

FACTORS DETERMINING STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS MEASURED AT THE BEGINNING OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES

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As more students enter higher education, the levels of their competencies are getting more heterogeneous, and the number of those who fail at the beginning of their studies has been increasing. There are assessment and selection mechanisms (e.g. the Scholastic Aptitude Tests in the USA) that help students and higher education institutions to match students' learning skills with the demands of the training institutions, but in many European countries, including Hungary, the traditional high-school leaving examinations are not satisfying to guide the transition processes. Several measures can be taken to reduce the rate of early dropout; among those are (1) a better high-school leaving examination (matriculation examination in the Hungarian system) for improving the selection processes and (2) assessing students' preparedness at the beginning of their higher education studies. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between the matriculation examination results and students' knowledge at the beginning of their university studies. Participants were 1468 full-time students (63.3% of the entire population) from a major Hungarian university (males 42.3%, females 57.7%) who graduated from high schools in spring 2015 and, after a successful admission process, started their higher studies in September in the same year. They completed five online tests covering the major subjects of their previous high school studies, including Hungarian language and literature, history, mathematics, science and English as a second language. The reliability of the tests (Cronbach alpha) was high, varying between .88 and .96. A questionnaire was used to explore students' socio-economic backgrounds and learning strategies. The results indicate that matriculation achievements predict the entrance test performances in the different subjects in different ways. The matriculation examination results and the tests can be compared in relation to three subjects: strong correlation was found in mathematics ($r=.656$) and history ($r=.503$), while moderate for the Hungarian language and literature ($r=.378$). High correlations were found between some tests results, e.g. between Hungarian language and literature and history (.598) and mathematics and science (.529). The questionnaire results indicated that a number of students prefer memorization strategies, and these show small negative, but still significant correlation with test results, while strategies aiming at better understanding positively correlated with the tests results. Strong correlations were found between the parents' education level and test results. Women achieved better in Hungarian language and literature, while men were better in history, mathematics, science and English as a foreign language. The results of the present survey serve as information for improving the matriculation examination and for preparing better tests for assessing students' initial learning skills.