

## DETAINED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY ON THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS FACTORS

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### Abstract

High rates of recidivism and prison overcrowding are urgent critical issues that demand to be explored and managed, possible solutions are then worthy of attention. Correctional education is associated with a reduction of recidivism rates, as well as with other personal benefits, both from individual and social standpoint; it is then necessary to understand which factors promote its success.

The main purposes of this research were to describe the study experience of 28 students from the penitentiary center of the Milano-Bicocca University and to identify some factors of their academic success. A questionnaire has been administered, which includes both ad hoc descriptive questions related to personal and academic experiences and psychometric scales measuring Academic Self-Efficacy, Academic Motivation and Academic Resilience; the original scales have been modified to fit the correctional context. Descriptive results picture an extremely complex situation regarding participants' current and past academic experiences. Despite this complexity, some aspects yielding better academic and social outcomes have been found, especially high social support as well as recent participation in correctional education programs. Regarding the analysis of the psychometric scales, there were just few significant correlations, among which the ones between Academic Resilience and two of the academic outcomes, i.e. Dropout Intentions and Academic Satisfaction. It is then necessary to deepen the exploration of both the theoretical models and the academic success indicators to be used.

The detained university students who participated in this study show some different characteristics from the general inmate population in Italy; this suggests that university study could affect prison experience. It is then important to further explore this type of education and its success factors in order to promote a positive prison experience and the reduction of recidivism.

**Keywords:** *Recidivism reduction, correctional education, university, academic success.*

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years in Italy, even if crimes are decreasing, recidivism rate is increasing, reaching 62% (Antigone, 2022); this emergency calls for the individuation of possible solutions. Correctional education has shown its efficacy in reducing recidivism (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders e Miles, 2013); considering the low levels of education of the Italian detained population (80.2% of detained people have not an high school diploma - Antigone, 2022) we think this theme is worthy of attention. That's why we decided to explore the experience of university detained students, investigating possible academic success factors.

There are few studies focused on tertiary correctional education and they mostly use qualitative methodologies. It emerges that, beyond the reduction of recidivism, college allows detained people to grow up and develop themselves (Fine et al., 2001) but it also favors Self-Efficacy and Resilience (Spark and Harris, 2005). From a social point of view, attending college can help detained people to rebuild the relationships with their families, for whom their university experience is particularly relevant (Fine et al., 2001); it also helps to build new relationships (Pelletier and Evans, 2019). If these programs are so important what is needed is to understand how they work and what promotes their success.

In recent years researchers have focused on the psychosocial factors that affect academic success, among which Motivation and Self-Efficacy stand out (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley e Carlstrom, 2004), together with other dimensions such as Resilience (Cassidy, 2015). Other factors that we consider interesting referring to the correctional context and that have been identified as academic success factors are Social Support (Schneider and Preckel, 2017) and Educational Background (Richardson, Abraham and Bond, 2012). We did not find any investigation specifically focused on detained students' academic success.

## 2. Aims

Trying to address the scarcity of literature on tertiary correctional education and especially on its success factors, the study aimed to explore the experience of university detained students, using a sample of 28 detained people enrolled at the University of Milano-Bicocca. We wanted to describe the individual, contextual and relational aspects of their study experience and to investigate the relation between them and academic and social outcomes, in particular exploring the role of Educational Background and Social Support. Finally we aimed to analyze the association between academic outcomes and some of the psychosocial factors proposed by the literature on academic success: Motivation, Self-Efficacy and Resilience.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Questionnaire and measures

Participants filled in a paper questionnaire consisting of 89 close questions. The first part investigates: socio-demographic information, detention characteristics, outside and inside educational background, university experience, outside social networks, social support, academic and social outcomes. Academic outcomes comprehend: a measure of performance (ratio between ECTS actually achieved and the ones expected), n. of interruptions, delay in studies, academic satisfaction and dropout intentions. Social outcomes comprehend: the level of importance of being a student for themselves and for others and the enlargement of their social networks.

The second part of the questionnaire measures the following psychosocial factors :

- Academic Self-Efficacy: 3-items scale inspired by the one proposed by Nielsen et al. (2018);  $\alpha = .80$ .
- Academic Motivation: 4-items scale inspired by the one proposed by Alivernini e Lucidi (2008);  $\alpha = .63$ .
- Academic Resilience: 9-items scale inspired by the one proposed by Cassidy (2016);  $\alpha = .60$ .

### 3.2. Participants

Among the 40 detained students of the University of Milano-Bicocca, 28 could have been reached and participated in the present study, 14 of them are detained in the Milano-Opera Prison and 13 in the Milano-Bollate Prison, 1 is now living in a therapeutic community. They are all men and they are on average 45 years old ( $SD = 10.29$ ;  $ME = 46$ ), there are just 4 foreign people in the sample.

### 3.3. Analyses

Both the descriptive and correlational analyses have been carried out using the statistical software SPSS (Version 28). To run the correlation analyses, considering the small sample size and the non-normal distribution of the variables, we used the non parametric test of Spearman's Rho. To investigate the role of the two academic success factors, i.e. Previous Correctional Education and Social Support, we clustered the sample according to the presence/absence of the variable in the former case and the low/high level of the variable in the latter; then we ran the differentiated descriptive analyses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Individual, contextual and relational aspects of the experience of detained students

Individual aspects: participants are serving long sentences, 10 of them have been sentenced to life imprisonment and the others have, on average, received 14.09 years sentences ( $SD = 8.60$ ;  $ME = 10$ ) and already served 9.86 years ( $SD = 8.14$ ;  $ME = 8$ ); recidivism rate is 32.1%.

Relating to previous education, 53.6% of the participants already had a high school diploma before the arrest, while the others achieved it through correctional education. Outside education has been characterized by various forms of irregularity, among the respondents 17.9% declare to have stopped their education and then started again, 17.9% have changed school and 42.9% have failed at least once. 53.6% of the participants achieved at least one school qualification inside prison and among them 17.9% of the respondents have stopped their education and then started again but no one failed.

On average participants have been enrolled at University for 3.28 years ( $SD = 2.7$ ;  $ME = 2$ ), they consider it difficult (on a 5 points likert scale  $M = 4.21$ ;  $SD = 0.69$ ;  $ME = 4$ ) but they feel quite able to

handle it (M = 3.82; SD = 0.86; ME = 4). They devote no more than half a day to study, just one of them declares to study more than 4 hours.

**Contextual aspects:** 25% of the participants live in a high security regime (mafia-related prisoners) and 32.1% don't benefit from any type of permission or alternative measure, both conditions that make imprisonment even harder. Relating to current study experience, 85.7% of them declare to study inside their cells and the same amount complain about too much noise that makes it difficult to concentrate.

**Relational aspects:** participants seem to have good social networks outside prison, all of them mentioned at least someone (parents, brothers/sisters, partner, children, friends or other people) when asked about who is part of it. The most important source of educational, organizational or personal help seems to be the University (85.7%) but participants also rely on other detained students (39.3% mentioned them).

#### 4.2. Academic and social outcomes

**Academic outcomes** are mixed: performance on average is low (from 0 to 1 M = 0.22; SD = 0.28; ME = 0.13); the average grade is 24.53/30 (SD = 2.23). Among participants, 57.1% have stopped and then resumed their studies and 35.7% are lagging. Participants seem to be quite satisfied with their university experience so far (5 points likert scale, M = 3.41; SD = 1.1; ME = 3.5); 75% have never seriously considered dropping out of university.

**Social outcomes** are generally positive, since participants generally consider it important to be students (5 points likert scale, M = 4.29; SD = 0.85; ME = 5) and 75% of them feel it is the same for close people; 75% of them consider their social network enlarged after the beginning of university.

#### 4.3. Psychosocial factors and relations with academic outcomes

Results show (Table 1) the average levels of psychosocial factors and the correlations between them and academic outcomes. Academic Motivation is unexpectedly negatively correlated with Grades Average, while higher Resilience is associated with lower Dropout intentions and higher Academic Satisfaction, both aspects that could characterize a positive study experience. All the other correlations were not significant.

Table 1. Psychosocial Variables' Levels and Correlations with Academic Outcomes.

Psychosocial Variables	Levels	Significant correlations with Academic Outcomes
Academic Self-Efficacy (1 to 15 score)	M = 12.13; SD = 2.18	no significant correlations
Academic Motivation (-9 to 9 score)	M = 2.68; SD = 2.71	rs = -.542; p < .05; with Grades Average
Academic Resilience (5 to 45 score)	M = 33.96; SD = 4.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rs = -.487; p &lt; .01; with Dropout Intentions</li> <li>• rs = .399; p &lt; .05; with Academic Satisfaction</li> </ul>

#### 4.4. Role of previous correctional education and social support

The outcomes that appear more influenced by the presence vs. absence of previous correctional education and by the low vs. high level of perceived social support are presented in the following tables (Table 2; Table 3):

Table 2. Academic and Social Outcomes according to Absence/Presence of Previous Correctional Education.

	NO previous correctional education (N = 12)	Previous correctional education (N = 15)
<b>Performance (from 0 to 1)</b>	M = 0.18; SD = 0.27; ME = 0.03	M = 0.26; SD = 0.3; ME = 0.13
<b>Interruptions (n)</b>	6 (50%)	11 (73.3%)
<b>Role importance for others (n)</b>	9 (75%)	11 (73.3%)
<b>Enlargement of social networks (n)</b>	8 (66.7%)	12 (80%)

Table 3. Academic and Social Outcomes according Low/High Perceived Social Support.

	Low support (N = 16)	High support (N = 12)
<b>Performance (from 0 to 1)</b>	M = 0.17; SD = 0.25; ME = 0.06	M = 0.29; SD = 0.32; ME = 0.15
<b>Interruptions (n)</b>	10 (62.5%)	6 (50%)
<b>Role importance for themselves</b>	M = 4.13; SD = 0.89; ME = 4	M = 4.5; SD = 0.8; ME = 5
<b>Role importance for others (n)</b>	10 (62.5%)	11 (91.7%)
<b>Enlargement of social networks (n)</b>	11 (68.8%)	10 (83.3%)

Participants with previous Correctional Education show better performances, more irregular paths and better social outcomes. Participants who perceive to have more Social Support report better performances, more regular paths and better social outcomes.

## 5. Discussion

Who do we refer to if we talk about University detained students? Analyzing the study experience of 28 prisoners enrolled at the University of Milano-Bicocca, we aimed to describe this particular situation. It emerged that our sample is partially different from the general Italian detained population described by Antigone (2022): they are older, for the most part Italians and they present longer sentences. Participants also entered prison with a higher level of education, in fact half of them already had a high school diploma while the others achieved it through correctional education, this together with the lower recidivism rate is interesting if we think about the relation between education and the reduction of recidivism (Davis et al., 2013).

Studying is not always easy, for example a lot of participants study in their cells and almost everyone complains about the difficulty to concentrate, in addition they do not spend more than half a day studying. These aspects can affect detained students' performance, which is not optimal. Still, participants feel able to cope with University and they are quite satisfied about their results, this could mean that there are aspects they care more about than performance. From a relational perspective, participants describe good social networks and they feel supported, especially from the University; this could be related to the generally positive social outcomes. Social outcomes results are consistent with the literature about the importance of University experience for detained students' families (Fine et al., 2001) and the enlargement of social networks that it favours (Pellettier and Evans, 2019).

Looking for possible factors of academic success we carried out correlation analyses between some psychosocial factors and academic outcomes but results were not completely satisfactory. The only variable that seems to be related with a better university experience is Academic Resilience, associated with lower Dropout Intentions and higher Academic Satisfaction. This data is consistent with the literature about the importance of resilience for detained students (Sparks and Harris, 2005). The unexpected negative relation between Academic Motivation and Grades Average, together with the great amount of non-significant correlations could suggest two main observations: (i) we may need to elaborate more adequate scales to measure psychosocial academic success among detained people and (ii) we should reflect on which academic success' indicators really reflect the motivations of detained students.

Having participated in Correctional Education and perceiving more Social Support seem to be associated with better academic and, above all, social outcomes. This could suggest that previous correctional education could offer a good academic preparation but also positively affect the social impact of university. Social support seems to favor academic outcomes, consistently with the literature on academic success factors (Richardson, Abraham and Bond, 2012) and the social ones, stressing the importance of this aspect for detained students.

## 6. Conclusion and future directions

Current study has investigated the topic of university studies in prison through the exploration of the study experience of 28 detained university students. Participants' educational levels are higher and recidivism rate is lower than the general detained population, they also claim to have good social networks and to feel supported, in addition social outcomes are generally positive. It is possible that these aspects are

related to the impact of university studies, as the literature suggests, but to verify it we need a larger sample in order to test these hypotheses.

Study conditions are not optimal and this could affect the performances and we think it is important that university detained students are put in the proper study conditions (eg. comfortable and silent spaces). University staff, since it is considered the main source of support, should monitor and improve these aspects.

There were few significant correlations between psychosocial factors and academic outcomes and just one of them was coherent with the literature on academic success. This is in part due to the small sample but it could also mean that existing models are not adequate for correctional context, both in terms of predictors and indicators. An aspect that could be better used both as an indicator or predictor is Academic Satisfaction, since it does not seem to be linked to performance but it is related to Academic Resilience. Other two dimensions that seem to have a role in the experience of detained university students are Previous Correctional Education and Social Support, this underlines the importance of promoting the participation of detained people in educational programs and building supportive relationships in and out of prison.

This research has many methodological limitations, first of all the small sample size, together with the fact that the original psychosocial scales have been modified. The explorative and descriptive approach did not allow the models to be tested but it provided the basis for further reflection. Using larger samples and different methodologies, qualitative ones included, we need to design theoretical models able to grasp the peculiarities of correctional education; it will be then possible to understand what promotes its success and which benefits these programs could bring to detained people but also to the entire society in terms of reduction of recidivism.

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