

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF READING LITERACY AS A POTENTIAL RETENTION FACTOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Higher education student attrition has posed an increasing challenge for educators and administrators alike (Beer – Lawson, 2017). Striving to identify the facilitating factors and barriers to decreasing students' attrition, a number of studies have brought this issue in focus. Some findings pointed to situational (e.g. socioeconomic status-SES), dispositional (e.g. motivation), and institutional aspects (e.g. staff) as facilitating factors affecting student retention (Bowles – Brindle, 2017), while others concluded that early academic success such as first term credits predict graduation (Ayona, 2018). Being part of an overarching research project, the present study aims at identifying factors underlying student attrition from yet another angle. It seeks to explore the role of reading literacy, a basic information processing skill, as a potential retention factor in higher education. More specifically, it strives to identify to what extent reading literacy predicts the successful earning of the first and second 20 credits used as proxies for potential graduation.

A reading literacy test comprising four subtests representing different text formats and text types (82 items) was developed for the purposes of the study (Cronbach's $\alpha = ,82$). The test was administered to 2 229 first-year students in the beginning of the 2018 academic term (Mage = 19,86, SDage = 2,04) via the eDia assessment system (Csapó – Molnár, 2019).

Our analysis showed that students' average reading performance was 76.82% (SD = 8,16%), however, there were significant ($p < ,05$, $p < ,001$) and in many cases large differences detectable at subtest level (cont. narrative: M = 84,10%, SD = 9,38%; cont. expository: M = 59,67%, SD = 14,11%; non-cont.: M = 84,69%, SD = 9,11%; digital text: M = 74,05%, SD = 14,81%).

Structural equation modelling was used to analyze the predictive value of reading literacy achievement on a successful learning trajectory among higher education students. We tested different models to explore relationships between the measured and latent variables. The first model hypothesized that reading literacy test scores have an impact on the earning of the first ($\beta = ,11$) 20 credits, which strongly predict ($\beta = ,699$) the probability of getting the second 20 credits (CFI = ,989, TLI = ,982, RMSEA = ,038). The second model envisioned that reading literacy affects later success in combination with affective factors such as learning strategies and maternal education serving as proxy for SES. In the second model (CFI = ,966, TLI = ,952, RMSEA = ,041) reading test scores have a weak but significant impact on getting the first 20 credits ($\beta = ,104$), their predictive value is stronger than that of the learning strategies ($\beta = ,057$) or maternal education ($\beta = ,096$).

Our findings revealed that reading literacy can be considered as a facilitator or barrier to student retention, additionally, in combination with other affective or cognitive domains, it may be improved to contribute to better student outcomes in higher education.

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