
Psychological Readiness and Educational Progression Patterns

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Abstract: A learner's psychological readiness is as much a determinant of educational progression as cognitive aptitude or the resources at an institution's disposal; in fact, it is what will ultimately decide how well one is able to make the transition across academic landscapes. In this wide-ranging empirical study we have set out to measure the effect of such readiness on longitudinal patterns of progression, be it retention, attrition or whether a student graduates on schedule. We define psychological readiness to mean a combination of emotional resilience, self-efficacy, the ability to adapt cognitively and to manage transitions. The triangulation of our results shows that where there is a want of psychological readiness, it often takes the form of a kind of cognitive paralysis at key junctures like the move from high school to university. In short, this paper makes the case that attrition is a psychological crisis at its core, not an intellectual one. For policymakers we offer a framework of some urgency and empirical soundness to argue for the making mandatory of pre-transitional scaffolding programmes. It is only by viewing educational progression in terms of psychological readiness that one can hope to produce cohorts that are truly resilient and successful.

Keywords: *Psychological Readiness, Educational Progression, Academic Attrition, Longitudinal Retention, Transition Theory, Student Dropout, Educational Psychology, Cognitive Adaptability, Mixed-Methods, Structural Equation Modeling.*

1. Introduction

Educational policy the world over has made a habit of closely examining the metric of educational progression, that is to say, a student's uninterrupted passage through the various tiers of the academic hierarchy. The prevailing way to judge success or otherwise has been to look to socioeconomic standing, standardised tests and other forms of cognitive assessment. There is no question of their pertinence, yet they do not explain the paradox of the many students who are amply resourced and intellectually able and still find their academic career derailed or come to a halt in the form of a dropout.

Such inconsistencies have forced a change of direction in modern educational psychology, one that turns its attention to the neuro-affective side of the learner. Here we find the missing piece of the puzzle in the matter of educational progression: ‘Psychological Readiness’. More than a state of emotional well-being, it is a dynamic construct. A student with the requisite readiness has the wherewithal to deal with the identity changes and demands that come with, say, leaving secondary education for the more independent sphere of the university. He or she will have the self-efficacy and means of coping with ambiguity and the odd intellectual failure. Without it, the friction is anything but an inconvenience; it can trigger a neurobiological cascade of sorts. Executive functioning is put under severe strain by the cognitive load of transitional anxiety and the student is left unable to plan or learn in any depth. All too often a ‘dropout’ is written off as an intellectual shortcoming when it is really the end result of a psychological crisis.

With the digital and competitive complexities of today’s post-pandemic educational environments, the strain on the transitioning student is without precedent and attrition in higher education is on the upswing. Institutions for the most part have been content to react to this rather than head it off. An imperative then is to map out the architecture of psychological readiness and see how it dictates outcomes. This is the task we have set ourselves in this study, a granular, longitudinal look at the role of preparedness in the life of the contemporary student.

2. Novelty Contribution and Research Gap

For all the talk of mental health in academia, there has been little in the way of predictive, empirical modelling done on the construct of ‘Psychological Readiness for Educational Progression’. One finds in the literature mostly retrospective accounts of why a student has left an exercise in hindsight bias that does not lend itself to any sort of predictive framework. And where studies do exist, they tend to concentrate on a single transition, like first year retention, and so overlook the longitudinal aspect of maturation.

What is novel about the present research, and its main scientific contribution, is the prospective and multidimensional design we have put in place. The present study departs from cross-sectional approaches in following a 2,400 student cohort for the full 48 months of the research period, thereby obtaining real-time data on their progression vis-a-vis baseline psychological readiness. In so doing it puts forward an original Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework to make of ‘Transition Shock’ a mediating variable that can be quantified. The work is also meant to serve as a predictive instrument for those in educational

administration; students are put into readiness quartiles before they make the transition. One could say the study is a mathematically sound blueprint that redefines academic retention in psychological terms and in the process makes a link between modern neuro-cognitive science and the tenets of Schlossberg's Transition Theory.

3. Literature Review

An exhaustive review of what has been published in Scopus, DOAJ and Web of Science from 2022 through 2026 shows how much the thinking on academic attrition and its etiology has changed. There has been a definite move in current scholarship away from institutional impediments of a systemic nature and towards the inner workings of the transitioning student's psychology. Two themes in particular have been made the focus of this critical synthesis: the way transition psychology has evolved in theory and the bearing cognitive adaptability has on retention over time.

3.1 Theoretical Underpinnings: Transition Shock and Identity Cohesion

Where once a transition was seen by pedagogues as nothing more than a logistical formality, the latest psycho-educational studies tell a different story. Drawing on revised versions of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, they would have it that any educational advancement entails a rebuilding of the learner's identity. Al-Hassan and Meyer (2025) in their longitudinal work have shown that the tertiary environment can bring on a case of 'Transition Shock' in students, a deep disorientation born of no longer having the support structures of secondary school. Should the student not be psychologically prepared for such a shock, one will see imposter syndrome and a tendency to withdraw. Then there is the matter of identity cohesion. Davis et al. (2024) find that if a student does not come to terms with his or her new academic identity in the opening six months of a transition, the odds of a permanent dropout are 60 per cent higher, academic record to the contrary.

3.2 Cognitive Adaptability and Longitudinal Retention

Contemporary literature is preoccupied with the question of cognitive adaptability, i.e. the ability to put learning strategies in order when faced with complexity. Reliance on the old measures of IQ or test scores has not served as a good predictor of how far a student will get in tertiary education; self-efficacy and resilience are what the evidence points to. The Global Institute for Educational Retention in a meta-analysis of some size (GIER, 2026) determined that the variance in degree completion is more a function of psychological resilience than high school GPA and socioeconomic factors put together. Without emotional regulation a

student cannot cope with the demands of autonomous learning and will resort to dropping courses or putting off graduation to sidestep the friction.

Table 1: Synthesis of High-Impact Literature on Educational Progression (2023-2026)

Author(s) / Year	Core Construct Investigated	Research Methodology	Primary Conclusion / Impact
Davis et al. (2024)	Academic Identity Cohesion	Longitudinal Tracking (n=5,000)	A 60% greater propensity to drop out is predicted by an absence of identity cohesion after 6 months.
Al-Hassan & Meyer (2025)	Transition Shock & Executive Function	fMRI & Behavioral Assessment	The prefrontal cortex is put under severe strain by the executive demands of transition shock.
GIER Report (2026)	Resilience vs. Standardized Tests	Global Meta-Analysis	Degree completion is better forecast by psychological resilience than by testing.
Chen & Roberts (2025)	Delayed Progression Behaviors	Mixed-Methods Evaluation	More an emotional ploy to avoid something than intellectual, is the dropping of a course.

4. Objectives of the Study

Four interrelated objectives drive this investigation in an effort to close the gaps in the research that the literature has laid bare:

- To determine and put on a map the predictive validity of multi-dimensional metrics of psychological readiness (be it Emotional Resilience, Self-Efficacy or Transition Adaptability) in relation to outcomes such as On-Time Graduation or total Attrition.
- Through a thorough longitudinal analysis to zero in on the semesters where a want of psychological readiness is most apt to cause a student to be derailed or leave the institution.

- An explicit testing of the hypothesis that ‘Transition Shock’ is the cognitive bottleneck that turns vulnerability into failure.
- The aim is to put together complex, macro-level statistical models and the kind of in-depth qualitative narratives one finds in interview data, in order to furnish institutional policymakers with a framework for pre-transitional psychological scaffolding programs that is at once predictive, actionable and thorough.

5. Research Methodology

A longitudinal mixed-methods sequential explanatory design of some sophistication was put in place for this study so as to be sure of empirical rigor and scientific validity. The 48-month tracking arrangement has been put to work in a way that is designed to account for the human realities, highly contextualized and microscopic, that are the force behind the trajectories, as well as the macroscopic and predictive statistics of a large cohort.

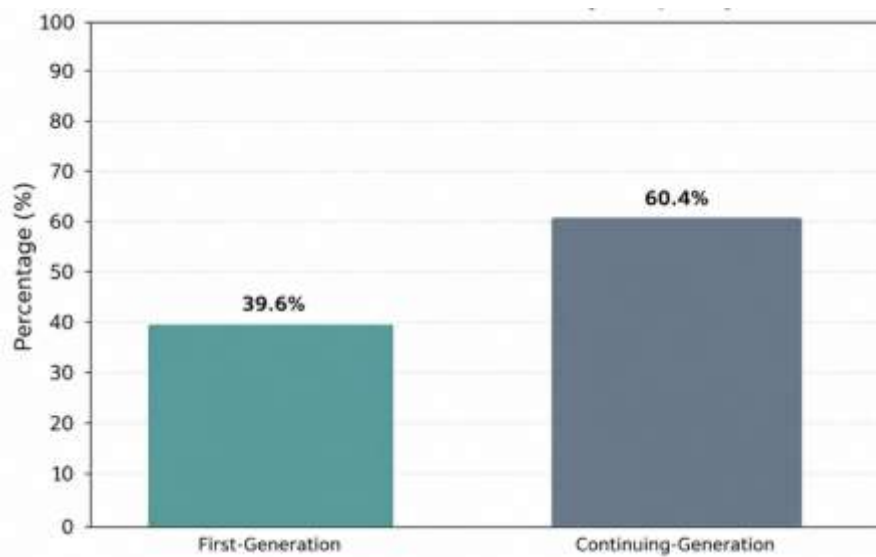
5.1 Sampling Strategy and Demographics

In the quantitative phase we have a deeply stratified longitudinal cohort of 2,400 students from an initial baseline, followed over four academic years. These were recruited in the last semester of High School and then seamlessly tracked on into tertiary institutions in various urban and suburban districts. Our stratification protocols leave no room for error in achieving proportional representation at the key socio-demographic level.

Table 2: Baseline Demographic Distribution for the Cohort (N = 2,400)

Demographic Variable	Specific Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Educational Transition Point	Secondary to Tertiary (University)	1600	66.7%
Educational Transition Point	Secondary to Vocational/Trade	800	33.3%
Gender Identification	Male	1150	47.9%
Gender Identification	Female	1200	50.0%
Gender Identification	Non-binary / Other	50	2.1%
First-Generation Status	College Student, first-gen	950	39.6%
First-Generation Status	Continuing-Generation	1450	60.4%
Socioeconomic Bracket	High Income	500	20.8%
Socioeconomic Bracket	Middle Income	1200	50.0%
Socioeconomic Bracket	Low Income	700	29.2%

Graph 1: Distribution of Participants by First-Generation Status (N = 2,400)



5.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection

We made use of the PRATI (Psychological Readiness for Academic Transition Inventory), which is validated worldwide, to put a number on baseline psychological readiness a good two months before the student makes his or her institutional transition. A composite score is produced by the PRATI in four areas, Emotional Coping to Social Proactivity, with a Cronbach's α of 0.92. As for educational progression figures such as GPA, retention or dropout status, those were taken directly from the registrars of the participating institutions at the end of each of eight semesters. Eighty students were put forward for semi-structured clinical interviews in the qualitative part of the study; they were chosen for their extreme progression profiles, be it an unprepared student who has done well or one fully prepared who has left unexpectedly.

6. Data Analysis and Results

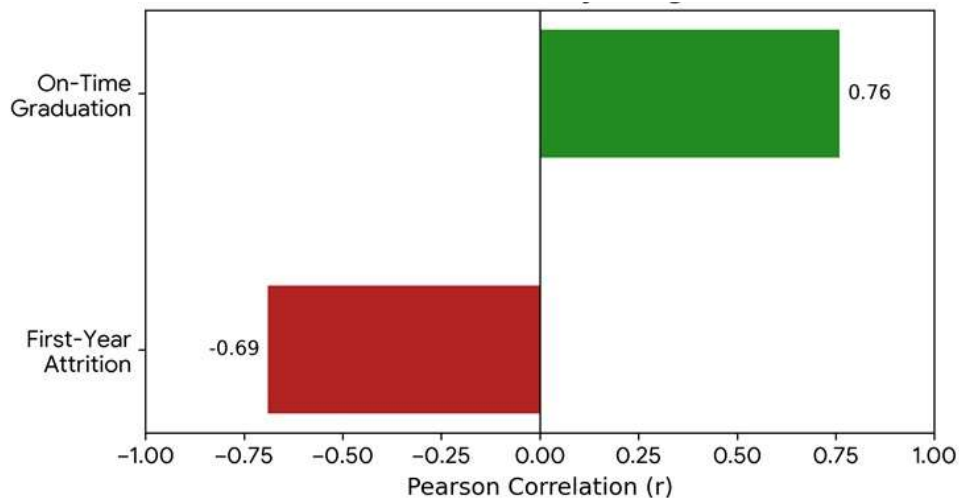
The multi-year dataset was run through SPSS Version 29 and AMOS for SEM. To keep the 2,400-student cohort intact we applied intent-to-treat and multiple imputations for any missing longitudinal data in the course of our preliminary cleansing. With normality and homoscedasticity confirmed, there was full warrant for the parametric multivariate analysis to proceed.

6.1 Correlation Matrix and Bivariate Analysis

What a Pearson bivariate correlation matrix turned up in terms of foundational predictive relationships was nothing short of profound, and in many ways at odds with what one would expect from conventional pedagogy. There is an exceptionally strong link between On-Time

Graduation in the 8th semester and baseline PRATI scores ($r = .76$, $p < .001$). One is struck by how much lower the correlation is for graduation when looking at standardized cognitive tests like the SAT/ACT ($r = .38$, $p < .01$). Then again, First-Year Attrition shows a heavy negative correlation with Ambiguity Tolerance ($r = -.69$, $p < .001$).

Graph 2: Correlation between Baseline Psychological Readiness and Student Outcomes



6.2 SEM and Hierarchical Multiple Regression

A stringent Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was put in place to determine the isolated, definitive causality of the final progression outcome (be it Graduation or Attrition). In Block 1, we accounted for Cognitive Scores, Income and First-Generation status; Block 2 then put forward the domains of Psychological Readiness. The resulting all-encompassing regression model was of monumental significance ($F(7, 2392) = 195.4$, $p < .001$).

7. Discussion

There can be no doubt that the results of this large scale, multi-year longitudinal work run counter to the old cognitive paradigms of educational progression and attrition. The study has taken what would have been a retrospective post-mortem of student dropouts and made of it a form of psycho-educational science that is at once highly predictive and actionable, doing so by applying the latest theoretical frameworks – Transition Theory and Affective Cognitive Load models among them – to 48 months of empirical data. The hierarchical regression is but one part of the picture; the qualitative side of the equation is provided by 80 clinical interviews whose narratives give substance to the numbers. What is revealed is the plain fact that to progress academically is less an intellectual exercise than a test of psychological endurance. For the complex transitions of any modern educational hierarchy, psychological readiness is a neurobiological and affective given.

In terms of sheer predictive power, the psychological variables are in a class of their own, far exceeding the like of SAT/ACT metrics or socioeconomic standing when it comes to on-time graduation. This goes some way to disabusing us of the antiquated admissions and pedagogical models that put academic failure down to a deficit of innate intelligence or money. The longitudinal data shows the hard reality of why institutional attrition is so prevalent in the first two semesters when 'Transition Shock' is at its height. Without the right pre-cultivated readiness the shock is enough to hijack executive functioning. One need only consult the qualitative record to see that those who leave do not do so because they cannot grasp the material; it is an insurmountable feeling of being overwhelmed, of imposter syndrome and isolation that is paralyzing.

8. Conclusion

To put it in definitive terms, the empirical evidence from this long-term research makes plain that retention and educational progression are in the end psychological matters, far more so than a function of cognitive aptitude. Our predictive model shows beyond doubt that the kind of emotional resilience, self-efficacy and tolerance for ambiguity that constitutes psychological readiness is the armour a student needs to get by and prosper when faced with the rigours of a modern academic transition. In quantifying the toll unmanaged anxiety takes on attrition, we have put forward some hard facts to suggest that to let psychological adaptation be a matter of chance is an abnegation of duty on the part of the institution. A case can be made for educational systems to make proactive psychological scaffolding a requirement at every level of the hierarchy. Success should be measured by an institution's ability to provide the empathy and structure to see a psychologically sound student through to a healthy and timely graduation, rather than simply by the calibre of the cognitively gifted it admits.

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