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Why Do Students Who Are Eligible to Enter University Fall into Academic Probation and What Possibilities Are There for Effective Interventions?

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Abstract

Probation is the academic status of students who do not meet minimum academic criteria of Grade Point Average (GPA) as specified by the university. Probation furthermore restricts the amount of credits that can be loaded. It is a growing problem with many different causes. It has been studied for many years with e.g. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) consists of four subscales that are social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, academic adjustment and institutional attachment (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). In 2014, Istanbul Technical University (ITU) Dean of Student and Registrar's Office published the General Statistical Evaluation Report highlighting the issue of academic probation. In this study the authors aimed to identify the reasons of academic probation and to set up an intervention model at the University Career Centre. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews and group discussions were conducted with 182 undergraduate academic probation students from 13 faculties. Data analysis using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (MAXQDA) was used to identify the reasons for academic probation. Once the reasons had been identified, existing tools were improved and new tools were developed. After the implementation of various intervention measures such as promoting career summits, setting up a web portal, informing the administration of the university of the importance and necessity of creating open areas, the results were analysed. At the end of a two-year period of strenuous efforts, the effectiveness of those measures was evident as the probation rate had dropped from 23.46% to 17.08% (ITU Dean of Student and Registrar's Office, 2014, 2016).

Keywords

Academic Probation, Career Centre, Counselling

1. Introduction

Academic probation is the academic status of students who do not meet minimum academic standards and it is widely used by many universities (Lindo, Sanders, & Oreopoulos, 2010). Students fall into academic probation if their GPA does not meet those requirements. It is a common issue for many HE institutions that has been investigated by various authors who aimed at reaching a greater understanding of the causes of academic failure (Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Astin, 1984; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

High school graduates are faced with the necessity of adjustment to a new life as soon as they enter university (Shim & Ryan, 2012) as they must adapt to a new environment and its demands. A sizeable number of students are worried about their ability to cope with the new situation and if they fail to overcome this issue and do not find ways to adjust, they may end up no longer paying any attention to their GPA and decide to leave university. Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, and Pierce (2012) observed that there is a relationship between college adaptation and GPA and therefore it is important to create environments that facilitate students' involvement.

Academic adjustment has been investigated most frequently. Baker and Siryk (as cited in Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994) indicated that a well-defined goal, a strong attachment to the institution, and a high motivation to learn are also elements of academic adjustment. Furthermore, psychological variables such as personal or emotional problems, anxiety, and low self-esteem have an influence on academic achievement (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

Boyer and Sedlacek (1988) indicated that social support also predicts GPA. Gray, Vitak, Easton and Ellison (2013) found that a strong sense of integration is an important element for future academic success. Being well integrated into social life at college, having a supportive network and good relationships with staff are important components of social adjustment (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Finally, Astin (1984) argued that holding a part-time on-campus job influences retention in a positive way while off-campus jobs have adverse effects on retention.

ITU is one of the best universities in Turkey (QS Top Universities, 2015) and one of the oldest (ITU: From Past to Future, n.d.) and most prestigious in the world. Competition is fierce and prospective ITU students need to get very high marks in the university entrance exam. Nonetheless, the General Statistical Evaluation Report that was prepared by ITU Dean of Student and Registrar's Office observed that almost a quarter of all undergraduates were at one point in

time placed on academic probation. This is the reason why the University's Career Centre conducted this research to identify those factors that lead to the failure of undergraduates who had performed outstandingly well in the ITU admission exams and, ideally, also to develop effective intervention tools. This study was carried out with undergraduates who had been placed on probation because of their poor academic performance. It is hypothesised that poor adjustment to university life has a negative effect on students, leading into academic probation as students who have difficulties adapting to Higher Education will also get lower grades. It is also anticipated that academic probation might be reduced through specific interventions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

650 undergraduates on probation were invited for an interview via e-mail. 182 students from 13 faculties volunteered to participate in the study. There were 158 male students and 24 female students with an average age of 21.5. Finally, the average of their GPAs was 1.49.

2.2. Measures & Procedure

We used a semi-structured interview technique. There were one-on-one interviews as well as group discussions. SACQ constituted the base for our questions. SACQ (as cited in Kurtz, Puher, & Cross, 2012), a 67-item questionnaire, is a self-report measurement tool commonly utilised in studies on college adjustment. The questionnaire has four subscales: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Institutional Attachment. The Academic Adjustment subscale includes 24 items, the Social Adjustment subscale includes 20 items, the Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale includes 15 items, and the Institutional Attachment subscale includes 15 items. The Institutional Attachment subscale shares 8 items with the Social Adjustment subscale and 1 item with the Academic Adjustment subscale. Baker and Siryk (as cited in Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Martin, Swartz-Kulstad, and Madson (1999)) showed that the internal consistency reliability is quite high for the full SACQ scale, ranging from .89 to .95, with the subscales' internal consistency reliability ranging from .73 to .91. Several applications of the SACQ have provided correlations ranging from .68 to .90 between the subscales and the full scale (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). In consideration of these correlations, four basic components in academic probation i.e. academic, psychological, social and economic factors, were investigated in this study. The interviews were written down and coded. They were then analysed in terms of content analysis through MAXQDA 12, and the results were visualised by showing the associations between the codes.

3. Results

Based on the answers of the students, four main factors for academic probation

were identified (see **Figure 1**).

3.1. Academic Factors

Three main issues were identified within academic factors leading to probation (see **Figure 2**). Lack of awareness was the first academic factor with students deciding to go to university without a specific purpose. They entered Higher Education because e.g. everybody else did so or because it was expected of them. Furthermore, although students who ended up on probation had deliberately opted for the ITU, they had neither chosen their department in a careful manner nor did they have any plans about what to do after graduation, or even see the
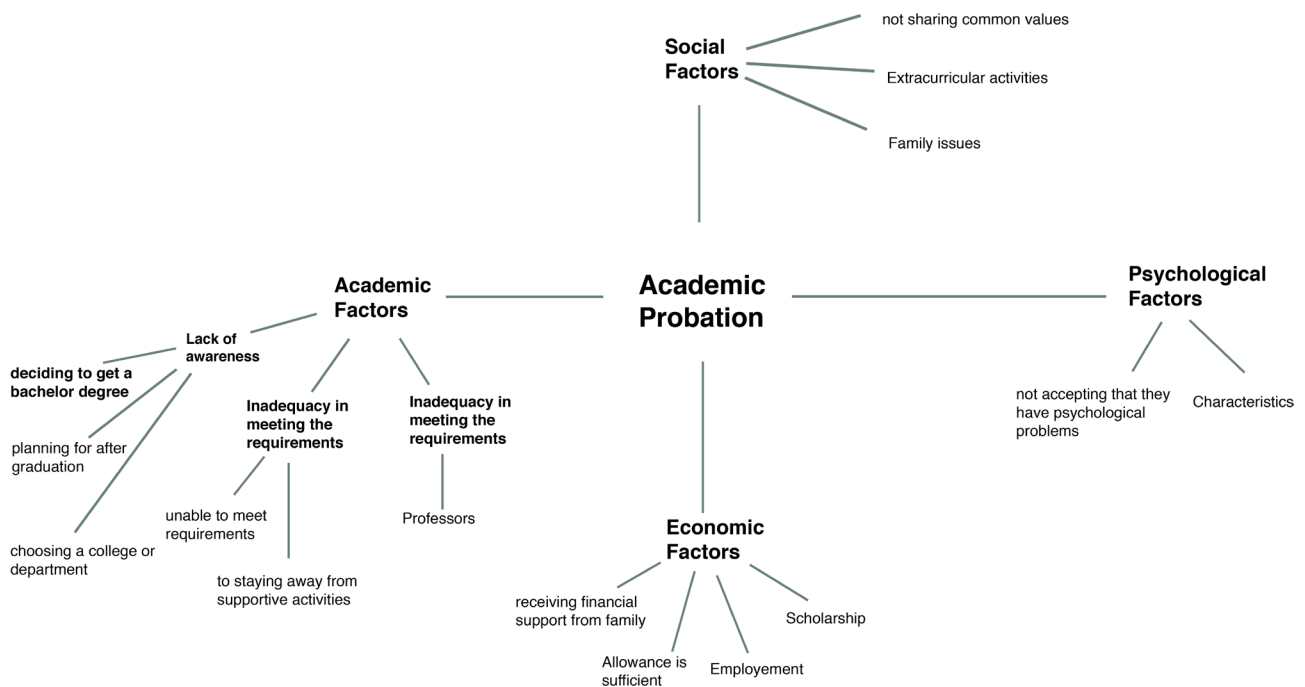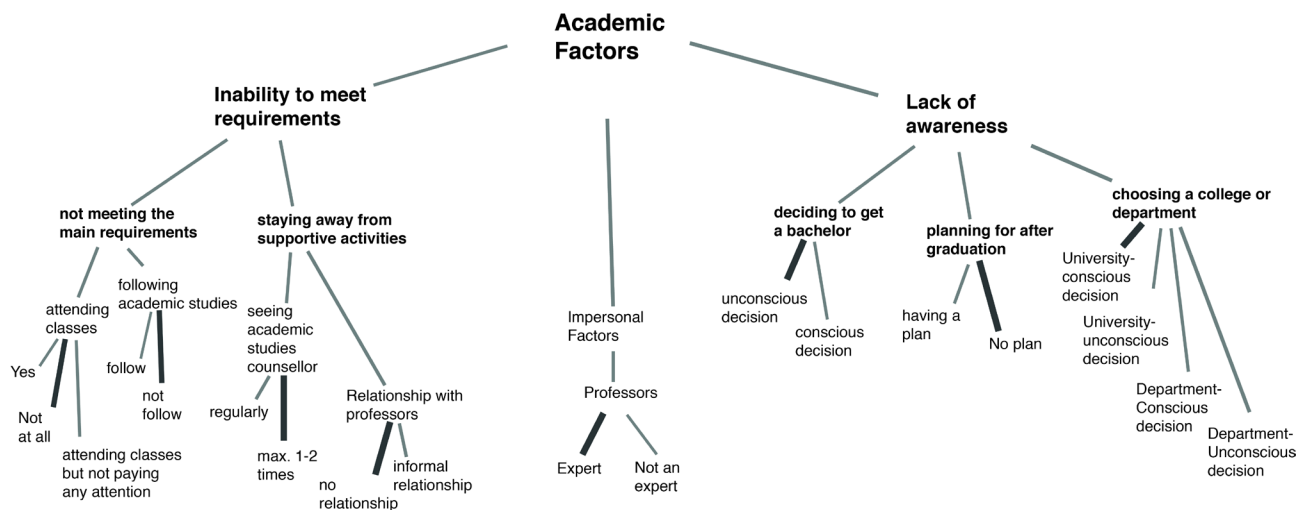

Figure 1. Main factors of probation.

Figure 2. Academic factors of probation.

need for having such a plan. All they did was taking into consideration other individuals' advice, putting their faith in the hypothetical economic return of a given profession or simply relying on their performance in the university entrance exam.

A second issue that came to light was these students' inadequacy in meeting minimal requirements such as attending lectures. To make matters worse, they were at the same time also staying away from supportive activities. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) indicated that e.g. informal contact with professors was an indicator for not dropping out of students who were struggling academically. Furthermore, probation students did not take up the opportunity to see their academic counsellors or to get in touch with their professors outside of classes. Finally, although 65% of probation students indicated that their academics were on the whole experts in their field, 60% nevertheless thought that these academics were not all that good as lecturers.

3.2. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors play in important part in academic probation. As it can be seen in Figure 3, psychological factors can be divided into two categories: specific characteristics, and an overall refusal to accept having any psychological issues. Aspelmeier et al. (2012) showed that certain types of locus of control were associated with GPA. We did however not observe a behavioural trend in locus of control in our study as the number of students on probation who regarded themselves as responsible for their problems was close to the number of students who blamed others for their problems.

Decision-making difficulties, pessimism and feelings of worthlessness were specific characteristics of probation students. Although 74% of students stated
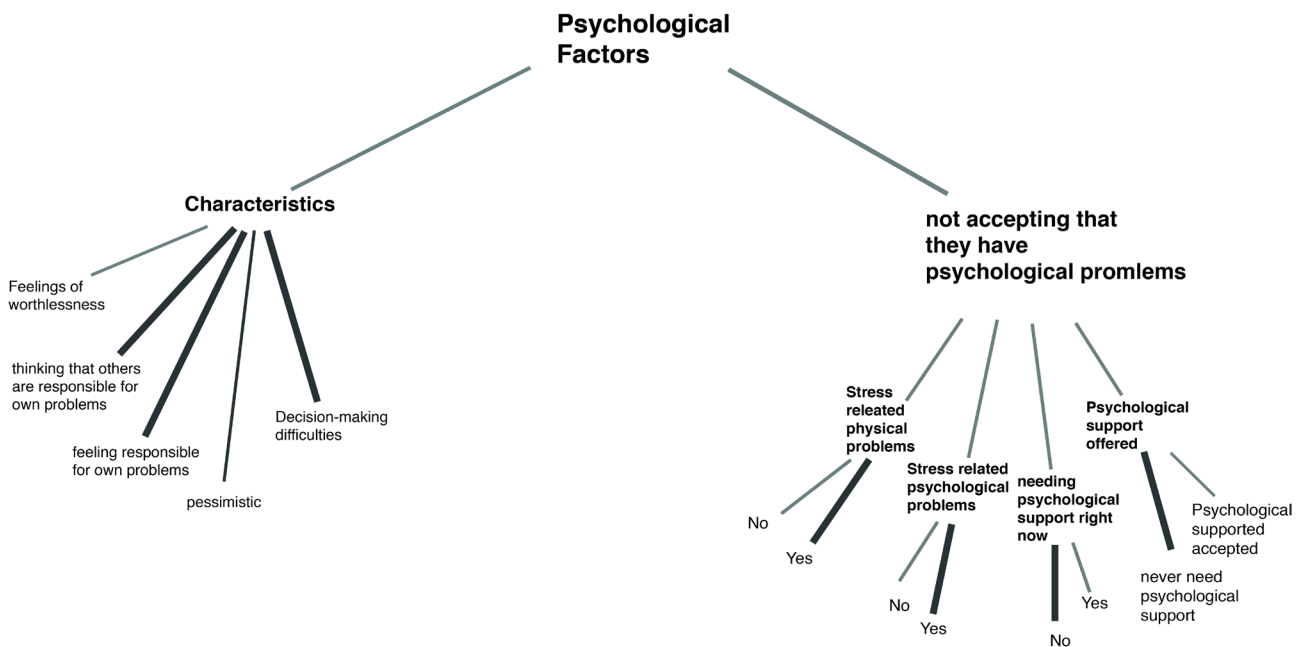

Figure 3. Psychological factors of probation.

that they did not need any psychological support, 87% of them were suffering from stress-related psychological problems and 81% from stress-related physical problems.

3.3. Social Factors

Four specific components emerged among the social factors as given in the answers of the students on probation (see **Figure 4**). They believed that they were not sharing common values with their fellow students. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) showed that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds may experience a certain discomfort because of feeling different from other students. In our study, 42% of probation students saw themselves as being different from their fellow students, and 40% would, given the chance to do so, choose other fellow students.

Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison (2013) and Plant, Ericsson, Hill, & Asberg (2005) had pointed out the influence of extracurricular activities pertaining to academic probation. In our study, extracurricular activities and family issues were also found to play a part in academic probation. Thus, a quarter of those probation students who were living away from their families admitted to being homesick. And although 64% of students on probation were living with fellow students, 81% would rather be living on their own if they could afford to do so as they said having issues with their roommates. Nevertheless 58% of probation students indicated that they shared their problems with friends.

3.4. Economic Factors

Finally, economic factors played an important role in academic probation. Employment, level of allowance, scholarship and financial support from family were taken into consideration (see **Figure 5**). Of the 87% of students on probation
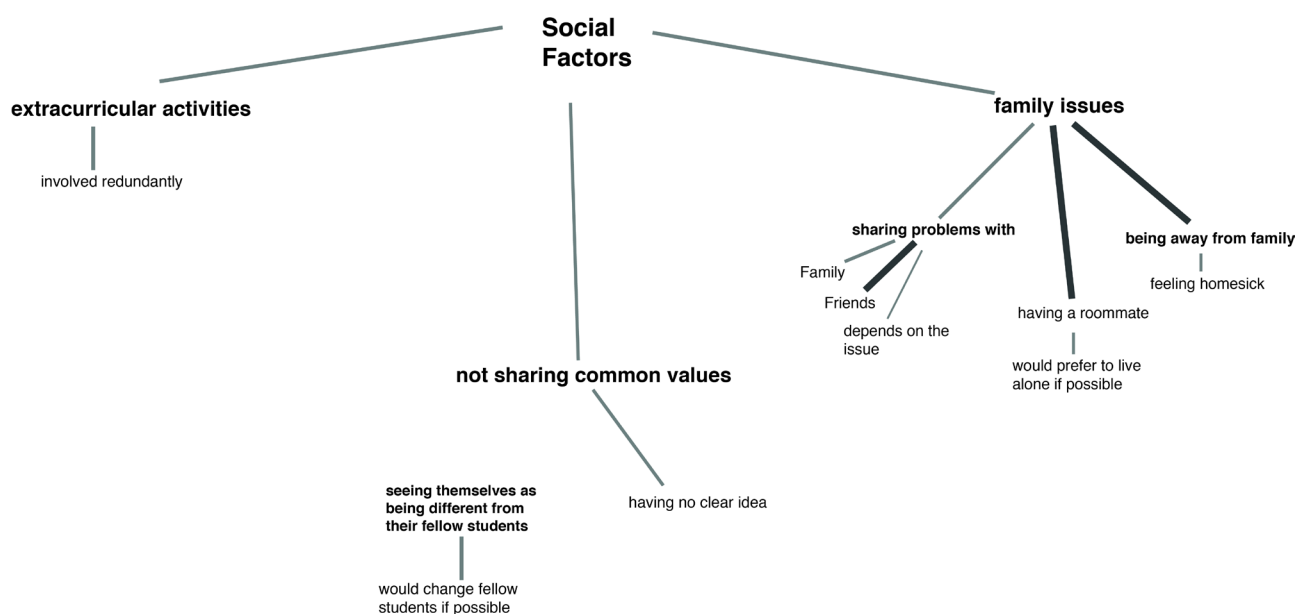

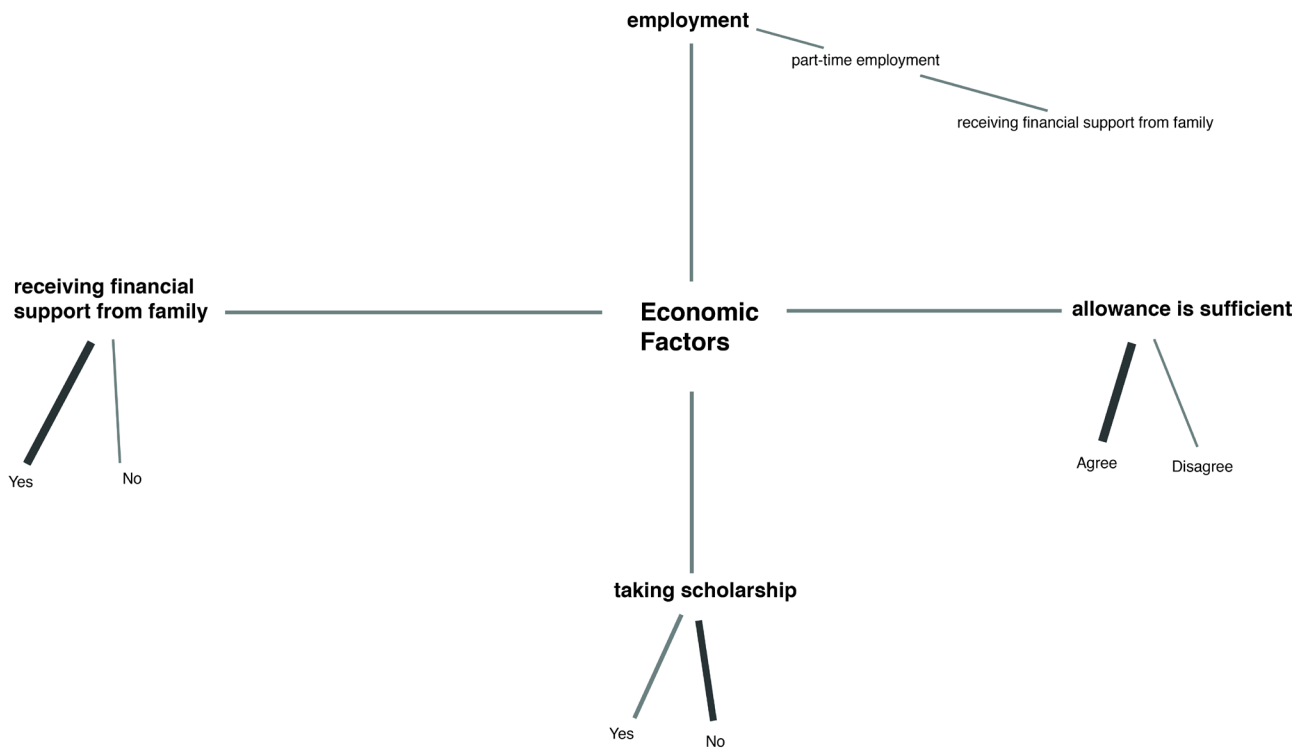**Figure 4.** Social factors of probation.

Figure 5. Economic factors of probation.

who were receiving financial support from their families, a quarter thought this was back-breaking for their families. 84% of probation students were satisfied with the level of their allowance, and 42% were part-time employees. And even though 87% of part-time employees were supported financially by their families, they thought that employment affected their scores negatively. Bodvarsson and Walker (2004) however found that students who received financial help from their families failed more courses than students who did not receive such support. Moreover, the likelihood of them falling into probation was higher than that of students who did not receive such help and their GPA were also lower. Finally, because of their low GPA, probation students were unable to take on a scholarship.

3.5. Probation Reasons from the Point of View of Probation Students

It is important to understand what students think in order to help them improve their performance and come out of academic probation. Hence, apart from those factors mentioned above, we also looked at the reasons given by students for academic probation (see Figure 6). Lack of discipline and laziness were the most frequently mentioned factors. Moreover, they singled out motivation and concentration problems as main factors for their failure. As already stated regarding the academic factors contributing to academic probation, students also emphasised lecturing styles and the degree of difficulty of courses (Smith & Winterbottom, 1970; Dunwoody & Frank, 1995). Even though lecturing styles and

Reasons from probation students' point of view

Professors' lecture styles an courses

Motivation and concentration problems
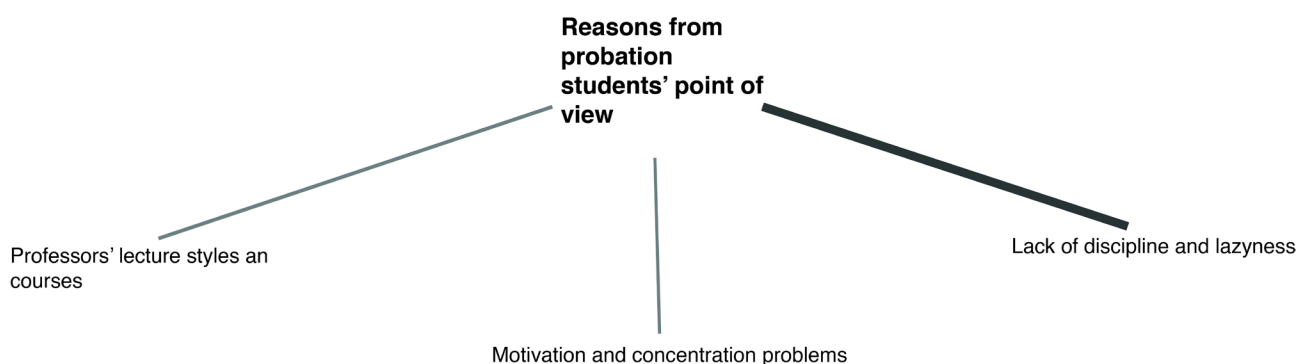
Lack of discipline and lazyness

Figure 6. Reasons for probation from probation students' point of view.

course requirements were put forth as reasons for poor academic performance by students on academic probation, the Trendence Graduate Barometer 2015 report on the ITU does not support this observation as the work of the academic staff was found to be a good performance indicator for the ITU.

The ITU Career Centre (ICC) recognised the necessity to motivate students to formulate a plan in order to improve their academic standing. Hence the ICC worked hard to raise the awareness of the university on the issue of academic probation. The ICC also looked into using existing tools in a more efficient way and put great effort into the development of new tools in order to achieve effective results in the prevention of students falling into academic probation.

4. Intervention Tools

4.1. Enhancing Existing Tools

4.1.1. Reorganising the ICC Team

People are the most valuable resource in any organisation as without motivated individuals no improvement or innovation is possible. Therefore, a first step was the reorganisation and strengthening of the ICC team. Now, the ITU Career Centre consists of 3 academics and 2 specialists, and 6 volunteer part-time student assistants. This team is now responsible for the provision of accurate career guidance to the ITU students through organisations such as the ITU Career Summit (ICS), specific company events, career counselling sessions and social media services. Those events are of the greatest importance as they show students that they can find a job or an internship even if they do not have a wide network of contacts. The ITU requires students to complete a minimum of 3 (2 for some departments) internships; this is very difficult for some students who have come from distant regions of Turkey and who are trying to get on in the metropolitan city that is Istanbul. The ICC puts great emphasis on "On the Campus Recruitment" (OCR) and holds a variety of events during the year with employers from the private and public sectors, as well as NGOs. To this end the ICC cooperates with student clubs, other universities, some high schools, legal authorities, various institutions and non-governmental organisations, etc. through networking and collaboration. Furthermore, an experienced expert in organising events was hired to help with the preparation of career fairs and in

communicating with businesses. Additionally, a psychologist specialised in human resources transferred from the private sector to the ICC as a career consultant. This psychologist knows exactly what companies expect from new graduates and helps students to meet those demands. Since the reorganisation of career centre, task management has become more efficient and the effectiveness of the ICC has increased dramatically.

4.1.2. Career Summit and Events

The ITU Career Centre is a bridge between students and business. Every year in the last week of February, it organises the biggest career summit of Eurasia with the aim to facilitate contact between students and employers. Companies arrange workshops, present case studies, set up interviews and accept job and internship applications. While in the past the ITU Career Summit happened in one place only, it has now been moved to nine different locations on several university campuses, thus giving more students the opportunity to attend the fair and to meet the world of business. In meetings with human resources specialists, students may come to realise that they must increase their GPA, that they must come up with a plan or several plans for life after graduation in order to find employment. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that students who struggle academically, greatly benefit from career planning assistance as it helps them to formulate goals. When organising the ICS, the ICC also involved the student clubs thus providing students with self-improvement opportunities in organising, planning, and communication skills. Moreover, this experience promotes bonding amongst fellow students as they share common interests, purposes and values. The ICS'16 was a huge success with the presence of 137 companies and with close to 30,000 students attending.

4.1.3. Online Services

Marketing of one's services and gaining recognition for one's work is crucial to improve one's efficiency. Here social media play an important part as the ICC has more than 165,000 followers on social media. In addition, the ICC relies on more traditional tools such as information bulletins and banners. Thus, the ICC can reach and inform more people, raise their awareness of its activities and inform them about new developments.

4.1.4. Career Counselling

Furthermore, the ITU Career Centre has a comprehensive offer in career counselling services to ITU students such as writing a job application letter, a CV, familiarising them with interview techniques as well as career counselling proper.

Students on probation were actively encouraged to take on the offer in counselling. They were informed that laziness and lack of discipline were not inborn and that they could choose to work hard. And if they did not know how to go about it, students on probation were given support in how to improve their study skills. Furthermore, students suffering from stress-related issues were di-

rected towards the ITU Psychological Counselling Services.

Those students at the Istanbul Technical University (ITU) who had won a scholarship because of their excellent performance in the university entrance exam, and who later lost it because of their poor academic performance and ended up on probation, were invited to go and see the Office of Scholarships to look for alternatives they could benefit from if their academic standing were to improve.

4.1.5. Other Forms of assistance

Absenteeism was one of the academic factors leading to probation. Students were encouraged to adjust their extracurricular activities to their workload and reminded that attending classes has a greater impact on their performance than self-study (Dolton, Marcenaro, & Navarro, 2003). Attending classes also promotes good communication between lecturers and students, and gives students the opportunity to debate course topics with their fellow students. The academics at the ITU also recommend that students should, if possible, not work in their freshman and sophomore years to prevent absenteeism.

Students on probation were incited to go and see their academic advisors to discuss their courses and life at university. Through career counselling, those students who were dissatisfied with their study choice could then be shown various alternatives, ranging from transferring to a different department to opting for different study programmes. If probation was related to having made an initial "bad" choice, these alternatives could broaden perspectives for these students.

4.2. Creating and Implementing New Tools

4.2.1. Web Portal

In today's world, a digital presence is a must. Seeing the need for an online platform early on, the ICC launched a web portal named the ITU career and Talent management (ITU-KAYS). This portal facilitates communication with students and allows the publication of announcements, internships and job opportunities for ITU students. Furthermore, students can also make an appointment with a career counsellor through ITU-KAYS. To date almost 200 employers and over 8000 students are registered as regular users on ITU-KAYS.

4.2.2. New Career Fair

In 2015 a new event named the National Engineering Career Fair (TUMKAF), was added to the long-established ICS. 66 companies were present with their booths at TUMKAF and 7530 engineering students and graduates from all over Turkey attended.

4.2.3. Setting up of Open Areas

A good study environment is instrumental to effective learning (Astin, 1984). With this concern in mind an existing hall was converted into a study room allowing those students who cannot study in their dormitory or their home to do

so in the best possible conditions. Finally, with the aim to promote greater socialising between students, the rectorate also agreed to the redevelopment of cafés and restaurants on ITU grounds.

4.2.4. Other Measures

ITU has a long-established reputation in engineering education in Turkey since 1773. Today it owns 6 technoparks under the name of ARI Teknokent where more than 200 Research & Development projects are carried out, thus providing many openings for ITU students such as internships, project works, and part-time or full-time job opportunities. ARI Teknokent also offers via the ITU Seed start-up and entrepreneur ecosystem financial support to many ITU students who have creative and innovative ideas. In this regard, beyond an engineering education of the highest quality, the ITU ARI Teknokent also presents students with opportunities to realise their own innovative ideas through projects.

One of the reasons why students fall into probation originates in the decisions they make at high school on what and where to study. It is therefore important to highlight the ongoing developments implemented by the ICC on career and talent management. A master degree programme and a certificate programme have been elaborated and a graduate programme will accept applications from prospective students this fall. The certificate programme has been offered twice and attracted considerable attention. Its objective is to provide career counsellors with academic qualifications of a high standard. The ICC believes that these counsellors will ultimately be in a very good position to help students to make "better" decisions regarding universities, study fields, and ultimately also occupational choices.

5. Conclusion

These efforts brought about great rewards. The rate of academic probation fell from 23.46% to 17.08% (ITU Dean of Student and Registrar's Office, 2014, 2016). According to the Universum Talent Research (2015), 85% of ITU students use one or more of the ICC career services on offer to great satisfaction. Furthermore, ITU students show a keener interest in career fairs where they can meet prospective employers than students from other universities. Finally, Trendence (2015) indicates that the ITU career services are amongst the best there are.

Heisserer and Parette (2002) underlined that the development and implementation of a successful intervention programme that supports students in reinstating good academic standing are both challenging and rewarding. This is partially because the responsibility does not lie with the counsellors and institutions only (Ahmed, Chowdhury, Rahman and Talukder, 2014) as the primary responsibility rightly lies with the students. They must be motivated to come out of academic probation and willing to cooperate as otherwise none of these efforts will have any impact.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise that in our study we took only a single instant photo of academic probation at ITU. What we need to do now is to create a photo album to look at the situation at other universities and to identify possible differences and similarities. Moreover, our sample did not include any students with good academic standing. Their views on probation might offer different perspectives leading to further studies. Such an approach could also lead to the elaboration of a mentorship programme, matching probation students with academically successful ones.

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