on Microsoft forms, based on students' responses

When asked about whether they continue to feel motivated to continue their studies, 41 students chose "motivated" and 9 "very motivated" while 17 chose "less motivated" and 3 "unmotivated". To the following question "What could motivate you better? Please name or describe a factor which could be a strong motivation for you"- the answers were very varied ranging from "Going to school instead of attending online classes", "attending the classes in person", "I felt more motivated with hybrid type of classes", " experiencing the university life, not on-line", to more distant projections of their future career as "in the thought about what I will become after graduating this school", " my purpose in life is to become one of the best professionals" or "to think about my future". Other answers are focused on "face to face communication", "more dialogue, more communication", as well as "teacher support" or "better socialization with colleagues and professors", "knowing that the work I'm doing makes difference in some way". 57 of the respondents acknowledged the existence of an online learning community in the courses they attended, while 25 denied the existence of this community.

In their answers to the question concerning a better motivation to pursue their studies, some of the answers indicated the lack of time to prepare or the number of assignments as being a demotivating factor. These answers can be put in a direct relationship to the question concerning the amount of time necessary to prepare their daily tasks, where most students- 39, indicated two to

three hours as the average, while 26 of them chose four to five hours. This would amount to a number of hours varying from 10 to 25 hours of independent study per week. While 17 students opted for six hours or more.

*Figure no. 2. The number of hours of independent study per day*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 hour | 3 |
| 2-3 hours | 39 |
| 4-5 hours | 26 |
| 6 hours | 17 |
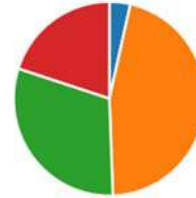
*Source:* Generated on Microsoft forms, based on students' responses

In order to investigate students' perception on the relationship with their professors they were asked to indicate if they felt encouraged during online classes by the attitude of a professor, 66 of them opted for "Yes", while 18 opted for "No". This answer can be coupled with the options expressed to another question "How would you describe the relationship with your professors?" In this case 14 opted for "Excellent" and 50 for "Good", while 5 for "Poor" and 2 for "Very poor". Considering the above expressed answers, we may conclude that the perception on the relationship student-professor is positive and that the efforts made by professors to reach their students were appreciated and efficient, undoubtedly the human component of the learning process was present.

Student satisfaction is a further section of our investigation dedicated to the perception students have of doing important things at school in this case 48 of them said "Yes". When asked about the necessary support they needed during online courses students' answers varied from "sometimes" - 36, to "no, never"- 4. Students' desire to feel involved, working groups, belong to a specific group and to learn from each other is validated by their choices when asked about the improvement which can be brought to academic courses, 51 selected "more group work", 18 opted for "more one-to-one activities". The feeling of accomplishment which should be felt by the participants to any course is shared in the case of the online courses by 39 students while 46 denied having experienced this feeling. Considering the role played by accomplishment in the overall motivational process of learning this is quite worrying, and adjustments need to be made.

## 5. Conclusions

The digital world as it is experienced by learners worldwide nowadays is less generous in terms of social interaction and real-life learning techniques. Although alluring and offering numerous options to connect to each other, as well as a considerable amount of easiness of access, it limits the social dimension of the human component. It is beyond any doubt that a well balanced and a carefully crafted structure of the online resources can encourage interaction, collaboration, motivation and autonomy in the case of academic learning. The study load component should also be attentively observed as, in the case of social distancing, educators are most often tempted to increase the amount of assignments, following the idea that "more is better" or considering that students have more time to dedicate to study. The use of digital technology in academic education represents a very useful tool offering an ideal testing ground for innovating educational methods. However, education is deeply rooted on a social ground and built by social interacting factors, therefore, any educational digital tool needs to be based on a complex of social cultural forces in order to motivate students and create the desired state of comfort while learning. Students' academic performances as well as their motivation to continue their studies go hand in hand with the social relationships they are able to develop with the academic environment.

Getting students involved in digital solutions for the courses ensures students' engagement and enthusiasm at all times. Digital skills will "push" them to question the nature of their own learning and motivate them to get involved and voice their opinions in a more "permissive" environment. A further step will be provided by adaptive technologies which promise to prevent students from feeling discouraged or bored as they sometimes feel in a one-size-fits-all traditional approach. On the one hand students are eager to receive personalized feedback on the basis of their performance,

on the other hand a re-personalizing process of education in which professors are provided long term data on students' performance, in which students are placed in a broader context and seen along their continuous learning process, is needed. During this period of online education both students and professors were taken out of their real-life context and pushed into an area none of them was prepared for. As a result, frustration and demotivation occurred on both sides, while numerous complaints on feeling disrupted or confused or even lost can be heard from behind the screens. Technology based teaching and learning are a reality of our days and the improvement of learning outcomes and learner satisfaction are a permanent concern for their educators.

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