

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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# The process of adaptation to higher education studies and its relation to academic dropout

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## Abstract

The academic dropout of higher education students represents one of the most significant challenges that university institutions have to face today. This research analysed the university academic trajectory of students who dropped out of university for good. The aim of this paper is to examine in depth the factors that influence the idea of the construction of academic dropout and its relationship with the difficulties of adaptation to the university training system. A qualitative study was carried out in which the interview technique was applied to  $n=34$  dropout students belonging to three Spanish autonomous communities. The results made it possible to identify and examine students' difficulties in adapting to university studies in greater depth. The interviews revealed contextual and emotional details that contributed to dropout, such as personal and professional challenges and a lack of emotional support. The findings lead to the need to approach the issue from a holistic viewpoint in order to address the different reasons behind university dropouts. This broad view of the academic trajectories of university students who drop out is a benchmark for strategies to improve student retention and success in higher education.

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## KEYWORDS

academic dropout, academic trajectories, higher education, higher studies, university students

## 1 | INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Academic dropout among students entering higher education is one of the problems currently facing university institutions. It is a global problem, the effects of which are reflected in practically all countries worldwide and which, far from being eradicated, continues to increase every year (Álvarez-Pérez & Cabrera, 2020; Naaman, 2021; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2021). In some Latin American countries (Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Bolivia, etc.), university dropout rates are around 44.5% (Aguilera-de Fretes & Jiménez-Chaves, 2012; Álvarez-Ferrandiz, 2021; Montero-Rojas et al., 2007; Urbina-Cárdenas & Ovalles-Rodríguez, 2016). And in both the United States and in some European countries, the reality of this problem is similar, with rates close to 50% in some cases (Arce et al., 2015; Sbravati et al., 2024).

In Spain, 33.2% of incoming students dropped out of undergraduate studies in the 2015–2016 academic year (Fernández-Mellizo, 2022), which is quite a considerable percentage (Fernández-Mellizo, 2022). However, a distinction must be drawn between students who changed studies (12.4%) and those who dropped out of university for good (20.8%). As Tinto (1975) points out, it is important to distinguish between the two types of dropouts. The first type of dropout is temporary and is due to poor social and academic integration into a degree course.

Generally, at the end of the first academic year, students realise that they are not satisfied with the studies they have chosen and rethink their decision, leading them to enrol in another degree programme (Arce et al., 2015). This is referred to as “internal academic migration”, to emphasise that what takes place is mobility between degrees, but without the students disassociating themselves from the university (Benítez et al., 2006). However, the second type of dropout is a more significant change, as students leave university for good, redirecting their interests towards other educational or professional goals (Acevedo, 2021; Tinto, 1975).

One of the main goals pursued by governments and universities is to reduce university dropout (Sbravati et al., 2024; Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019), as it has detrimental consequences on individuals (demotivation, low self-esteem, stress, low engagement, etc.), on institutions of higher education (costs of public resources, organisational and reputational problems for the universities that have this problem, etc.) and in the social sphere (frustration, feeling of wasted time and private resources with no economic return, etc.). In this sense, the university dropout rate is an indicator of the quality of educational plans that can have an impact on the university's reputation, profitability and funding (Gómez-Gallego et al., 2021). Indeed, academic dropout is one of the indicators of quality in higher education, which shows the existence of important failures and weaknesses in the processes of transition, adaptation and promotion of students. The failure of the students, in this case, highlights the capacity of the university centres to be socially unaccountable based on the public criteria of quality and to not fulfil the aims entrusted to them: to train competent professionals to integrate socially and in the labour market.

Defining university dropout is complex because it is difficult to find a formulation that addresses the different types of dropouts (Acevedo, 2021; Viale-Tudela, 2014). Thus, depending on the causes, it may be an involuntary dropout because the student did not comply with the administrative requirements or broke the institutional rules, or it can be a voluntary dropout due to a change of degree studies or to pursue other activities (academic or work) outside the university system (Gómez-Gallego et al., 2021; Holliman et al., 2018). In Spain, and in this study, university dropout is understood to be the definitive abandonment of any degree course, i.e., after having enrolled for the first time at university, students do not re-enrol for two consecutive years or graduate in 4 years after the first year (Fernández-Mellizo, 2022).

There are many reasons why students drop out of university (Álvarez-Pérez & López-Aguilar, 2019; De la Cruz-Campos et al., 2023; De Vries et al., 2011). Research on university dropout shows different explanatory

models (Naaman, 2021; Tinto, 1975), as well as different classifications of factors/variables that attempt to explain dropout (Álvarez-Ferrandiz, 2021; López-Aguilar et al., 2022; De Silva et al., 2022; Fernández-Mellizo, 2022; Gómez-Gallego et al., 2021). Most of these papers highlight personal, institutional, economic and student-university interaction factors (Aina et al., 2018; Fernández-Castañón et al., 2017; López-Cózar-Navarro et al., 2020; Sbravati et al., 2024).

Among the personal variables that may hinder the adaptation processes are the lack of information to decide (García-de Franeli & Adrogué-de Deane, 2015), previous academic performance (Gómez-Gallego et al., 2021), the mode of access, since students coming from vocational training are more likely to drop out of their studies as they do not have the basic skills required in higher education (Roig-Vila, 2018), lack of motivation for their studies (Bergold & Steinmayr, 2018; Sbravati et al., 2024), low visibility beyond the immediate future and lack of projection into the future (Bernardo et al., 2015), are some of the problems and difficulties that increase the risk of failure and dropout in university studies. Moreover, research works such as those by González-Campos et al. (2020) and Silva-Laya (2011) note that the first academic year is a critical stage in the decision to drop out or continue with studies. Academic performance plays a decisive role in this process (Lizarte & Gijón, 2022; Pellagatti et al., 2021).

Other difficulties and problems associated with dropping out relate to the interaction between personal and institutional variables (Lorenzo et al., 2023). According to Tejedor and García-Valcárcel (2007) and Jung and Kim (2018), some of the variables that may explain dropout are: regular non-attendance in class, organisational aspects of the institution, difficulties associated with the teaching staff (excessive demands, type of exams, inadequate assessment tests, lack of communication, poor information on assessment criteria, etc.) and difficulties associated with the student (mastery of study techniques, responsibility, level of ambition, participation and involvement in class, time management problems, inadequate study behaviour, incompatibility of study with work, etc.).

Regarding economic problems, student health problems (Li & Carroll, 2020) and socio-family problems (González-Ramírez & Pedraza-Navarro, 2017), a series of difficulties are also identified, such as: student illness, dependence on grants, work, illness or death of a family member, living away from the locality, having to use public transport, living outside the family home, etc. Difficulties in terms of social and academic integration are also identified (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2021). Lack of academic control and low interest in studies increase the intention to drop out (Šabić & Puzić, 2022). And the difficulties of social integration in terms of the quality and quantity of teacher-student relationships and interactions between students are factors to be considered when explaining dropout. Students who find little support from teachers and a low degree of social interaction with the class group show a higher intention to drop out of school (Álvarez-Pérez & López-Aguilar, 2019).

It could be summarised that the numerous research studies being carried out on the study of university academic dropout focus on identifying explanatory factors to quantify the phenomenon, but lack information on the student who drops out (their expectations, how they perceive the university environment, how they shape their future projection, what their relationships are like, their lifestyles, culture, etc.).

To understand the magnitude of the problem, according to the data published in the report *La universidad española en cifras 19–20* (Hernández-Armenteros & Pérez-García, 2023) in Spain, the dropout rate in undergraduate studies at public universities during the 2019–2020 academic year was 20.17% in on-site universities and 40.84% in off-site universities. Specifically, in the first phase of the study presented in this manuscript, a total of 2210 students from different degree programmes who had left their studies definitively up to the time of data collection answered an ad hoc questionnaire. Of the sample, 42.2% belonged to the University of La Laguna, 12.7% to the University of Huelva, 13.8% to the University of Santiago de Compostela and 31% to the University of Zaragoza.

This paper therefore interviews students who have left university definitively in order to identify problems and difficulties in adapting to their studies according to the academic trajectories they have experienced. The study's main contribution is an in-depth analysis, from a qualitative approach, of the reasons behind dropping out of university studies, examining, through personal accounts, the experiences and problems encountered by the students who dropped out. Thus, the following research questions were proposed: (a) What elements make it difficult for students to adapt to university during their first year? (b) Which difficulties are perceived

by university students the first time they go to university? (c) What is the impact of a lack of motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) on continuation or dropout from university studies? (d) Which elements cause student dissatisfaction during their first year of higher education? (e) What is the academic performance of potential dropouts?

## 2 | METHOD

This article presents part of the narrative results of a larger R&D&I project.<sup>i</sup> The methodological design of the project is mixed sequential. The method follows a multiple case study design in which the universities of La Laguna, Zaragoza and Huelva participated. In particular, the analysis of the quantitative data was used to design the interviews, select the sample and gather narrative (qualitative) data from the participants. According to Cohen et al. (2007), qualitative data collection gives research a greater level of depth and a more holistic/global and detailed view of the problem or reality being analysed. The power of qualitative methods is that they make it possible to access meaningful data and interpretations that other quantitative methods do not. This way, as highlighted by Gil del Pino et al. (2017), through stories, narratives and the re-enactment of events, it is possible to know the reasons behind different actions and decisions in the field of social sciences. This study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines set out by Tong et al. (2007) in Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) by looking at the three domains highlighted: (1) research team and reflexivity, (2) study design and (3) analysis and findings.

### 2.1 | Objectives

The aim of this work is to analyse the impact of academic trajectories on the adaptation of students to university studies, with the specific objectives being: (a) to describe the elements that affect the adaptation of students during their first year of studies; (b) examine in depth the difficulties encountered in adapting to university studies and, finally, (c) determine the motivation, satisfaction and performance of students during their studies.

### 2.2 | Population and sample

For the sample selection, a non-probabilistic purposive sample was applied according to the following criteria: (a) permanent dropout from university studies<sup>ii</sup>; (b) branches of knowledge (Social and Legal Sciences, Health Sciences, Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Engineering and Architecture), (c) academic performance and (d) sex. The participants had given up their studies at the University of La Laguna (ULL), the University of Zaragoza (UNIZAR) and the University of Huelva (UHU). Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

### 2.3 | Instrument

Data gathering was carried out through a structured interview, as it is the optimal method for delving into the causes and personal assessments of the reasons for dropping out of university studies. This type of interview allows information to be collected in a systematised and equal way among the interviewees. The use of qualitative techniques provides an in-depth understanding of the motives behind each decision, the factors that determine dropout and the combination of variables that come into play (Ritacco-Real and Amores-Fernández, 2016; Tong et al., 2007).

TABLE 1 Sample features.

|            | Social and legal sciences | Health sciences | Science | Arts and humanities | Engineering and architecture | Total  |
|------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------------------|------------------------------|--------|
| Variable   | n = 10                    | n = 6           | n = 6   | n = 5               | n = 6                        | N = 33 |
| Sex        |                           |                 |         |                     |                              |        |
| Women      | 2                         | 4               | 2       | 2                   | 2                            | 12     |
| Men        | 8                         | 2               | 4       | 3                   | 4                            | 21     |
| University |                           |                 |         |                     |                              |        |
| ULL        | 3                         | 4               | 2       | 3                   | 2                            | 14     |
| UNIZAR     | 6                         | 2               | 4       | 1                   | 2                            | 15     |
| UHU        | 1                         | –               | –       | 1                   | 3                            | 4      |

Note: N = 33. Ages between 22 and 50 years of age (M = 30.3; SD = 6.9).  
Abbreviations: UHU, University of Huelva; ULL, University of La Laguna; UNIZAR, University of Zaragoza.

The structured interview script designed was composed of ten general core questions, which, in some cases, led to control sub-questions. This system allowed participants to relate their experiences of their academic trajectories and their process of adaptation to higher education. By way of example, some of the questions asked included: (a) *Once you went to university, was it an easy path? Did you encounter difficulties? What were they? Were you faced with any important changes? What did you do about it?* (b) *During your time as a university student, what would you say your academic performance was like, and did you have to re-sit a subject more than once because you did not pass it? If so, why do you think this was?* and (c) *What would you say were the aspects that motivated you during your studies? Did you find what you expected?*

In this study, it is understood that the definitive abandonment of university studies occurs when a student has stopped attending university permanently – up to the time of gathering the research data – and has no intention of returning to finish their studies or to start new ones.

2.4 | Data gathering procedure

The research teams taking part in the study consisted of teaching and research staff, experts in the field of university guidance and academic dropout, from five Spanish universities (ULL, UNIZAR, University of Huelva, University of Santiago de Compostela, University of Castile La Mancha). After having passed the first phase of the project (quantitative analysis), each research team contacted the people who met the sample selection criteria. First contact was established either by e-mail or a phone call. The sample was completed in three universities according to the following criteria (ULL, UNIZAR and UH).

Once the terms of participation in the interview were agreed and accepted, the interviews were held in the months from October 2022 to January 2023. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet rooms or phone calls. The maximum duration of the interviews was 20 min. All were recorded with the informed consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed.

2.5 | Ethical questions and methodological rigour

Regarding ethical issues, the principles of integrity and reciprocity in the research process were taken into account. This study was approved by the Research Ethics and Animal Welfare Committee (CEIBA) of the ULL

(CEIBA2021-3079). Prior to conducting the interviews, the person in charge of data collection was informed about the purpose of the study and interview in order to comply with informed consent. Likewise, permission to record the conversation was requested, and the protection of personal data was ensured under the aegis of Organic Law 3/2018 of 5 December on Personal Data Protection and guarantee of digital rights.

In addition, in order to prevent possible negative impacts (difficulties in generalising results, influence of context, risk of subjectivising data, difficulties in accessing the sample, possible interviewer and interviewee bias) of using the interview as a data collection technique, the research team developed a structured interview script, which was reviewed in two plenary sessions by members with expertise in qualitative methodology and in the theoretical content addressed. The data collection protocol was also established, and interviewers were selected who were experts in developing qualitative research techniques.

With regard to questions of methodological rigour, the criteria of confirmability and transferability were taken into account. In the first case, the starting position of the research group in terms of the research problem and categories of analysis was explicitly shown. Regarding the second criterion, a structured information gathering instrument was designed and, in addition, informants were selected through scrupulous and well-defined sampling.

## 2.6 | Analysis and interpretation of results

Content analysis was carried out using ATLAS.Ti version 9, following the criteria or guidelines proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2008). To carry out the analysis, Grounded Theory was chosen, using the Constant Comparison Method (CQM) or procedure. The conceptual categories were generated (emerging categorisation system) and subsequently the groups of codes that would determine their properties and allow us to respond to the objectives formulated.

The aim of the qualitative content analysis was to transform patterns of meaning into relevant categories and subcategories (Patton, 2002). Given the complexity of the task, two researchers carried out a particular analysis of the transcripts, identifying the minimum units of meaning and obtaining the emerging categories. As a result of the inter-judge consensus, three categories were extracted, which, in turn, grouped together subcategories of analysis that made it possible to better understand the narratives collected. The other researchers cross-checked the analysis and assumed the inter-judge result, thus ensuring that the results and interpretations were true to the original meaning (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Table 2 shows the categorisation data from the interviews.

Thirty-four documents were uploaded to the archive, of which 33 were analysed ( $n=4$  from the University of Huelva;  $n=15$  from the ULL;  $n=14$  from the University of Zaragoza). Two categorical systems comprising 18 codes or subcategories were generated (see Annex, Figures A1 and A2). In addition, four groups of "memos" were created with sociodemographic characteristics.

## 3 | RESULTS

The outcomes are presented below in accordance with the specific objectives described in the methodological section of the study. Focusing on the elements or difficulties in the adaptation of university student dropouts, the results are shown through the presentation and interpretation of the participants' narratives. The qualitative content analysis of the narratives allowed us to organise the results based on the specific objectives and research questions of this study: (1) elements affecting the adaptation of students during their first year of study, (2) difficulties encountered in adapting to university studies and (3) factors influencing university dropout rates.

TABLE 2 Categorisation of interviews.

| Categories                               | Subcategories or code                                     | N° quotes | Percentages |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Sociodemographic characteristics "memos" | Sex                                                       | 33        | 3.78        |
|                                          | Age                                                       | 33        | 3.78        |
|                                          | Degree course abandoned                                   | 33        | 3.78        |
|                                          | University where you studied                              | 33        | 3.78        |
|                                          | Partial total                                             | 132       | 15.12       |
| Academic pathway in university studies   | Highlights of the University Academic Trajectory          | 45        | 5.15        |
|                                          | Significant changes in the academic trajectory            | 38        | 4.35        |
|                                          | Difficulties/facilities in accessing university studies   | 73        | 8.36        |
|                                          | Motivation during university studies                      | 28        | 3.20        |
|                                          | Expected performance                                      | 33        | 3.78        |
|                                          | Performance. Regular attendance                           | 27        | 3.10        |
|                                          | Performance. Average mark                                 | 41        | 4.69        |
|                                          | Performance. Repeat subjects                              | 30        | 3.43        |
|                                          | Satisfaction with University studies                      | 47        | 5.39        |
|                                          | UAT highlights                                            | 29        | 3.33        |
|                                          | Partial total                                             | 391       | 44.78       |
| University dropout                       | Voluntary dropout                                         | 31        | 3.55        |
|                                          | Dropout conditionality                                    | 38        | 4.35        |
|                                          | Dropout decision confirmation                             | 47        | 5.39        |
|                                          | Perceived difficulties before starting university studies | 24        | 2.75        |
|                                          | Dropout moment                                            | 63        | 7.21        |
|                                          | Reason behind university dropout                          | 75        | 8.60        |
|                                          | Perception of successful completion                       | 32        | 3.66        |
|                                          | Request for institutional support                         | 40        | 4.59        |
|                                          | Partial total                                             | 350       | 40.10       |
|                                          | Total                                                     | 873       | 100         |

### 3.1 | Elements affecting the adaptation of students during their first year of study

The following is a description of important changes that may have occurred since starting university and which in some way could have influenced the interviewees' unsuccessful academic trajectory.

The positive aspects cited by the participants point mainly to the climate experienced with the group-class. They also highlight group cohesion with the aim of achieving academic goals and actions related to the lending of notes and help in studying; they positively point out the atmosphere generated in the classroom.

I was lucky too; we were a good group. In the History degree course, as you will understand, there weren't 160 of us, there were, I think it ended up with about 70 of us in the first year. And then we kind of helped each other out as the course progressed. So, in that aspect, things got better, because we all got together and we overlapped each other's notes and we helped each other a little bit more.

(Participant 8.ULL)

Other highlights of the university experience refer to the methodology used by the teaching staff and the complementary training offered. A former student of the UNIZAR Law Degree commented that when he was a student, he found it striking that credits were offered for participation in other activities of a non-educational nature, such as sports (Participant 21.UZ). As for the methodology applied by the teaching staff, the active methodology of the internships in the subjects and their relationship with professional development were positively valued. Two people from the UHU, from the Degree in Computer Engineering and the Degree in Cultural Management, positively highlighted the availability of the teaching staff and the flexibility with regard to the personal conditions of the students (Participant 32.UHU; Participant 33.UHU).

The most unfavourable aspects of the university experience would be related to the abrupt change from post-secondary studies (or vocational training) to university. Interviewees mentioned the existence of obvious differences in teaching and pedagogical methodologies (greater student autonomy at university), the high number of students in the same classroom, the feeling of impersonality in learning and the high level of absenteeism.

What surprised me the most about the university is the radical change from secondary school to university, in other words, and I understand that this is due to the number of students [...] there was too radical a change between going from secondary school, where you have a teacher who tries to teach you and who explains, to university, where what they do is give you some general ideas and you do what you can to get by.

(Participant 11.ULL)

It was a very different system of organisation and studies compared to post-secondary. For me it was quite a big leap, because you had to be more constant, they didn't give you everything as spoon-fed as at school; you had to put your head to work more, both for taking notes in class, and then studying them, and for the books [...].

(Participant 27.UZ)

Infrastructure is another aspect that was highlighted negatively. In this case, reference was made to the deterioration of the buildings, the obsolescence of materials and poor environmental conditions, such as poor acoustics and dimly lit classrooms. (Participant 4.ULL; Participant 7.ULL; Participant 17.UZ), mostly cited by people who studied at the ULL.

With regard to teachers, although some participants pointed out positive aspects, it was also negatively rated that, for the most part, teachers were inflexible in the face of change, with low empathy, lack of involvement and

inaccessibility (Participant 4.ULL; Participant 9.ULL; Participant 12.ULL; Participant 15.UHU; Participant 17.UZ; Participant 31.UZ). Several participants from the three universities reported experiencing situations in the classroom where teachers were disrespectful to students (Participant 15.UHU).

Another aspect that was negatively evaluated was the academic timetable of the degree courses, which were considered excessively long and/or split. This was one of the lowest rated aspects of the university experience (Participant 27.UZ). In another case, it was noted that starting university studies meant sacrificing their personal and social life in order to meet the demand for university education (Participant 29.UZ).

The important changes that affected the university academic career would be mainly related to the adaptation from their experience in post-secondary studies, in particular those that have to do with the learning methodology and responsibility for their own results. The expository methodology used by the university teaching staff means that the students are responsible for taking notes, creating their own materials and, in short, being able to grasp the relevant information of the contents of the subjects, while in post-secondary, a logocentric model is followed, where the teachers select, elaborate and present the contents in an expository manner (Participant 32.UHU; Participant 30.UZ; Participant 26.UZ; Participant 15.UHU).

Some aspects pointed out that are related to methodology include the assessment system, perceived as a "test" fraught with uncertainty due to a lack of knowledge of the relationship between the demand for demonstration of learning and the notes or materials produced by the students themselves (Participant 15.UHU). Other ratings related to evaluation methods are associated with the extent of tests (Participant 27.UZ) and their standardisation: [...] *of the assessment system at the University that changed with respect to post-secondary studies in that sense that you remember many of those multiple-choice tests, I saw that the obsession with memorising and regurgitating work continued* (Participant 33.UHU).

Elements such as moving house, sharing a flat with other students and adapting to another group of people in order to form friendships were cited as important changes, although not decisive, when it comes to dropping out of university (Participant 21.UZ; Participant 20.UZ; Participant 17.UZ; Participant 14.ULL). These changes affected emotional and social wellbeing more than strictly academic ones. Other changes reported in academic trajectory were related to family problems (Participant 3. ULL), going through difficult times in life coming from a broken family (Participant 2.UZ; Participant 2.UZ) and separation from parents (Participant 32.UHU). In this way, family and personal instability influence the decision to drop out, providing an immediate solution to the emotional discomfort and leaving aside academic stability and future consequences: *If I had tried to insist to my father, I could have continued my studies at home for another year, but as I also wanted to become independent and get away from the bad atmosphere at home, I decided to look for a job* (Participant 16.UHU). Two people pointed to financial stability as an important factor in their decision to drop out of school. The loss of employment was, for one of them, the main reason for dropping out, as it led to the impossibility of paying for her studies (Participant 9.ULL). In another case, moving to another city (island), sharing a flat with other students and the need to find a job to support herself conditioned her continuation at the university (Participant 11.ULL).

### 3.2 | Difficulties encountered in adapting to university studies

The difficulties encountered in accessing academic studies at university can be grouped into three dimensions. The first has to do with personal difficulties, the second refers to those derived from the university itself and, finally, the third refers to relationships, whether due to feelings of loneliness, difficulties in relationships or estrangement in family relationships or friendships. This grouping emerges from the responses obtained.

Firstly, the answers were oriented towards a difficult emotional situation and complicated by the feeling of unhappiness (Participant 1.ULL), anxiety produced by the academic workload linked to work performance (Participant 7.ULL) and in other cases by demotivation, without explaining the causes.

[...] I made friends very quickly; I liked going to class; in engineering, I've always been very good at mathematics, so I didn't have any major setbacks [...] but I started to get discouraged, no more... I said bah, this is not my thing. So that's when I started to say, I'm going to go the other way because I'm not comfortable here, but it wasn't a question of difficulty in studying or anything like that.

(Participant 14.ULL)

In other cases, family problems made it difficult for students to adapt to university. Some reported not feeling supported by their families and having financial difficulties, which meant that they depended on scholarships to continue their studies (Participant 2.ULL; Participant 8.ULL; Participant 16.UHU; Participant 21.UZ; Participant 23.UZ). Economic problems also led to the need to combine studies with a job, making it hard to stay at university and forcing critical decisions to be made between academic training and working life (Participant 16.UHU; Participant 24.UZ; Participant 27.UZ).

Other drawbacks found in the adaptation to university were motivated by the lack of knowledge of the degree itself and the problems of adaptation with respect to secondary/high school, as well as the great differences found in the teaching methodology (Participant 12.ULL; Participant 5.ULL) and the lack of study habits in the previous stages. One of the cases refers to the lack of knowledge of many of the concepts dealt with in a Health Sciences Degree, due to not having completed post-secondary studies and having gained access through a Higher Cycle (Participant 25.UZ).

[...] I left secondary school and the truth is that my study habits were non-existent, I mean, if I attended class I would just pass, you know? And the change from post-secondary to university is quite a big one. Everything is quite different. The teaching staff are very different as well. In other words, the context changes dramatically, you know? So, I was a little bit out of place.

(Participant 7.ULL)

In terms of personal and social wellbeing, some people stated that loneliness was the source of the difficulties perceived at the start of the academic trajectory, although to a lesser extent than the previous ones, having its origin in the change of residence (Participant 12.ULL; Participant 16.UHU) and the change of friendships (Participant 12.ULL; Participant 16.UHU). Finally, in other cases, no problematic situations that could be the cause of university dropout were noted (Participant 10.ULL; Participant 11.ULL; Participant 20.UZ; Participant 21.UZ; Participant 22.UZ; Participant 24.UZ; Participant 27.UZ; Participant 34.ULL).

This dimension, linked to the difficulties encountered after leaving university, describes the personal frustration that students experience at this point in their lives: *Well, like you say, at that moment in my life it was a very big blow, from which it was difficult for me to recover because I saw it as an absolute failure* (Participant 17.UZ). And in this same aspect, frustration due to the social image that transcends abandonment and that has to do with the reflection that others have of people and that conditions self-perception and self-esteem: *I get a little embarrassed when the subject comes up and people asked me what I studied, that's all I can say.* (Participant 26.UZ).

These personal hardships are also compounded by work-related difficulties, which people become aware of after some time has passed:

Maybe my job opportunities will be a bit reduced and the knowledge, I mean, I like to know, I mean, I like knowledge. So, I think that I've missed out on a lot, a lot of knowledge and future job opportunities.

(Participant 18.UZ)

### 3.3 | Factors influencing university dropout rates

This section describes which elements of motivation affected participants' decisions to encourage them to drop out. It also examines the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the university and, specifically, how poor academic results led to the decision to drop out of university.

The intrinsic motivation of students during their university experience is mainly found in the fulfilment of the expectations of access to university: *We could say that what motivated me was that I got a place in biology and I wanted to be a biologist, and if I wanted to be a biologist I had to continue* (Participant 1.ULL). In this sense, those who managed to enrol in their first-choice degree course said they felt motivated enough to avoid dropping out (Participant 2.ULL; Participant 24.UZ; Participant 25.UZ), even if in the future they might realise that they had made the wrong decision (Participant 28.UZ). Other aspects with an impact on intrinsic motivation include not giving up or abandoning what is being started (Participant 3.ULL) and avoiding generating a feeling of failure (Participant 30.UZ). It was expressed that future social and professional projection was an element of inspiration to improve living conditions, i.e. university studies were related to better professional and, consequently, economic and social prospects (Participant 18.UZ; Participant 27.UZ; Participant 29.UZ).

I was motivated, I was always eager, I always had a lot of energy, but I could feel that I lacked a lot of foundation. I went to private classes and I saw that in the subjects I failed, that is, I did fail, but I looked at what I had been able to do and I said 'Hey, I failed, but I've learned a lot for next year, I'll get it!' And I was looking to the future with perspective, when I was failing, I was thinking: Okay, I need to get a job in order to save, because I know this is going to cost me, but I'm going to pass!

(Participant 16.UHU)

In other cases, the unfounded value of learning was the main reason they went to university (Participant 23.UZ; Participant 25.UZ; Participant 24.UZ; Participant 33.UHU; Participant 19.UHU). Companionship, relationships and collaboration with peers were influential factors in motivation throughout the academic trajectory at the three universities (Participant 5.ULL; Participant 8.ULL; Participant 16.UHU; Participant 20.UZ; Participant 31.UHU). In contrast to the difficulties cited, some people highlighted that the teachers were an important source of motivation for them due to their sensitivity, professionalism and empathy.

This teacher used to explain things very clearly. It's always true that if she saw you with a blank look on your face, that she knew you weren't understanding what she was explaining, she would ask "What don't you understand?" despite having over a hundred of us in the class. Well, let's see, a hundred and something were enrolled. There could have been 60, maybe 70 students in the class, but even so, she was still asking each of them. I don't know, she was one of the few who did make the effort to see whether we had all understood what she was explaining or not.

(Participant 5.ULL)

Family environments and friendships are key influences on the motivation of university students and their progress at university (Participant 14.ULL). Some of the respondents never found anything to motivate them (Participant 26.UZ; Participant 15.UHU).

The opinions regarding satisfaction with the university experience are more represented by positive perceptions ( $n=17$ ), as opposed to negative ones ( $n=8$ ). There are people who did not feel particularly satisfied or dissatisfied ( $n=8$ ), pointing out which aspects were more satisfactory versus less satisfactory.

[...] but there are subjects, for example, that I felt very good about—I was very comfortable taking those subjects— and other subjects that I didn't like at all, due to the syllabus, obviously, and because of the teacher too, because it seems like you're going to a class of I don't know what....

(Participant 30.UZ)

The positive evaluations proffered are related to the degree itself, the teaching staff and the relationships with classmates, but also to the opportunities that the time spent at the university has provided once this stage has passed.

University was a new opportunity for me, how to leave a bit of the past behind and to open up to a new future. And the truth is that it really helped me to create new social networks, to broaden my expectation of what a person, a friend, could give you.

(Participant 21.UZ)

In some cases, dissatisfaction with higher education studies was associated with their own personal assessments, which justified the decision to drop out of university studies permanently, at least until the time of the research (Participant 22.UZ; Participant 23.UZ).

Regarding the academic outcomes achieved during the university experience, the marks were negative from the start of the academic year (Participant 7.ULL; Participant 15.UHU; Participant 17.UZ; Participant 19.UZ; Participant 22.UZ; Participant 26.UZ; Participant 28.UZ; Participant 30.UZ). In other cases, however, they worsened as the course(s) progressed (Participant 18.ULL; Participant 21.UZ; Participant 24.UZ). Work responsibilities and balancing studies and work were the main causes of low performance or poor marks (Participant 28.UZ).

Yes, it was a little bit lower than what I was used to getting, but that's why, because it was more difficult to achieve that mark, it's more complicated.

(Participant 12.ULL)

In terms of the comparison of the academic results that the participants obtained in high school and at university, the low performance at university generated a lot of frustration (Participant 26.UZ). To a lesser extent, it was stated that academic performance had been good or very good, being reasons or causes of low weight in the construction of the idea of dropping out (Participant 31.ULL; Participant 33.UHU; Participant 34.ULL; Participant 20.UZ; Participant 12.ULL; Participant 9.ULL; Participant 4.ULL).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In recent times, numerous studies have addressed the problem of dropout using qualitative methods, with the aim of accessing information that is more focused on personal nuances in order to provide a more comprehensive view of this phenomenon. The study by Zamudio et al. (2019) analysed the responses of a sample of 524 students, with the aim of defining the causes of school failure in relation to three fundamental criteria: the economic dimension, academic consequences and the lack of support resulting from unequal educational and employment opportunities. Likewise, following a qualitative approach, Romero Sánchez and Hernández Pedreño (2019) investigated the diversity of causes that led to school dropout by applying three qualitative techniques: life stories, professional interviews and focus groups. Among the conclusions of their study and in relation to the method, they highlighted that the life history technique proved adequate for investigating endogenous causes of school dropout, while interviews worked well for investigating data on exogenous causes (institutional or structural).

The multifactorial nature of academic dropout and the diversity of variables that come together to finally provoke it particularly advise the use of methodologies that allow us to approach the reality of each participant and their specific circumstances, as this will allow a comprehensive understanding of this multivariate phenomenon. As stated by Cárdenas (2019), the analytical models of academic dropout are diverse, precisely because of the complexity involved in covering the universe of variables, of a very diverse nature, involved in it (some centred more on personal causes and others more of a contextual, social or institutional nature).

Analysis of the participants' accounts in the study shows that there are various factors that come into play in the lives of students when they enter university and that determine whether they adapt to, remain in or, on the contrary, drop out of higher education. The research also confirms the importance of academic transitions and the transcendence of the first year in students' educational trajectories, where changes compared to other stages or educational experiences give rise to an unfavourable context that leads to the idea of dropping out (Álvarez et al., 2011; Álvarez-Pérez & López-Aguilar, 2019). And in relation to transitions, the need to reinforce the connection between university education and the previous stages is still evident. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the work of Gómez-Salazar and Álvarez-Gil (2020), which shows an experience of practical and interactive workshops between secondary school pupils and students and university lecturers from the degree in Architecture, with the intention of introducing them to the field of knowledge and valuing the importance of these studies in today's society. The study confirms that it is not only academic factors (lack of knowledge of the degree, low grades and performance problems in some subjects, difficulties in adapting to the learning methodology, lack of study habits, etc.) that ultimately determine dropout, but rather other personal or emotional variables (moving house, moving away from family, loneliness, work responsibilities, having to live with strangers, having to make new friends, having to combine studies and work, financial problems in the family, etc.). One term expressed by the participants, which accurately describes the situation that many students experience during the first year of university studies, is the feeling of being "out of place". In addition to prior performance, the lack of information and guidance available to many students entering university is often a precursor to many of them dropping out (Bernardo et al., 2017). The feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity, stress, etc. that many students experience when starting higher education exert such great pressure that dropping out becomes the only alternative and a door of salvation to overcome all these vicissitudes.

Many students highlighted clear differences from their post-secondary studies, which undoubtedly had a negative influence on their adaptation to university, on their assessment of higher education and on the explanation for their disengagement. These differences relate to the methodologies used (the use of expository methodologies was highlighted above all), the high number of students per group, the feeling of impersonality, satisfaction with the choice of studies made and the poor infrastructure of the university centres. Other reasons given for the process of adapting to the university experience were the role of the teaching staff (low empathy, lack of accessibility, lack of respect, etc.) and assessment methods (uncertainty generated by the assessment, length of tests, type of exercises, etc.).

All these problematic realities reflected in the stories should be a starting point for articulating response measures. But it is worrying that no significant solution has been found to such a serious problem of international importance, beyond specific actions adapted to concrete realities. As stated by Moreno-Rodríguez et al. (2022), improvement solutions should be approached in a procedural and preventive way, in order to provide a real containment of the problem of academic failure and dropout. We cannot ignore the fact that dropout has different repercussions, one of which is that it affects people's life projects. Those who fail to progress through the education system are constrained in terms of future possibilities and plans, and corrective improvements should be made for those who have the greatest difficulties. Those who are left out of the system, for whatever reason, are less able to develop a satisfactory life project. As Román (2013) points out, many educational practices are an invitation for students to drop out of education, and, in many cases, they are academically and socially vulnerable. For this reason, there is a call for global and profound action to address the problem of dropout, correct the deficiencies of the system and provide solutions to the diversity, vulnerability and needs of all students. Those who drop out,

those who are defeated by the system and its practices, those who feel they have not met the standards, those who have not been sufficiently supported by the system to overcome the bumps that appear along the learning pathways, those who need more time, those who need different support to achieve the objectives, those who find it difficult to advance because they do not have the same resources as the others, all of these probably feel responsible for their own failure.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work was to study in depth the educational trajectories of students who had decided to take a university degree and who, due to various circumstances, had to drop out. This analysis was approached from a qualitative perspective, as it was considered an appropriate strategy to delve deeper into the factors and reasons that led participants to drop out of education.

The results of the study shed light on a complex reality experienced by students entering university studies, who are surrounded by a multitude of factors that, in many cases, are very difficult to reconcile. The loneliness and worry that accompany the arrival and start of university studies is an insurmountable process for many. For this reason, the need to introduce changes, based on institutional responsibility, to try to reduce the effect of these variables, which are at the root of dropout, was insisted upon. Dropout must be understood as a painful problem in the lives of students who fail, which affects their self-esteem and the construction of their own life plans. It is a problem that reaches very high numbers and should therefore be a matter of priority concern for governments.

Measures such as thoroughly preparing the transition processes between stages, improving information on university studies, improving coordination and collaboration between stages, preparing teachers who have to deal with first-year students and improving guidance, tutoring and mentoring systems for students from the moment they enter higher education. But not only reactive tutorials (after the assessment for recovery) but proactive tutorials, which allow problems to be anticipated, formative, facilitating and follow-up tutorials, which generate closeness and support so that the student feels accompanied from the moment students enter the university. Tutorials that awaken motivation, involvement, progress and dynamisation in learning. All of this can undoubtedly help students to integrate and build their educational projects, thus preventing them from falling into the trap of failure and dropout.

If we had to highlight the limitations of the research, we would undoubtedly refer to the difficulties of accessing the participants. As these are people who left university several years ago, contact and willingness to participate in studies of this nature is very difficult, as it involves evoking unsatisfactory life events that happened a long time ago. However, we also have to appreciate the willingness and involvement of the people who took part.

For the future, it would be interesting to assess the use of other data collection methodologies (life stories, focus groups, etc.), which could be applied in combination with interviews and could help to enhance the predictive value of the data. And as part of future possibilities, it could be interesting to carry out longitudinal studies to monitor the problem of dropout (when and why it occurs) as well as the people who drop out, in order to assess how they reconstruct their life trajectories and their life projects after leaving university. As for the results obtained, they should be a reference of interest when designing guidance systems and programmes for students, both at the pre-university and university level, aimed at facilitating the adaptation of students and the development of their training and professional projects. The information obtained can undoubtedly contribute to improving the problems faced by pupils who drop out. Specific measures such as preparing students to make good decisions about the studies they want to take, enhancing their knowledge of the degree courses to prevent them from feeling out of place later on, informing them about how to work at the university so that they can later integrate smoothly, giving them more personalised attention in the first steps of their university career, making

first-year teaching staff aware of the need to help them face the change or guiding them on the importance of defining a training project are some real measures that can serve to prevent them from considering abandoning their studies and so that they will not feel that they have to drop out.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare that we have no financial or personal conflicts of interest that could inappropriately influence the conduct of this research.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## PROTECTION OF PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

The authors declare that the procedures followed conformed to the ethical standards of the research ethics committee of the University of La Laguna, the University to which the majority of the research group belongs and which is leading the project.

## DATA CONFIDENTIALITY

The authors declare that they have followed the protocols of their work centre regarding the publication of the data of the participants as informants.

## RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND INFORMED CONSENT

The authors have obtained the informed consent of the subjects referred to in the article as participants. This document is in the possession of the corresponding author.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Analysis of the explanatory factors of university dropout and strategic actions for its improvement and prevention." (PID2020-114849RB-I00).

<sup>ii</sup> Students who dropped out of university and have not re-enrolled in the same or other university studies for 4 to 10 years.

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ANNEX



FIGURE A1 Academic trajectory. Categories, codes and quotes.

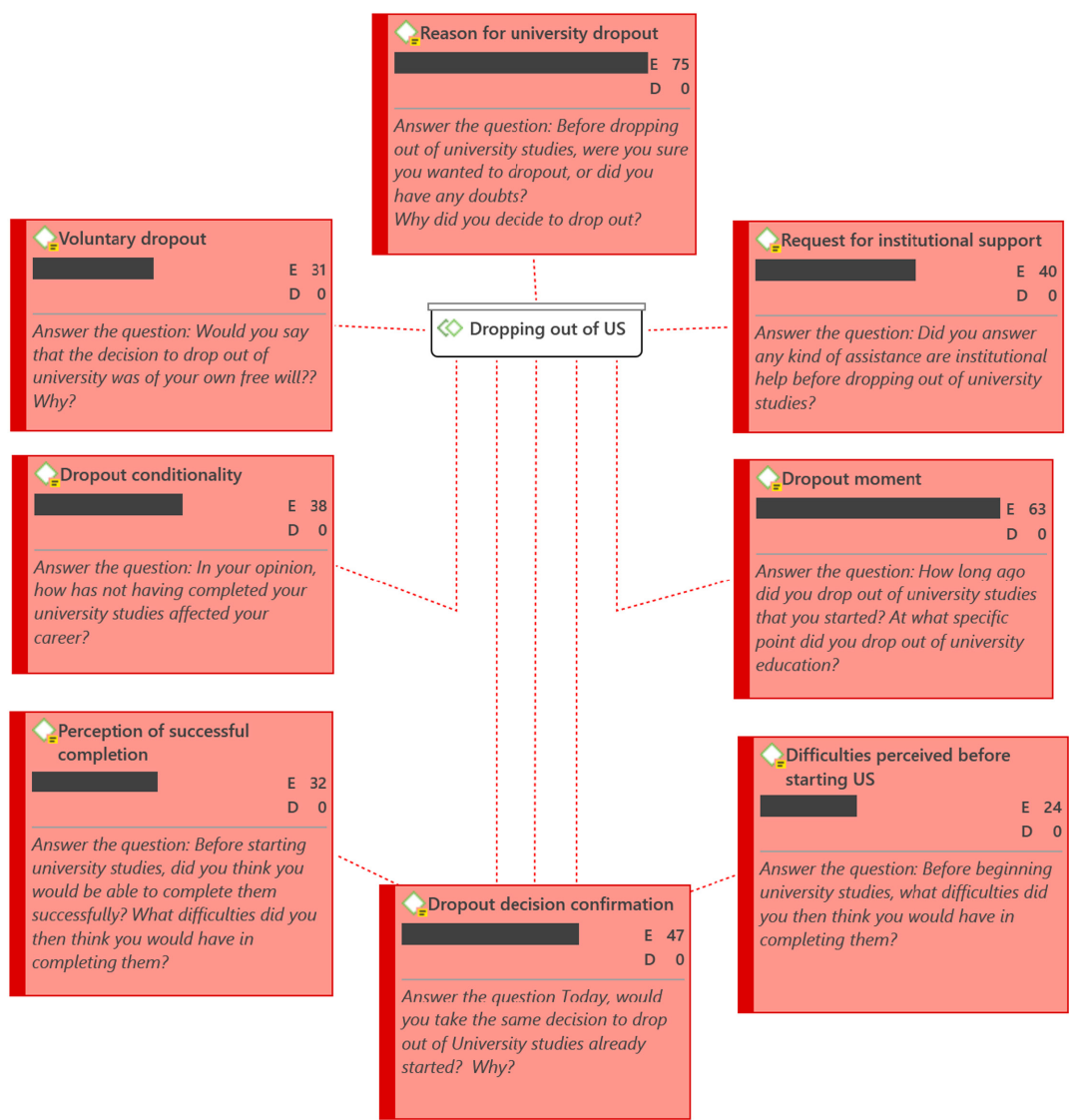


FIGURE A2 University dropout. Categories, codes and quotes.