

Chapter 25

Reassessing Master's Program Dropouts in Tourism: Is the Labor Market Failing to Compensate for the Effort?



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Abstract Each year, more students are enrolling in postgraduate degree programs. However, many students will fail to complete the degree and drop out. Dropout results in economic and psychological repercussions and potentially hinders career advancement. Despite increasing enrolment in postgraduate programs, existing studies predominantly focus on the undergraduate level. Still, master's students, assumed to possess maturity and experience, exhibit lower completion rates. This study focuses on master's students in tourism, a critical sector for countries reliant on skilled professionals. The research aims to elucidate the factors influencing dropout decisions and students' perceptions regarding the economic implications. Findings suggest that motivation for pursuing a master's degree in tourism is often driven more by personal satisfaction than purely financial considerations. Furthermore, these graduates may not receive the expected recognition for their advanced qualifications upon entering the labor market. As such, comprehensive analysis in tourism education is imperative to address dropout issues effectively and better align educational outcomes with job market demands.

25.1 Introduction

A country's social and economic growth is intricately linked to the academic performance of its inhabitants. Education is widely recognized as crucial for national progress, not only for its individual benefits but also for its societal advantages ([1, 2]). Higher levels of education empower individuals to acquire knowledge and skills, enhancing their attractiveness to employers as qualified professionals ([2, 3]). This leads to increased employment opportunities, higher salaries, job stability, and improved quality of life [2]. Moreover, a more educated population fosters societal

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cohesion and civic engagement, reinforces democratic values, and is correlated with reduced crime rates [3].

Recognizing these benefits, governments have implemented public policies to promote access to higher education [3]. Pursuing a tertiary education degree represents a significant investment of time, effort, and resources for individuals and their families. It also signifies a considerable financial commitment for governments to public funding since, within the European Union (EU), most tertiary education students (79.2%) in 2021 were enrolled in public institutions [4].

In 2021, there was an approximate cohort of 18.5 million students pursuing their tertiary studies within the European Union member states, with 59% pursuing an undergraduate level and 29% a master's level [4].

As the global economy evolves, individuals and nations recognize the importance of higher education levels for competitiveness and success. Consequently, pursuing a master's degree is now extensively regarded as a necessary qualification in higher education, facilitating the enhancement of current skills and acquiring new ones relevant to specific professions. Despite the growing global interest in master's degrees, dropout and failure rates remain significant challenges [5]. Of the approximately two million students attending college each fall in the USA, only 54.8% will graduate [6]. Other countries, such as Spain, Germany, and Denmark, have dropout rates exceeding 40% [7].

With this context, it is relevant to understand why master's degree students fail to complete their degrees to help develop preventive measures to overcome this issue and minimize the waste of financial and human resources due to failure or dropout [5].

This paper focuses on a master's degree in tourism and the relevance of this choice associated with the increasing importance of tourism and qualified human resources to the economic development of European countries. The Portuguese case is presented after an initial contextualization regarding the dropout phenomenon. Some considerations and implications can be drawn from this study and are presented in the last section, the conclusion.

25.2 Literature Review

Higher Education (HE) is a path that demands significant student effort; some will fail to obtain a degree. Failure in higher education impacts students' future, constrains societal progress, and affects university income [8].

Students dropping out of university may encounter adverse economic and psychological effects due to their failure to finish a degree. The expected economic return for a HE degree investment is lost, and other expectations (e.g., promotion or mobility to different professional activities) will not be achieved [9]. Moreover, the student's time, effort, and money are also lost [8]. Individuals with higher educational attainment are more likely to secure employment, maintain it, acquire new skills, and earn higher incomes throughout their careers than those with lower education levels ([2,

8]). Dropping out diminishes employment opportunities for students and subjects them to social stigmatization [10].

From an institutional perspective, the waste of resources must be highlighted since student dropouts lead to operational inefficiencies and losses, as resources such as facilities, technology, and personnel are underutilized [8]. For HEI, there is an inefficient use of the university's finite resources, which can harm the institution's reputation and negatively impact student recruitment ([10, 11]).

In societal terms, the loss extends to potential talents and skills for the workforce. Higher education is crucial for fostering civic engagement, reducing gender disparities in unemployment, and promoting increased participation in volunteer work [2]. Educated citizens typically earn higher incomes, contribute more to taxes over their lifetimes, and require fewer social entitlements and governmental welfare benefits. The economic returns are particularly pronounced at the tertiary level. This investment yields long-term social and economic advantages by supporting later academic achievement, promoting equity and social mobility, and reducing poverty [2]. Conversely, students who drop out often experience increased reliance on public assistance [11].

So, failure in higher education is a prevalent and critical problem. However, it is essential to distinguish between students who voluntarily leave their current program to pursue alternative paths, such as transferring to another institution or changing majors and those who leave higher education.

It is also significant to acknowledge that no universally accepted definition of failure exists as this phenomenon can vary across different contexts and educational systems [3]. Definitions of failure can vary depending on the criteria, statistical models, and relevant variables considered for understanding and addressing the phenomenon [1]. According to [12], when defined from the perspective of higher education institutions, failure is referred to as attrition, while from the individual perspective, it is called dropout. Some authors use the terms attrition and dropout interchangeably; however, attrition is a broader term encompassing all instances of students leaving an educational program before completion, whereas dropout specifically refers to students exiting the educational system entirely [12].

One can understand dropout or failure as when a student leaves the higher education system permanently without obtaining a degree ([3, 13]), and this is the definition used in this paper.

The empirical literature on reasons for dropping out of higher education often cites Tinto's [14] initial study. Tinto [14] highlighted three main factors influencing student departure: (1) pre-entry characteristics such as commitment, preferences, and intentions; (2) experiences at the higher education institution, particularly academic and social integration; and (3) external factors, including economic barriers and family commitments. Dropout typically arises from a combination of these factors [15].

Currently, theoretical models related to student dropout often consider variables classified into four main categories: individual, socioeconomic, academic, and institutional ([3, 10]). The individual category includes personal characteristics and environmental factors such as age, gender, and parental education. The socioeconomic

category involves economic and social circumstances like family income and job availability. The academic category pertains to student performance, achievement of learning objectives, skill development, grades, academic background, performance on standardized tests, and attendance. The institutional category includes variables that directly impact the educational process and depend on HEI, such as curriculum design, teaching quality, support services like academic advising and counseling, and infrastructure like libraries and laboratories ([3, 10]).

The empirical literature on student departure often relies on proxies that are strong predictors of dropout rather than directly identifying the underlying mechanisms [15]. Social background strongly influences student success in higher education. First-generation students, who are often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, encounter challenges such as limited family resources, lack of parental support, and difficulties integrating into institutional life ([10, 15]). Another critical determinant of students' dropout rate is the student's academic performance in the first year, which significantly increases the likelihood of dropout since first-year students are already likelier to drop out ([10, 15]).

Additionally, dropout rates vary significantly across different educational levels and regions. At the undergraduate level, rates are relatively stable: approximately 20–30% in European countries, 15–21% in Australia, and around 40% in the USA. Master's programs exhibit diverse dropout rates across countries, varying in European countries from 33% in Norway to 7% in Switzerland. In the USA, they range from 34% in science and technology degrees to 14% in business administration programs. In doctoral studies, dropout rates are notably higher, reaching nearly 40% in Europe and almost 50% in the USA ([3, 16]).

Therefore, it is essential to understand failure at HEI and implement strategies to prevent dropout and enhance persistence. This effort benefits individuals, HEI, and society.

25.3 The Portuguese Case of the Master in Tourism Marketing

This section details a study exploring the reasons behind the non-completion of a master's degree program in the field of tourism in a Portuguese HEI. It begins by justifying the focus on a master's degree rather than an undergraduate degree, emphasizing the significance within the context of tourism studies. Subsequently, the research methodology and findings are presented.

25.3.1 *Why Focus on a Master's Degree?*

Over the last century, higher education has undergone significant global expansion, with a notable promotion of postgraduate education in recent years. Postgraduate education has emerged as a strategic tool for fostering economic and social development [3]. Specifically, in master's programs, enrolment has grown substantially [16].

Previous research has extensively studied the dropout phenomenon among undergraduate students, and even though some studies have investigated master's student dropout, empirical research on this degree remains limited, even though completion rates for these programs are lower than those for undergraduate programs ([3, 5, 10, 11, 16]).

Master's students typically possess greater maturity and experience in higher education, suggesting their decision to enroll is more economically deliberate. However, dropout rates in postgraduate studies tend to become problematic during the completion of the master's thesis in the second year, unlike undergraduate studies, where higher rates of academic failure occur in the first year ([17, 18]). Also, [16] noted that, unlike in undergraduate programs, background variables have little to no value in predicting dropout outcomes from master's programs. Once acceptance is based on undergraduate performance, the influence of past background factors becomes irrelevant.

Particularly in the case of Portugal, the latest official data [19] describe that from the 433,217 students that were enrolled in tertiary education in the academic year 2021/2022, 268,046 were undergraduate students and 141,841 were postgraduate students (78,613 were master degree students; 38,612 were master degree from an integrated master, i.e. it is mandatory to enroll after undergraduate to obtain a tertiary degree, a condition that ceased in the academic year 2022/2023; and 24,616 were doctoral students) [19].

Even though it seems that postgraduate studies successfully attract students, the completion of those studies seems very low. In fact, at the master's level, when comparing the number of enrolments in 2019/2020 and the completion rate two years after, that is, the expected time to conclude a master's degree, it is easy to understand that the rate is meager [19]. Of the 126,740 students enrolled in 2019/2020 in a master's degree (64,957 for a master's degree and 61,783 for an integrated master's degree), only 28,343 completed it. This represents a completion rate of 22.4%, which is very low [19]. The remaining 77.6% of the students will complete at a later stage or eventually drop out.

Therefore, there is a critical need for a thorough understanding of the factors and variables that influence failure in postgraduate education. Such insights are invaluable for the academic community, program leaders, and decision-makers in higher education institutions who seek to minimize dropout rates and enhance student persistence in postgraduate programs [3].

25.3.2 Why Focus on Tourism Degrees?

The travel and tourism (T&T) sector significantly contributes to the global economy and is a significant employer worldwide. It is a highly inclusive and diverse sector, helping to strengthen the social fabric and enrich communities [20]. Tourism is a relevant economic area for many countries. In 2023, the T&T sector contributed 9.1% to the global GDP, and there were 27 million new jobs in T&T, representing a 9.1% increase compared to 2022 [20].

Undeniably, possessing a degree is significant, with the expectation that higher educational levels correspond to higher earnings [2]. The travel and tourism (T&T) sector is one where service quality is linked to human resources qualifications. However, in Portugal, there is a scarcity of, difficulty in retaining, and insufficient qualification of human resources in T&T. Only 14% of T&T workers in Portugal hold a higher education degree, compared to the national average of 35%. In 2022, 49% of workers in T&T had completed lower secondary education, and 37% had completed upper secondary education [21]. Despite the scarcity of qualified workers, the tourism sector is noted for offering wages that are, on average, 35% lower than the average gross salary across the overall economy [22].

In Portugal, of the 64,957 students pursuing a master's degree and excluding those from integrated master's degrees, only 882 are studying in a tourism-related field (Travel, Tourism, and Leisure or Hospitality, Restaurant, and Catering), corresponding to 1,4% [19]. This is highly concerning since the tourism industry has lower qualified workers when compared to the national average, and the tourism industry represents 9.1% of the national GDP. Furthermore, the number of individuals who successfully graduate with a tourism-related master's degree is 20.2%, even less than the global percentage previously presented of 22.4% [19], as illustrated by Fig. 25.1.

Figure 25.1 shows a considerable difference between the students who enroll in tourism master's degrees and those who graduate with those degrees. In terms of qualified workers in the tourism sector, this is a concerning situation, and the reasons for this should be addressed.

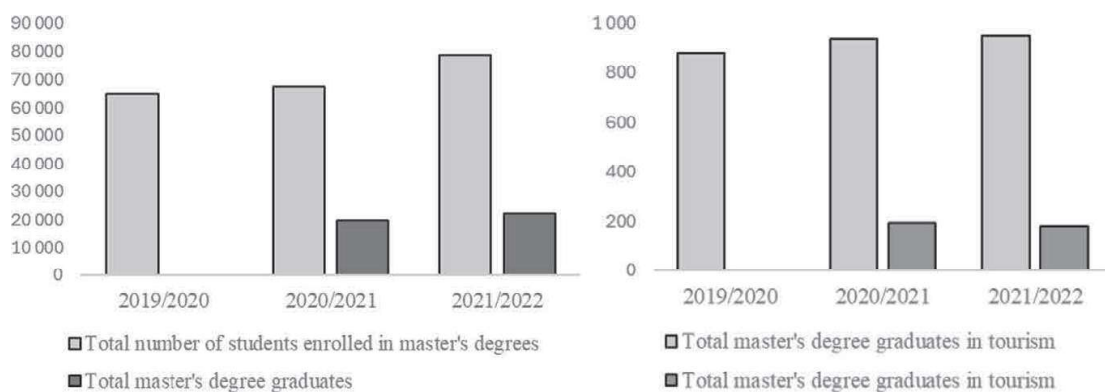


Fig. 25.1 Evolution of the number of students enrolled in master's programs and those who completed the master's degree

25.3.3 *Materials and Methods*

The research followed was qualitative research of an interpretative nature, focusing on master students, and the aim was to understand the factors influencing dropout and students' perceptions and expectations regarding the degree.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with first-year master's degree students of tourism marketing from a Portuguese HEI, the EsACT school of the Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (Bragança Polytechnic University).

All students were invited to be interviewed, and a sample of eleven students was obtained. The interview script was based on the work of [12], with 17 open questions. The script focused on the student's background, factors that motivated the abandonment (personal, academic, socioeconomic, and institutional factors), factors that stimulated persistence, and students' expectations regarding the degree. The interviews occurred in January 2024, with nine presential and two by Zoom, lasting between 25 and 43 min.

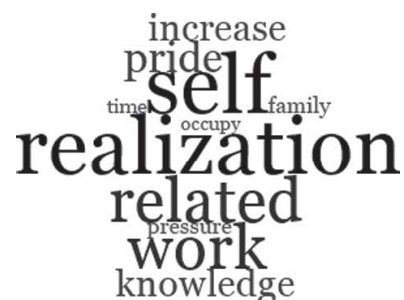
25.3.4 *Results and Discussion*

The sample comprised eleven individuals aged 24 to 59; nine were female, and two were male; nine were working students, and two were full-time students; eight had their own families at their charge (children); and nine attended classes far from their residence.

Regarding educational background, a considerable proportion had graduated from the same institution (10), and nine of the respondents entered their master's program immediately following graduation. When questioned about the reasons for entering the master's degree and what they believed would make them successfully complete it, the majority referred to personal motives. Figure 25.2 presents a resuméd cloud of words with the main reasons for achieving the master's, which shows that the respondents are more concerned with their self-realization rather than for economic reasons.

The analysis of the reasons that the respondents present to justify their willingness to drop out was based on a thematic analysis of open-ended responses [23], using the NVivo 12 software, starting with the initial themes, which were aggregated in

Fig. 25.2 Cloud of words regarding the motive to enroll in a master's degree



intermediate themes until reaching the final categories that can explain the main reasons to drop out, as can be resumed in Table 25.1.

The main reasons for departure are divided into several factors, although respondents often cited a combination of varied reasons. The respondents presented these reasons for possible dropout, excluding the understandable situation of unexpected problems with health, family, or work.

The analysis of Table 25.1 is complemented with examples from respondents' open-ended replies to illustrate better the explanations presented to consider those factors relevant for dropping out.

From the analysis of Table 25.1, it is possible to understand that the main categories that arise from the analysis match the dropout categories presented in the literature. It was impossible to analyze the impact of the economic factors since all the students had full scholarships and no economic constraints to attend classes.

Personal factors such as family responsibilities and work-life balance were strained, and if they had not been well-ensured, they would not be able to attend the degree. This is consistent with other studies that describe master students as typically older and juggling responsibilities between family, work, and school. When there is notable tension between their home and school environments, this is a significant factor in dropping out [16].

In this category, unrealistic expectations were also referred to by nine of the respondents, especially regarding being unfamiliar with the work required. One

Table 25.1 Main reasons to drop out

Final categories	Intermediate categories	Initial themes
Personal factors	Time management	Family responsibilities Limited support systems Work-life balance
	Unrealistic expectations	Lack of clear goals Lack of motivation Unfamiliarity with the work required
	Other personal difficulties	Mental health issues Other health issues
Academic factors	Relationship with the master's degree	Thesis supervisor interaction Thesis theme knowledge Thesis preparation first year
	Relationship with peers	Unfriendly environment Lack of empathy from peers
	Academic background	Insufficient or inadequate undergraduate knowledge Different knowledge area
Institutional factors		Lack of institutional support
		Inflexible schedules

respondent (R7) stated, *"I could not imagine the amount of work we had to perform. It's like having another full-time job."*

The category that incorporated academic factors was the most referred to as a possible inductive of dropout. Even though respondents identified relationships with peers and educational background as potential factors that lead to demotivation and willingness to drop out, most of the respondents stated that the relationship with their peers was exceptionally good; they had created a healthy and supportive environment in the words of respondent R3 *"It's like a family. I never thought I would find people so supportive and so friendly and that, with my age, I would integrate so well. We even meet outside classes to work on our assignments (...)"*.

The relationship with the master's degree was the reason more strongly mentioned by the respondents, clearly stating that this is what the respondents believed was the primary reason to drop out, and that was the reason they referred to other colleagues they knew that dropout mentioned. They mention the fact that the first year was highly demanding and they had to do countless assignments for all the course programs, and that in the end, they had no knowledge about their thesis theme and felt like they were starting all over again at the beginning of their second year, was very demotivating. They stated that working on a general theme during the first year was important to feel more secure and prepare to develop a thesis in the second year. Also, the relationship with the thesis supervisor was mentioned in this category. Respondent R9 emphasized, *"Sometimes we choose the supervisor for their knowledge in a certain area, and then the supervisor has too much work to take time to read the students' emails(...) I already know whom I want to be my supervisor, and I feel confident that I created a good relationship during the first year so that I will be supported in the thesis part."*

Theoretically, the dropout rate becomes problematic in the second year when working on the master's thesis. At that stage, from the analysis, the central aspect that has an essential role in the persistence or failure of the master's student is the previous work and knowledge on the selected theme during the first year and the interaction with the supervisor. The role of the master's thesis supervisor, although briefly mentioned in the literature, was emphasized by the respondents.

The final category, institutional factors, was mentioned to state that the institution had very good conditions to promote adequate academic work from the students. However, some respondents highlighted that the inflexible timetables were inappropriate to perform as expected. R5 explained that *"(...) I have delivered some assignments late or with a lower quality than I wanted due to the inflexible schedules that the teachers establish. It is impossible to work full-time and then present a work every week. But the teachers don't care about the explanations."*

This factor, inflexible schedules, is closely related to the student's work-life balance and family responsibilities. The literature has identified the interference of schedules with work obligations [16]. Balancing work and study places students in challenging positions, as managing both can create tensions, especially when inflexible class schedules impact job performance. Some authors [16] also highlighted that inflexible schedules create problems when coupled with family commitments. In this study, R11 emphasized: *"If my children were not grown up, I would not be*

able to attend school or deliver the assignments in time. It is hard work, and we don't have time to do anything else besides work and attend classes and do the assignments." The words of R7 reinforce this position, stating, *"It's very demanding [the master's degree]. If I hadn't had the support of my husband, I couldn't have delivered the assignments on time. I have to continue with my life at home with all the tasks associated with family life."*

In terms of perception of what they expect to achieve with the degree, it was surprising to hear that some respondents felt that their work colleagues and superiors were not supportive of their efforts. Furthermore, one respondent (R3) even stated, *"Sometimes it is better to not let them [superiors] know we are enrolled in a master's degree or they will be afraid we want their job position and make our life difficult."*

25.4 Conclusion

The practical implications of this research are crucial for Higher Education Institutions and government entities in enhancing persistence strategies for postgraduate programs and promoting academic success.

To develop effective dropout prevention strategies, HEI should consider individual, socioeconomic, academic, and institutional factors. These were also the factors identified by the respondents in coherence with the known literature. As such, support programs should be implemented and tailored to postgraduate students' needs. In line with other studies (e.g., [3]), these support programs may encompass academic mentoring, emotional counseling, and financial aid.

Even though theoretical research states that economic factors are one of the main reasons students drop out, this was not the case in this research, not even being considered, but only because all students had a scholarship.

Furthermore, HEI must develop policies that help students balance their academic commitments with personal and professional responsibilities, creating a more inclusive and flexible environment. This is a critical recommendation since students feel overwhelmed with balancing all their family and work responsibilities alongside academic obligations.

A positive remark is related to infrastructure and resources, and in regards to this, students considered that they were adequate to their academic needs. However, it is relevant to maintain this to support research and learning required for a master's degree.

Since the second year of the master's degree is the most problematic in terms of dropping out, and since this research enhances the need for more solid knowledge before conducting a thesis assignment, it is recommendable that the students engage in assignments that increase their expertise in the potential thesis theme. It is also necessary to establish measures that assess the progress of the work during the thesis process to enable timely intervention and promote the thesis' success. These measures should also involve the advisor's participation, as they significantly influence the student's success or failure.

Finally, a note should be made regarding the theoretical need for the master level in the tourism industry and the actual acceptance of that level by the labor market. According to the respondents, it is not well perceived by colleagues or superiors, and if not in public institutions, there is no expected earnings increase or promotion involved. This goes against known economic educational theories. Suppose this occurs in a sector where the quality of the service is related to the qualification of human resources. In that case, it excludes the quality and efficiency benefits gained from a higher educational level. Further research should explore ways to bridge this gap between educational qualifications and labor market perceptions to ensure that higher education translates into tangible professional growth and improved service standards in the tourism industry.

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