# Decision-making Processes Among Potential Dropouts in VET and Adult Learning[1]

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**Abstract**

In a current project (2017-2020) about dropout among 18-24-year-old students in VET and basic general adult learning the aim is to study the students' thoughts and actions in relation to deciding to stay in or drop out of an educational programme,

The study combined two sets of data: weekly student surveys and interviews with these same students. While the surveys provide a weekly snapshot of the students' thoughts regarding the probability of them continuing in the programme, their satisfaction with the educational programme as a whole, the specific lessons they attend, and the atmosphere at the school, the interviews contribute with detailed descriptions of the students' thoughts on the same matters.

Findings: Based on the students' answers over an eight-week period, it was possible to trace a graph illustrating changes in the students' attitudes. These graphs can be placed within four categories of development: the stable, the positive, the unstable, and the negative. The latter can furthermore be differentiated as reflecting a stable decline, a fluctuating decline, or a sudden decline. In the interviews, the aim was to elicit the individual students' thoughts and actions at the points when their graphs took a turn.

Conclusion: The findings show that the students' thoughts and actions concern matters both inside and outside the school. Furthermore, seemingly trivial matters in the students' lives are shown to have a potentially decisive influence on the students' thoughts about staying in or dropping out of a programme. These findings confirm the importance of focusing on students'

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[1]    The paper is a shortened version of an article for IJRVET (Aarkrog et al., 2018).
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decision-making processes not only in research on dropout but also in practice as inspiration for teachers and guidance counsellors.

**Keywords**

dropout, decision-making, young adults

## 1 Introduction

Drop-out among young adults (18-24 years old) is high. A report from CEDFOP shows that dropout has been prioritized in EU policy since the adoption of the Lisbon strategy in 2000, the current aim is to reduce dropout for this group to below 10% by 2020.

Much of the extensive research about drop out focuses on institutional and individual factors and the relations between these, arguing that dropout must be seen as a long process (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012; Fine, 1991; Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Brown & Rodriquez, 2009; Finn, 1989; Hodgson, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Archambault et al., 2009; Jimerson et al., 2000).

However, there is little research concerning students' decision-making processes in relation to dropout. The aim of the project is to improve strategies for preventing dropout by gaining knowledge about students' thoughts and actions related to decisions to stay in or drop out of an educational programme. The educational programmes included in the study are either vocational, situated in vocational colleges, or general, situated in adult education centres. The latter courses typically prepare for enrolling in VET.

The project concerns the following three research questions:

1. How do young adults in VET and general adult education typically decide whether they want to continue with the educational programme in which they are currently enrolled?
2. What leads students to change their minds about staying in or dropping out of an educational program?
3. What do students think and do during periods in which they alter their perceptions?

## 2 Methods

Theoretically, the project is inspired by the concept of teetering (Lessard et al., 2007). Teetering describes the oscillating processes in relation to decisions about drop out. Furthermore, the study of the students' decision-making processes is inspired by Harren's typology of three styles of decision-making. The styles illustrate the degree to which an individual takes responsibility for the process and to which this individual uses logic (the more rational), emotions and feelings (the more intuitive), or expectations of authorities and peers (the more dependent) as the primary approach in thoughts and actions during the decision-making process (Harren, 1979).

The empirical data includes surveys and interviews conducted with 31 students, who were enrolled in programmes at a total of six vocational schools and eight adult general education centres during autumn 2017. The purpose of the student surveys was to study, how the students' desire to continue in the specific educational programme develops over time. Assuming that the students' satisfaction with the programme in general, the lessons, and the atmosphere at the school has an impact on their desire to continue, a multidimensional construct was used including four questions:

1. How satisfied are you with this programme?
2. How satisfied are you with the lessons (the teaching)?
3. How satisfied are you with the atmosphere at the school?
4. How strong is your desire to continue in this programme?

The students answered these questions every week. Based on the students' answers over an eight-week period, it was possible to trace a graph illustrating changes in the students' attitudes.

The purpose of the interviews with the 31 students was to learn about their thoughts and actions at the points when the graphs changed. The interviews were semi-structured and concerned the students' thoughts and actions in relation to the fluctuations and directions of the graphs, including two lines of questioning reflecting the research questions above: 1. What happened at the time when you answered differently, i.e. when the graph or graphs changed? This included the students' explanations of the graphs showing answers to questions 1-3 in the survey, as well as referencing to other specific events at school or events occurring outside school, e.g. mental health or personal problems. (Research question 2 above). 2. What did you think and do at the time when the graph changed? (research question 3 above). Each interview was recorded, had a duration of ½ - ¾ of an hour, and was transcribed with a focus on the students' answers to these two lines of questioning.

## 3    Results

Based on an analysis of question 4: "How strong is your desire to continue in this programme?", four categories of development have been defined:

1. The stable development, i.e. students showing no development when comparing the initial position with the final position, values fluctuating slightly around the mean value (11 students).
2. The positive development, i.e. students who during the education become more certain that they will continue in the program (4 students).
3. The unstable development, i.e. students who oscillate however with no systematic change (4 students).
4. The negative development, i.e. students who at the beginning of the education have a high probability of continuing in the program, who however, become increasingly negative (12 students).

With a focus on the risk of dropping out, the study particularly focuses on the 16 students, who go through either an unstable development or a negative development.

Concerning the unstable development, the students in this category oscillate significantly over time in their answers to all four questions in the survey. They typically have problems both inside and outside school. School is to some extent perceived as a refuge when the external problems dominate. This can somewhat explain why the students stay in the programme.
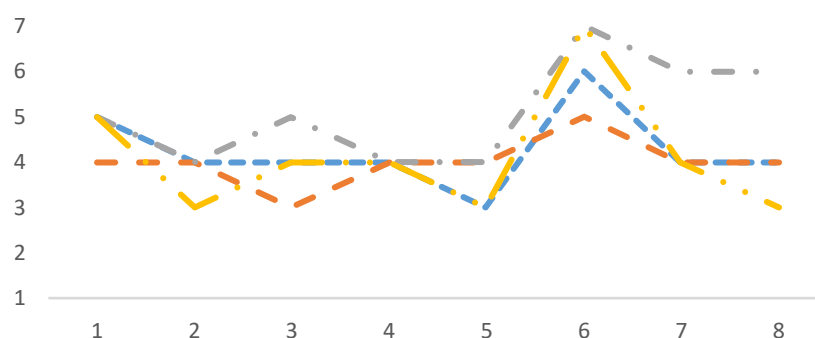
Figure 1    Mark, male student. Blue ⋯⋯⋯⋯ : satisfaction with the programme; orange ⚊ ⚊ ⚊ ⚊ ⚊ : satisfaction with the lessons, grey ⚊ - ⚊ - ⚊ - : satisfaction with the atmosphere; yellow ⚊ -- ⚊ - : motivation to continue in the programme.

The strongly oscillating graph characterizes students who are highly sensitive towards quite small changes, such as Mark, 22 years old (Figure 1), who is studying general subjects in order to enrol in an as yet undefined VET programme. Mark does not like maths lessons: "We have maths on Monday, and I answered the survey on a Monday, so I was just in a bad mood". Regarding his thoughts and actions in relation to the oscillating graph, he says: "I have good and bad days, often related to whether I can keep up academically; in particular with maths, which stresses me and pressures me emotionally. I might also have had a bad morning, or private problems, which depresses me; sometimes it is just trivial things. However, then I start to bunk off; I don't bother; I feel I'm wasting my time. I think that this doesn't make sense to me and I find something else to do. I feel blank."

The social atmosphere at school is crucial for Mark's satisfaction with the programme and his motivation for going to school and continuing in the programme, as can be seen in the sixth week, where the grey, the blue and the yellow graphs take the same upward direction. "I always think twice before just dropping out; I really like to be with my classmates." However, Mark is also influenced by other issues referring to his personality: "I want to be in control of my own life, and I need to obtain the qualifications". The teetering process for this student shows, on the one hand, that he is easily affected by 'trivial things' and that he is at risk of dropping out. On the other hand, he knows that he is in charge of his own life and that he is responsible for completing the programme. Mark completes the programme.

The category *negative development* has been divided into three subcategories: 'stable decline', 'fluctuating decline', or 'sudden decline'.

Concerning the "stable decline", the students generally struggle with problems both inside and outside school and suffer from physical or, most often, psychological problems. At the beginning of the programme, they are optimistic that they will continue. However, after a couple of weeks, the graph starts to show a decline.
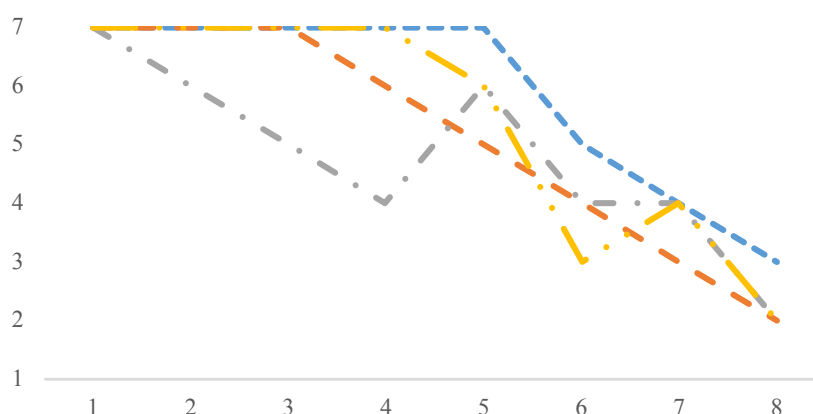
Figure 2   Mona, female student. Blue ⋯⋯⋯: satisfaction with the programme; orange – – – – – : satisfaction with the lessons, grey – – – – – : satisfaction with the atmosphere; yellow – – · · – – · : motivation to continue in the programme.

Mona (Figure 2) is 21 years old, has dropped out of several VET programmes, and is now studying a number of general subjects in order to enrol in a yet undefined VET-programme. Mona fairly easily gets into troubles with other people. Asked about the oscillating and downwardly sloping graph, she explains that in the fourth week she got into trouble with another girl: "I just did not want to be at school with that girl. I was away for two weeks because my grandmother died, and when I returned, I was told that she (the classmate) never wants to talk to me again." When asked about why the orange graph (satisfaction with the lessons) declines in the fifth week from 7 to 5, the explanation shows that she is involved in trouble among the girls in the class: "Someone from the class had told the supervisors that I and two other girls disrupt the lessons. I was called for an interview, and I just thought it was so creepy and that I would never do a thing like that (inform against somebody) to the others (classmates)."

Students with a *fluctuating decline* are sensitive towards events and experiences both inside and outside school. These can be positive but are mostly negative. A 22-year-old female student, Lila (Figure 3), has previously dropped out of several programmes and is now training for a qualification as a retail assistant. Lila suffers from psychological problems and in the third week when the yellow graph declines, Lila explains that she felt depressed: she could not get out of bed, she had problems falling asleep at night, and she began to doubt whether she would be able to complete the programme. She asked her doctor to adjust her medication, falling ill and staying at home for a few days.

Lila is influenced by the atmosphere in the class; the grey graph drops from 5 to 3 in the third week. She explains: "We don't speak to each other nicely in our class; classmates are rude to each other." She is also influenced by the lessons: in the third week, the orange graph declines from 7 to 5 and follows the blue graph in the fifth week, with the rating falling to 4. Lila explains: "We had too much teaching at the blackboard. A lot of us learn much better when we have the things in our hands. One of my classmates and I were allowed to work outside the classroom, and that helped me; I was back on track."
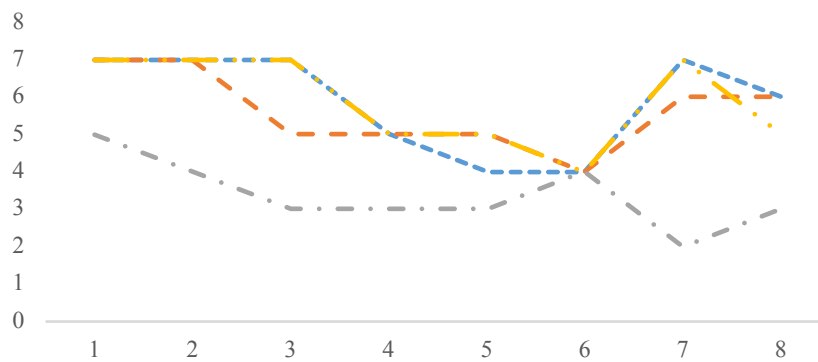
Figure 3    Lila, female student. Blue ⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯: satisfaction with the programme; orange ▬ ▬ ▬ ▬ ▬ : satisfaction with the lessons, grey ▬ ▬ ▬ ▬ ▬ : satisfaction with the atmosphere; yellow ▬ ▪ ▬ ▪ ▬ ▪ : motivation to continue in the programme.

Thus, Lila's oscillating graphs reflect a sensitivity to things like changes in teaching methods, meaning that the overall downward trend nonetheless shows fluctuations: having dropped from 7 to 4 during the first six weeks, the yellow graph climbs to 7 again in the seventh week before dropping to 5 in the eighth week. In Lila's case, psychological problems combine with her dissatisfaction and frustration regarding the classroom atmosphere and the lessons. She withdraws when she needs to consider her situation; she does not ask for help; she may listen to others' opinions, but she mostly listens to her gut feelings. At the time of collecting data, Lila has not dropped out of the programme.

Finally, a *sudden decline* means that the student's engagement appears stable for a period before suddenly declining significantly. Even though the students in this category perform quite well academically, they are unsure of themselves and have low self-efficacy, which may be due to a mental disorder. Like the other students with negative graphs, they do not take initiatives that might support them in continuing in their current programme.

Katja (Figure 4) is an 18-year–old girl who is training for a qualification as a painter and decorator. She lives in accommodation provided by the school and is performing well at school, the teachers having no doubt that she will be able to pass her exams. She has previously dropped out of another VET programme at the same school, where she neither had problems of attainment. She also thrives socially and feels at ease in the class. As the yellow graph (motivation to continue in the programme) shows, she is initially confident that she will continue; however, the graph already falls abruptly to 4 in the second week, rising gradually during the following weeks before suddenly falling to 1 in the eighth week. Asked about this abrupt drop, she says that she suddenly decided to drop out; however, she finds it difficult to explain why: "I thought about it a lot, but I did not have the motivation to go to school. Furthermore, I was sure that I would not be able to pass the exams. Rather stop than fail the exam". She wants to avoid a defeat, to play it safe and be the one who withdraws before she is told to do so.

Katja also argues for her decision by blaming the type of tasks that she would have to perform as a painter and decorator: "Sandpapering, standing on a ladder in windy weather; it's just not me. I want to work with wallpaper, colours, and patterns". She had the same kind of reasons for dropping out of the previous VET programme. Her explanations for dropping out during the interview do not entirely seem to fit the reality. She is good at schoolwork, and according to her teachers, she would be able to complete the programme. Still, it seems as if she is easily out of the saddle, convincing herself that the right decision is to drop out. Her personal history may shed light on her thoughts, feelings and actions. She has suffered from

parental neglect, as both her parents are drug addicts. She has difficulties making commitments, fearing that she will be let down. Furthermore, her problems with getting up in the morning, partly due to various physical and psychological conditions, result in a high rate of absenteeism. She tells that she takes anti-depressants and sleeps a lot. Katja drops out of the programme convinced that this is a wise decision. At the time of dropping out, she already knows which VET programme she wants to enrol in instead.
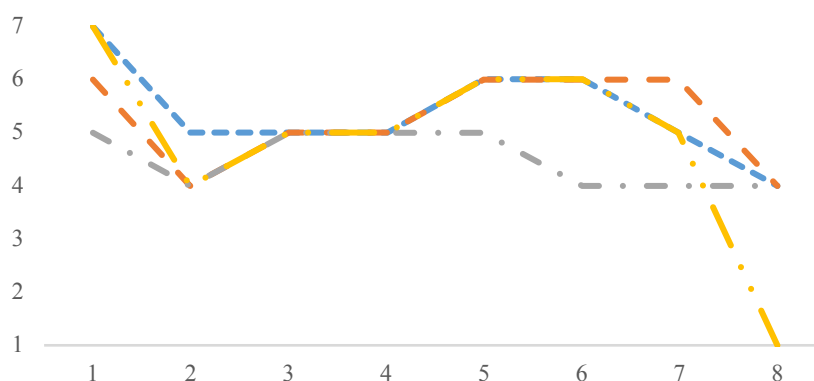


Figure 4    Katja, female student. Blue : satisfaction with the programme; orange : satisfaction with the lessons, grey : satisfaction with the atmosphere; yellow : motivation to continue in the programme.

Comparing the findings to Harren's typology of three styles of decision-making process - 'the more rational', 'the more intuitive', and 'the more dependent' (Harren, 1979) - it can be argued that many of the students' deliberations seem to be more intuitive than rational. Further-more, the study points to the importance of taking the initiative to seek help in finding a con-structive solution to one's problems. However, this needs to be tested in further research.

## 4   Conclusion

Based on 31 students' weekly responses to the question of their motivation to continue their studies, supplemented by three questions concerning their perception of the programme, the lessons, and the atmosphere at the school, the study explores the students' thoughts and actions in relation to events that have influenced their responses.

In line with previous research, the students' deliberations regarding whether to drop out or stay in their current programme can be described as a process influenced by a number of issues related to the school, current educational programme and to the students' lives outside school.

The results show that the students' responses follow different developments, some even and stable others sharp and abrupt, and yet others oscillating and turbulent. The study points to the importance of seeking help to find a constructive solution to one's problems. Some students will take the initiative to seek help; in other cases, the teacher or guidance counsellor will have to take the initiative to turn to the student.

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