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Varadinum Summer School: Between perception and motivation

Grigore Vasile HERMAN¹, Mihai ŞANDRA², Anca POP², Mihai ILLE², Dana CRISTEA², Luminiţa FILIMON¹, Claudiu FILIMON¹, Gheorghe Codruţ BULZ², Ricardo MARTINS³, Tudor CACIORA¹, Anca Maria SABĂU^{2*}

1. Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning, Faculty of Geography, Tourism and Sport, University of Oradea, 1 Universităţii St., 410087 Oradea, Romania, e-mail: gherman@uoradea.ro, lfilimon@uoradea.ro, cfilimon@uoradea.ro, tudor.caciora@yahoo.com
2. Department of Physical Education, Sports and Physiotherapy, Faculty of Geography, Tourism and Sport, University of Oradea, 1 Universităţii Street, 410087 Oradea, Romania, e-mail: mihaisandra98@yahoo.com, popancacristina@yahoo.com, illemihai@uoradea.ro, danacristea07@yahoo.com, bulz.codrut@gmail.com, sabauancamaria@yahoo.com
3. School of Management, Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Av. Pedro Álvares Cabral, n° 12, 6000-084 Castelo Branco, Portugal, e-mail: ricardo.martins@ipcb.pt

* Corresponding author

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Abstract: The Romanian society is currently facing numerous challenges, among which the issue of school dropout is becoming increasingly prominent. The purpose of this study is to establish the relationship between the perception and motivation of the target group (students in higher grades at risk of school dropout) to participate in the Varadinum Summer School, organized under the auspices of the University of Oradea - Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport, and funded through the ROSE financing program. In this context, the organization of summer schools represents a serious alternative with beneficial effects in curbing school dropout. The obtained results will be utilized to optimize the selection process for the future target group and enhance the organizational management of the 2024 edition of the Varadinum Summer School.

Keywords: school dropout, perception, motivation, education, Varadinum Summer School

Introduction

The socio-economic changes that have characterized Romania in recent times have generated profound psychological shifts regarding the role and importance of education in society (Herman et al., 2020a). Concurrently, there has been an increase in the school dropout rate among students and scholars, particularly those in at-risk situations, defined as individuals *"coming from families with low incomes; historically discriminated based on ethnicity; residing in rural areas or other areas lacking nearby schools; having one or both parents working abroad; having special educational requirements"* (Applicant's Guide, 2019). The necessity to identify new solutions to reduce and even halt the effects of school dropout, associated with the growing poverty, especially in rural areas, among vulnerable populations (divorced parents, disadvantaged social groups etc.), led to the organization of summer schools within the ROSE financing program. The primary objective of this program was to *"support students enrolled in public higher education institutions and students in state high schools, potential future students, who are at risk of dropping out in the first year of undergraduate studies, belonging predominantly to disadvantaged groups"* (Applicant's Guide, 2019).

The concept of summer school, from a temporal perspective, is relatively recent, having been introduced for the first time in 1996 in public schools in Chicago, USA. Subsequently, it was adopted in other schools in Baltimore, Boston, Denver, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington (Matsudaira, 2008). It was introduced in response to the poor academic results recorded by students at the end of the school year as a condition for promotion (Cooper, 2001). Simultaneously, it aimed to enhance students' academic performance (Cooper et al., 2000).

Starting from a relatively similar situation, namely the high non-promotion rate of students at high risk of dropping out (18.2%), belonging to socio-economically disadvantaged categories at the Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport of the University of Oradea, during the academic year 2018/2019, from the first year of study and with the existence of a funding source (ROSE), the project "Open Doors to the Future - Varadinum Summer School" was initiated. Its aim is to *"facilitate the transition of 150 high school students to tertiary education in the fields of Geography and Physical Education and Sport and retain them in the first year of university study through specific activities such as career counseling and guidance, mentoring courses, study visits, and workshops"* (Application Form, p. 4).

Open Doors to the Future is a summer school designed for 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students from Bihor County who wish to experience student life. The summer school provided a diverse program of activities that combined theory with practical experiences in various fields, involving university staff and specialists from partner institutions. These activities took place both in the laboratories on the university campuses in Oradea and in the field. Participants had the opportunity to immerse themselves for two weeks in the teaching, learning, and evaluation methods offered by the University of Oradea - Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport. Simultaneously, they engaged in field-specific guidance courses in the fields of geography and physical education and sport, workshops, study visits, career counseling and guidance, sports competitions, cultural events, and many other

activities typical of university life. These were specially designed to showcase the beauty and uniqueness of the city where they might reside during their higher education studies.

The University of Oradea, particularly the Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport, makes sustained efforts to increase the proportion and means of implementing student-centered education, a fundamental objective aimed at minimizing school dropout. The implementation of activities outlined in the project Open Doors to the Future - Varadinum Summer School aims to *"increase the pass rate of the bacalaureate exam in the high schools supported by the project"* and the *"retention rate in the first university year"* (Applicant's Guide, 2019).

The analysis of the dropout situation among first-year students at risk from a socio-economic perspective within the Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport indicates a significant difference in grades obtained in certain subjects compared to other colleagues. This difference is attributed to factors such as non-attendance of classes and failure to appear for exams, which are determinants of dropout (Application Form, p. 4). One way to improve the academic situation of first-year students involves supporting them through counseling and career guidance services starting from the high school level, before making decisions about their desired college. This support is closely correlated with the needs and aspirations of each student. Consequently, students' participation in career counseling and guidance activities, mentoring courses, study visits, and workshops aimed to increase students' awareness of the importance of completing their studies and the relevance of their specialization choices from a professional perspective. This was achieved by providing an early university experience.

The informational support was provided by the disciplines of physical education, sport and geography, both playing significant roles in developing sets of skills and competencies for future graduates in the labor market (Herman et al., 2016).

In the specialized literature, the issue of school dropout has been extensively analyzed from various perspectives, highlighting causes associated with poverty, socio-economic status, student disengagement from school life, and the level of parental education, among others (Ensminger and Slusarcick, 1992; Jenkins, 1995; Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger and Thomas, 2000; Olah, 2009; Kumar et al., 2023; Selim et al., 2023).

In this context, the objective of the present study is to assess the motivation and perception of the target group following the implementation of the Varadinum Summer School, conducted in July 2023 at the University of Oradea - Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport. The aim is to enhance the next edition, scheduled for 2024.

The working hypothesis aimed at the idea that understanding motivation contributes to a better identification of the target group, while the perception of the target group is a significant variable with direct effects on shaping motivation, satisfaction, and consequently, the behaviors of the target group (Herman et al., 2020b).

The novelty of this study lies in the methodology employed, particularly the informational structure of the questionnaire, and the manner in which the perception and motivation of the target group are quantified. The engagement of the target group, along with the necessity and relevance of the study, is crucial in shaping the next target group for the Varadinum Summer School, 2024 edition.

Materials and methods

The data required for this study were obtained in the year 2023, in the month of July, within the Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport, using a survey method based on a sociological questionnaire (Ilies et al., 2023a and b). The data collection was carried out through consultations with the target group that participated in the Summer School during the period from July 17, 2023 to July 30, 2023. The target group consisted of 44 high school students (29 males and 15 females) from the following localities: Beiuș (National College Samuil Vulcan, 10 students), Bratca (Theoretical High School No.1, 9 students), Marghita (Horea Technological High School, 12 students; Octavian Goga National College, 7 students; Technological High School No.1 Popești, 1 student), and Oradea (Bihorul Sports High School, 3 students; Vasile Voiculescu Sanitary Technological High School, 1 student; School of Art, 1 student). The students were in the 10th grade (13 students), 11th grade (27 students), and 12th grade (4 students) (Figure 1).

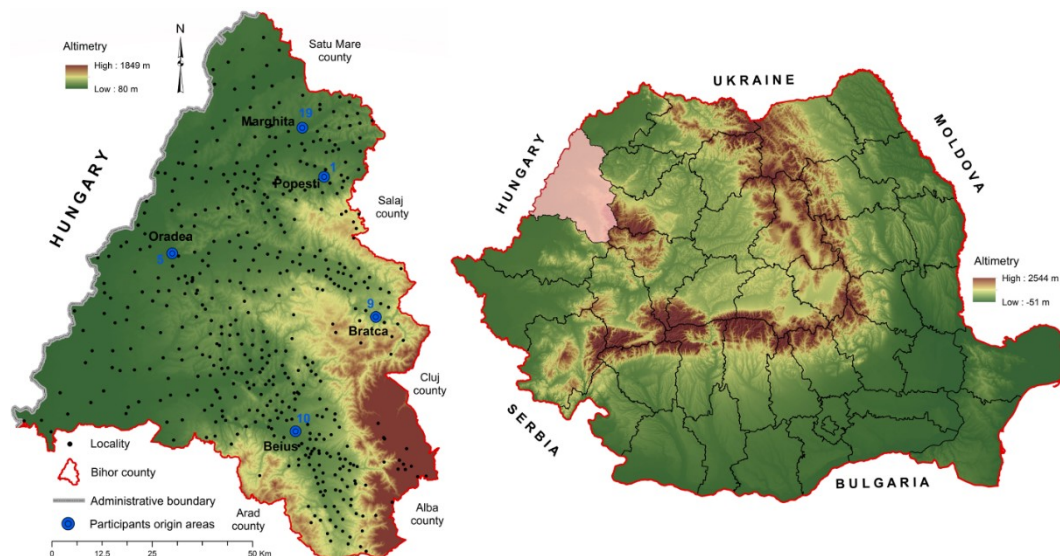


Figure 1. The selection area of the target group, at the level of Romania and Bihor county

Regarding the students' risk situation, out of the total participants, 22 come from low-income families, 32 live in rural areas, 2 students have a history of discrimination based on ethnicity, 9 students have one or both parents working abroad, and 4 students have special educational requirements. Through the Summer School, our goal was to address university dropout in Romania by combining efforts in an efficient collaboration. We aimed to create harmony between moments of fun

and learning to make the educational experience more engaging and less prone to abandonment.

The questionnaire used was structured with 8 items related to the motivation and perception of participants in the Varadinum Summer School, organized under the auspices of the University of Oradea, Romania. Items X1 and X2, regarding experience, and X8, regarding the intention to recommend participation in summer school programs to other colleagues, were binary (0 - No, 1 - Yes). Item X3, regarding the motivation for participation, had multiple responses, while those concerning the role and usefulness of participating in the Varadinum Summer School (X4 - X6) involved responses in the Likert scale format (1 to 10, where 1 represents not at all, and 10 - very much) (Table 1).

Perception is an essential aspect, sometimes challenging to capture, with direct influences in the management of summer schools. Among the influencing factors analyzed in this study, experience stands out (whether it is the first time participating in a Summer School or from other participations, including those heard about), the extent to which the project achieved its objectives, the utility of the proposed activities in the project, and the need for improvement in the proposed activities. Regarding motivation, factors such as curiosity, gratuity, the need for cultural enrichment, and spending leisure time in an enjoyable manner were analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected variables for the studied criteria

Criteria	Subcriterion	Variable	Data	Type of Data
C1 - Perception	Experience	X1. After attending a Summer School for the first time	44	Quantitative
		X2. After participating in other summer schools and through hearsay	44	Quantitative
	The extent to which the project achieved its objectives	X3. Career counseling and guidance	44	Quantitative
		X4. Familiarization of students with the academic environment specific to the fields of Geography and Physical Education and Sport	44	Quantitative
		X5. Familiarization of students with key actors involved in the management of issues specific to geography and sports	44	Quantitative
		X6. Initiation of students with the main methods, means, and technologies specific to the fields of study in Geography and Physical Education and Sport	44	Quantitative
	Utility of the proposed activities in the project	X7. Career counseling and guidance	44	Quantitative
		X8. Mentoring courses	44	Quantitative

		X9. Study visits	44	Quantitative
		X10. Workshops	44	Quantitative
	The need for improvement in the proposed activities	X11. Career counseling and guidance	44	Quantitative
		X12. Mentoring courses	44	Quantitative
		X13. Study visits	44	Quantitative
		X14. Workshops	44	Quantitative
C2 - Motivation	Motivation	X15. Curiosity	44	Quantitative
		X16. Gratuity	44	Quantitative
		X17. Need for cultural enrichment	44	Quantitative
		X18. Spending leisure time in an enjoyable manner	44	Quantitative

In order to identify and understand the relationships between the perception and motivation of the target group following participation in the Varadinum Summer School, the multicriteria analysis method was utilized (Patro and Sahu, 2015; Kiselakova et al., 2020). In this study, the criteria of perception (14 variables) and motivation (4 variables) were examined (Table 1). Using the Min-Max Normalization Method or the Value Mapping Method (Patro and Sahu, 2015), the values of each variable were standardized to obtain an aggregate value for each analyzed criterion and sub-criterion (Boc et al., 2022; Deac et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023). The relationship index between perception and motivation was then calculated, and the target group was classified based on the type of relationship between perception and motivation. Data processing was performed using Excel software.

Results and discussions

Perception is an image, a reflection of the world through the lens of the personality of the target group. As it is shaped by numerous factors, including age, social category, ethnic structure, religious structure, education level, and more, we can say that understanding and quantifying perception is a subjective yet crucial aspect (Oneţ et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021a and b; Herman et al., 2022a and b; Ilies et al., 2023a; Herman et al., 2023). It is necessary because it further manifests in the motivation and satisfaction of the students participating in the Varadinum Summer School.

Following the analysis of 14 variables related to experience, the extent to which the project achieved its objectives, the utility of the proposed activities in the project, and the need for improvement, it resulted that the perception of the target group was good (75.7%, 28 students), weak (16.2%, 6 students), and very good (8.1%, 3 students) (Figure 2).

However, noticeable differences can be observed from one person to another. The lowest level of perception was recorded by respondents number 10, 13, 22, and 39 in the database, while the highest level of perception was recorded by respondents number 2, 24, and 33 in the database. Fluctuations in the level of

perception can also be observed based on each variable (gender, place of residence, school of affiliation etc.).



Figure 2. The motivation and perception of the participants within the Varadinum Summer School project

Motivation represents a triggering factor with direct effects on the formation of the target group that will participate in future editions. Similar to perception, the motivation to participate in such events is a highly sensitive aspect conditioned by numerous socio-demographic factors. However, following the consultation with the target group, the following types of motivations stood out: very weak (54.5%, 24 students), weak (27.3%, 12 students), good (11.4%, 5 students), and very good (6.8%, 3 students) (Figure 2). Individual-level analysis highlighted the weakest motivation in respondent number 29 from the database, while the highest values were recorded for respondents' number 3, 23, and 37 from the database. Significant differences were also observed in the analysis of motivation based on gender, locality, school, etc.

Based on the indices obtained from the analysis of the 18 criteria, the relationships between perception and motivation of the target group participating in the Varadinum Summer School were categorized into an interval of values $[-1; 1]$. They were classified into four equal intervals between -1 and -0.5, representing weak negative relationships; -0.51 and 0, representing strong negative relationships; 0.1 and 0.5, representing strong positive relationships; 0.51 and 1, representing weak positive relationships. Each participant was assigned to one of these four categories as follows:

- (1) Weak negative relationships, characterized by index values between $[-1; -0.5]$, were not established for any individual in the target group (Figure 3).
- (2) Strong negative relationships with relationship index values between -0.51 and 0 were identified in 20.5% of the students who participated in the Varadinum Summer School (Figure 3). This type of relationship is characterized by perception values lower than those specific to motivation. For example, for participant number 23 from the database (from the Technical College "Traian Vuia," Oradea), the perception value was 0.394179894, while the motivation value was 1.

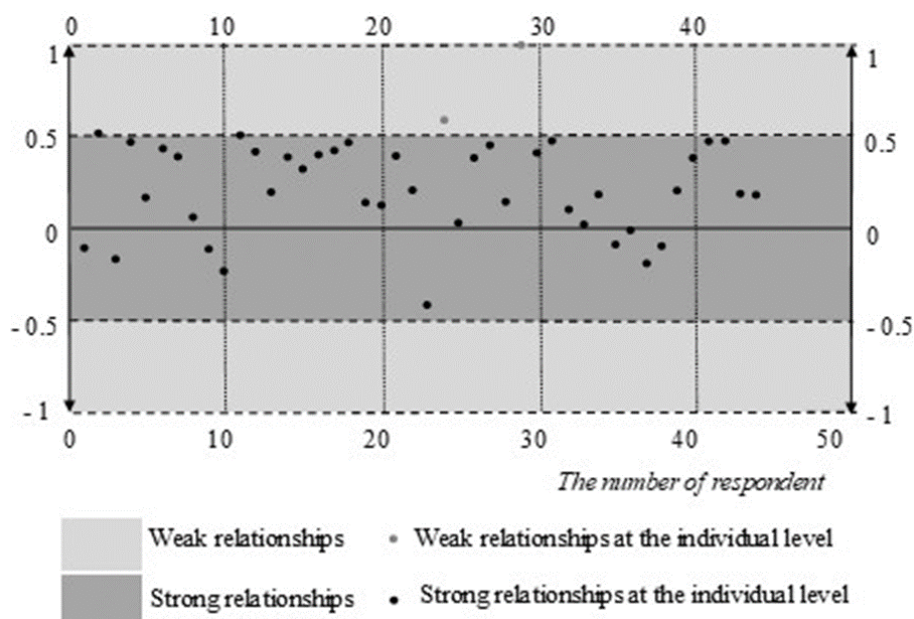


Figure 3. The relationship between perception and motivation of the target group participating in the Varadinum Summer School project

- (3) Strong positive relationships with relationship index values between 0.1 and 0.5 were identified in 72.7% of the students (Figure 3). This type of relationship is defined by perception values higher than those specific to motivation. For example, for student number 11 from the database (National College Octavian Goga, Marghita), the tourist perception value was 0.74, while the tourist motivation value was 0.25.
- (4) Weak positive relationships with relationship index values between 0.51 and 1 were identified in three students (two from Theoretical High School No. 1, Bratca, and one from Horea Technical High School, Marghita) (Figure 3). This type of relationship is defined by perception values higher than those specific to motivation. Thus, for the two students from Theoretical High School No. 1, Bratca, the perception values were 0.96 and 0.66, while the motivation values were 0.25 in both cases. In the case of the student from Horea Technical High School, Marghita, the perception value was 0.77, while the motivation value for participating in the Varadinum School was 0.25.

Conclusions

In conclusion, from this study, it emerged that students who participated in the Varadinum Summer School 2023, held at the Faculty of Geography, Tourism, and Sport under the auspices of the University of Oradea, had a positive perception (75.7%, 28 students), while the motivation was diametrically opposed, very weak (54.5%, 24 students) (Figure 2).

Regarding the relationships between motivation and perception among participating students, strong positive relationships predominated (72.7%), followed by strong negative ones (20.5%), and weak positive ones (6.8%).

The results obtained from this study refute the working hypothesis that a positive perception contributes to forming a similar motivation among potential students to participate in the Varadinum Summer School, 2024 edition.

Regarding the acquired satisfaction and its effects on changing behaviors, it was measured by using the following question, "Would you recommend participating in the Varadinum Summer School to your colleagues?" to which they responded affirmatively in a percentage of 100%. Against this background, the satisfaction gained during the summer school had a significant contribution, influenced by the quality of the activities provided in the project, the lived experience, and the level of expectations. Therefore, we can emphasize that the results obtained in this study can have significant implications for organizing the next edition of the Varadinum Summer School.

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