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# Incident factors in Andalusian university dropout: A qualitative approach from the perspective of higher education students

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University dropout is currently one of the main challenges faced by government bodies and state and regional universities. Both personal and institutional reasons can be identified as root causes of university dropout. On a personal level, students accumulate experiences of academic failure that lead them to reflect on the possibility of continuing their studies, while from an institutional point of view, failure can be attributed to educational deficits, reputation, and quality parameters of the university institution itself. Even though more and more universities have educational policies aimed at reducing dropout rates, the dropout figures continue to rise, which shows that this is a complex problem due to the number of variables involved. The main objective of this study is to analyze the factors that influence university dropout among Andalusian students. The methodology is qualitative through a focus group with the participation of 12 students who dropped out of their academic studies in education science degrees at the University of Malaga (Spain). The study population corresponds to students who formalized their enrollment in the first year of the degree in the 2021/22 academic year. The content analysis followed a deductive category development model. The results reveal that the factors that explain the educational abandonment of the students, who are the object of this research, are identification with studies that did not meet their initial expectations, the use of traditionalist methodologies, the development of work activity, and the economic difficulties in covering the costs derived from university education. The main conclusion include the importance of designing educational policies in line with the reality and needs of the students, the use of innovative methodologies that increase the degree of motivation of the students, as well as studying dropouts from a holistic perspective, considering the multiple variables that influence its origin.

## KEYWORDS

university dropout, higher education, university persistence, dropout prevention, factors

## 1. Introduction

Dropping out of university studies is currently one of the main concerns that attract the attention of educational institutions in different countries due to the negative consequences it generates, not only because of the loss of resources but also because of the limitations for social, economic, and cultural development (González and Uribe, 2018). The statistics on university dropout rates are overwhelming and are the best representation of the magnitude of this problem (Urbina and Ovalles, 2016).

Specifically, in Spain, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) reveals that the rate of early school leavers stands at 16% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), 2020). This percentage is far from the target set by the European Union in the Europe 2020 Strategy, which stipulated reducing the dropout rate in Spain to a maximum of 15% (European Commission, 2020). All this generates economic losses of more than 1 billion euros per year in Spain (Colá, 2015). As a result, reducing university dropout remains one of the fundamental objectives of government agendas and a challenge for education professionals in the 21st century (Tuero-Herrero et al., 2020).

Therefore, in the scientific field, university dropout and retention are of great concern to the educational community and researchers. In the national context, various research works were carried out to identify the factors involved in university dropout using a quantitative methodology. The research carried out by López-Cózar-Navarro et al. (2020) focused on analyzing the personal and educational variables that lead to university dropout. The conclusion of this study include the importance of educational guidance in the compulsory stage and its continuity in higher education. Along the same lines as the earlier research, Cervero et al. (2021) identified that certain factors of academic, social, and affective origin, such as, for example, low self-esteem and motivation, are among some of the causes of university dropout.

In the international context, several studies have also been carried out in the field of research. One of them, carried out in South Korea, aimed to study the factors affecting university dropout through the analysis of interviews. The findings show that family influence had a negative impact on students' university satisfaction along with academic success, and these two factors are considered to be highly significant in reducing university dropout (Jae Kyung, 2022). The research carried out by Velasco Poveda et al. (2020) concluded that economic and family factors have a significant impact on university dropout. In the same way, they highlighted other influential factors such as motivation, academic success, and the emotional state of the students. Research on university students in Germany finds that the decision to drop out is centered on emotional, motivational, behavioral, and cognitive-affective variables (Bäulke et al., 2022), the interest and expectations of study (Behr et al., 2021), or with different personal and environmental barriers or conditions

that prevent the successful pursuit of a career (Powazny and Kauffeld, 2021).

These and other research studies (González González, 2006; Bethencourt Benítez et al., 2008; Arce et al., 2015; Constante-Amores et al., 2021) focus on identifying some of the factors that may influence university dropout, although they do not delve into the students' own perceptions during their educational career, which would allow a more detailed understanding of the causes that led to this phenomenon. However, it is worth mentioning Tinto (1975), a reference in the study of the phenomenon of university dropout, whose interactionist model highlights the importance of different variables in explaining university dropout: the importance of the student's previous academic history, in terms of study skills and academic performance; the socio-economic conditions of the family; expectations with the studies chosen in higher education; the sense of relevance with the peer group; and the involvement in university academic life through participation in curricular and extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1993; Tinto and Russo, 1994).

This would be the central focus of this study, together with the need to develop preventive measures to guarantee continuance at university, given that the research carried out has focused more on analyzing the variables involved in university dropout, but not so much on how to prevent university dropout and encourage continuance.

## 2. University dropout in the autonomous community of Andalusia

The concept of university dropout is characterized by its complexity (Stiller and Bachmaier, 2017), so, we can find several factors that are associated with this phenomenon. University dropout admits various definitions; on the one hand, as a process in which students disengage, temporarily or permanently, from the institution or the educational system after having enrolled in the corresponding studies (Páramo and Correa, 1999). On the other hand, as a difference between students who enter a degree program for the first time and those who graduate having passed all the corresponding subjects (Zandomeni et al., 2016).

In this study, we have considered university dropout as the phenomenon that defines students who have canceled their enrollment during the first year or who have not enrolled in the same university the following year (Tuero-Herrero et al., 2020; Portal Martínez et al., 2022). This interruption can be motivated by various reasons: involuntary dropout, starting other studies, entering the world of work, the desire to resume studies in the future, poor academic performance, and/or low identification with the chosen studies (Esteban et al., 2017; Casanova et al., 2018b; Casanova et al., 2022). The situations identified are diverse and the lack of terminological clarification can lead to confusion; however, for university institutions, any situation

that leads students to interrupt their studies should be valued as a failure, as they have not managed to successfully complete the educational objectives of the program taught, apart from the loss of time, cost, and the psychological trauma of the individual who drops out (Cabrera et al., 2006a; Faas et al., 2018; Sosu and Pheunpha, 2019).

Therefore, it is necessary to identify and analyze the factors that could be at the origin of this phenomenon. Currently, personal, academic, sociological, sociological, economic, and organizational factors are some of the most studied (Viale, 2014; Constante-Amores et al., 2021). The first is closely related to variables such as students' gender or age. An example of this is associated with a study conducted at the University of Seville, where they concluded that women were significantly more likely than men to drop out of university studies (González-Ramírez and Pedraza-Navarro, 2017). Likewise, the age at the start of studies also influences the probability of dropping out; in fact, most students who drop out start their studies when they are over 20 years old (Aranque et al., 2009).

Among the personal variables, we can also find the motives and the order of degree choice (Tuero-Herrero et al., 2020). In this line, vocational issues are closely related to motivation, as well as to permanence in studies (Cabrera et al., 2006b). On the other hand, academic variables are linked to satisfaction and fulfillment of the expectations of the chosen degree, as well as class attendance and involvement in educational development (Esteban et al., 2017; Casanova et al., 2018a).

In relation to socio-economic factors, the importance of support networks, closeness in the relationship with the teaching staff, relations with the family, the enjoyment of grants, or the level of studies of their parents can be highlighted as key aspects that favor permanence at the university (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011; Esteban et al., 2016). In this sense, student retention is better when the family environment has sufficient economic resources to cover the costs of their children's studies (Casanova et al., 2018a). Finally, another research study has shown that satisfaction with the activity and skills of teachers, as well as the organization of university studies, plays an important role in academic decision-making (Duque et al., 2013). All these situations can lead to both dissatisfaction and demotivation of students, which can lead to university dropout.

To carry out this study, various research and reports, both national and regional, have been considered as a starting point. In relation to national studies, it should be noted that university dropout is one of the major problems of the Spanish university system (Esteban et al., 2017). Hence, in Spain, statistics are published every year on dropout rates in Spanish universities. It is estimated that every year approximately 125,000 students who enroll at a Spanish university end up dropping out of the academic year (Pérez and Aldás, 2022), causing large economic losses for the Spanish government (Portal Martínez et al., 2022). The annual report "Facts and figures of the Spanish university system" of the Spanish Ministry of Education corroborates these

data, placing Spain as one of the countries with the worst university success rates, causing several negative consequences (Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte (MECD), 2015; Pérez and Aldás, 2022). First, students who decide to drop out of their studies face a loss of resources invested in their education, such as time or money (Mestán, 2016). On the other hand, for the university institution, dropping out has a negative impact on its prestige, as well as large financial losses (González-Ramírez and Pedraza-Navarro, 2017).

These aspects are not only reflected in statistics but also constitute a topic of great interest in the scientific community. Accordingly, several studies (Bethencourt Benítez et al., 2008; Constante-Amores et al., 2021) that highlight the factors that influence university dropout among Spanish students are of different natures (demographic, socioeconomic, and academic). Along the same lines, Castaño et al. (2008) analyzed the factors associated with student dropout based on qualitative studies, also associating psychological and institutional factors with university dropout.

If we focus on the Andalusian context, this autonomous community is the one most affected by this phenomenon. According to the report "The Spanish University in Figures" by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish, Andalusia is one of the regions with the highest dropout rate, being only surpassed by the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, and the Principality of Asturias (Conferencia de Rectores de Universidades Españolas (CRUE), 2017). The reports carried out in this context can serve as a guide to determine the relevant factors of academic dropout, concluding that different socioeconomic and family variables have a special impact on university dropout among Andalusian students, such as living outside the family home, depending on a scholarship, or combining studies with work (Conferencia de Rectores de Universidades Españolas (CRUE), 2017; González-Ramírez and Pedraza-Navarro, 2017).

In view of this reality in Andalusia, this study aims to analyze the factors that intervene both in university dropout and staying at the university, based on the experiences of students at the University of Malaga. The following specific objectives are derived from this general objective: to identify how the choice of a university degree and its course influences possible university dropout; to investigate the personal, family, and/or economic causes that led to university dropout; to find out about the different post-dropout trajectories from a personal, academic, and/or employment perspective of the students; and to propose good pedagogical practices that contribute to university permanence.

### 3. Materials and methods

The methodology of this research was qualitative, based on the focus group technique, with the aim of analyzing the

factors that influence university dropout in students belonging to the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Malaga (Spain). A focus group was carried out with a total of 12 students, of which nine were female students and three were male students. These were students who dropped out of their academic studies in the area of Educational Sciences and who formalized their enrollment in the first year of their degree in the 2021/22 academic year. The participants were from degree programs in Social Education, Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, and Pedagogy. **Table 1** shows the distribution of students based on the degree program.

During the course of the focus group, the participants were encouraged to express their opinions freely, with the participation of a moderator who was responsible for directing and redirecting the debate toward the issues addressed in this study.

To gain access to the participants, we considered the information collected on the virtual campuses of some of the subjects of the aforementioned degrees, where we identified cases of students whose enrollment had been discontinued. A letter was drafted and sent *via* e-mail, considering their possible interest in participating in this research. The letter explained the main objectives of the research, the reason for conducting the focus group, and the possibility of adapting to the personal needs of the students who were to participate. Throughout the whole process of data collection, different ethical codes were established to ensure the confidentiality and wellbeing of the people involved. The data collection took place in the last term of the 2021/22 academic year, starting in July and ending in September.

The focus group lasted approximately 1–1.5 h. The session was conducted virtually, and prior authorization was requested to proceed with the recording.

Considering the complexity associated with the phenomenon of university dropout and the multiple factors associated with it, it was considered appropriate to adapt this study to **Torrado's** (2012) telephone interview, which made it possible to inquire about issues related to the current situation of each student, the causes that led to their dropping out, as well

as their academic and employment trajectory after dropping out.

The questions addressed in the focus group were the following:

- What studies gave you access to a university degree?
- Which degree did you choose to start your university education?
- What were the reasons that led you to choose that degree?
- Did you attend classes regularly?
- How did you approach the study of different subjects while you were a university student?
- How did you deal with any questions or doubts that arose during your studies?
- In general, how do you evaluate your university experience?
- For what family, personal, and/or financial reasons did you drop out of university?
- Since leaving university, have you considered continuing your studies? Or have you chosen to work?
- What do you do now?
- What suggestions would you give to colleagues who want to start university studies?
- What suggestions would you give to those in charge of universities so that students do not become demotivated and attend classes regularly?

In the process of analyzing the information, the following phases were followed: recording, literal transcription of the recordings, pre-reading of the transcriptions, definition and coding of the deductive categories and subcategories, design of the hermeneutic unit, inductive obtaining of the fragments (quotes), elaboration of the semantic network of the macrocategory, and the semantic network of categories with empirical evidence. For all this, the qualitative analysis application Atlas. ti. (2022) was used. **Table 2** presents the deductive categories and subcategories from the focus group analysis of this study.

The category "previous academic status university studies" focuses on the analysis of the student's situation before university entrance. This category includes three subcategories, aimed at finding out which were the studies that allowed them to access the university ("access studies"), the university degree selected ("degree choice"), and the motivations that led to this choice ("motivations in the choice").

The category "academic situation during university studies" refers to the experiences of university students regarding their level of adaptation to the educational process. Within this category, subcategories are distinguished: "class attendance" in terms of regular class attendance; "university experience," which is related to the ways of planning, how to organize study, and the procedures used in resolving doubts; "decision to drop out"

**TABLE 1** Distribution of students participating in this study.

Number of students	Gender	University degree
1	Female	Degree in Early Childhood Education
3	Female	Degree in Social Education
2	Male	Degree in Social Education
1	Male	Degree in Pedagogy
3	Female	Degree in Pedagogy
2	Female	Degree in Primary Education

Own elaboration.

TABLE 2 Deductive categories and subcategories.

Categories	Subcategories
Previous academic status university studies (PAS)	- Access studies (AS)
	- Degree choice (DC)
	- Motivations in the choice (MC)
Academic situation during university studies (ASD)	- Class attendance (CA)
	- University experience (UE)
	- Decision to drop out (DDO)
Causes of dropout (CD)	- Personal factors (PF)
	- Family factors (FF)
	- Economic factors (EF)
	- Work factors (WF)
	- Curricular and organizational factors (COF)
	- Identification with studies (IS)
Post-dropout trajectory (PDT)	- Combination study-work (CSW)
	- University re-entry (UR)
Suggestions for university permanence (SUP)	- Peer suggestions (PS)
	- University suggestions (US)

Own elaboration.

refers to the overall assessment of the university experience that leads them to consider dropping out of university studies.

The category "causes of dropout" refers to the various reasons that lead students to drop out of university studies. This category includes six specific subcategories: "personal factors" and "family factors," which refer, on the one hand, to the students' reasons for dropping out of university studies and, on the other hand, to the students' socio-family contexts as determining factors for dropping out of university studies, such as "work factors," such as students working in a professional job, which prevents them from combining work and studies; "economic factors," relating to the lack of resources to be able to cover the costs of university education; "curricular and organizational factors," which relate to the didactic and teaching planning variables that are part of each subject and that may trigger possible drop-out decisions, while the subcategory "identification with studies" allows us to understand the extent to which students identify with their studies and their professional projection.

The category "post-dropout trajectory" analyzes the future projections of students once they have initially left their studies. This category includes the subcategory "combination study-work," to find out to what extent the student has favorable conditions to reconcile academic and working life, and the subcategory "university re-entry," referring to decisions to return to university classrooms.

The category "suggestions for university permanence" includes the different recommendations offered both to other

students who are about to start higher education and to those responsible for university studies, to examine possible measures to help ensure that students stay on at the university.

## 4. Results

To present the results of this research, the most significant contributions of the participants have been analyzed by the categorization process and the objectives of this study. The participants' discourses were anonymized and coded to ensure confidentiality. The codes used to identify the participating students correspond to a Degree in Social Education (DSE), a Degree in Early Childhood Education (DECE), a Degree in Primary Education (DPE), and a Degree in Pedagogy (DP). In each of the extracted fragments, in addition to the degree, the gender of each of the participants has been included.

From the content analysis carried out with the Atlas. ti. (2022) application a semantic network has been obtained for the macrocategory "university permanence," in which the rest of the categories are related to the academic situation before and during university studies, the main reasons that led to dropping out, the post-dropout trajectory, and suggestions or guidelines to ensure university continuance (Figure 1).

The macrocategory "university permanence" is interconnected with the code curricular and organizational factors, being a central element from which other key subcategories converge, such as the decision to drop out due to personal, economic, family factors, and the combination of study-work. Another subcategory associated with "staying at university" is the choice of degree, which is identified with access to studies and motivation in the choice of these studies, which in turn, together with suggestions from the university and peers, influences the decision to drop out and university re-entry. The subcategories, class attendance and university experience, are directly related to work factors, curricular, and organizational factors, as well as identification with studies.

In the category "previous academic status university studies," three subcategories are presented that collect information on access studies (AS), degree choice (DC), and motivations in the choice (MC).

The participating students entered university either through Baccalaureate or through Higher Level Training Cycles. Among the reasons that led them to choose the degree, the students of DSE highlighted that it is a very necessary profession, with multiple areas and spaces for intervention, and that it can help in social transformation. In addition, one aspect to highlight from these students is that their choice of degree was conditioned by their personal experiences, which meant that they wanted to give an opportunity to people who find themselves in situations similar to those they had experienced, as well as a way of identifying and constructing their identity.



Primary Education, or even the Degree in Psychology, so they had the idea of finishing the first year and then trying to re-enroll in the desired degree course.

Another emerging issue related to the choice of this degree was the possibility it offers to prepare for competitive examinations in educational guidance, which in one way or another, allows them to have direct contact with students of different ages, to provide them with personalized educational attention, and optimization of their learning. Also, noteworthy in the arguments of these students is the continuous demotivation during the first year of the degree, as they dealt with very general aspects of the profession that hardly allowed them to have direct contact with the practical reality of pedagogical professionals, in addition to the bewilderment about the specific functions of these professionals in educational centers, and, therefore, about job opportunities.

DP student. *It was the degree course I managed to get into and the one that was closest to the one I really wanted to study, which was the degree in Early Childhood Education. But I was left out because I didn't have enough marks. My initial idea was to do the first year and then reapply for the one I really wanted, to see if I had better luck.*

From the category "academic situation during university studies," three subcategories are extracted, "class attendance (CA)," "university experience (UE)", and "decision to drop out" (DDO). The participating students from the different degree programs stated that they used to attend classes regularly at the beginning, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was very hard for them to stop having contact with their classmates in person and the virtual classes were very boring and monotonous. They had to be online for long hours and the teaching methodologies were lecture-based, so they had little option to intervene. Another problem was internet access, as many of the participating students were from rural areas with poor connectivity, so they were unable to access the content and began to lose interest in the subjects. In addition to all this, they were overloaded with work and theoretical activities, which made it impossible for them to apply the content to real situations.

With regard to how they planned their studies, the participants generally stated that during classes they took notes, bought reference manuals for the subjects, and even expanded the information with documents available on the virtual campuses. When they had some doubts, in the beginning, they wrote an e-mail to the teacher, but as their doubts were not fully clarified, they relied on other classmates through social networks. Other students (Degree in Primary Education), referred to the fact that they wrote messages by e-mail to the teacher, but did not receive a reply and took advantage of the last minutes of the

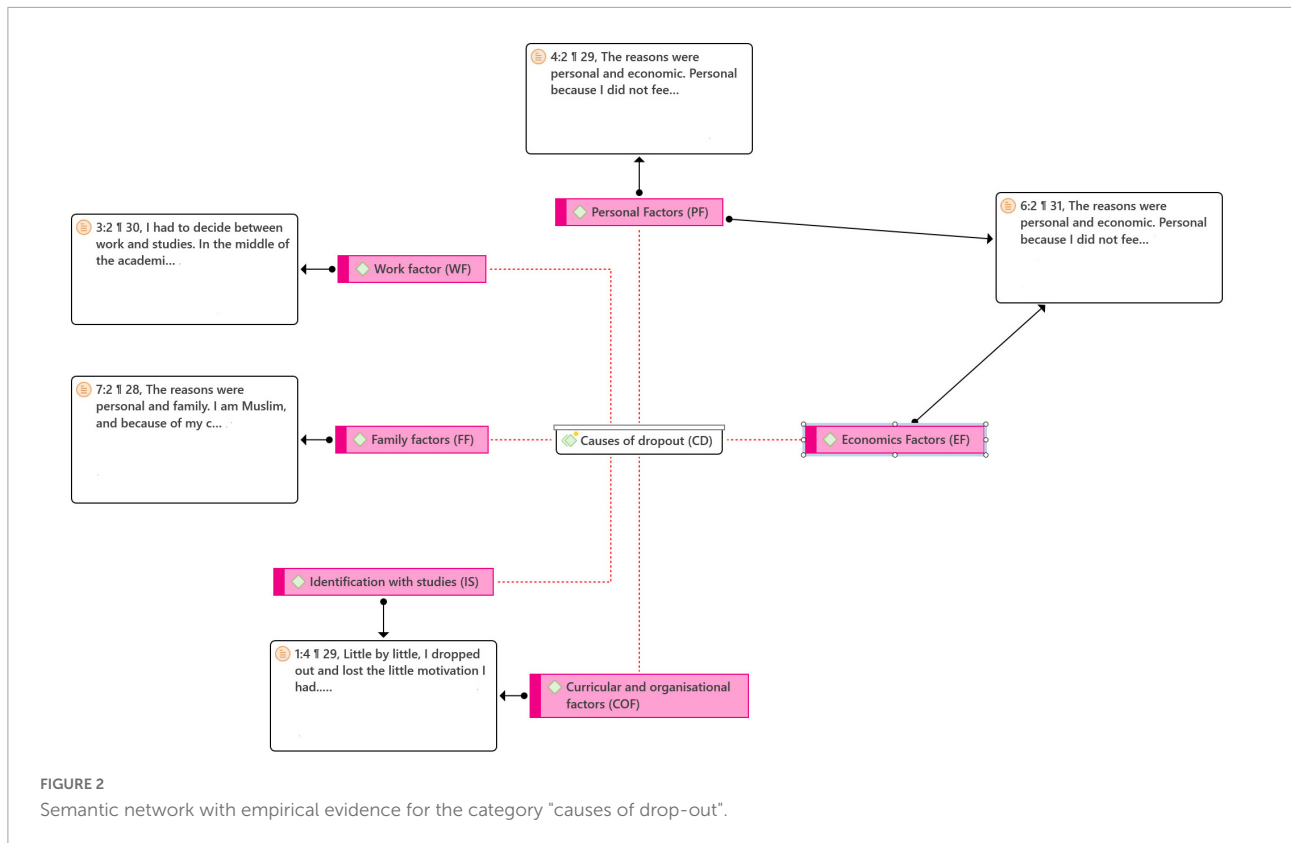
class to ask questions. However, as time went on, in some subjects, they recognized that they were losing motivation, and they no longer followed up on the subject or asked questions, but instead requested the notes of the subject from other classmates with the intention of studying before the exam and having the possibility of passing. In this aspect, the students from different degree programs agreed that, together with other factors, motivation is an element that plays an essential role in the rethinking of abandoning a university degree.

DP student. *At the beginning, I started with enthusiasm and attended classes regularly, but as time went by, I became disillusioned with the degree and turned off, I started to attend classes less, the subjects were very theoretical, and I didn't see the application to the practical field.*

DP student. *I took notes, I downloaded all the documents and presentations from the Virtual Campus, and I even bought a book or two recommended by some professors.*

The category "causes of dropout" is made up of the subcategories "personal factors" (PF), "family factors" (FF), "work factors" (WF), "economic factors" (EF), "curricular and organizational factors" (COF), and "identification with studies" (IS). **Figure 2** presents an exemplification of a semantic network with empirical evidence of the deductive category "causes of dropout" that has been obtained from the inductive analysis of the documents. The arguments offered by the participants in this research suggest that the main reasons that led them to abandon their university studies include personal, economic, and university-related variables. In relation to the personal variables, the students of the Degree in Education alluded to the fact that they did not identify with their chosen degree and that it did not meet their initial expectations, all of which led to an identity crisis that led them to reconsider whether to continue studying or to opt for work. Some of the students (Degree in Social Education) stated that during the first year, they suffered a personal and identity crisis as they had conflicts with their parents or partners, which led them to repeatedly miss classes, reconsider other more attractive options, and even to drop out of their studies. Among these options, they highlighted looking for a job or taking competitive examinations to have a certain degree of professional stability in the short term rather than pursuing a university degree.

DSE student. *I guess seeing myself working made me realize that the priority for my family at that time was to have several salaries, and I was a bit "forced" to work full time instead of continuing to attend school.*



With regard to the economic variables, many students (Degree in Primary Education, Degree in Early Childhood Education, and Degree in Social Education) stressed the need to carry out a professional activity to contribute to the improvement of the family economy, as in many cases the students lived with their parents and siblings, which required them to contribute some extra income to maintain the expenses derived from university education. A student with a Primary Education Degree said that they not only had to pay the registration fees but also other expenses related to transport, curricular material, etc., as they did not have a scholarship for their studies.

DECE student. *The reasons were personal and economic. Personal because I did not feel satisfied or identified with my studies. Economic because at home the income dropped, and it was necessary to think about working and even finding something stable that would help the economy at home to improve.*

DPE student. *The reasons were personal, first. At home, my family never pressured me to work. In fact, they insisted that I should finish my degree quietly and told me that there was always time to work. But suddenly I found myself earning money, surrounded by children (which I liked) because I got a*

*job as a school monitor, and I began to think that in the future I could get something better in the education sector. I tried to combine it all, but I couldn't. The pressure got the better of me. The pressure got the better of me and I decided to keep working.*

For their part, with regard to the university course itself, the students agreed that there was a lack of motivation in specific subjects due to the excessively lecture-based teaching methodologies, which obliged them to be attentive in class to take notes, but did not give room for participation in the debate of ideas or discussions, as well as the inflexible attitudes of certain lecturers in offering alternatives that would allow them to combine study and work without having to give up their university education.

DES student. *I lost motivation over time. The classes were boring and the lack of flexibility of the teachers helped me to quit.*

The category "post-dropout trajectory" includes two specific subcategories: "combination study-work" (CSW) and "university re-entry" (UR).

The students of the Pedagogy and Social Education Degree stated that they were aware that having a university degree could help them to get a job with greater professional projection and

stability. They also stated that they had classmates who, through instant messaging groups, told them that it was very difficult to work as a pedagogue in an educational center or as a social educator because there were many unemployed professionals and because of labor intrusion. They also commented that it was not only for this reason but also because some of these students had completed a higher degree in Social Integration, which allowed them to work in educational centers as monitors and perform the functions of a social educator in this case.

DP student. *My cousin has studied the intermediate degree in Social Integration and is already working in a school, she has delighted her, but her professional figure is more welfare, but also performs functions of social educator, working more hours and earning less, so.*

The students in the Degree in Primary Education and Degree in Early Childhood Education emphasized that distance learning universities are a good opportunity to reconcile study with work. They also expressed the idea of returning to university studies later, but in a gradual manner, considering the possibility of enrolling in individual subjects based on prior contact with the teaching staff in charge to find out about possible ways of reconciling work and study.

GSE alumnus. *As of today, I am still working, but my intention is to resume my studies next year. I have thought about enrolling in some individual subjects, and I will first review the guides and try to find out about the requirements, to start taking the subjects that will allow me to continue working.*

DP student. *I am considering continuing to work because I know how difficult it is nowadays to get a job, but I also think that I can have more possibilities if I have a degree. Therefore, the option I am considering in the medium term is to enroll in a distance-learning university in Degree in Social Education, to get a degree, which, added to my work experience, could give me more options and career opportunities.*

The category "suggestions for university permanence" includes two subcategories: "Peer suggestions" (PS) and "University suggestions" (US).

With respect to the subcategory "Peer suggestions," the students of the Degree in Primary Education and the Degree in Pedagogy comment on the importance of planning and organizing study time each day, knowing in advance what possibilities the university offers to reconcile study and work, in the sense of being able to request to attend class part-time, for example, and if this is not feasible, consider studying at a distance-learning university.

DPE student. *That they organize their study time well so that there is also time to enjoy time with family and friends. And if this is not possible, they should study at a non-attending university.*

On the other hand, the students of the Degree in Social Education emphasize analyzing from the outset what the professional opportunities are and what they really want to do in the future to avoid wasting unnecessary time and effort. They also suggest that, if they have chosen the degree they wanted, they should make the most of the classes and the teaching staff and also share experiences with other classmates.

DSE student. *I would tell them to be fully involved in the subjects, that if they have entered the desired degree, they should give the best of themselves, and if they work, they should try to combine everything in the best way but evaluate what they really want to dedicate themselves to in the future.*

GES student. *That they take advantage of the joy of sharing moments with their peers.*

Regarding the subcategory "university suggestions," the students in general stated that teachers should give more prominence to students, leaving aside traditionalist methodologies, favoring debate, participation, and group work. The participants in this study insisted on the importance of teachers teaching how to think, making classes more dynamic and rethinking the form of evaluation, and prioritizing comprehension over memorization. In this regard, they commented that it was necessary to revise the curricula to adapt them to the new demands and social needs.

DSE student. *I think it is fundamental that students are active protagonists in the classes, that they can express themselves, that the subjects are designed as "dialogues," and that there is flexibility in the attitudes of teachers toward students who work but also want to study. The key, I think, is empathy, understanding, and flexibility.*

DP student. *I think it is very important that teachers teach to think, that they make the classes dynamic, that they do not encourage memorization, but above all understanding, and that, instead of giving final exams, there should be eliminatory evaluation tests that allow us to study gradually and have a better chance of passing the subjects.*

Another aspect to highlight is the functionality of the contents given in the subjects so that they have practical applicability and a real professional projection. For example,

by inviting working professionals who can share their own experiences and thus provide a real vision of each workspace. They also state that it is essential to have student counseling services that explain from the first year what the professional opportunities associated with each degree are.

DPE student. *That useful content for the performance of the profession is transmitted, and the main needs of the students are addressed, assessing each case, and trying to offer flexible solutions. I believe that the key is that the classes are dynamic, and the teachers are approachable and accessible.*

## 5. Discussion

This section presents the discussion of the results according to each of the categories and subcategories, maintaining a structure in accordance with the initial objectives.

### 5.1. Previous academic status university studies

Most of the participants in this study argue that the reasons that first motivated them to choose a university degree were related to vocational aspects. This data is consistent with the conclusive results of other research (Tinto, 1993; Esteban et al., 2016; Bernardo et al., 2019; Castro-López et al., 2021; Cervero et al., 2021), which emphasize the importance of having adequate counseling during schooling to reach the choice of higher studies that match personal interests and motivations.

The need to obtain a degree with which to have greater possibilities to access the labor market appears as another of the essential motivations provided by the participants in this research. These findings also appear in other studies (De la Fuente et al., 2017; Sánchez-Gelaberte et al., 2020), in which it is emphasized that obtaining a degree constitutes a way to overcome the labor precariousness of employment that young people who lack a university degree must face.

Some of the participants who have taken part in this study have clarified that the grade obtained in the Spanish Baccalaureate has conditioned their access to the chosen degree since they have begun to take some studies seeking to validate later some subjects to try again to access the degree that really was the desired one. Along the same lines, we find other studies (Rodríguez et al., 2016; Venuleo et al., 2016; Rump et al., 2017) which show that some students begin undesired university studies to keep themselves busy and opt to change their degree the following year.

On the other hand, regarding the motivations for choosing a university degree, it is worth noting the influence exerted

by the families, who insisted that their sons and daughters opt for degrees already taken by some of their members. This is the case, for example, of the Degree in Early Childhood Education and the Degree in Primary Education. This issue has been seen in other studies (Clark and Dumas, 2016; Weis et al., 2016; Mostart and Pienaar, 2020; Tuero-Herrero et al., 2020), in which the value of family professions as a reference with which to acquire various professional skills is emphasized.

### 5.2. The academic situation during university studies

Most of the participants recognize that, although at the beginning they attended classes regularly, during their studies, they encountered certain difficulties in continuing with the same degree of involvement for various reasons: development of work activity, personal problems, and lack of motivation. Along the same lines, other studies (Acevedo, 2020; Casanova et al., 2022) warn that among some of the reasons for university dropout is the difficulty in reconciling study and work, in addition to a decrease in motivation and problems of identification with the studies, which leads to sporadic attendance in classes.

Another issue to highlight with respect to the ways of approaching the study on the part of the participants of this research is related to the planning and organization of the study. The students verbalized that they took notes on the subjects, expanding the information both with the contributions of their classmates and from the documents provided by the teachers in the virtual campuses of the subjects. This issue is also part of the data provided by other studies (Duque et al., 2013; Esteban et al., 2017), which emphasize the value of adequate planning and access to materials of interest as key aspects in the organization of the study of the various university disciplines.

Regarding the procedures used for the resolution of doubts, most of the students in this research admitted that to solve the various questions of the subjects they used e-mail as a means. Since they had little time due to their personal, work, or family situations, they could not do it in person. Likewise, they also relied on other classmates to ask about subject content through instant messaging groups. In this regard, they emphasized the importance of maintaining direct contact with teachers and being able to better understand the issues raised. Some studies (Garza-Moya et al., 2018; Lei et al., 2018) affirm the importance of direct contact with teachers and with peer groups to have the necessary support with which they can overcome the difficulties that may be generated throughout academic training.

The students who were part of the focus group of this study valued their university experience in a positive and

rewarding way at the beginning, although some of them said that they sometimes felt somewhat overwhelmed by the number of academic tasks to perform and the difficulties to combine all this with the performance of a professional activity or family reconciliation. In the same way, some students have recognized that those classes that were designed as a form of dialogues and shared meetings were essential to escape from certain personal problems and to continue with sufficient motivation to continue their university studies. These data are also collected in other studies (Nowell, 2017; Alcalá del Olmo et al., 2020), in which the use of active methodologies by teachers, their flexibility, and the creation of spaces that encourage students to play an active role are seen as factors in the prevention of university dropout.

### 5.3. Causes of dropout

Most of the students argue that the reasons that led them to drop out of college were personal, family, and economic.

Among the personal reasons was the search for personal identity in the face of studies that did not correspond to initial expectations. In addition, different problems associated with an identity crisis, conflicts between parents and children, or dating relationships led them to begin to reconsider dropping out of university for various reasons: to have more time to resolve these situations or also to look for a job that could guarantee them financial independence.

Among the economic and family reasons was the development of a full-time professional activity that prevented the reconciliation of study and work, together with the need to contribute to the improvement of the family economy in the face of job losses and precarious employment situations on the part of the parents. These results are consistent with other studies (Tinto, 1993; Mestan, 2016; Ghignoni, 2017; Lizarte, 2017; Tuero-Herrero et al., 2020; Constante-Amores et al., 2021), in which the need to develop a professional activity to contribute to the improvement of family income and dissatisfaction with the chosen degree in terms of the contents addressed and the methodology constitute factors located at the origin of university dropout.

Regarding curricular and organizational factors, it should be noted that the participants commented that, in most of the subjects, the teachers resorted to traditionalist methodologies, based on the transmission of theoretical content, without encouraging the active participation of the students. In addition, they highlighted the lack of practical applications of these contents in the professional contexts of intervention. In this regard, a study undertaken by Alcalá del Olmo et al. (2020) emphasizes that today, to increase student motivation, it is necessary to rethink certain methodologies that allow students

to become actively involved in social transformation projects based on service-learning experiences.

### 5.4. Post-dropout academic trajectory

Most of the students who took part in this research recognize that they have chosen to continue working after dropping out of university. However, most of them wish to resume their studies to overcome job instability and opt for better-paid jobs. In this regard, they admit to considering the possibility of enrolling in a distance-learning university to be able to reconcile study and work. These findings also form part of other studies (Sánchez-Gelabert, 2020; Sánchez-Gelabert et al., 2020), in which the advantages of studying in the distance mode in terms of mobility and flexibility, access to information, self-management, and optimization of technological resources are noted.

### 5.5. Suggestions for university permanence

The students have provided suggestions for young people who wish to begin their university studies, as well as for those in charge of higher education institutions.

In the first case, they emphasized the importance of making a good choice of studies, in terms of personal identification and professional opportunities, as well as planning and organizing study materials and time well. In this regard, they highlight the importance of being properly informed of the deadlines existing in the universities for requesting recognition of part-time students in the event of possible work activity.

In the case of the suggestions offered to university managers, the students emphasize the value of active and innovative methodologies, the flexibility and proximity of the teaching staff, as well as the design of learning spaces in which it is possible to meet the expectations and needs of the students. They also emphasize the value of functional learning, related to the social and professional reality, so it is important to open university classrooms to the community and meet its main needs from the particularities that define each degree. These results are also glimpsed in other studies (Cervero et al., 2017, 2021; Casanova et al., 2018b; Bernardo et al., 2019), in which the promotion of meaningful learning, the possibility of connecting theory with professional practice, and the updating of content addressed from the different disciplines constitute signs of excellence and university quality.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides interesting data on the factors that influence the origin of university dropouts from the experiences

of students in the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Malaga (Spain). It also provides a series of recommendations aimed at preventing and guaranteeing continuity at the university.

Students who access their first-choice degree program are less likely to drop out of university studies because both the overall assessment of their experience and their identification with the studies themselves is positive (greater interest). However, various economic, personal, work, and family factors that did not exist at the beginning may converge and may condition the permanence of the student in that degree program. On the other hand, students who enter the degree program without having a clear professional and employment purpose are more likely to become demotivated and lose interest in the subject, since they do not feel identified with their studies or with their future employment, which is defined as uncertain. In addition, certain teaching methodologies, marked by lecturing and the inflexibility of the teaching staff, in terms of responding to the needs of the students, have a direct impact on the origin of university desertion.

In coherence with the results obtained and the scope of this study, it is recognized that there are certain limitations that should be considered for future research. We have only counted on the contributions of students belonging to the Degree in Primary Education, Degree in Early Childhood Education, Degree in Pedagogy, and Degree in Social Education. It would be more enriching to have the participation of students from other areas of knowledge and other autonomous communities, considering the social projection of university dropout and its relevance in today's knowledge society. Likewise, it would be appropriate to have the experiences of university professors that allow them to reflect on their own professional practice and from there, to be able to identify other ways of pedagogical intervention. Considering that we have chosen to use a qualitative methodology, based on the formation of a focus group, it would be necessary to incorporate other instruments for collecting information that would allow the triangulation of the data obtained with a quantitative methodology.

Finally, a decalogue of different recommendations and suggestions that may contribute to preventing desertion and guaranteeing university permanence, which has emerged from the analysis of the different assessments and arguments provided by the students, is provided:

- Reinforce educational guidance at the compulsory stage and provide continuity during the course of university studies.
- Early detection of university dropouts through student satisfaction surveys at different times during the academic year.
- Reinforcement of the tutorial action of the teaching staff to meet the demands of the students and respond to the main difficulties that may be detected.
- Use of emerging and innovative methodologies that favor the active participation of the students.
- Flexibility on the part of the university institutions for those students who wish to combine their studies with work and/or family.
- Close and direct contact of the teaching staff with the group of students to create a climate conducive to dialogue, critical thinking, group cohesion, and understanding rather than memorization.
- Practical applications of the theoretical contents addressed in the different subjects so that students can participate in socio-educational action projects with social transformation value.
- The first week of initiation in the university degree is essential to support an accompaniment to the students, to present the teaching guide, and available technological tools, such as the use of the virtual campus.
- To give greater rigor to the practicum course, where students can build meaningful learning by relating the contents previously taught in the subjects with the practical reality in which they interact.
- Greater visibility of counseling services for students to make them aware of the professional possibilities associated with each degree.
- Design educational policies that consider students in situations of special vulnerability, to make the principle of equal educational opportunities a reality.
- Encourage the formation of university research groups to study in depth the factors involved in university dropout, from those variables that affect the student body to those related to organizational and curricular factors in higher education institutions that contribute to ensuring university retention.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Málaga was requested before carrying out this study. This is a survey research study and therefore, according to national, international, and University of Málaga regulations, obtaining such approval is voluntary. As required by law, information will be provided to all participants. The researchers will not

exert any pressure on students to participate in this study. This work will comply with international and Spanish legislation and international reference documents, such as the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation will be voluntary and completely anonymous, complying with data protection law. The benefits of this research will be shared with local, national, and international stakeholders. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

JF and MM: Introduction and literature review. MS-V and MA: methodology and analysis of results. MS-V, MA, JF, and MM: discussion of results and conclusion and writing—review and editing. All authors contributed to each section of the manuscript and approved the submitted version.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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