Emotional variables, dropout and academic performance in Spanish nursing students

Fátima Roso-Bas [a,*], Antonia Pades Jiménez [a,1], Esther García-Buades [b,2]

[a] Department of Nursing, University of Balearic Islands, Universitat de les Illes Balears, Guillem Cifre de Colonya, Cra. de Valldemossa Km 7,5, 07122 Palma, Balearic Islands, Spain
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Balearic Islands, Spain

SUMMARY

The dropout of university studies is a main concern in many countries, also for Health Sciences degrees. The reviews on dropout in all university degrees as well as nursing generally show multidimensional causes with factors related both to institutional and students' characteristics. Regarding the personal variables of students, researchers have focused on financial, family and personality features. Far less attention has been devoted to emotional variables.

This study aims to explore whether individual variables of the emotional domain such as perceived emotional intelligence, dispositional optimism/pessimism and depressive rumination are related and/or can predict students' intention to dropout and academic performance. Using a cross-correlational approach, data were obtained from a sample of 144 nursing students. Students with a pessimistic disposition revealed a greater tendency to drop out. The remaining variables correlated significantly with pessimism but had no predictive value on dropout. Our results suggest that students with low levels of emotional clarity and repair and high depressive rumination have pessimistic expectations, so they are more likely to leave studies. No significant results were found in relation to academic performance. We conclude with an identification of strategies to increase retention and academic success.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Dropout in higher education is an issue that has been concerning education administrations for many years. Although there are large differences between European member states, around 17–18% of European students leave their studies before graduating (Cabrera et al, 2006; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). These data are considered not only as the echo of university failure but also one of many indicators of the quality of educational programmes together with evaluation and performance rates. In order to improve these data, the European 2020 Strategy sets as an objective to reach at least 40% of young people finishing their university degrees.

According to statistics for different countries (OECD, 2010), dropout is a main concern for Health Sciences. However, some universities report lower dropout rates in Health Sciences than other departments, as is the case in Spain according to annually published reports by the Ministry of Education (MEC, 2015).

Several reviews about the factors that might influence dropout of nursing students underline the complexity of this issue, and point out at a large number of multidimensional factors (Cameron et al., 2011; Dante et al., 2013; Urwin et al., 2010). Taken together, this empirical evidence suggests an interaction between individual, institutional, political, social, and occupational factors to explain dropout. Personality features and the student's family or financial situation are highlighted as relevant individual predictors of dropout in the literature.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the role of individual factors of the emotional sphere (emotional intelligence, optimism/pessimism and depressive rumination) in predicting the tendency to drop out and academic performance in a sample of nursing students in Spain.

Background Literature

Over the last few decades, many studies have provided evidence on the relationship between emotional skills and performance in students (Parker et al., 2004a, 2004b; Petrides et al., 2004; Salanova Soria et al., 2005). However, there is mixed evidence about the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance (Barchard, 2003; Jiménez Morales and López-Zafra, 2009). This heterogeneity is probably due to the diversity in methodological and epistemological approaches to assess emotional intelligence and performance (see the review by Mestre Navas & Fernández Berrocal, 2007).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 971 25 98 07, +34 626 79 34 43 (mobile).
E-mail addresses: fatima.roso@uib.es (F. Roso-Bas), Antonia.pades@uib.es (A. Pades Jiménez), esther.garcia@uib.es (E. García-Buades).
[1] Tel.: +34 971 17 27 18.
[2] Tel.: +34 971 17 27 51.

According to the model of Mayer and Salovey (1997) emotional intelligence is

The ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion: the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (p. 10).

In the area of health sciences, López Fernández et al. (2011) found that students with high emotional skills performed better in clinical practice than students with low emotional skills, but obtained non-significant results relating emotional skills with performance in theoretical assignments. In other studies, however, significant relationships between high scores on emotional intelligence and high performance in both tests and evaluation of clinical practices were observed (Beauvais et al., 2011; Fernandez et al., 2012; Valadez Sierra et al., 2013).

Other researchers have investigated the protective role of emotional competence on stress in the academic and clinical contexts. Thus, high emotional competence can promote an adaptive cognitive style and efficient troubleshooting (Jordan and Troth, 2004; Rahim and Minors, 2003). Furthermore, it has been found that appropriate emotion management and coping strategies can reduce perceived stress by students (Aradilla-Herrero and Tomás-Sábado, 2006; González Cabanach et al., 2011; Montes-Berges and Augusto-Landa, 2007; Por et al., 2011). This literature is particularly interesting when studying the issue of drop out because stressful experiences during studies and clinical practice have been described as one of the key factors contributing to nursing students' drop out (Bouden, 2008; Boyd and Mckendry, 2012; Timmins and Kaliszer, 2002a, 2002b). According to these authors, examinations and academic writing assignments, responsibility required in clinical practice, as well as coping with death and suffering of patients are critical factors described by students as a source of anxiety and stress.

A second line of research related to retention and drop out has focused the attention on students' expectations. According to the theory of Scheier and Carver (1985, 1993), dispositional optimism is a construct that refers to a person's positive expectations about the future, it is a stable and widespread way of thinking. Studies based on this construct clearly show that the optimistic disposition is a protective factor for depression in students (Ortíz et al., 2003) and it promotes the use of effective coping strategies to deal with stressful situations (Chico Librán, 2002). A positive impact of dispositional optimism has also been shown on better adjustment to university and retention (Pritchard and Wilson, 2003; Solberg Nes et al., 2009). Inversely, pessimistic people tend to deny problems and not to commit to goals, which leads them to an avoidance coping style. Londoño Pérez (2009) found that pessimism predicts cancellation and repetition of courses, both regarded as risk signals for dropping out

A third personal factor worth exploring is depressive rumination. The influence of depression on academic outcomes is well-known (Eisenberg et al., 2009). One of the most studied variables closely related with depression is rumination. The broadest concept of rumination, proposed by Nolen-Hoeksema (2004), refers to repetitive thoughts of depressive experiences, its causes and consequences. Therefore, other authors also called it depressive rumination (Papageorgiou and Wells, 2004). This response style is not only a risk factor for depression but it also maintains and enhances depressive symptoms (Cova et al., 2009; Sarin et al., 2005).

The impact of ruminative style has also been studied regarding academic performance and retention. Studies analysing this topic argue that depressive rumination may block cognitive responses, leading to poor problem solving and reducing effectiveness, motivation, efforts and concentration on academic tasks (Lyubomirsky et al., 1999; Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Understandably, the importance of this kind of response as a predictor of dropout at university has been highlighted (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Meilman et al., 1992).

In sum, these findings point out to the relevant role of emotions to complete university degrees successfully. Thus, depressive rumination and pessimism seem to be emotional factors that hinder success and retention in higher education. Conversely, emotional skills and optimism would act in the opposite direction promoting retention and academic achievement.

Methods

The Present Study

The aim of our study was to explore the relationship between variables of the emotional sphere (emotional intelligence, optimism/pessimism, depressive rumination), and academic performance and tendency to dropout in a sample of nursing students in Spain.

Study Hypotheses

H1. Higher levels of emotional intelligence and dispositional optimism will be associated with a reduced tendency to drop out and higher academic performance.

H2. Dispositional pessimism and depressive rumination will be associated with an increased tendency to drop out and decreased academic performance.

H3. Emotional intelligence, rumination, and dispositional optimism/pessimism will predict the tendency to drop out and academic performance.

Research Context and Design

This piece of research is part of a wider project on "Training in social skills and emotional intelligence for nursing, psychology and physiotherapy students" approved, financed by, and complying with the research regulations of the Institute of Education Sciences at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB, Spain). This study was conducted from a cross-correlational perspective, collecting data by self-report questionnaires.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection Procedure

Third year nursing students were approached while in ordinary lectures. Researchers explained the objectives of the study and invited students to participate. Each participant read and completed an informed consent form. Students were informed that their responses would be treated confidentially. All students attending the lecture voluntarily completed the questionnaires. All data were collected during the same session taking approximately 25 min.

Data Collection Instruments and Study Variables

The first section of the questionnaire was dedicated to collect socio demographic data (age, sex, current academic year, employment status). Next, students answered the following instruments:

Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS-24) by Salovey et al. (1995). Spanish Version by Fernandez-Berrocal et al. (2004).

The TMMS-24 is an ability-based 24-item self-report scale of Perceived Emotional Intelligence adapted from original version by Salovey et al. (1995). It consists of three subscales: the degree to which respondents believe they pay attention to their feelings and emotions (Emotional Attention), the degree to which respondents believe they are able to perceive their emotions (Emotional Clarity), and the degree to which respondents believe they are able to repair their emotions (Emotional Repair). Each subscale is composed of 8 items. High scores on clarity and repair reflect high-perceived emotional intelligence,