تقويم وقياس فاعلية إجراءات القبول في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية وآدابها في جامعة دمشق

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الملخص:

تستند صناعة القرار في الإطار الأكاديمي هو عملية تستند على النتائج البحثية في غالب الأحيان للحصول على النتائج المثلى. قد تتضمن هذه القرارات على سبيل المثال لا الحصر المواد المقررة وأساليب التقييم وطرائق التدريس وإجراءات القبول. تسعى جميع المؤسسات الاكاديمية لتصميم أدوات مبنية على معايير محددة تتسم بالعدالة والمساواة. تم اعتماد امتحان القبول لقسم اللغة الإنكليزية في العام الدراسي 2019-2020. انطلاقاً من الرغبة الدائمة بالتطوير وتقويم وقياس نتائج اعتماد هذا الامتحان عمل الباحث للإجابة عن سؤالين: ماهي التعديلات الممكن اجرائها لامتحان القبول؟ وهل يعتبر الامتحان الحالي فعالاً؟ استخدم الباحث بيانات إحصائية من قسمي الإحصاء والامتحانات في كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية إضافةً لتحليل الاتجاهات للإجابة عن أسئلة البحث. أظهرت القيم الإحصائية أن امتحان القبول المستخدم حالياً ساهم بتقليل عدد الطلاب في القسم ولكن لم يؤثر على نسب الرسوب في السنة الأولى. بالنسبة لتحليل الاتجاهات في بعض كليات ومعاهد جامعة دمشق تم اقتراح عدة نماذج (نموذج السنة التحضيرية ونموذج HIBA المعهد العالي لإدارة الاعمال ونموذج مبني على عدة مراحل ونموذج انتقائي). كما تم تقديم بعض الاقتراحات الممكنة للأبحاث المستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية، تقويم، قياس، فاعلية، إجراءات القبول.

Assessing and Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Admission Procedures of the Department of English Language and Literature in Damascus University

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Abstract:

Academic decision making is often based on research results in order to optimize the effectiveness of the choices made. Such decisions could possibly include but are not limited to the modules taught, assessment procedures, teaching methods, and admission procedures. All academic institutions aspire to create perfect instruments for a fair, equal, and criteria-based admission. The admission test for the Department of English language and literature was first used in the academic year 2019. However, there is always a desire to improve the procedures and evaluate what is currently at use. This research investigated two questions: What are the possible adjustments that could be made for the admission exam? and to what extent is the current entry exam effective? The researcher used statistics collected from the statistics and exams departments in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Damascus University and trend analysis to answer the research questions. The statistics showed that the currently used admission test did help in decreasing the number of learners accepted in the Faculty but it did not affect the percentage of those who fail the first year. After analyzing the on-going trends in some Faculties and Institutions in Damascus University, several models that could improve the admission process have been suggested such as: a preparatory year, the HIBA model, a multi-staged admission test, and an eclectic model. Finally, future research recommendations were made in order to highlight other aspects that need to be investigated.

Introduction:

Delivering high quality education is the prime aim of any department in an academic Faculty. This could be developed by choosing the ideal modules, teaching material, and teaching methodology that would reflect the vision, and the targets of all stakeholders. In various universities in Syria, different admission procedures are used in order to ensure that students who enroll in a certain department fit the criteria in mind. The admission criteria and effect are of great interest to many researchers.

Oktar (2022) suggested an exam free random selection based on high school General Point Average (GPA). This could be done by incorporating a 'lottery coefficient' that is based on school GPA, class GPA and class ranking. The method researched allowed learners with higher success to have higher coefficient. However, having students being selected based on a lottery coefficient would render all previous 12 years of school education less important. Robi (2014) in a study in India highlighted the relation between the results of academic entry tests and predicting university success. The main conclusions were that the average score of the preparatory year and university entrance exams were valid predicators for the first-year college GPA. However, the average of the preparatory class was more valid. Polackova & Svatosova (2013) had a similar study in the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, their aim was to investigate the relationship of success in university study in relation to admission results. Their research concluded that there was a correlation between the results of the admission test and academic success. Furthermore, it was suggested that the method of choosing learners who are proficient in certain aspects that would be linked to their university studies is much more effective than relying on other methods. This 'success' is not to be achieved with ease, at times such exams would have a psychological and a physical impact on learners (Safa & Sheykholmoluki, 2023). In their investigation for the impact of the Iranian National University Entry Exam (INUEE) they stated that:

"… the need for a paradigm shift by which the current one-size-fits-all INUEE is substituted with a more humane, fair, and unbiased assessment system that minimizes the negative consequences, unfairness, and the involved reported bias." (Safa & Sheykholmoluki, 2023, p20).

Stemler (2012) argued that academic success could be predicted by looking at the GPA of the first year. However, it can only perform as a 'proxy' for academic knowledge that relate to what is being studied. The researcher also highlighted a major point which suggests that admission tests for higher education should match the objective of the institution itself. Nissen, Meijer & Tendeiro (2018) correlated the first-year GPA with number of dropouts and obtained university credits. They suggested that there is a moderate correlation among the factors. They also highlighted the fact that according to their research it was an 'interesting' result to discover that the curriculum-sampling test was a good predictor to measure learners' academic achievement on both short and long terms. Koch & Foxcroft (2003) suggested that cluster analysis could aid in identifying learners who could proceed with their education after the admission phase without any support and development, and those who cannot. Geiser (2014) in the defense of 'subject-specific-assessment' such as the SAT suggested that such kinds of testing allow learners to display their knowledge in modules they are good at which might aid them in being accepted in a certain college or university. Nevertheless, the so-called 'college race' is a major problem the over competitiveness might lead leaners to get to certain criteria but lose interest in self-development later on. The alternative could be establishing a benchmark so that learners could be compared to. Staying away from norm referencing could have its advantages at times as Geiser stated:

"Our first consideration should not be how an applicant compares with others but whether he or she demonstrates sufficient mastery of college-preparatory subjects to benefit from and succeed in college. […] Then begins the true work of admissions in applying in- situational selection criteria—special talents and abilities, leadership and community service, opportunity to learn, socioeconomic disadvantage" (Geiser, 2014, p23).

To sum up and according to the literature discussed, establishing a coherent and well-designed admission exam would positively reflect on the department's social responsibility. Also, it would highly set the ground for introducing a set of predictors that can later on aid in forecasting some key performance indicators about the

department itself or the learners. However, the procedures of this admission exam should be extremely tentative because have to be incredibly tentative in order to reduce the chance of unfairness among applicants who might have less chances to be accepted due to their high school GPAs for example.

Research Problem:

Despite the fact that an admission exam has been taking place since the academic year 2019 - 2020, many of the department lecturers, including the researcher, are constantly emphasizing learners' lack of proficiency. The main argument is that the entry exam cannot suffice as a filter to determine the needed skills for the learners to proceed with their undergraduate education in the Department of English Language and Literature. Many valuable suggestions have been made in order to overcome this issue. Some believed that including modules in the first year to enhance learners' language appraisal would suffice. Others believed in changing the criteria of the entry exam itself in order to reduce the number of people who enroll in the Department. All the suggestions made are indeed valuable, and would be incredibly accurate if backed up with accurate data. Therefore, this research aims to look into the statistical data that might be helpful in pinpointing what aspects could be amended, changed, or added in order to meet the vision of all the stakeholders.

Research Questions:

What are the possible adjustments that could be made for the admission exam?
To what extent is the current entry exam effective?

Research Significance:

This paper could aid in taking managerial decisions to reshape or validate the existing measures in relation to the entry exam for the Department of English Language and Literature in Damascus University based on statistical data and trend analysis.

Research Methodology:

Trend analysis was the main tool used to investigate the first question. Only Faculties and Institutes in Damascus have been taken into consideration to decrease the variables as much as possible and to be as close to the context of the study as possible. Nevertheless, this research depended solely on quantitative data collected by the faculty's exams, and statistics departments to answer the second question. The written approval to access the data was taken from both the Head of the Department and the Dean prior to starting this research. The data has not been edited or changed by the researcher. However, some values have been calculated for the sake of investigating the research questions. The data from exams department was collected by the researcher himself by hand, and later organized in a digital format as an excel file. On the other hand, the data from the statistics department were in digital format and used as they are. The data collected included the numbers of students in each year, numbers of graduates in each term, number of freshmen, and the number of students who failed at each year. The data collected is from the year 2006 – 2024. However, only the academic years 2015/16 – 2023/24 were taken into consideration because the other years lacked a large proportion of needed data.
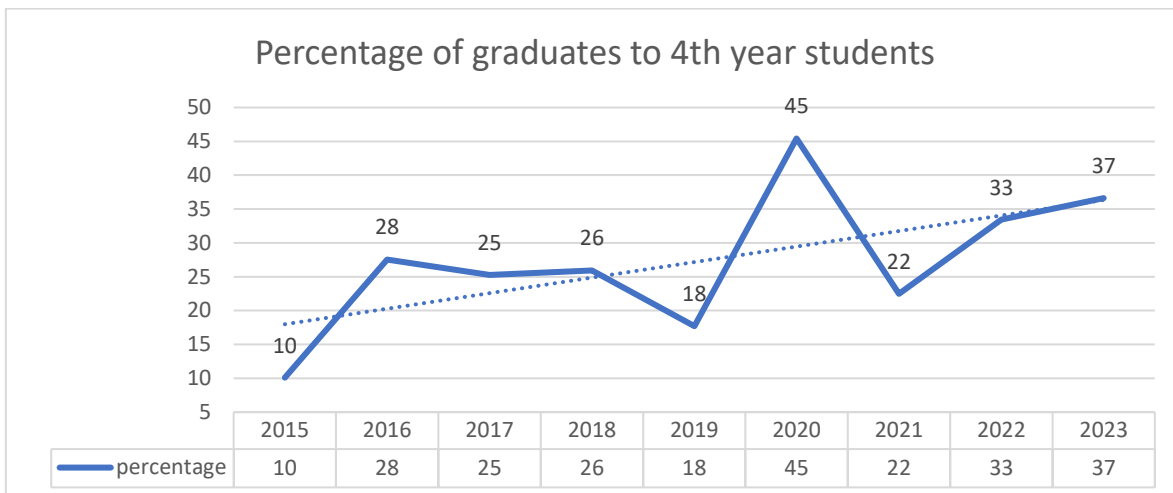
Results and Discussion:
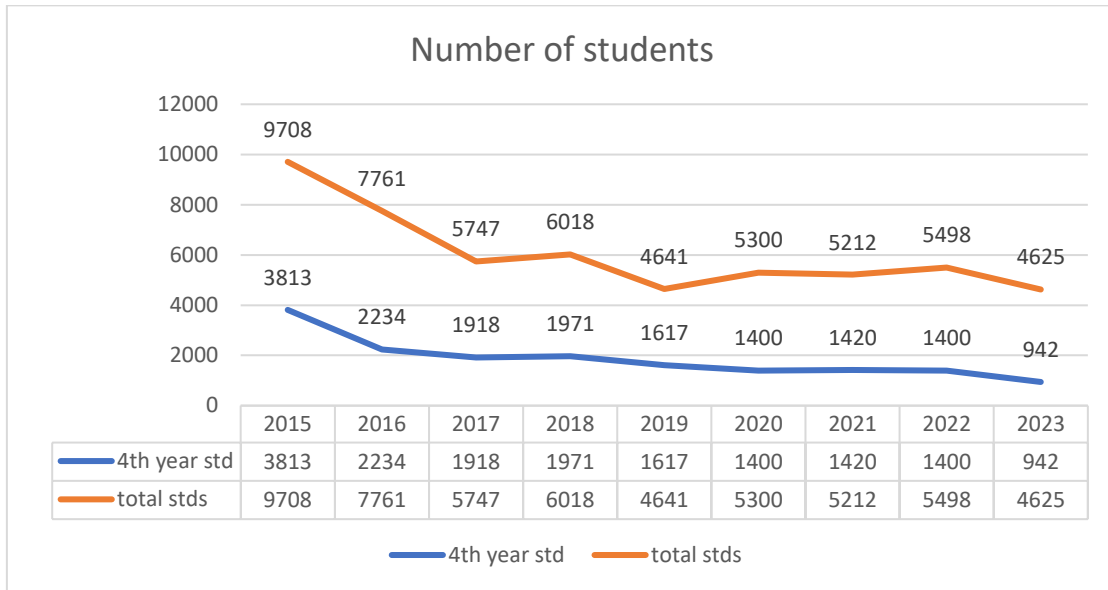
Graph (1) total number of students and number of 4th year students from 2015 to 2023

It could be noted that there has been a sharp decline in the total number of students in the department. This could be highly noted in the year 2017 as it could be the turning point of the total number of students in the Department. Since 2017, the number of students did not exceed six thousands except for once in the year 2018. However, what is really worth noting is the proportion that fourth year students represent out of this total number which has been on a decline since the year 2016. The number of fourth year students did not exceed 2234 since the year 2016 dropping to 942 only in 2023 and it is the only year when the number dropped below one thousand.
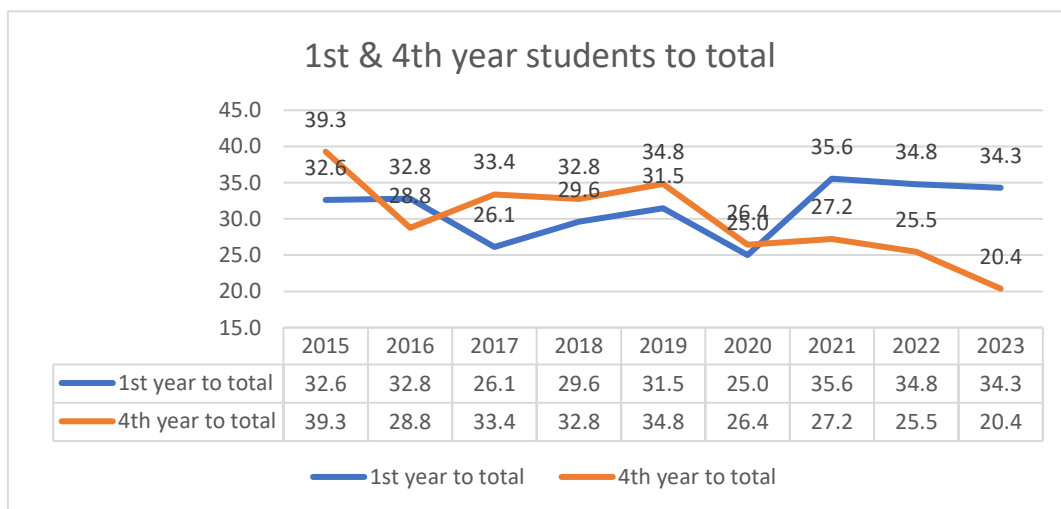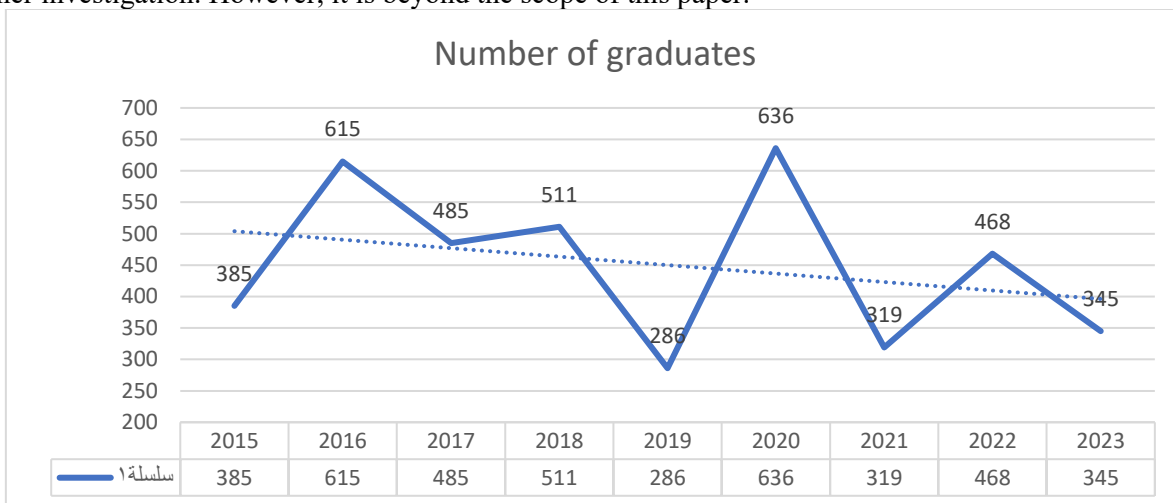

Graph (2) the percentage of 1st and 4th year students in comparison to the total number of students

In the graph above the 1st year students' percentage is represented by the blue line while the 4th year is represented by the orange one. It is worth noting that despite the fact that the total number of learners decreased all in all, the percentage of first year students sharply spiked in the year 2020 - one year after incorporating the entry exam- and it remained around the average over the years which is above 30%. The percentage of first year students hardly faced any changes, the fourth-year students' percentage has been on an ongoing decrease since the year 2019 plummeting to only 20% in the year 2023.

Percentage of graduates to 4th year students

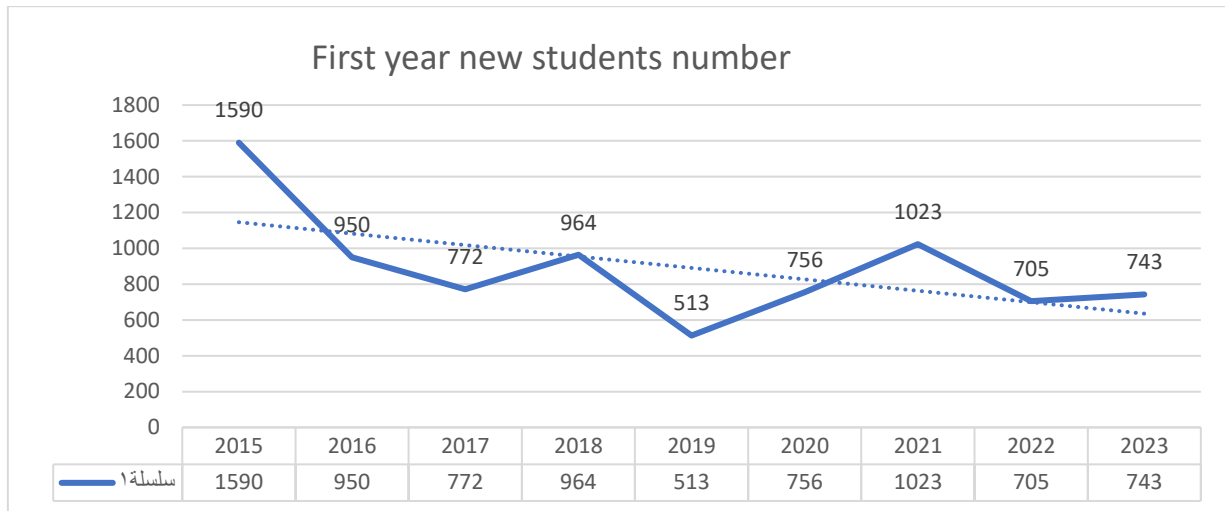|	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
percentage	10	28	25	26	18	45	22	33	37

Graph (3) the percentage of number of graduates to the number of fourth year students

It could be noted that alongside with the large decrease in the numbers of fourth year students, the percentages of graduates have witnessed serious fluctuations. This sort of inconsistency could be alarming and in need of further investigation. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Number of graduates

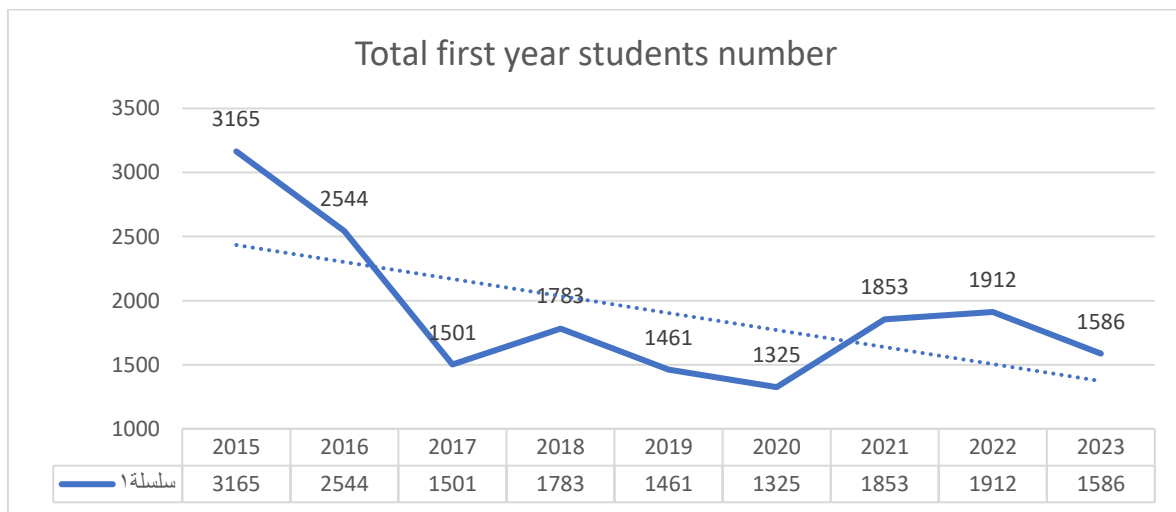|	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
سلسلة١	385	615	485	511	286	636	319	468	345

Graph (4) graduates by number.

Similar to the graph before, which represents the same idea but using percentiles, the number of graduates is inconsistent over the years. The differences sometimes can be almost double, like the difference between the year 2019 and 2020.

First year new students number

|	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
سلسلة١	1590	950	772	964	513	756	1023	705	743

Graph (5) First year students in number

The graph represents the number of first year students who are newly accepted into the Department by year. It can be easily spotted that the year when the entry exam was implemented for the first time, the number of students sharply dropped. This could highlight that it was able to filter a large number of those who are entering the department. However, the number gradually increased reaching 1023 in the year 2021, which is double the number of 2019, only to go back to the 700 range in the next two years.

Total first year students number

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
سلسلة١	3165	2544	1501	1783	1461	1325	1853	1912	1586

Graph (6) the total number of first year students

The graph highlights the total number of first year students, those who failed alongside the newly accepted students each year. Regardless of decreasing over the years and the trend line showing a clear decline, the number of those who failed is significant to be taken into consideration.
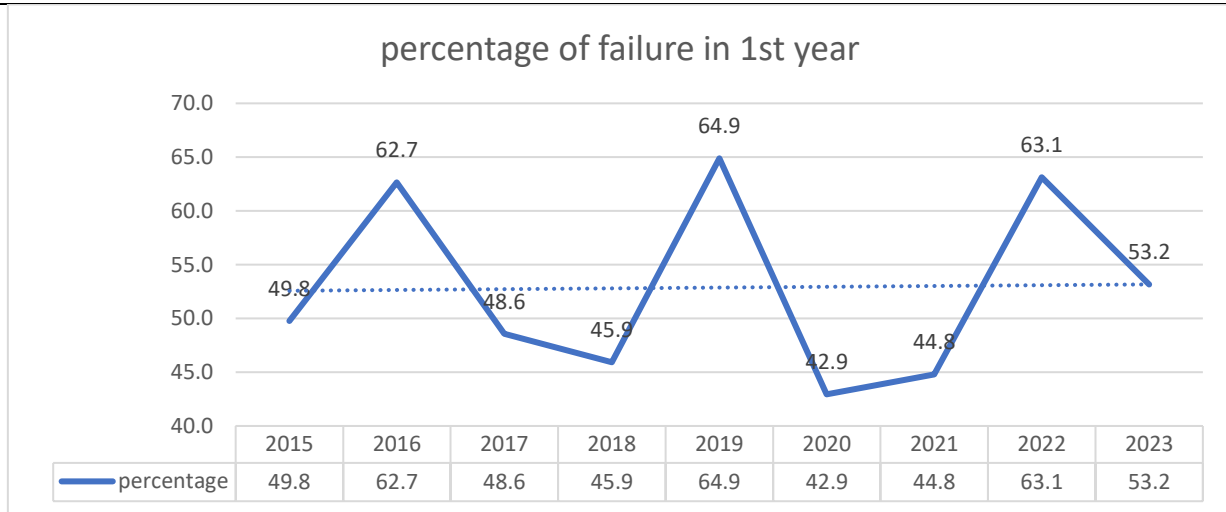
Graph (7) the percentage of students who failed their first year.

Regardless of the decrease of student numbers in the first year, the percentage of failure shows a rising trend line. Also, it has always been more than 42%, which is the lowest year, from 2015 till 2023. The alarming rates of more than 60% in the years 2016,2019 and 2022 should be highly investigated.

All in all, the total number of learners dropped to half over the course of nine years. Also, the number of fourth year students decreased sharply. Yet, the percentage of graduates has been on a rise but the number of graduates decreased. The percentage of the first-year students has recently been rising making more than third of the learners' number in the last three years. The percentage related to fourth-year students dropped to reach twenty percent in the year 2023. The most concerning numbers were related to the number of students in the first year; while the newly accepted students decreased over the course of nine years, the percentage of those who failed the first year has never dropped below 42% in the last nine years. It could be concluded that the currently implemented admission exam is functional since the number of first year students declined in the year 2019. However, there was a slight rise in the numbers in the years that followed. Yet, based on what has been inferred from the graphs, the major problem is the number of students who fail the first year. It is worth noting that the exam itself is criterion referenced but later on the candidate selection criteria is norm referenced. Some variations of the admission process could be used based on on-going trends in Syrian universities:

A preparatory year -just like the one implemented in medical Faculties in Damascus University- could be a great way in order to allow learners to pursue their education while getting the chance to change majors if their results at the end of the first year were unsatisfactory. Also, it would help in redistributing the curriculum in a way that helps in including/ excluding certain modules that might help in enhancing learners' proficiency in order to be able to proceed in their university education. The addition of a preparatory year could help in expanding the content, decreasing the number of modules per semester, in addition to allowing the inclusion of more areas of interest. Another point worth mentioning could be allowing first year students to be well-oriented about the major and what it contains. Many would have unrealistic expectations or wrong understanding of the content. If this model is to be thought of or later adopted, dedicated needs analyses must be conducted to identify the proper plans, curriculum, and methods. Such topics are highly important for future research as they are not in the scope of this article.

A different form of entry exams; the Higher Institute for Business Administration (HIBA) requires first year students to study and pass four introductory modules prior to enrolling in the institute. This could allow learners who did not do as well as they expected in their high school exams to get a better chance at pursuing university education if the criteria are met. Also, it allows to adjust the criteria of the screening process allowing the

Department to choose learners who are more linguistically proficient and capable. It could cover four main areas of interest in the Department (literature, language, translation and academic writing). This would suggest a separate type of screening based on learners' understanding of fundamental concepts in their major which matches what was been discussed in the literature. However, failing one of these modules should disqualify the applicant from pursuing their application for one academic year but does not deny the chance of retaking the entry exam in future years.

A multi-staged entry exam; as implemented in the post-graduate study programs in the Department of English Language and Literature, the Higher Language Institute and the Higher Institute of Translation and Interpretation. The learners are required to take a series of exams that qualifies them to pursue the study in a specific major. A multi-staged entry exam is similar to the previous concept but the difference is the amount of effort in introducing new ideas is less and the level of gatekeeping is much higher. In the sense that failing in any of the stages disqualifies the applicant from pursuing their application for one academic year. The usual process to enter a master's program in the Department of English Language and Literature is to take the standardized national exam for master's degree. Then, a criterion exam is taken that is more content specific based on the major the student has chosen. Finally, an oral interview is made with a panel that consist of a number of Ph.D. holders of that major. This does not only play a role in decreasing the number of people who enter, it also allows the Department to choose the creme de la creme out of applicants based on various criteria and levels of difficulty. This process, although being very time consuming, is a great choice in order to make sure that the choices made have some sort of consensus and multiple Faculty members are involved in decision making.

An eclectic approach would also yield to be beneficial. This could be achieved by selecting a number of learners based on their high school marks and average at first. At this stage the margin should be kept wide in order to allow people who underperformed in high school, due to any learner related factors, to get an equal chance to apply. The second stage would be a proficiency test that is credible, well-designed and meets the criteria needed just like the one currently being used as it showed positive results. The third stage is to include some curriculum-based material. This could be done by adopting the HIBA model in admission exams. It could be highly beneficial to check curriculum-related proficiency as it does not necessarily relate to general language proficiency. Another substitute for this stage would be a preparatory year. This is highly unlikely to be possible due to technicalities that relate to students switching their majors in the end of preparatory year if they did not score high enough. In the case of medical colleges, the applicants have already scored the highest possible marks in their high school exams which makes them eligible to enter any other Faculty. In the case of the English Department and regardless of learners' scores, this might result in a lot of administrative work that might be unsolicited. In the final stage the faculty members can be divided into a number of panels so that they can interview those who passed the modules of the first year; depending on which step to be chosen whether the HIBA model or the preparatory year model. The screening process can be overlooked in this model due to the fact that in the first step it has been achieved and learners were chosen based on their high school marks already. Therefore, those who pass all those stages are allowed to study in the Department. This will only perform as a filter to decrease the number of those who enter the Department. This might also decrease the number of those who fail the first year but that is only an assumption to be investigated in future research.

All the aforementioned suggestions would be beneficial for gatekeeping and decreasing the number of those who enter the Department. Subsequently, they might not necessarily affect the number of those who fail the first year. Thus, it is highly recommended for future research to investigate the reasons that stand behind the percentage of those who failed the first year. This is a variable that is vital to understand and reduce. Also, it could be beneficial to investigate the correlation between the admission exam results and the first year GPA or the final GPA. It could be of major importance to understand how the admission is linked leaners' achievements. One of the most important aspects to research is to perform a full needs analysis for the Department. Studies could be made to evaluate what is being used and planned for and to investigate the market's needs and what areas are most crucial to cover as well as the expected number of people needed in those domains. This will not only affect the admission process itself; it will also extend to curriculum design

and modules choices. Another important aspect of research is to analyze the texts and material being used to teach in the Department throughout the year. This will help in establishing clear criteria for text choices and understanding the proficiency level needed for those who enter the Department. It could be possible that the level in mind does not really match the level they are presented with in the first year. Therefore, many find it too difficult to pass.

Conclusion:

This research aimed to evaluate the admission procedures used by the Department of English Language and Literature in Damascus University. The research depended on trend analysis and quantitative data collected from the exams and statistics departments in the faculty. The data displayed that the number of first year students decreased after implementing the current admission test which means it served its purpose in choosing those with higher proficiency to enter the department. The trend analysis allowed to explore other ways to reimagine the current admission criteria in order to address the research problems. Also, other conclusions from the data showed that there were a lot of future research recommendations that were highlighted in the end.

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