

# DROPOUT PHENOMENON IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN THE NORTH OF PORTUGAL, AND THE REASONS BEHIND IT

M. Santos Lopes<sup>1</sup>, P. Sismeiro Pereira<sup>2</sup>, P. Fortunato Vaz<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, Agrupamento de Escolas de Vieira de Leiria (PORTUGAL)*

<sup>2</sup>*Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (PORTUGAL)*

<sup>3</sup>*Centro de Investigação em Educação Básica (CIEB), Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (PORTUGAL)*

## Abstract

School dropout is a problem that directly affects higher education students, this education system and, consequently, society, since, in the perspective of an economy increasingly supported by knowledge and innovation, higher academic qualifications are given relevance. During the transition to higher education there are vicissitudes that, associated with the individual characteristics of each student, may directly affect the integration, adaptation, permanence, and success of students in the course and/or institution where they were placed. The analysis of the bibliography out points to different reasons that may lead higher education students to abandon their studies. The present research aimed at understanding the extent of the dropout phenomenon in a higher education institution in the North of Portugal, and the reasons behind it. It had as objectives: 1) to survey the data concerning school dropouts in this institution, through the analysis of the student's dropout; 2) to analyze the reasons for dropping out stated by the students who abandon studies. This research involved 612 students, being 50.16% (n=307) female and 49.84% (n=305) male, aged between 18 and 71 years (at the time of annulment) and an average age of 25 years. To achieve the objectives, we performed a documentary analysis of the official data of the quit studies of students in three consecutive years, even before the Covid-19 Pandemic. In the survey we identified the number of dropout in the period under study, as well as the reasons given by students when they quit studies. This resulted in the construction of a database for statistical purposes in a Microsoft Excel sheet that was available for later consultation and updating. In the process of building the database, a documentary analysis was made of the justifications presented by the students when they applied for dropout, and these were subjected to a content analysis process. The analysis and discussion of the results allowed us to conclude that (i) in the triennium studied 5.88% (n=612) students left the institution; (ii) the main reasons for the annulment were personal, professional, economic difficulties and academic reasons. In addition to the reasons mentioned by students for dropping out of this higher education institution, and similarly to what is mentioned in the literature, this research allowed us to understand that the integration and adaptation of students to institutions and to the academic context are also very important and should be taken into account when the subject of concern and study is dropout. It was also perceived that issues such as academic difficulties, related to the act of studying itself, are little explored and worked on, so they may end up remaining and may imply that students who cannot overcome them end up failing and/or dropping out of their studies. It is important to emphasize the relevance of the data obtained, which, being from years prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, may constitute a term of "comparison" with data collected during and after this same Pandemic.

Keywords: Higher education; Dropout; Motivations; Students.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

During the transition to higher education, there are vicissitudes allied to the course that, associated with the individual characteristics of each student, can directly affect the integration, adaptation, permanence, and success of the students in the course and/or institution where they were placed.

In the survey *Population with medium educational attainment not in formal education who started but never completed tertiary education by sex, age, educational attainment level, work experience while studying and reason for not completing tertiary education* presented by European statistics (Eurostat), it can be observed that in the European Union 3318.1 million young students between the ages of 15 and 34 have attended university but interrupted their studies at some point and did not finish them [1].

The report *EUROSTUDENT VI Overview and selected finding: Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe 2016-2018*, a publication presented by Eurostudent.eu in 2019, shows that in the 28 EU countries, on average 7% of higher education students reported having interrupted their studies for at least one year. In the case of Portugal the average figure is the same, but in the case of Croatia and Estonia in particular it was twice as high, the figures being 15% and 14% respectively. In this report, differences (from the international averages) are presented with regard to the reasons for interruptions in their study programmes by students with and without a history of higher education in the family. For the former, the top three reasons are lack of motivation (34%), followed by work-related reasons (24%) and financial difficulties (23%). For the latter, there are four main reasons: financial difficulties (31%), demotivation (28%), being okay with work (26%), and family reasons (25%) [2].

Portugal, school dropout is a reality. In the study by [3], which sought to identify the situation after four years of students enrolled in the first year, for the first time, in the academic year 2011/2012, in three-year degrees, the results show that 46% of students completed their degree, 14% were still enrolled in the course but had not completed it, 11% had chosen to change course (continued of study in higher education) and 29% were not in Portuguese higher education and did not complete the study cycle. The results also point to the fact that one in four students dropped out of Portuguese higher education somewhere in this period (between the academic years 2011/2012 and 2014/2015).

The document "Atualização do Portal Infocursos" published by the [4] presents, among other information, the situation of students one year after their first enrolment in a higher education course, namely the percentage of students who were no longer in the national higher education system one year after the beginning of the studies. This document shows the data for undergraduate degrees and integrated master's degrees in public and private education between the years 2015 and 2018. In public undergraduate degrees, it can be seen that in 2015 there were no longer 10.3% students in the higher education system, in 2016 there were no 9.8%, in 2017 there were no 8.7%, and in 2018 there were no longer 8.4% students. With regard to private education degrees there is a percentage of students not found in the system one year after the beginning of the studies of 12.6 in the year 2015, 13.5 in the year 2016, 13.0 in the year 2017 and 12.7 in the year 2018. Regarding the integrated master's degrees, it can be seen that in the public education courses, 5.0% of students were not found in the year 2015, 2.3% of students in 2016, 2.5% of students in 2017 and 2.8% of students in 2018. In the integrated master's degrees of private education, in 2015 7.5% of students were not found in the system, in the year 2016 12.4% of students were not found, in the year 2017 8.0% of students were not found, and in 2018 5.6% of students were not found in the system.

In the context of the heterogeneity of the student population, [5] refer that this population does not always have the necessary skills to cope with the demands inherent to entering higher education. Thus, not being generalized, these students may constitute future situations of dropout risk.

In the study by [6] whose objective was to understand the motivations and reasons that led students to drop out of their studies at the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), and which was carried out with a sample of 603 students, the authors put forward the idea that there is not only one single and exclusive reason for dropping out, but a combination of several. In this study, two important concepts are presented and distinguished for a better understanding of dropout: transfer and dropout. The first one means the description of "a process of leaving an HEI where the student started his or her studies to another institution of the same level of education" (Silva et al., 2017, p.8). The second also involves an exit from the educational institution, but simultaneously "the exit from the educational system itself without completing higher education and without having prospects of, immediately or in a short period of time, returning to higher education" [6p. 8].

Dropout is much more than just dropping out of school. It is a process that began long before the decision was made. In order to understand this dropout process these authors explore three concepts: Pushed out which is related to the fact that the student experiences adverse situations (e.g. excessive absences, abstinence, disciplinary problems, school pressure, etc.) that may contribute to his being expelled and if he cannot manage and overcome these situations, it may ultimately result in school dropout; Pulled out which is related to the student's personal and intimate situation that distances him/her from completing his/her studies (e.g. pregnancy, marriage, lack of economic conditions of him/her or his/her family, unemployment, incompatibility of work and school schedule, etc.); Falling out, which refers to the fact that students fail to obtain sufficient results for their progress in studies

which consequently leads to demotivation and disillusionment with school. More than the previous concepts, Falling out reveals a process of gradual dropping out of school demonstrated by behaviors and desires (e.g., not liking school, feeling that they do not belong in the school environment, etc.) that are not marked by external or circumstantial factors such as those underlying the previous two concepts. Usually, these are the students who simply do not re-enroll and who disappear from the system [7].

The [8], the entity coordinating university education, organised a working group composed of university representatives and student representatives, with a view to reflecting on the dropout phenomenon [8]. Subsequent to this reflection, and with regard to the possible factors that are based on motivations for dropping out, the document "Combate ao abandono escolar - O guia de boas práticas no ensino superior" was produced by student representatives [9]. This document results from the parameters identified by the aforementioned working group and is the document that in the national panorama illustrates a strategic-political definition of what is happening in higher education at the level of dropout. Thus, it groups four main reasons for dropping out of higher education in Portugal: (i) Vocational issues; (ii) School failure; (iii) Perception of employability difficulties; and (iv) Economic difficulties. It should be noted that these, not necessarily grouped in this way, also appear in the consulted bibliography.

School dropout involves not only individual, but also social issues. It emphasizes that dropping out of school translates into a significant loss because students who do not finish their higher education find themselves confronted and exposed to precarious and low-skilled jobs, simultaneously jeopardizing the country's competitiveness [6].

The present research aimed at understanding the extent of the dropout phenomenon in a higher education institution in Northern Portugal and the reasons behind it. Its objectives were: 1) to gather data on dropout in the institution, through the analysis of the student's dropout; 2) to analyze the reasons for dropping out given by the students who dropout.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Participants**

In this research, 612 students participated, 50.16% (n=307) female and 49.84% (n=305) male, aged between 18 and 71 years (at the time of cancellation of enrollment) and a mean age of 25 years.

### **2.2 Data collection and analysis procedures**

After obtaining the necessary authorizations from above, the data survey regarding the student's dropout was carried out over a period of seven months. The following information was systematized for each student: code (each student was given a code so that it was possible to identify him/her without registering his/her name), gender, year of cancellation, year of admission, access conditions, date of birth (which allows us to know the age at the moment of admission and at the moment of leaving institution), nationality, place of birth, district, locality, reasons for quit studying of registration, school, course, degree, curricular year and precise date of the quit of the studies.

We performed a desk review of the official data on student's dropout in three consecutive years, even before the Covid-19 Pandemic. In the survey we identified the number of dropouts in the study period, as well as the reasons given by students when they quit studying. This resulted in the construction of a database for statistical purposes in a Microsoft Excel sheet, which is configured as a data collection tool, and was available for later consultation and updating. In the process of building the database, the documentary analysis of the justifications presented by the students when applying for dropout was performed and these were subjected to a content analysis process [10].

From this process the following categories and subcategories resulted (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categorization of the reasons used as justification for Dropout.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>
Professionals	Professionals with no other specification Professional incompatibility Entry into another professional field
Personal	Personal without further specification Family Members Integration Difficulties Does not intend to attend in the current school year
Economic difficulties	Economic difficulties without further specification You are unable to settle a debt Placed closer to home Emigration Difficulties in finding a house/room Unemployment makes it impossible to continue attending the course
Academics	Academics not otherwise specified Exchange within the institution Placed in another institution Course does not meet expectations You want to improve application conditions
Health	Health with no other specification Doctor's orders and/or medical certificate Traffic Accident Surgical intervention Psychological
Administrative	Administrative without further specification Did not get a study visa Late entry to the course
No justification	No specification

It is important to make a reservation for the subcategories "Placed closer to home" (economic difficulties) and "Placed in another institution" (academic reasons), because, although these subcategories correspond to transfers, in the present study, they were considered only as reasons for leaving the institution under study. In the case of the expressions "to have been placed closer to home" analyzed in the files, they were interpreted as a subcategory of economic difficulties because it was evident during the data survey that the students justified their placement in another higher education institution in a place closer to their residence as a factor promoting a reduction in expenses with transportation, meals, house and/or room expenses. Regarding the (subcategory) "emigration" of the students who had cancelled their dropout, this was considered as a subcategory of economic difficulties, since the student's expressions referred to the fact that they were going to work "abroad" in search of "better living conditions", or looking for a job that they did not have in Portugal. The subcategory "Difficulties in finding a house/room" was considered as economic difficulties, for the fact that the students referred not being able to find a house/room at prices they could afford. In the Administrative reasons, the subcategories result exclusively from the successive justifications for quit studying of students from Portuguese-speaking African Countries.

### 3 RESULTS

Of the 10415 students dropout in the period under study, 612 students quit studying, which corresponds to a percentage of 5.88% of students who dropped out of this higher education institution in the three-year period under study.

Considering the total number of students who quit studying in each of the calendar years under study, we can see that the first curricular year of the different study cycles is the year with the highest percentage of dropout. It was in the third curricular year that, in each of the calendar years, there was the lowest rate of cancellations. The undergraduate degree is the study cycle with the lowest percentage of dropout.

### 3.1 Motivations for dropout

Table 2 presents the reasons recorded by students for the dropout. Of the 624 dropout totaled over the three calendar years, 499 (79.97%) were justified and 125 (20.03%) had no designation in the reason for quit studying. The reasons with the highest percentage are "personal reasons" with 19.55% (122) justifications, followed by "professional reasons" with 19.23% (120) justifications and "economic difficulties" with 16.83% (105) justifications and "academics" with 16.03% (100) justifications. The reasons in smaller percentage are the "administrative reasons" with 2.24% (14) justifications.

*Table 2. Reasons registered by students for dropout.*

<i>Motivations</i>	<i>Total em %</i>
Academics	16,03
Administrative	2,24
Economic difficulties	16,83
Personal	19,55
Professionals	19,23
Health	6,09
No justification	20,03
Total	100

It is important to remember that all the reasons have subcategories. In the academic reasons the subcategory "course does not meet expectations" was the most prevalent, with 43 students. In the administrative reasons, the subcategory "late entry to the course" was the most prevalent, with 10 students. In the reasons for economic difficulties, the most prevalent difficulty was "economic difficulties without any other specification", with 67 students. In the personal reasons, the most prevalent subcategory was "personal without further specification", with 100 students. In the professional reasons the most prevalent subcategory was "professional incompatibility" with 101 students. In the health reasons the subcategory "health without other specification" was the most prevalent, with 31 students.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In such a way, within the scope of this study it was possible to conclude that:

- a) In the triennium studied, 5.88% (612 students) of the 10415 students who in started studying left the higher education institution.

The dropout percentage of 5.88 is lower than that found in 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 in the Infocursos Portal [11], which was 8.2%. Although the percentage found in the present study is lower than the "national" percentage, even though the parameters used are different (in the present study we calculated the dropout of all years, courses and regardless of whether or not it was their first start of the studies in higher education/in this institution), it still implies an important group of students who found themselves in the condition of abandoning their studies in the institution.

The percentage of 5.88% observed is worthy of measures to prevent this dropout. In this sense, it is important to consider what the [9] states when it argues that it is crucial to implement preventive practices by setting up training and awareness-raising in the day-to-day of the institutions in order to stimulate the involvement of the academic community in recognizing and signaling risk situations.

- b) The main reasons of the IPB students who dropout were personal reasons (19.55%), professional reasons (19.23%), economic difficulties (16.83%) and academic reasons (16.03%).

With regard to the reasons for the dropout, justifications were provided by almost eighty percent (79.97%) of the ones who quit studying.

It is important to remember that the personal reasons included the subcategories "personal without further specification", "family", "integration difficulties", and "does not intend to attend in the current academic year". The "integration difficulties" are also mentioned by [12] who state in their study that it is through effective integration that the student acquires sufficient ability to cope with the demands of life as a higher education student. According to [13], when this situation does not occur, negative feelings emerge (such as anxiety, psychological or even physical distress) that may be significant for the individual who is not managing to develop cognitive and/or behavioral mechanisms to help him/her adapt to his/her new life context, leading to adaptation problems, school failure, integration and, possibly, dropout. In this sense, the "poor integration of the student in the institution or in the city" is mentioned as a dropout motivation by [8] and the "social integration difficulties" are mentioned by [14] as a possible relationship with the "fear of isolation" and "social rejection" in the adaptation to higher education.

The professional reasons included in this study were the subcategories "professional with no other specification", "professional incompatibility" and "entering another professional field". These were also mentioned as main reasons for dropping out in the study of [15]. Related to these reasons may be, "difficulties in reconciling work and studies" mentioned as a reason for dropping out by the [8] and "difficulties in reconciling studies with work" namely due to "excessive tiredness", incomprehension of the employer" (particularly with schedule compatibility) mentioned in the study by [6].

In the reasons "economic difficulties" which include "economic difficulties with no other specification", "no possibility of paying off a debt", "placed closer to home" and "emigration", it was found that these reasons are, globally, the most mentioned factor, in the consulted bibliography. Once again, this situation may also be related to the aforementioned economic recession experienced in Portugal between 2011 and 2014 [16].

[17p. 50] even mentions that "dropping out of universities is a problem that derives from another much larger problem - the crisis, and is thus found in parallel with other problematic phenomena such as unemployment, emigration, poverty or even criminality". This author concluded in his study that lack of economic resources were the rationale for dropping out of higher education. In the study by [18], economic factors were also found to be the main reason for dropping out, mainly in the sense of trying to support the intrinsic costs of attending higher education, such as the payment of tuition fees. In [6], similarly to this study, "economic issues" were the third main reason for leaving the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro.

The attribution of grants by the Social Action Services of Higher Education Institutions and by the Direção Geral do Ensino Superior, as direct support to students (foreseen in [19]) favors the "access to higher education and the practice of successful attendance, with positive discrimination of economically needy students with adequate academic performance" and may be seen, from another perspective, as an aid in reducing the possibility of students dropping out. However, the lengthy process that this entails from the moment of application to the delivery of the amount that corresponds to each student's situation, implies a situation that is detrimental to its original purpose [9] which is to "favor access to higher education" and "the practice of successful attendance.

Students coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are 2.3 times more likely to drop out than students coming from more economically empowered families, which reveals that for economic issues, it is not enough to think about the idea that "there is a scholarship for these purposes." Economic difficulties can be overcome by intervening at other levels within the higher education institution itself, not necessarily involving only the awarding of scholarships. It can, for example, be through the dynamization of volunteer projects in which the student who is supported due to economic difficulties also volunteers to support others with other difficulties. For example, a student with economic difficulties can help one who has difficulties organizing his studies [20].

It should be added that also in the study by [18] economic and academic factors (specifically teaching/learning methods, assessment modalities/methods, teacher availability and adequacy of course units) are presented as the main causes for students dropping out of courses.

This research is innovative in the sense that there is no knowledge of an exhaustive survey having been made, in the higher education institution in question, of the data concerning dropouts in this institution. This survey allowed the creation of a database with information regarding dropouts that, among other information, allows us to understand the reasons for the student's dropout in this period. This database can be updated annually, allowing an updated knowledge of the reasons that lead students to drop out, year after year, as well as the extension of this phenomenon.

This will result in a greater knowledge about the phenomenon under study. When addressing issues such as school dropout, concepts such as school failure and/or economic difficulties are constantly associated. This research allowed us to realize that the integration and adaptation of students to institutions and to the academic context are also very important and should be taken into account when the subject of concern and study is dropout. It was also perceived that issues such as academic difficulties, related to the act of studying itself, are little explored and worked on, so they may end up remaining and may imply that students who cannot overcome them end up failing and/or dropping out of their studies.

This research has also allowed for an increasing of technical-scientific knowledge that will be important for future research. It is important to emphasize the relevance of the data obtained, which, being from years prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, may constitute a term of "comparison" with data collected during and after this same Pandemic.

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