



Risk factors and coping options in preventing university dropout - An institutional screening tool supporting first-year student success

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ABSTRACT

The transition to higher education represents a critical developmental period for students and is frequently associated with academic, psychological, and social challenges. Within the growing body of First-Year Experience research, increasing attention has been devoted to early identification of factors that may contribute to student disengagement and dropout. This paper introduces the conceptual development and institutional application of a multidimensional screening tool designed to support the early recognition of potential dropout risk factors among university students.

The instrument was developed at the University of Szeged as part of a broader institutional strategy to strengthen student wellbeing, academic engagement, and retention. Rather than presenting empirical results from student responses, this 'On the Horizon' article focuses on the design rationale, theoretical foundations, and practical implementation of the questionnaire within a university support environment. The tool is intended to promote structured self-reflection among students while simultaneously assisting institutional support services in identifying areas where targeted interventions may be beneficial.

The article outlines the conceptual framework underlying the questionnaire, the thematic domains it addresses, and the mechanisms through which students receive guidance and support following completion of the survey. Particular attention is given to the integration of the instrument into institutional support structures, including counselling services, mentoring programs, and learning support initiatives.

By presenting the development and institutional application of this screening tool, the paper contributes to the broader conversation on proactive, data-informed approaches to supporting first-year student success in higher education.

Keywords: first-year experience, student retention, student wellbeing, early intervention, higher education support

Introduction

Student dropout in higher education remains a persistent challenge internationally. A considerable body of research has demonstrated that the first year of university study is particularly critical in shaping students' academic persistence and overall educational trajectory (Lukacs – Sebő, 2015; Józsa, 2019). Difficulties experienced during this period may significantly influence students' decisions to remain in or leave higher education.

The transition from secondary education to university represents a major shift in learning expectations, institutional structures, and personal responsibility. Newly admitted students often encounter an unfamiliar academic environment in which they are expected to manage their own learning processes, navigate

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administrative systems, and establish new social networks. For many students, this transition also involves relocation, increased financial pressure, and a reduced level of direct guidance from teachers compared to their previous educational experiences (Blair, 2017).

Research within the First Year Experience (FYE) literature highlights that academic integration, social belonging, and psychological wellbeing are among the most important determinants of student persistence. Tinto's influential theory of student departure emphasizes the importance of both academic and social integration within the institutional environment. When students experience difficulties in either domain, their commitment to the institution may weaken, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal (Tinto, 1993).

More recent work has expanded this perspective by highlighting the importance of institutional practices that actively support student transition. Transition pedagogy frameworks emphasize the responsibility of universities to create supportive learning environments that foster engagement, belonging, and academic confidence during the first year of study.

Within this context, universities are increasingly exploring the use of early-identification tools designed to help detect potential challenges faced by students during the transition into higher education. Such tools can support institutions in designing targeted interventions that promote student success and wellbeing.

First-Year Experience and student retention

The First Year Experience research tradition has consistently emphasized the complexity of the transition into higher education. Student persistence is shaped by a wide range of interacting academic, social, and personal factors. Studies have shown that early experiences within the university environment strongly influence long-term academic outcomes (Blair, 2017).

Several scholars have emphasized the importance of institutional engagement strategies. Kuh's concept of high-impact educational practices highlights the value of structured learning environments, supportive peer networks, and opportunities for active engagement in academic communities (Kuh, 2008). Similarly, Thomas has emphasized the central role of belonging in supporting student persistence (Thomas, .

The literature also highlights the importance of psychological wellbeing in shaping students' academic trajectories. Stress management, academic self-confidence, and perceived social support are frequently identified as key factors influencing students' ability to successfully navigate the transition into higher education (Tessényi, 2024).

In response to these challenges, many universities have begun to implement early-warning systems, student wellbeing surveys, and other diagnostic tools aimed at identifying potential areas of difficulty among students. These initiatives reflect a broader shift from reactive approaches to student support toward more proactive and preventive institutional strategies (Sandoval-Palis et al., 2020).

Development of the screening tool

The screening instrument presented in this article was developed within the institutional context of the University of Szeged as part of a broader effort to strengthen student support systems. The development process was informed by both theoretical insights from the First Year Experience literature and practical experiences within student counselling and academic support services (Lukacs – Sebő, 2015; Tessényi, 2024.).

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The primary objective of the tool is to encourage structured self-reflection among students while simultaneously providing universities with insights into the types of challenges commonly encountered during the first year of study. Rather than functioning as a diagnostic instrument, the questionnaire is designed to support early awareness and facilitate access to appropriate institutional resources.

The development process involved identifying key domains that frequently emerge in research on student persistence and wellbeing. These domains were translated into questionnaire items that invite students to reflect on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to university life.

Special attention was given to ensuring that the instrument would be accessible to students from diverse academic disciplines. The wording of the items emphasizes clarity and self-reflection, allowing students to meaningfully engage with the questionnaire regardless of their field of study.

Structure of the instrument

The screening tool is organized around several thematic domains that reflect the multidimensional nature of the student experience. These domains capture aspects of academic engagement, psychological wellbeing, and social integration within the university environment.

Among the central themes addressed by the questionnaire are academic motivation, perceived academic competence, stress management, social relationships within the university community, and access to institutional information. Additional domains focus on students' perceptions of their chosen field of study, their expectations regarding future career opportunities, and their ability to manage academic responsibilities.

The questionnaire invites students to respond to a series of statements reflecting everyday experiences within university life. Through this process, students are encouraged to reflect on their own strengths, challenges, and support needs. This reflective dimension is an important feature of the instrument, as it supports students in developing greater awareness of their own learning processes and wellbeing.

Importantly, the instrument is designed to function as a supportive rather than evaluative tool. Students receive feedback that highlights available institutional services and encourages them to seek support when necessary.

Institutional application

Within the institutional context, the screening tool functions as part of a broader ecosystem of student support services. Students are invited to complete the questionnaire voluntarily during their university studies, typically within the early stages of their academic journey.

Following completion of the questionnaire, students receive feedback designed to support reflection and guide them toward relevant support resources. These may include counselling services, academic skills workshops, peer mentoring programs, or other institutional initiatives designed to support student wellbeing and academic success.

From an institutional perspective, the tool contributes to a broader understanding of the types of challenges commonly experienced by students. Such insights can support universities in designing targeted interventions that strengthen student engagement, improve academic support services, and foster a

stronger sense of belonging within the university community (Sandoval-Palis et al., 2020; Kisalfold.hu, 2018).

Challenges and ethical considerations

The implementation of student screening tools within higher education institutions raises important ethical considerations. Participation must remain voluntary, and institutions must ensure that students clearly understand the purpose of the instrument and the way in which their responses may be used.

The present article focuses on the conceptual development and institutional application of the screening tool rather than the analysis of student responses. Any future research involving the analysis of student data will require appropriate ethical approval and adherence to relevant data protection regulations.

Ensuring transparency, protecting student privacy, and maintaining trust between students and institutions are essential elements in the responsible use of such tools.

Future directions

Future research will explore the potential of the screening tool to contribute to broader student success initiatives. With appropriate ethical approval, further studies may examine how the instrument can support early identification of student challenges and how it can be integrated into institutional retention strategies.

In addition, the adaptability of the instrument across different institutional contexts will be explored.

Collaboration with other universities may provide opportunities to refine the tool and contribute to the growing body of international research on the First Year Experience.

Conclusion

The transition into higher education represents a critical period in students' academic journeys. Universities therefore face the challenge of creating supportive environments that foster engagement, wellbeing, and academic persistence.

The screening tool presented in this article represents one possible approach to addressing these challenges. By encouraging structured self-reflection and connecting students with institutional support resources, such instruments may contribute to more proactive approaches to student success.

Although the present paper focuses on the conceptual development and institutional application of the tool, future research may further explore its potential contribution to student retention initiatives. Through continued development and responsible implementation, such approaches may play an important role in supporting students during their transition into university life.

Biographies

Judit Tessényi, PhD is Acting Expert Director, Student Counseling Center, University of Szeged. Her background is in Economics (Budapest University of Economics, 1991); MBA (University of Szeged); PhD (2014) and her research interests are the social aspects of gambling and behavioral addictions; corporate social responsibility; mental activity and leisure in aging; and early intervention and prevention programs in

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higher education. Representative work includes numerous publications on student well-being, dropout prevention, and related topics.

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