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Students' Perception of the Determining Factors of University Dropout

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Abstract: *The factors influencing university dropout are varied, complex, and not easily identifiable. The aim of this study is to assess students' perceptions of these dropout factors. A total of 36 students from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău participated in the research, which included a focus group to identify the main factors contributing to dropout among students. The research results highlighted several important aspects related to university dropout, such as: the reasons behind choosing a particular faculty, how students manage doubts or concerns that arise during their studies, the categories of reasons (personal, family, relational, financial) which may lead to dropout, learning difficulties encountered during studies, and suggestions provided to peers considering dropping out as well as to university managers to help keep students motivated and ensure regular attendance. Understanding the factors contributing to university dropout is crucial for preventing and reducing this phenomenon within the academic environment.*

Keywords: *focus group; perceptions; students; university dropouts.*

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University dropout – academic reality and concept

The dropout phenomenon has experienced a rapid and extensive growth in the last 25 years in most educational systems on all continents, gradually increasing from the pre-university level to the university level (including in Romania). In academia, the phenomenon began to manifest itself in the 1970s in the USA (Aina et al., 2022). Subsequently, it quickly developed from isolated cases to a worrying, complex phenomenon (causally, in terms of forms of manifestation and as a means of reduction), one of the major challenges facing higher education worldwide, which must be addressed in a multifactorial manner and requires immediate action. All the more so as it represents a loss from several points of view: for the student himself who drops out, for the institution, for the labour market (local, regional, national, global) and finally for the entire community (Johansson, 2019). With Romania's accession to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), increasing participation rates in higher education and reducing dropout rates have become priority aspects in the context of analyses that highlight worrying data. To illustrate the seriousness of the phenomenon, the study entitled *The Dropout in Romanian higher education - Definition, measurement, interpretation study* (Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022) (which takes as a reference the promotions of students enrolled in Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in 2015) indicates that the dropout rate was 47.96% for Bachelor's students, 42% for Master's students and 70% for Doctoral students. Therefore, besides the above-mentioned study, there is a number of recent analyses and initiatives that support the efforts to understand the phenomenon of early school leaving and to support its decrease: Report on the state of higher education in Romania, 2022-2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023); the launch of the call for the First Student in the Family programme (Ministry of Investments and European Projects in partnership with the Ministry of Education, 2024b); the initiation of the National Programme for the Reduction of University Dropout (Romanian abbreviation PNRAU) (2023) (Ministry of Investments and European Projects in partnership with the Ministry of Education, 2024a); the launch of dual education (2022) and the construction of the 29 dual education campuses by 2026. They highlight the concern at macro-systemic level to mitigate the effects of early school leaving and the financial support for these steps from the National Recovery and Resilience Programme (Romanian abbreviation PNRR). The multitude of these measures and the expansion of the

amounts invested in this direction in higher education in Romania once again underline the magnitude of the dropout phenomenon and the urgent need to control it.

From a conceptual point of view, we have identified meanings of the 'university dropout' term in a number of literature review studies published in the last 5 years, of which we stop at the following: Depoo & Hajerová-Mullerová, 2024; Kocsis & Molnar, 2024; Rahmani et al., 2024; Aina et al., 2022; Barroso et al., 2022; Alexe-Cotet et al., 2022; Johansson, 2019; Kehm et al., 2019. Their approaches go in the following explanatory directions (Table 1):

Table 1. Meanings of the term dropout

No.	Authors, year	Article Title	'Dropout' Definition
1.	Depoo & Hajerová-Mullerová, 2024	Managing Internal Personal Factors of Business Student Drop-Out to Build Retention	"Dropouts can be defined as students who leave the higher education system without obtaining a first degree. The list of terms can also include the frequently used term leaving university early" (p. 1051).
2.	Kocsis & Molnar, 2024	Factors influencing academic performance and dropout rates in higher education	"From the theoretical background, we concluded that it is not possible to provide a universal definition of either university dropout. University dropout is a decision-making process based on individual reasoning" (p. 13).
3.	Rahmani et al., 2024	Dropout in online higher education: a systematic literature review.	"The term *dropout* bears various interpretations, encompassing temporary absences and programme non-completion. Similar terms are commonly used, some of which are synonyms (attrition, withdrawal, non-completion), while others have antonyms (retention, perseverance, continuation, completion, and success)" (p.2).

4.	Aina et al., 2022	The determinants of university dropout: A review of the socio-economic literature	"University dropout is the result of a sequential process made under gradually decreasing levels of uncertainty and a student's consciousness about education costs and future returns, as well as by that student's level of integration into the academic system" (p.4).
5.	Barroso et al., 2022	Dropout Factors in Higher Education: A Literature Review	"Students who temporarily or definitively quit higher education", for personal or institutional reasons.
6.	Alexe-Coteț et al., 2022	*Dropout in Romanian higher education – Definition, measurement, interpretation*	"the percentage of the student population that has not graduated within two years of the date of theoretical completion of the study programme" (p. 32)
7.	Johansson, 2019	Dropping out of School - a systematic and integrative research review on risk factors and interventions	"Dropping out of school can be seen as the ultimate consequence of a process where the student's withdrawal from school increases and becomes more and more serious" (p. 5).
8.	Kehm et al., 2019	Student dropout from universities in Europe: A review of empirical literature	"...leaving university studies altogether before degree completion" (p. 147).

It should be noted that the selection and analysis proposed in the previous table were made from the perspective of dropout as a process, and not from the perspective of it as a system of variables or factors that determine it (as analysed and explained in numerous studies on the subject). From this perspective, the meaning of the term is that of a complex, multifaceted process that can be explained in monodisciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, at

least in terms of psychological, educational, sociological, economic and managerial aspects (Kocsis & Molnár, 2024; Rahmani et al., 2024; Barroso et al., 2022).

Studies focused on exploring students' perceptions of the determining factors of university dropout

The determining factors of university dropout are a topic of interest for all the actors involved, which proves that studies aiming to explicitly know them, as they are concretely manifested at the level of universities (in the diversity of their conditions of existence and activity), seek to identify the perspective of 1. *students* (Călin et al., 2024; Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al. 2024; Cuevas-López et al. 2023; Lorenzo-Quiles et al. 2023; Samašonok et al. 2023; Yusof et al.,2023; Bäulke et al., 2022; Bernardo et al., 2022; Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, 2022; Sabic & Puzic, 2022; Santi et al., 2022; Yılmaz & Sarpkaya, 2022; Díaz et al., 2021; Androulakis et al., 2020; Maroco et al., 2020; Stanciu et al., 2019; Casanova et al., 2018; Strumpher, 2018; Zamora-Araya&Villalobos-Madrigal, 2018; Oreški et al., 2016; Muzenda, 2014; Lukosius et al., 2013); 2. *academic staff members* (Yılmaz & Sarpkaya, 2022); 3. *institutional stakeholders* (De Silva et al., 2022); 4.*administrators* (Holmstrom, 2021), 5. *Alumni* (Oreški et al., 2016).

The dropout factors which have been identified by reference to these 5 categories of respondents from the studies highlighted above are presented as follows:

1. Studies that examine *students' views* on dropout factors are mainly presented from two perspectives. The first is the one that provides different taxonomies of the relevance of these factors. For example: *primary factors,* such as "students' personality, their ability to adapt, their socio-economic level, the student-teacher relationship and the quality of the educational act in universities" and *secondary factors*, such as "poor motivation, lack of self-esteem, a high degree of frustration that students feel especially in the first year of studies until they adapt to their new status, etc." (Călin et al., 2024,35). In the same spirit, without naming them primary and secondary factors, a similar grouping is made: on the one hand, socio-economic level, self-perception of academic performance, level of satisfaction with studies, level of satisfaction with both academic and social experiences, cognitive statements, personal beliefs of students; on the other hand, low

motivation, inadequate social or financial support, and academic or personal obstacles (Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al., 2024).

Another approach is to divide them into *individual* and *institutional factors* (Cuevas-López et al., 2023; Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023). Among the individual factors we highlight "the motivation of the students themselves and their own academic performance, due to the student's task or poor integration, lack of motivation and loss of interest in studies, low self-esteem" and among those at the level of the university community itself we underline a loss of capital for family members, the school/university environment and the country itself (Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023, 2). Another relatively convergent view is that which groups the factors into external factors (including aspects such as the content of studies, the specifics and nature of teaching, the role of those around the student) (Samašonok et al, 2023, 157) and personal/internal factors (illness or health problems, moving to another country, financial difficulties, difficulties in combining studies with work, inability to successfully organise time and activities, difficulties in adapting to the environment and new demands, inability to concentrate and focus during studies , lack of motivation to study, lack of confidence in the chosen specialisation, laziness to study) (Samašonok et al, 2023, 158). The proposal of Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, (2022) is also in the sense of two categories of factors, which includes in the personal reasons: pressure from the family to leave school and go to work; bad relations with classmates; the inability to renew the scholarship; the need to work and the inability to continue studying for financial reasons (Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, 2022, 104). Included in the category of *institutional* reasons are the following: lack of practical training; unmotivating teaching methods; lack of commitment to students on the part of the university; little information and support from the university during the course; assessment systems that are not suitable for students; and g) teachers are distant and treatment is impersonal (Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, 2022, 105). In summary, the above authors group the factors of university dropout from two categories into five categories as follows: Academic experience; Academic motivation; Overall academic satisfaction; Blended and distance learning satisfaction; Student engagement (Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, 2022, 106). From another perspective, also with two categories of factors, both voluntary and involuntary factors are emphasized (Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023). Yılmaz & Sarpkaya, (2022) provide us with a novel systematization of university dropout factors, i.e. pre-admission factors

(I): orientation, personality, system, family, career and city factors (considered as input factors); after admission, the university processes factors (II) such as psychological condition, academic condition, social condition, organisational situation, appointment factors, military service, family situation and financial situation (considered as process factors) (Yılmaz & Sarpkaya, 2022, 519-520).

Another systematisation of university dropout factors offers the model of Bernardo et al. (2022) structured into three broad categories of factors: 'satisfaction, social adaptation, and self-regulation strategies' (Bernardo et al., 2022, 23). A further model with 3 categories of factors is proposed by Bäulke et al. (2022): emotional (subjective well-being, anxiety), motivational (academic self-concept, subjective task value), behavioural (academic procrastination) and cognitive/affective (learned helplessness) variables (Bäulke et al., 2022, 857). Sabic & Puzic (2022) also refer to 3 categories of factors in their study, namely social background, academic and institutional characteristics.

Although Androulakis et al. (2020) investigates 4 such categories of factors, there are differences in impact between them, thus "the factors related to students' academic performance have the greatest impact compared to personal, economic, institutional and social factors" (Androulakis et al., 2020, 107). Stanciu et al. (2019) discuss about other 4 categories of factors: the lack of skills of efficient learning; the socio-economic and psychological specificity of students with special educational needs; the requirements of the academic environment; the lack of adaptation to the requirements of the academic environment.

Díaz et al. (2021) identified five categories of factors: psychological, sociological, economic, organizational, integration & adaptation (Díaz et al. (2021, 113), a taxonomy later taken up and exploited by Lorenzo-Quiles et al. (2023, 3-4). More extensive is the systematisation in 6 categories of dropout factors offered by (Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al. 2024) according to which they are of a "psycho-educational, educational, biographical, socio-economic, pedagogical, and vocational" nature (Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al. 2024, 3). Through these studies conducted by investigating the students' perspective on the categories of factors of university dropout, we can see how their number and consistency are increasing, in order to better understand the extent of the causality of the phenomenon of university dropout and to subsequently ensure the best possible intervention measures to reduce it through action on the categories of factors.

The second perspective of study analysis is the one providing results of the investigation of students' perceptions of dropout factors focused narrowly on certain aspects, on a few to many of these factors, such as students' difficult adaptation to the demands of the academic environment, students' wrong orientation towards majors that do not correspond to the student's personal interests and vocational profile, assumption of professions that require adequate and sustainable development, social and financial aspects, lack of motivation for learning, various aspects related to the specifics of the educational process in the academic environment (Santi et al., 2022). The study by Oreški et al. (2016) offers a descending hierarchy of dropout factors in the order of their impact: demotivation for learning and fulfilling responsibilities, laziness, wrong choice of study programme, study programme is too difficult, poor management of responsibilities, financial problems and poor learning conditions, poorly organized study programme, poor preparation for courses, personal problems, other obligations (family, business, sports, social involvement, etc.), health problems (Oreški et al., 2016, 373-374). According to Casanova et al. (2018), the factors of interest are "academic performance, (high, average and low performance), in which different types of variables act as mediators: gender, type of course (Bachelor's [BA] or integrated master), studying at the first university of the students' choice or the mother's educational level" (Casanova et al., 2018, 408). A study by Yusof et al. (2023) investigates factors such as students' motivation, expectancy, affective components, the economic crunch, learning difficulties. Zamora-Araya & Villalobos-Madrigal (2018) stop at the same number of factors, only others: admission exam scores, vocational and economic factors, teaching methods, and unmet expectations of students about the programme. For Strumpher (2018) the factors investigated are fewer in number, only finance, social context of individual learner, other personal attributes like learners' attitude to learning and commitment. There are also 4 factors also studied by Lukosius et al. (2013), namely academic, community, family, and social factors. Muzenda (2014) demonstrates that socioeconomic status had the highest significant effect, followed by student-related factors while institutional factors had the least effect on dropout. Whereas for Maroco et al. (2020), the number of factors studied is reduced to student engagement and burnout. Through these studies carried out by investigating students' perspectives on only a few (increasingly narrow and punctual) factors of university dropout, we

note how studies are carrying out increasingly nuanced analyses on different factors, and sometimes fewer and fewer in number precisely to increase the depth of the investigation, ranking the factors according to their impact in order to identify specific solutions to reduce dropout.

2. *Regarding the academic staff members' point of view* on dropout factors we refer to the study published by Yılmaz & Sarpkaya (2022). Recent studies are invoked which demonstrate that students' experiences with academic staff are "highly determinant factors for a dropout" (apud Yilmaz & Sapkaya, 2022, 528). Hence, the theoretical view that the relationships between teachers and students and the low level of communication between them can influence the decision to drop out of university has been reconfirmed by this study. Other factors highlighted included: students' psychological condition (Yilmaz & Sapkaya, 2022, 538); academic status of the students - "mainly unmet expectations, such as an expectation of better education, absenteeism, and weak intrinsic motivation" (p. 539); students' social experiences (Yilmaz & Sapkaya, 2022, 539); organizational factors (academic environment, campus life, student living conditions) (p. 540); low level of financial gain from employment immediately after graduation (p. 541); financial situation, family situation, and extrinsic motivation (all three of which are closely correlated) (p. 541).

3. The complementary perspective of *institutional stakeholders* regarding the factors of university dropout can be understood in an integrated manner as a result of the model presented in a recent publication (De Silva et al., 2022), which systematises the following 12 classes of factors: Personal dropout reasons, Interest in the subjects, Curriculum alignment with satisfaction, Institutional support of students' goal commitment, Individual academic struggles, Professional and financial concerns, Academic integration, Student well-being, Faculty-student relationship, Social support and sense of stability, Curriculum-related difficulties, Personal and contextual aspects (De Silva et al., 2022, 188).

4. *Administrators* represent another category of actors in higher education that should not be overlooked in the context of school dropout issues. Their perception of the factors involved, as well as a specific series of ways to reduce dropout rates, is analysed and extensively presented in a recent study (Holmstrom, 2021). This study synthesizes the following factors: those related to the teaching process (varied teaching strategies, alternative approaches); Principal-Staff Relationship Impact; Teachers' relationships with students (Holmstrom, 2021, 67-80).

5. The viewpoint of *alumni* on this issue cannot be omitted either. The study conducted by Oreški et al. (2016) is interesting because it compares the perspectives of students and alumni regarding the factors of academic failure (with dropout being a form of failure). The data highlight three categories of common factors: Inability to balance study and other commitments (family, work), difficulty with academic content, and Lack of time and learning organization. Students and alumni have differing opinions on these factors. "One factor that stands out from the rest of the results is *Management of time and responsibilities*. It has much lower statistical significance than two closely related factors (*Inability to balance study and other commitments* and *Lack of time and learning organisation*), which both have much higher statistical significance in the differences between students' and alumni's opinions" (Oreški et al., 2016, 375-376).

The factors influencing university dropout in Romania are multiple, from the characteristics of the students and the field studied, to the baccalaureate grade and the high school course (Alexe-Coteț et al., 2022). The dropout rate reaches 62.8% for those with averages between 6 and 7 at the baccalaureate, and students who come from the technological sector have the highest dropout rates, 53.6%.

The multitude of university dropout factors identified, the relative convergence of perspectives but also the diversity of approaches, the complexity of the offered models provided us with the necessary theoretical foundation on the topic and allowed us to turn to a qualitative study based on a focus group through which to identify the specific causes of university dropout in our educational institution, so that the reduction solutions that can take shape will effectively fold on this particular institutional context.

Research objectives and questions

The objective of the research is to identify the students' perception of the main factors of university dropout.

The study was centred on the following questions:

- How do students cope with academic challenges and learning obstacles?
- What family, personal, and financial factors contribute to students leaving university?
- What measures can be implemented to reduce university dropout rates?

Research methodology

Participants

The study involved 36 students from "Vasile Alecsandri" University in Bacău from the Faculties of Letters, Engineering, Economic Sciences and Movement, Sport and Health Sciences. The participants for the focus groups were selected using convenience sampling, targeting students from various faculties who had faced dropout issues. This method allows for the recruitment of participants who are easily accessible (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The students chosen for the focus groups were specifically selected for their special knowledge about the dropout phenomenon and their willingness to share valuable insights with the research team. We should mention that the participation in the study was voluntary and those selected were willing to share information and personal opinions with the research team.

Research methods

The research used the focus group method, defined as "a small meeting of people who have a common interest or characteristic, brought together by means of a moderator who uses the group and its interactions as a way to obtain information on a research problem/topic" (Williams & Katz, 2001).

This approach engaging a small number of participants allows for the collection of qualitative data through informal group discussions centred on specific topics or issues (Wilkinson, 2004, 17). The focus group method offers several advantages, including the ability to gather more data from participants quickly and efficiently (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and fostering a sense of belonging among participants (Peters, 1993), which creates a safe environment for sharing information. Additionally, it facilitates the emergence of valuable insights through participant interactions (Morgan, 1998). In order to explore the students' perception of the factors influencing university dropout, a focus group guide was developed based on the ten questions, adapted from Santos-Villalba et al. (2023).

Research procedure

In May, three focus groups were formed from students chosen for participation, and these sessions were held in June 2024. The groups were organised by specialisation, with each consisting of 12 participants,

as follows: one with students from one with students from Communication and Public Relations and Romanian-English Language and Literature, another with students from Primary and Preschool Education Pedagogy and a third with students from Engineering, Economic and Physiotherapy.

In order to foster an environment conducive to sharing their ideas about the factors contributing to university dropout, an open and comfortable atmosphere was created.

Data analysis

The data was recorded using thematic content analysis. The process followed these stages (Ezzy, 2002): coding, categorising to develop significant categories related to the factors of university dropout, and comparison to identify connections between categories, culminating in the formulation of theoretical conclusions. A main advantage of content analysis lies in its ability to enable the interpretation of data while ensuring the extraction of valuable and relevant insights (Baban, 2000).

Ethical issues

The current study was conducted in line with ethical standards for research involving human subjects, following approval from our University Ethics Committee. Additionally, ethical clearance was obtained in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, given that the study included human participants.

Results

The data interpretation involved addressing each research question both quantitatively, by calculating frequencies within specific thematic categories, and qualitatively, through the analysis of participants' responses.

Q1: What influenced your decision to enrol in the chosen faculty?

From the perspective of identifying the factors which influenced the decision to choose a faculty, respondents mentioned a variety of opinions. This question aimed to identify several motivational aspects that could serve as predictive factors for identifying the risk of university dropout. As shown in Table 2, the factors influencing the choice of faculty are both *objective* - well correlated with elements that contribute

to shaping a truly desired future career for the respondents - and *subjective*, lacking a direct connection to essential elements for academic training, such as proximity to home or the development of a set of general skills.

Table 2. Responses in thematic categories for Q1

Thematic categories	**Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)**
Relevant factors for academic training: Passion for the field of studies	P 1, 5, 11/fg1; P 2, 5, 9, 10/fg2; P7/fg3
Personal development and general skills training in which we identified the subcategories: desire for advancement; pursuing further education; personal development; career promotion; requirement for qualifications in the workplace; skills development; stepping outside the comfort zone; ongoing improvement; eagerness to learn more	P 2, 7, 11/fg1; P 2, 6, 8, 10, 12/fg2; P 1, 6, 8, 9, 12/fg3
Subjective factors that generate dropout risk: Proximity to home; the influence of parents or friends; saving time	P 12/fg1; P 1, 12/fg2; P 2, 5/fg3

(P6/fg2) mentioned: "*I started two faculties 15 years ago, but after about a year and a half I dropped both. The reasons were that I was young, unsure how to choose and didn't know what I wanted to do. After that experience, I decided I would only pursue university studies, when I was certain about my goals.*" and "*I chose a university degree because it was a continuation of what I did in high school and I wanted to deepen what I had learned, on the one hand, and on the other hand, I was doing it for myself as a person. "(*P8/fg3)

Q2: How did you approach studying various subjects as a student?

The following categories emerged regarding students' approaches to studying various subjects (Table 3): active participation in classes, as a result of the use of innovative teaching-learning strategies by teachers - introduction of new participatory methods encourages the students to be engaged in the learning process and at the same time helping them to maintain their interest in the subjects taught, thus reducing the risk of dropout; engagement in independent study - is determined solely by intrinsic motivation and the teachers' ability to arouse interest in the subjects they teach, for many students, independent study is an indicator of a desire to continue their academic

path; expression of positive attitudes towards learning - is the result of a complex of factors that combine elements of intrinsic motivation with extrinsic motivation which teachers can convey to students. Positive attitudes towards learning are also determined by the inputs coming from the labour market regarding its future development trend

Table 3. Responses in thematic categories for Q2

Thematic categories	**Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)**
Active participation in classes, because of teacher's innovative teaching-learning-assessment strategies: use of interactive methods; inclusion of a self-assessment section at the end of the course	P 10/fg1; P 5, 12/fg2; P 3/fg3
Engagement in independent study: review of mandatory and supplementary bibliographic resources; thorough examination of course content; identification of key concepts; drawing up outlines and summaries	P 1, 4, 5, 9/fg1; P 3, 4, 11/fg2; P 2, 5, 10/fg3
Demonstrating positive attitudes towards learning: interest in studying; dedication; adaptability; accountability; patience; self-confidence; inquisitiveness	P 1, 2, 9, 12/fg1; P 1, 5, 10/fg2; P 2, 4, 7, 8, 11/fg3

P5/fg2 mentioned how he approaches studying the subjects: "*I generally read through the course and then note down the key concepts. At the end of each chapter there is a self-assessment section that I complete, and if I am satisfied with the result I will stop, otherwise I review the course again.*"

Q3: How did you manage questions or uncertainties that came up during your studies?

The thematic categories related to managing questions or doubts during studies included the following (Table 4): seeking support from others - the need to manage uncertainty, along with the challenge of dealing with it, often causes frustration, limitations, and a lack of self-confidence in students. Therefore, it is important for students to discover resources that can help them cope effectively; exhibiting positive attitudes towards handling doubts, verifying information, and experiencing no questions or doubts (2). Among all participants, two reported that they encountered no doubts during their studies.

Table 4. Responses in thematic categories for Q3

Thematic categories	Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)
Seeking support from others: communication with the year advisor; discussing with close friends and family; asking teachers for clarifications; collaboration with senior colleagues; gathering opinions from others; cooperation with family members	P 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 11/fg1; P 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12/fg2; P 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12/fg3
Exhibiting positive attitudes towards handling doubts: dedication; optimism; patience; practicality; reflecting on the benefits; perseverance; open-mindedness	P 2, 8, 12/fg1; P 3, 5/fg2; P 1, 3 ,4, 8, 10/fg3
Verifying information: accessing relevant information online; conducting independent research	P 6/fg1; P 5, 9/fg2; P10/fg3

The support we receive from those around us is highlighted P8/fg1: "*I tackled the doubts that arose during my studies with a lot of determination, passion and with the support of a friend. After my first semester I felt I might not succeed, because I had family obligations and a job and I wanted to excel as a student. Fortunately, a friend who encouraged me, providing me the moral and psychological support that helped me manage everything much more effectively."* In order to illustrate the transformation of fears into optimism, we present the example provided by P9/fg3*: "I felt that the faculty wasn't right for me; I am a more introverted person... I didn't really like speaking in front of the class or with strangers. However, over time, I actually started to enjoy what I do."*

Q4: Did family-related factors contribute to your decision to drop out of university? If so, what were those?

Based on the students' responses, we identified several categories of family-related reasons for leaving studies: imbalance between family life and academic responsibilities and the emotional impact of some family members regarding the faculty choice (P 1, 4, 11/fg1; P 1, 2, 8, 10/fg2; P 2, 5, 8, 10/fg3).

The students' comments highlight the importance of family support during their university studies: "*I had my family's encouragement to keep going and now that I am in my third year, I can honestly admit that I am starting to enjoy what I am studying."* P11/fg1. The students having their own families also highlighted several challenges they face: *"In addition to being a student, I had to make time for my child and cook, but there were also other*

aspects related to family dynamics, my husband, etc." P8/fg2. Other students pointed out the impact that their parents' philosophy has on their decision to continue their studies: *"(...) because of my parents, as they don't have higher education and can't understand the stress of being a good student and spending all your time studying."* P10/fg3.

Q5: Were there any personal reasons that led you the decision to discontinue your studies? If so, what were they?

The data indicated several thematic categories in terms of personal reasons for dropping out of studies (Table 5): significant personal projects and issues related to personal development. Most students (N=21) stated that there were no personal reasons leading to university dropout. There were references made to the economic situation, the need to have two jobs, the loss of a budget-funded student seat, or changing residence.

Table 5. Responses in thematic categories for Q5

Thematic categories	**Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)**
Significant personal projects	P 4, 12/fg1;
Issues related to personal development: lack of self-confidence; poor organisational skills; high stress level	P 2, 5, 11, 12/fg1; P 3, 4, 11/fg2; P 1, 3, 5, 9, 12/fg3

When discussing various personal reasons, one student mentioned an important aspect with an emotional impact: *"There are students at the university with certain disabilities or challenges, and many of them lack the necessary support to continue their studies."* P4/fg2. For other students, the discrepancy between the knowledge and demands of university life and the prerequisites acquired during high school represented very stressful factors*: "If you didn't have a solid foundation of basic knowledge from high school and no written course materials, it's very difficult to learn. I had classmates (...) who found it very hard to understand what the teacher was teaching; they can't learn new theories without prior knowledge."*

Q6: From a financial perspective, what factors did you identify as reasons for dropping out?

The following categories were established regarding the financial reasons that can lead to dropping out of studies: financial difficulties: transportation costs; insufficient funds; high tuition fees (N=17: P2, 5, 6, 8,

10, 11/fg1; P1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 11/fg2; P4, 5, 8, 11, 12/fg3) and need for parental financial support (P3/fg1, P2, 7/fg2). Financial aspects were also mentioned in the previous questions, with participants referring to the need to find a job or an additional job to ensure sufficient income to cover tuition fees, rent, and other specific expenses of student life.

One student (P8/fg1) explained how financial issues impacted his university experience: "*I faced these challenges during my first year. At that time, I was on a budgeted seat, but working part-time. When I could not cover my expenses in the city, I had to take on another job, which meant I could no longer maintain my budget status and switched to paying full tuition."* P7/fg2 highlights the need for additional financial resources: *"My parents can't give me enough money. They work in agriculture in the countryside, and their income comes solely from what they manage to sell. For me, as a student, that is not sufficient, even if I have a social scholarship and my sister also helps me out."*

Q7: Did you face any learning challenges that contributed to your decision to leave university?

The thematic categories related to learning difficulties that could cause the dropping out of university studies are: difficulties in the learning process with the following subcategories: high number of subjects (P7/fg1, P11/fg1); extensive homework (P7/fg1); large volume of information (P9/fg2); high difficulty level of some subjects and issues related to assessment (P3/fg2, P7/fg3).

One student pointed out that a learning challenge could stem from a lack of basic knowledge in the subject P9/fg3. *"For instance, in our first year of…., we had courses in anatomy and physiology. If you did not have a solid background, it was quite challenging to grasp and absorb all that information. I had classmates from social sciences who struggled to understand certain concepts because the study programme is focused on providing details."*

Q8: What advice would you offer to fellow students who are thinking about dropping out of university?

Based on the students' responses, the following thematic categories were established regarding the suggestions offered to their peers considering dropping out of university (Table 6): communication with others, showing positive attitudes (N=34).

Table 6. Responses in thematic categories regarding Q8

Thematic categories and subcategories	**Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)**
Communication with others	P 10/fg1; P 7/fg2
Showing positive attitudes:	
- perseverance (not giving up, regardless of circumstances);	P1, 2, 9/fg1; P7,11/fg2; P8, 11/fg3
- reflection on the future and confidence;	P3/fg1; P 5,12/fg2; P 9/fg3
- searching for solutions and overcoming obstacles;	P5, 9/fg1; P7/fg2; P 3, 8/fg3
- discovering what truly brings happiness and fulfilment and also satisfaction from work accomplished through effort and dedication;	P7, 8, 11/fg1; P2, 8/fg2; P1, 9, 11/fg3
- finding motivation ambition and optimism;	P6/fg1; P5/fg2; P 2/fg3
- considering the benefits of continuing studies for future career prospects;	P1, 4, 9/fg1; P9,12/fg2; P9/fg3
- setting short-term goals that provide a sense of progress and achievement;	P11/fg1; P 1/fg3

As an example, we can share the additional suggestions made by students for colleagues considering dropping out of their studies: *"I would encourage them to reflect on whether this is what they truly want for their future, if they enjoy the field, and if they feel a sense of belonging. Life's journey will not always be easy, but if they discover their passion and enjoy what they are doing, they will persevere and not be discouraged by the minor obstacles that that may come their way."* P6/fg1

Q9: What message would you like to share with high school students considering university studies?

The data revealed several thematic categories regarding the suggestions provided to high school students who wish to pursue university studies (Table 7): expression of positive attitudes (N=22), appropriate guidance and professional development (N=7), successful completion of learning activities (N=5), and presence of a supportive environment at the university (N=5).

Table 7. Responses in thematic categories for Q9

Thematic categories and subcategories	Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)
Demonstrating positive attitudes:	
- optimism and generosity;	P3, 4, 11/fg1; P6,10/fg2; P9/fg3
- motivation and seriousness	P2, 7/fg1; P6/fg2; P3, 7/fg3
- overcoming obstacles and realism;	P2, 4/fg1; P3/fg2; P10, 12/fg3
- courage to ask questions and seeking help from teachers;	P1, 6/fg1; P8,12/fg2; P9, 12/fg3
Appropriate guidance and professional development:	
- choosing a faculty with a promising specialisation;	P3/fg1; P10/fg2; P12/fg3
- easing adaptation to changes in the living environment;	P6/fg1; P5fg2
- engaging with faculty for professional development	P3, 12/fg3
Successful completion of learning activities: attending courses and committing to intensive study; absorbing a significant information; actively exploring information beyond the curriculum;	P2, 7/fg1; P7/fg2; P8, 11/fg3
Presence of a supportive environment at the university: empathetic teachers; mutual respect; equal opportunities;	P 6/fg1; P12/fg2; P3, 12/fg3

One of the students proposed several recommendations for high school students considering to apply to university: *"The first suggestion would be to plan ahead, as I faced this challenge myself. They should research the field they intend to pursue, create a list of pros and cons, and determine whether that field aligns with their interests."* P6/fg2 offers another example: *"Don't get discouraged, as starting a new phase in life involves new changes. Don't let doubts influence you (such as whether you'll be able to handle it, whether you'll have support, etc.)."* P12/fg3.

Q10: What recommendations would you give to university leaders to keep students motivated and engaged in attending classes?

The following thematic categories were identified based on the suggestions for university leaders (Table 8): enhancing teaching methods

(N=14), implementing administrative solutions (N=9), promoting student-centred education (N=8), and providing effective academic and career guidance (N=3).

Table 8. Responses in thematic categories for Q10

Thematic categories	Participant (P)/Focus group number (fg)
Enhancing teaching methods:	
- incorporating interactive activities;	P1/fg1; P12/fg2; P9/fg3
- adopting a modern teaching approach; and using educational games	P1, 6, 7/fg1; P4, 7/fg2; P9, 12/fg3
- creating an engaging and appealing course environment including online courses	
Implementing administrative solutions:	
- structuring the programme effectively and reducing the number of subjects and hours;	P1, 6/fg1; P12/fg2; P9/fg3
- providing support from faculty leadership;	P3/fg1; P6/fg2; P9/fg3
- flexible and well-organised timetable;	P6/fg3
- offering financial aid to students in need	P7/fg2
Promoting student-centred education:	
- tailoring education adaptation to students' needs that encourage and support students;	P2, 7/fg1; P6/fg2; P6, 12/fg3
- fostering effective communication between managers and students;	P6/fg2; P12/fg3
- providing effective academic and career guidance	P3, 6/fg2; P9/fg3

A suggestion made by a student referred to the importance of effective communication: *"Students should have communication skills, especially those lacking any motivation."* P12/fg3 gives an example related to effective academic and career guidance by *introducing the role of the university psychologist within the (…) starting from the first semester.*

Conclusions and future research directions

The primary value of this study lies in its diagnostic approach. Gaining direct insight into the specific causes of university dropout (especially in smaller institutions) is an important step towards reducing dropout rates. The added value of our study lies at the microsystemic and institutional level, within the socio-economic context of a relatively small regional university. On one hand, it validates the theoretical findings discussed earlier, while on the other, it allows us to gain a

deeper understanding of our students' perspectives on the causes of university dropout, their perceptions of the challenges they face during their studies, and some suggestions they have for teachers or academic management.

Broad, system-wide measures must be complemented by targeted interventions at the micro level to effectively address the needs of various disadvantaged student groups (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The focus groups with students from the Faculties of Letters, Engineering, Economic Sciences, and Movement, Sport, and Health Sciences helped identify factors contributing to dropout within our institution. The main reasons the students chose their faculties included: a desire for personal development, passion for their chosen field of study, and proximity to home. The students frequently expressed positive attitudes towards learning and active participation in individual study as their preferred approach to studying various subjects. When it came to resolving questions or uncertainties during their studies, students highlighted the importance of seeking help from others and maintaining a constructive attitude towards managing doubts. The leading factors influencing dropout were financial challenges. Most students did not report family, personal, or academic difficulties as reasons for considering dropping out.

The identification of financial factors as a key cause of university dropout in our research sample contrasts with findings from some other studies on the same topic (Yılmaz & Sarpkaya, 2022). This underscores the idea that university dropout is shaped by specific contexts, varying across educational institutions and student groups, as well as by how the dropout process is managed.

Although we identified financial issues as a significant factor through focus group discussions, it is clear, as current research indicates, that the decision to leave or continue studies cannot be attributed to a single cause (Bernardo et al., 2022). Instead, it is always influenced by a combination of interrelated factors.

The limitations of our study primarily stem from the small sample size of students involved and the inherent constraints of qualitative analysis. Our future research should expand to include larger student groups, ideally stratified by year of study, beginning with first-year students. This is important because students in each year may face not only general challenges common to higher education but also specific factors that may contribute to their decision to drop out.

Moreover, while this qualitative analysis represents a valuable starting point, it needs to be complemented by a quantitative approach, such as a questionnaire, to enhance the objectivity of the results. Additional selection criteria for participants, such as "field of study and cultural or social backgrounds would yield valuable insights" (Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al., 2024, 105).

Additionally, as highlighted in the theoretical section, it is important to consider not only the students' perspectives but also those of other actors involved in academic success or failure. Therefore, future research should include applied studies focusing on the perceptions of "teaching staff, the institution, and family members" which generally involves "the entire university community" (Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023, 2). After all, university dropout is a major concern that affects everyone.

Lastly, our study also holds prognostic value, as it paves the way for additional institutional measures aimed at understanding the specific causes of university dropout in our institution and tailoring activities to better meet the needs of our students. Proposed actions include organising workshops and focus groups with first-year students during the initial semester to understand their concerns and needs regarding their academic journey. Students would also benefit from individual and group counselling sessions, equipping them with strategies to address factors contributing to dropout tendencies on a case-by-case basis; first-year students should be familiarised with all available institutional support, such as resources offered through the Career Counselling and Guidance Centre, in partnership with the Student League. Continuous support from qualified staff, including Career Centre representatives and the broader academic community (faculty, administration, and leadership), is also essential. Additionally, meetings with alumni and experience-sharing sessions with successful students from higher years or those who have overcome challenges with dropping out could prove valuable. These institution-specific measures align with broader system-level efforts, such as developing tools to monitor university dropouts, facilitating the exchange of best practices among higher education institutions, offering relevant counselling, mentoring, and tutoring services, and providing additional support to at-risk students, including social grants, accommodation, free meals, and transportation subsidies (Ministry of European Investments and Projects, 2024a).

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